

1 New York Times Bestselling Author

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ASK MARIAH



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Chapter One

Michael Ashton beat the fire engines to his house by thirty seconds. Smoke poured from the kitchen window of the old Victorian as he jumped out of his car and ran up the walkway. His daughter's favorite teddy bear lay abandoned on the top step. Cups from a tea party were scattered across the welcome-home mat as if the participants had left in a big hurry, as if they had smelled smoke and run inside to see what was wrong.

His heart raced as he reached for the doorknob. Locked! He fumbled with his keys, swearing, sweating each second of delay. His children were inside. He had to get to them. The keys slipped out of his grasp and fell to the ground. He stepped backward, crushing a tiny pink teacup.

To hell with the keys. Panicked, he slammed his body against the door, forcing it open.

All he could think of were Lily and Rose, his six-year-old identical twin daughters. If anything happened to them, he would never forgive himself. They were all he had left.

"Please, God, let them be all right," he whispered as he entered the house. Smoke drifted through the hall and dining room, darkening the white walls, covering the hardwood floors with dust. "Lily! Rose!" he shouted as he moved toward the thickest area of smoke. "Where are you?"

The girls burst through the kitchen door, two whirling, smoky figures in blue jeans. Michael swept them into his arms, pressing their heads against his chest for one thankful second. "You're all right. You're all right," he muttered. "Let's get out of here." He ran toward the front door. Two firemen passed him on the steps.

"Anyone else inside?" one of them asked.

"Mrs. Polking, our nanny." Michael didn't stop moving until he reached the sidewalk. Then he set the girls down on the pavement and tried to catch his breath. Lily and Rose stared back at him.

They didn't appear to be hurt. Nor did they seem overly concerned about the fire. In fact, on closer inspection there was a light of excitement in Lily's dark eyes, and Rose looked guilty, so guilty that her gaze seemed fixed on the untied laces of her tennis shoes. At that, his panic began to fade.

He squatted in front of them so he could look directly into their eyes. Their long brown hair was a mess. Lily's pigtails were almost completely out. Rose still had one rubber band clinging desperately to a couple of strands of hair, while the rest swung free past her shoulders. There were no bumps or bruises on their small faces, no scratches to mar their tender skin, no sign of blood. "Are you hurt?" He ran his hand down Rose's arms, then did the same to Lily.

Lily shook her head, then Rose. Neither one said a word. Not even now. Not even in the midst of a crisis would they speak to him. Michael sighed, feeling the tear in his heart grow bigger. Since their mother, Angela, had died almost a year ago, the girls had refused to speak to him. No one had been able to tell him why. Thousands of dollars of family therapy had not helped him get to the root of their problem.

The doctors said the children, for whatever reason, didn't trust him. They were supposed to trust him. He was their father, their protector. He would die for them, but he couldn't seem to convince them of that fact.

"This is not my fault," a woman said from behind him.

Michael straightened as their nanny, Eleanor Polking, came down the steps, assisted by one of the firemen. Eleanor was a short, robust woman in her late fifties who carried an extra forty pounds.

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

"The girls set the kitchen on fire. That's what happened," Eleanor said in obvious distress.

She tried to push her hair away from her eyes, but the sweat from her forehead glued it in place. There was a wild light in her eyes. She looked as if she wanted to run as far away from them as possible, if she could just figure out an escape route. Michael had seen that expression before, on the faces of the four nannies who had previously served time in his home.

He glanced at Lily, then at Rose. They wouldn't look him in the eye. Damn.

"We were just making pasta, Mrs. Polking," Lily said defiantly, directing her explanation to the nanny. "Like Mama used to make."

"For our tea party. We didn't mean to cause a fire--" Rose darted a quick look at her father, then turned back to Mrs. Polking. "We didn't know you had to put water in the pot. When the pot got all red and smelled funny, we threw it in the trash."

Michael groaned. "Let me see your hands. Did you burn them?"

Lily and Rose held out their hands. Their pudgy little fingers were covered with streaks of red and green paint, but thankfully there were no burns.

"We used a hot pad, Mrs. Polking," Lily said, "just like you told us."

"Why were the girls alone in the kitchen?" he asked the nanny. "Don't I pay you to watch them?"

"I was in the bathroom, cleaning the paint off my dress." Eleanor turned around, revealing a circle of green paint on her ample bottom. "Do you want to know how this happened?" she demanded, her anger matching his.

Michael sighed. "Not really, no."

"The girls painted the chair in my bedroom green."

He scowled at Lily and Rose. "You've had a busy day, haven't you?"

"Too busy for me," Eleanor declared. "This is the last straw. I'm leaving just as soon as I get my suitcase packed."

"Yay--" Lily's spontaneous cheer ended with Michael's glare. "I mean, that's too bad, Mrs. Polking. Come on, Rose, let's look at the fire engine."

"You can't just leave, Mrs. Polking." He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "You agreed to stay the summer. I know the girls are difficult, but they just need a little extra attention."

"That's not all they need."

He ignored that comment. "I'm in the middle of a bid for a very big job. At least give me a week or two to make other arrangements."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ashton," Eleanor said, not sounding a bit sorry. "The girls have made it clear that they want you."

"I can't work full-time and take care of the girls. I'm only one person."

Mrs. Polking softened just a bit. "I understand. That's why I took the liberty of making you a list of summer school programs. You'll find it on the credenza in the dining room."

"When did you decide to do that?"

"This morning, after the girls glued my shoes to the floor. Perhaps they'll do better in a more structured environment." Eleanor checked her watch. "It's not yet five. If you hurry you may be able to find one for Monday. Good luck," she said, turning away.

Good luck? Since when had he ever had good luck? His wife was dead. His children wouldn't speak to him. The demands of his job as an architect, combined with the responsibilities of being a single father, made him feel as if he were running around in circles, chasing after his tail like a foolish dog.

He had never imagined that his life would end up like this. As he stared at the house, he was thankful it hadn't burned down. The house had belonged to his in-laws, the De Lucas, for almost a hundred years, since they first emigrated from Italy in the late 1800s. More than a house, it was a symbol of tradition, of family, of responsibility, of loyalty, of everything that a man should be.

His father-in-law had told Michael he was worthy of this house, that he knew Michael would take care of his daughter, Angela. He had felt the burden of that generous gift every day of their marriage. The burden had doubled in weight after the birth of the twins, and tripled in weight upon Angela's death at the age of twenty-six.

He hadn't taken care of Angela as he had promised. But he still had the girls to raise. He still had a chance to give the De Lucas back some of the love and respect they had given him.

The sound of voices brought him back to reality. He looked up as the firemen left his house.

"The fire was limited to the stove and the trash can," one of the men said. "You have damage to the ceiling and walls from the smoke. The floor around the trash can is pretty beat up, but that's about it. Otherwise you're okay," He paused. "I hope you'll have a long talk with your kids about fire safety in the kitchen and elsewhere."

"Oh, don't worry, I intend to have a very long talk with them -- about a lot of things."

The fireman grinned. "They sure are cute kids. One of them called 911. Sounded calm as could be. Well, we're off."

"Thanks," Michael said.

"No problem. That's what we're here for."

As the fire engine left, Mrs. Polking returned to the house and Lily and Rose wandered back to Michael, obviously uneasy now that they were alone with him. Lily dug her hands into the pockets of her jeans and tried to look confident. Rose chewed on a piece of her hair, the way she always did when she was nervous. For a few moments Michael let them suffer in silence.

The more he looked at them, the more they reminded him of Angela. They were their mother's daughters, all right, same dark brown hair, same big brown eyes, same stubborn chin, same impetuous, spoiled nature.

Oh, they were cute all right, and dangerous, especially Lily. The older twin by two minutes, Lily was the leader. She was rambunctious, loud, and often clumsy, but she would defend her little sister to the death.

Rose was his sensitive, emotional child, quiet and introspective. She tried to do what was right more often than Lily, but loyalty to her sister always came before anything else.

Looking at them now, Michael wondered which one of them would crack first -- which one would finally break down and talk to him.

Sometimes he thought Lily would be the one, because once in a while she impulsively started to say something, then stopped. Other times he thought Rose might provide the breakthrough, with her guilty, apologetic smiles. Neither one spoke to him now.

"We have to talk about Mrs. Polking." Of course, he'd be talking and they'd be listening, but he couldn't let their behavior go unnoticed. "You know you're not supposed to touch the stove."

No answer. No explanation.

"Maybe if you tell me why you did it, I could understand." Michael tried to be patient.

Lily made some motions with her hand, mimicking eating.

"If you were hungry you should have asked Mrs. Polking to fix you something."

Lily shrugged. Rose smiled apologetically. They were getting nowhere fast.

"What you did was dangerous. This isn't like gluing Mrs. Polking's shoes to the floor, although I'm not happy about that either. You could have been hurt. Mrs. Polking could have been hurt. I know you wouldn't have wanted that."

Rose sniffed as she shook her head.

Lily put her arm around her sister to give her courage.

"Can you tell me why you're giving the baby-sitters such a hard time?"

No answer.

Lily whispered in Rose's ear, loud enough so Michael could hear her. "I have to go to the bathroom. Do you want to come with me?"

"Yes."

"Wait a second; we're not done."

Lily pointed to her pants. Rose too.

"Fine, go to the bathroom, but this isn't over."

With that the girls disappeared into the house.

He knew the bathroom plea was an excuse to get away from him. Maybe it was for the best. He needed time to think. He needed a cold beer. Hell, he needed a new life.

* * *

"I think Daddy's mad," Rose said, opening the bedroom door so she could peer into the hallway. She listened for angry footsteps, but heard only silence.

"Is he coming?" Lily asked.

"No."

"Good." Her sister let out a sigh of relief.

Rose closed the door and sat down on one of the twin beds. She pulled her legs underneath her and rested her chin in her hands. "Maybe we shouldn't have tried to cook the pasta."

"We didn't know it was going to catch on fire."

"And we shouldn't have painted the chair," she added, knowing they'd been really

bad.

"We had to, or else Mrs. Polking wouldn't have left."

"He's just going to get someone else to watch us."

"Not if Mama comes back."

"I don't think she is coming back," she said with a sigh. "It's been so long."

"Yes, she is. She promised. Maybe we should look for her."

"We don't know where to look."

"We could go down by the boats, where Mama took us that day. Maybe she's there."

Rose shook her head, feeling her stomach turn over at the thought. She hadn't liked their trip to see the boats. She didn't even want to think about it. "We can't cross the street by ourselves, and we don't even know where the boats are."

"I bet I could find them," Lily said confidently.

"We're not going. Mama said she'd come back. We just have to wait for her."

Lily's eyes sparkled with a new idea. "Maybe Mariah can help us." She took the crystal ball off the dresser and set it on the bed between them. They'd gotten it a week ago for their sixth birthday, a present from their grandmother, Sophia. Inside the glazed blue glass were the head and shoulders of a beautiful lady with long blond hair, a glittery face, and a bright pink wizard's hat. Their grandmother said she had found the wizard in an antiques shop. She told them it had belonged to a little girl who swore it could make magic -- but only for people who believed in it.

Lily rubbed her hand over the top of the ball.

A spark of light surprised her. "What was that?" she asked, her eyes widening with alarm. She felt butterflies in her stomach, the kind that came whenever a new nanny arrived.

"I don't know. It didn't do that when I touched it yesterday," Lily said.

"Well, ask the question."

Lily rubbed her hand over the ball again, drawing another flash of light. "Mariah, we want to find our mother. Do you know where she is? Do you know where we should go to look for her?"

The lady's mouth began to move. Lily looked over at Rose in awe, "Did you see that?" she whispered.

Rose swallowed hard. She felt scared, but she wanted to hear the answer.

Mariah's voice came across, sounding as lovely as a melody. "For children who believe in me, school is just the place to be."

"What?" Lily asked in confusion.

"Go to school?" Rose repeated in doubt. She didn't want to go to school. It was summer, and they'd already done kindergarten.

"I'm going to ask her again. I don't think she heard me right." No matter how many times Lily asked the question, the crystal ball remained dark and Mariah remained silent. "Maybe the batteries are dead," Lily said as she turned the ball upside down.

"Where do the batteries go?" she asked.

"I don't know. I can't find anything."

"Maybe we should ask Daddy."

Lily rolled her eyes. "I don't think so."

"I didn't mean out loud," she said, although it was getting more difficult not to talk to him, especially when he was being nice or when he kissed her good night. But they'd promised their mother they could keep a secret, that they wouldn't speak to their dad again until she came home. She couldn't give up now. If she did, Mama might never come back.

"We'll try Mariah later," Lily said. "Maybe she needs to rest."

* * *

Michael stared at his waterlogged, smoke-filled kitchen in disgust. The cookbooks on the counter had been doused with water. The edges of the yellow-trimmed curtains that his mother-in-law had hung for them just after they moved into the house were charred around the edges. There were puddles on the floor with ashes floating like little boats in a murky river. What a mess -- just like his life.

He wished he had a magic wand that he could wave and everything would be all right again. He didn't know why he kept hoping for a miracle. He'd said enough unanswered prayers to know that magic and miracles did not exist.

He took off his suit coat and tossed it over the chair at the breakfast room table. Loosening the knot in his tie, he rolled up the sleeves to his elbows. Wading through a couple of inches of dirty water, he made his way to the refrigerator and opened the door. The inside was dark. Apparently the firemen had turned off the electricity, but the beers were still cold. Thank God!

He pulled out a can and opened it. One draught went a long way toward easing some of his frustration. As he took another sip he walked into the dining room, eager to get away from the kitchen disaster. That's when he saw the list of summer schools Mrs. Polking had left on the credenza. He reached for the paper, but his foot caught on the carpet and he stumbled, spilling beer all over everything.

"Damn." He shook the beer off the top of the paper, but the ink smeared and only one of the school names remained legible. "Happy Hollow School -- summer school programs, kindergarten through second grade," he read aloud. The school was in North Beach, just a mile away. Maybe he could convince the twins' grandmother to take the girls after school until he could find another baby-sitter.

Of course, he didn't have much credit left with the family. The girls had terrorized their aunt, uncle, and grandparents long before they'd started in on the nannies. And he hated to ask Sophia to baby-sit. She usually spent her afternoons at De Luca's, helping her husband, Vincent, and her son, Frank, run the family restaurant.

School was the best answer, at least until he could find another nanny. With any luck the teachers at Happy Hollow would be tough enough to take anything his girls could dish out.

Chapter Two

"You've got to be strong, you've got to be bold..."

"I've got to be stupid," Joanna Wingate muttered, adding her own lyrics to the music that blasted through the aerobics class at the San Francisco Health Club. Sweat dripped down her neck and between her shoulder blades as she tried to keep up with the class.

She glared at the mirror, not just at the sight of herself in leggings and a tank top, but at the image of her sixty-two-year-old mother beside her. Caroline Wingate, decked out in white yoga pants and a hot pink top was kicking her thin legs almost as high as their instructor, a twenty-something blond goddess named Elise.

Sandwiched in between their sleek figures, Joanna felt like a clumsy elephant. Although she wasn't fat by anyone's standards, she was not a lean, mean fighting machine. No, she was a twenty-nine-year-old teaching assistant at Stanford University working on her Ph.D. in American history -- and she was tired.

She had spent nine months supporting her father during a futile struggle with lung cancer that he'd lost two months earlier. She'd given up her apartment, her job, and her boyfriend -- actually, he'd given her up -- to help her mother take care of her father. She'd lost just about everything in her life during the past year except the extra ten pounds she'd gained sitting by her father's bedside.

Her mother, of course, had not gained an ounce. Caroline's stress had led to days of wanting nothing more than a bowl of soup and a cup of tea. Her mother found comfort in classical music and long walks on the treadmill. Joanna found comfort in chocolate-covered strawberries -- make that chocolate-covered anything.

"Let's go now, ladies. Follow me." Elise pranced around the room, leading something akin to a conga line. Joanna reluctantly joined in behind her mother, who didn't even appear to be sweating.

But then Caroline Wingate never perspired. A petite ash blonde, with a hairstyle that never went limp, Caroline was the exact opposite of her daughter. Joanna had long, curly brown hair that drifted past her shoulders and always looked a bit wild, full breasts, and a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

As the conga line neared the doorway, she dashed out and collapsed against the wall outside, rubbing the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. A minute later she was joined by her longtime friend, Nora Garvey, a plump redhead who was working off the lingering weight of her second pregnancy,

"Are you okay?" Nora asked.

"I need oxygen." She bent over, placing her hands on her knees.

Nora laughed and patted Joanna on the back. "Shall I call 911?"

"Just shoot me and put me out of my misery."

"You've got to be strong, you've got to be tough," Nora teased.

"I've got to be crazy for letting my mother talk me into this."

Nora leaned against the wall. "Your mother is amazing. She doesn't look a day over forty. She's in great shape."

"Tell me about it." Straightening, she walked over to the water fountain and took

a drink. Then she stepped aside so Nora could take a turn.

The fitness club, which was popular with the downtown San Francisco work crowd, was filling up, although Friday nights tended to be slower than the rest of the week. Most people probably had dates, she thought with sigh. She picked up a complimentary towel and wiped the sweat off her face.

She was not only out of shape, she was also out of sorts. Bored, restless, frustrated were only a few of the words that came to mind whenever someone asked her how she felt. Of course, she didn't express those words aloud. She simply said she was fine and kept her private anguish to herself, a trait she had learned early on from her mother. Caroline didn't confide in anyone, and to a certain extent Joanna didn't either. The only one who had even an inkling of the misery she had been in since her boyfriend dumped her and her father died was Nora.

As Nora turned away from the drinking fountain, Joanna tossed her a towel, Nora missed, and the towel landed at the feet of an incredibly tall and muscular man. He picked up the towel and handed it back to Joanna as she stared at him in amazement.

Good Lord, the man's muscles were huge. His round, bulging pecs glistened with sweat or some kind of body oil. He wore a tight tank top and a pair of small shorts that emphasized his other bulges. He was the most incredible specimen of a male she had ever seen. Pure brawn.

Nora cleared her throat, and Joanna realized she was staring.

"Uh, thanks," Joanna said.

His eyes drifted over her body. She hadn't had a man look at her that way in quite some time. She wondered what she would do if he asked her out.

Nora would say go for it. A new man was just what she needed to take her mind off her problems. But this man was not her type. She dated intellectuals, thin men with glasses and faraway looks and hair that needed cutting and clothes that needed fitting. This man didn't need clothes, period. Maybe she ought to expand her horizons.

"Why don't you give me a call?" he said.

"Maybe," Joanna prevaricated.

The man reached into a tiny pocket in the back of his shorts and pulled out a card. "I could whip you into shape in no time," he said with a smile as he continued down the hall with an arrogant swagger.

She looked at the card. "Hawk Cunningham, personal trainer. I guess he didn't want my body after all."

"He wanted your body all right."

"Yeah, as a before picture. Now I'm thoroughly depressed."

"Don't be," Nora said. "Personally I've never liked a man who has bigger breasts than I do."

She laughed. "True. But I'm not sure what my type is anymore. I thought it was David, but that obviously didn't work out." In the past five years she'd dated a variety of men. One had been too short, the other too tall; one too studious, another too boring; one talked incessantly about global warming and another had spent one very long dinner hour describing the different types of bacteria she was putting into her mouth with each bite of food. She'd thought she'd hit the jackpot when she'd met David Richardson, a professor of English literature at Stanford. Unfortunately he'd turned out to be as big a jerk as the rest of them.

"David was an idiot. And he wasn't for you."

"I thought he was."

"No, you picked him because he was safe, just like the others. You knew exactly what you would get. It was a no-risk situation. You're not very adventurous when it comes to men."

"What do you want me to do -- date an ax murderer?"

"I want you to date an interesting, exciting man, not some scrawny professor who cares more about his research than his girlfriend, and thinks having a good time is spending the evening at the library."

"I like the library," Joanna protested.

"You might like a few other things, too, if you ever gave them a chance."

"Like what?"

"Like sex."

"I've had sex. And it's nice but not exactly earth-shattering."

Nora laughed. "Then you haven't had good sex."

"Oh, please, are you going to tell me you see fireworks, that the room spins around in dizzying delight, and you think you'll die from the passion?"

Nora smiled somewhat smugly. "I'm not going to tell you anything, except this. If you find yourself the right man, I guarantee all those things will happen."

"Yeah, and I believe in magic, too," Joanna said.

Actually she wanted to believe in love and magic. Unfortunately reality kept slapping her in the face. "I think it's time to go back into the torture chamber." She motioned toward the aerobics room.

"My muscles are still burning," Nora complained.

"I think that's the point."

"Your mom seems to be doing well these days," Nora commented as they glanced into the aerobics class, where the group was dancing to a new beat, "At least on the outside."

"She likes to stay busy. It keeps her mind off the fact that my dad is gone."

"You're lucky to have a mother like her. She's always been your best friend, one of the girls. You wouldn't catch my mother in an aerobics class to save her life."

"Your mother is wonderful, always baking cookies and pies and decorating your house for every holiday," Joanna said wistfully. "My mother hasn't cooked a Christmas turkey in twenty years."

"We always want what we don't have."

"I guess." As an only child Joanna hadn't wanted for much. She had been the focus of her mother's life. They had done everything together -- gone to the ballet, art museums, and the symphony. She had accompanied her parents on trips to Europe and the South Pacific. She'd been incredibly fortunate. The only thing she'd ever lacked was a little space for herself.

Since she'd given up her apartment and since her father had died, things had gotten worse. Her mother wanted to do everything with her. As if on cue, Caroline appeared in the doorway.

"Joanna, there you are," she scolded, shaking her finger, "You need to cool down or your muscles will tighten up. Come walk with me."

"Too late. My muscles are on a coffee break," she said, retreating against the wall.

"I can't move until they come back."

"Really, Joanna." Caroline smiled at Nora. "I love your haircut. I'm thinking of doing something different with my hair, something more cool," she said with a self-conscious smile. "That is the right word, isn't it?"

Nora laughed. "You are the coolest, Mrs. Wingate. I go to Capelli's down on Union Street."

"Mm-mm, I may have to try them." Caroline patted her hair, which she had worn in the same style for the past twenty years. "Do they do manicures? I'd love to get one. And a pedicure would be heaven. I'll call them on Monday. We can make a day of it," Caroline said, gaining enthusiasm. "What do you think, Joanna?"

She smiled faintly. Her mother seemed to be on a quest to find something new to do each day. She never wanted to just be home. "I'm not sure what my plans are for Monday or next week for that matter." The summer was looming ahead of her and she needed to do more than just keep her mother company.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about your summer plans," Nora interrupted. "One of the teachers at Happy Hollow School is having a difficult pregnancy, and her doctor wants her to go to bed for six weeks. The summer session starts Monday and, well, we're desperate for a first grade teacher. I thought of you."

She looked at Nora in amazement. "Seriously?"

"Yes. You love kids, Joanna. And you're an experienced teacher."

"For eighteen-year-olds, not six-year-olds."

Nora waved a hand. "Oh, there's hardly any difference. The lesson plans are done. You just have to follow the schedule."

The offer was tempting. She needed to do something different for a few months. Since her father's death, she'd lost interest in her life and her old goals. Her thesis on the structure of family throughout American history no longer held any interest for her. She had several hundred pages and tons of photographs, but she just couldn't find the heart to finish it, especially since her own family had been shattered.

"What do you say?" Nora asked. "It's only six weeks, and you'll love the summer program. We do a unit on gardening, and the children plant their own vegetable garden. We also cook. You love to cook."

"It does sound like fun," she admitted. "And not that long either."

"But what about that trip to Hawaii we were planning," her mother asked. "And the line dancing class? You said you'd sign up with me."

She didn't want to learn line dancing or go to Hawaii. She also didn't want to hurt her mother's feelings. "You can do those things without me," she said.

"It wouldn't be the same without you."

She hesitated. Her mother was still grieving. Was it fair to leave her alone every day? But it had been two months, and she simply could not continue to spend every second with her mother. She needed time for herself -- a chance to figure out what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. One thing she'd learned from watching her father die was that life was far too short, and she'd already wasted too much of it.

"I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have brought this up," Nora said apologetically.

"No, I'm glad you did," she said. "I've been feeling restless. Maybe this job will help me figure things out."

"I don't understand," her mother interrupted. "Why take a preschool job now?"

What about your Ph.D.? You've worked so hard, and you're so close. How can you even consider taking a part-time job when you could be working on your thesis?"

"I can't do it right now. My mind is blank. Sometimes I don't know why I started it in the first place." She rested her palms against the wall, taking pleasure in the feel of the cool plaster beneath her fingertips. "The last time I spoke to Dad, he told me he didn't regret anything he had done in his life, only the things he hadn't done, because he was too afraid to take a risk or too busy to take the time. He told me not to make the same mistake, to dream, to reach for the stars, to grab on to something and make it mine."

Her mother looked at her as if she'd lost her mind, but then Caroline was not a dreamer. She was a doer. She got up in the morning, looked at her calendar, and followed her schedule. At night she sat down and planned the next day. Her life was a series of little things, and they seemed to keep her happy.

"Joanna, it's only natural that you feel empty, but you'll get back in the swing of things."

"Mom, please, at least let me think about it."

"Fine, I'm going to cool down." Caroline returned to the aerobics class, her shoulders stiff, her head erect.

"Sorry," Nora said with a sympathetic glance. "I didn't realize your mom had so many plans."

"My mother always has plans."

"They sound fun. Hawaii would be great."

"I've been to Hawaii. I'd rather spend time looking for an apartment."

"You're tired of the luxurious Bellarmine Towers?"

"I'm tired of living on the eighteenth floor. I want a garden and a deck. I want to look up at the trees and the sky instead of down at traffic jams."

"But you're so close to everything, the theater, great restaurants, shopping."

"I want dirt under my feet, land, trees, a view of something that isn't concrete. I want to walk out my front door and not look at an elevator panel." She shook her head, feeling her frustration boil to the surface.

"Then come and work at the school, Joanna. I can guarantee you a ground floor classroom, lots of sunshine, and plenty of dirt. It's only for six weeks. Just think, you can fill their little minds with history."

"I'll do it," she said impulsively.

"Good. You'll love the kids. First grade is an adorable age."

* * *

Bloodcurdling screams did not sound adorable, Joanna decided as she walked out of the teachers' lounge on Monday morning. The school was a long one-story building with the office in the center and two hallways leading to the classrooms in each wing.

Joanna spied Nora standing behind the reception desk, apparently oblivious to the racket.

"Is something wrong?" Joanna asked.

"What?" Nora looked up, her mind still focused on the papers in front of her. She was a veteran of eight years in the elementary school trenches and didn't exhibit any of the signs of nervousness that Joanna had experienced since she woke up that morning.

"The screaming," she said as a fresh burst of wailing rang through the open front

door.

"Oh. That's just the sound of first day jitters."

"Really?" Joanna walked across the hall and looked out the front door.

Two identical twin girls were clinging to a tall dark-haired man. Their clothes were completely mismatched. One wore jeans, a T-shirt, and different colored socks; the other wore a long-sleeved dress that would have her sweating in the summer sunshine before noon. Their hair was falling out of rubber bands, made worse by the rapid shaking of their heads every time their father told them to go into the school.

"Looks like it was a tough morning," Joanna said.

Nora joined her at the front door. "Oh, my. Where did he come from -- the cover of GQ?"

"It looks like it." The man on the street wasn't just attractive, he was gorgeous. Taller than average, he was athletically built, with dark curly hair a shade too long for his fine Italian suit. His tie was a daring shade of red, a contradiction to the conservative gray of his coat and pants.

This man would look good in a boardroom, surrounded by other power suits, but she doubted he could be more appealing than he was right now, with a crooked tie, a large wet spot on his jacket, and a doll poking out of his pocket. There was something about a man with his children that tugged at Joanna's heart.

"Those two are obviously running the show," Nora commented.

"Maybe we should help."

"Let's give him a chance. It's better in the long run to have the parents and children separate on their own." Nora nudged Joanna with her arm. "But you know all about that, don't you -- Miss College Professor."

"We don't have to worry about separation anxiety with eighteen-year-olds." Joanna shook her head. "I must have been crazy to take this job. I don't know how to teach little kids."

"It's not that hard. Besides, you're the most educated person I know."

"Educated in history, not six-year-olds." Joanna winced at a particularly shrill shriek. "They do eventually stop screaming, don't they?"

"If you're lucky. Relax. This job will be good for you. You said you were tired of your thesis, tired of spending all your time reading about dead people. This is real life, kiddo. If you can handle six-year-olds, you can handle anything."

"Right." Joanna moved closer to the door so she could hear the conversation going on outside.

"We talked about this," the man said, squatting in front of the girls. "You have to go to school today because you made Mrs. Polking leave, and I don't have anyone to watch you."

The two girls crossed their arms at the exact same moment and tilted their chins in the air like warriors going into battle. One girl shook her head so hard, her ponytail fell out. She looked down at the rubber band on the sidewalk and began to cry.

"It's okay, Rose," the man said. "I'll fix it." He grabbed the rubber band and roughly pulled her hair into it. The little girl cried louder.

"I wonder where their mother is," Joanna said quietly.

"Probably at work or home sick. I've never seen them before. They must have just signed up. I think they're in your class. I saw twins on the list. Their names are like

flowers. Lily and Rose, I think."

"How sweet."

Nora laughed. "They look anything but sweet."

Joanna reluctantly had to agree as one of the girls took off running down the street.

"Come back here, Lily," the man said.

Lily stopped ten yards away from him and pointed in another direction.

"We're not going home," he said. "I told you, I have to go to work so I can make money to buy you clothes and toys and food. Okay? Now, listen, if you go to school, I'll buy you a big pizza at Grandpa's restaurant and we'll rent a movie tonight."

The girl standing next to him stopped crying. He turned to her in relief. "All right, Rose?"

Rose pointed toward home.

"How about a triple-fudge sundae after dinner?" the man tried again. "And we'll go to the zoo on Saturday. You love the zoo."

"He might end up giving them the house before he's through," Nora said with a chuckle.

"You are bad," she replied as Rose ran to join her sister. She felt sorry for their father. He looked like a nice guy who was completely at his wits' end. "It's strange," she said, watching him move from bribery to threats. "The girls haven't said anything to him. I wonder if they speak."

"They may not talk, but they can certainly scream." Nora winced as a loud, piercing shriek rang down the street.

Their father grabbed each girl by the hand and tried to drag them into the school. Joanna had seen enough. She walked down the steps with a welcoming smile.

The girls looked up at her and their screams stopped with such abruptness that the silence was deafening. Joanna smiled a little nervously, not sure what to do now that she was here. She was rewarded with two matching exuberant grins. She couldn't believe the instant turnaround.

"Mama!" they cried. "You came back."

Joanna's mouth dropped open as the two girls hurled themselves into her arms, laughing and crying and calling her Mama. She couldn't do anything but cuddle them. They wouldn't have settled for less.

Their father looked shocked. His light blue eyes widened in disbelief. "My God," he said. "You look just like her. The same dark hair, the same eyes, the same mouth."

Joanna swallowed hard as his intense gaze moved from her hair, to her eyes, to her lips. "Their -- their mother?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes." His voice turned gruff. "She died a year ago."

Joanna's heart broke at the thought of these young girls being motherless. No wonder their father looked frazzled and the girls had difficulty separating from him. He was the only parent they had left. Still, she felt uncomfortable about her own position and decided it was time to clarify the situation.

"My name is Joanna," she said.

"No, Mama," one of the girls corrected her.

"I'm sorry. You must think we're crazy. It's just the resemblance." He waved a hand toward the girls. "Look at them. Don't you see yourself?"

Joanna licked her lips. Yes, there was a slight resemblance, but it was just in the coloring of their hair and eyes. She didn't really look like them. Although... A stray thought ran across her mind that if she did have children they would probably look something like these two.

"I guess we do look a bit alike," she conceded.

"More than a little. My name is Michael Ashton," he added. "These are my daughters, Lily and Rose."

"It's nice to meet you." She extended her hand and an incredible feeling of warmth crept through her as Michael's fingers curled around her palm. "I'm Joanna Wingate."

"Wingate? That doesn't sound Italian."

"I'm not."

"Angela, my wife, she was Italian." He cleared his throat. "So, do you want the girls to call you Miss or--"

"It's Miss, but Joanna will be fine,"

"Joanna," he repeated with another long, searching look. His gaze turned toward the girls. "I know she looks like Mommy, but she's not. She's... Are you their teacher?"

"Yes. First grade, right?"

"We already did kindergarten," Lily explained.

"That's good. I bet you learned a lot, too," she said. "How would you like to be in my class this summer?"

Both girls beamed at her, their tear-streaked faces glistening like rainbows in the morning sun. Joanna took each one by the hand. "Tell me your names again."

"I'm Lily, and she's Rose. She's the youngest by two minutes," Lily added. "Sometimes people can't tell us apart. Especially when we dress the same."

"But you'll know who we are, because you're our mommy," Rose said with a quiet intensity that wiped the smile right off Joanna's face.

"I'm not your mother, Rose, but I'd like to be your friend. Do you think we could be friends?"

"How come you don't want to be our mother anymore?" Rose asked in confusion.

"She's your teacher," Michael said firmly. "Rose--"

"It's okay," Joanna interrupted as Rose began to sniff. The last thing she wanted to do was start another round of crying. She turned to Michael. "Why don't you go now? The girls and I will work this out."

"Are you sure?" Michael asked, but he was already backing toward his car, sensing freedom.

No, she wasn't sure. But she had a feeling she would have an easier time dealing with the girls alone than with him. "We'll be fine. Say good-bye to Daddy, girls."

Rose and Lily waved, but they offered no loving words of departure. Nor did they hug him or give him a kiss. Strange, Joanna thought. One minute they didn't want to leave him, and the next they seemed happy to turn their backs on him.

"Mariah was right," Lily said to Rose. "She told us to go to school, remember?"

Rose nodded in agreement.

"Who's Mariah?" Joanna asked as they walked into the school together.

"She's a lady in a crystal ball," Lily replied.

"Oh." That seemed to explain everything.

Chapter Three

Michael was still thinking about Joanna Wingate when he parked his car in the subterranean garage beneath the Embarcadero Center in downtown San Francisco. The woman's resemblance to Angela was incredible. For a second he'd felt as if he'd seen a ghost.

Although he saw Angela in his daughters' faces, they were children. Lily and Rose reminded him of the Angela he'd met when he was a mere boy and she was just a child. But this woman, this Joanna Wingate, had to be close to Angela's age, which made the similarity startling.

Still shaking his head in bewilderment, he reached for his briefcase and the set of blueprints he had picked up at the printer. The upcoming ritual of work pleased him. He wanted to forget what he had just seen. He wanted to pretend that nothing was wrong. But as he boarded the elevator for the sixteenth floor, he knew something was definitely askew.

Who was Joanna Wingate? Why had she suddenly appeared in his life now -- now that he had gotten used to Angela being gone, when he had begun to think that the girls would give up their crazy fantasy that Angela was coming back.

Stepping off the elevator, he walked toward the double glass doors that led into the offices of Lawton, Hill and Cox, his home away from home for the past nine years. He had started out at the bottom of the heap in the prestigious architectural firm, working at a drafting table in a tiny cubicle with no windows.

He now had an office that overlooked the Bay Bridge. Instead of working on small parts of big jobs, he had become a project leader, overseeing five other architects and numerous support staff in the design and construction of high-rise office buildings.

As he stepped through the doors of his office, he breathed a sigh of relief. The thick burgundy carpeting that sank beneath his feet and the rich look of brass and glass felt right. He knew what to expect from his job, from his coworkers, and from his clients. His business life was predictable, and he was always in complete control.

"Michael, we need to talk," said Jackson Cox as he walked out of the conference room.

Jackson, one of the senior partners in the firm, was a short, balding man with a frenetic personality. He smoked cigarettes almost as fast as he talked, and his eyes darted constantly around the room as if he didn't want to miss the latest happening. Jackson was their marketing man, the one who went after the big jobs, the driving force behind Lawton, Hill and Cox's rise to the top.

"What's up?" Michael asked as Jackson kept pace with him down the long hallway.

"Gary Connaught just bought the Stratton Hotel. He wants to tear it down and build a fifty-story office building."

"The Stratton? That's a San Francisco landmark. It's been around forever."

"Exactly. It's old, crumbling, and the owners are going bankrupt. Connaught snapped it up for a song. He wants you to design the new building." Jackson slapped him on the back. "Congratulations."

Michael stared at Jackson for a long moment, flooded with conflicting thoughts. It was a hell of an opportunity; Jackson was right about that. But the Stratton? A lot of people would be upset to see that building go down in a pile of rubble. He had to admit to feeling somewhat bothered by the idea.

A long time ago he had dreamed about restoring old buildings, museums, cathedrals, libraries, civic centers. But Lawton, Hill and Cox rarely restored; they built new, they built high, they built bigger than anyone else. And they made a lot of money. Sometimes his conscience called him a sellout. Most of the time he ignored it. Today he couldn't.

"Are you sure Connaught has thought this thing through?" he asked. "The Stratton means something to the people of San Francisco. Nixon stayed there when he was president and--"

"Nixon is dead," Jackson interrupted.

"Mae West stayed there."

"She's dead, too."

"And Lucille Ball."

"Dead. All dead. The Stratton is past its prime. It's time to move on, and frankly I thought you'd be delighted to put your signature on a brand new fifty-story tower. Do you want me to tell Connaught you're not interested?"

"No." He immediately shook his head. "Of course not."

Jackson laughed and slapped him on the back again. "Thank God. For a minute there I thought you were turning into some self-righteous restoration fanatic."

"Who me? Never." But his voice didn't sound as confident as his words.

Jackson's eyes narrowed. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Good, because Connaught is important to us. We need one hundred percent from you, Michael. Hell, make that one hundred and fifty percent."

Great, which left him with minus fifty for the girls and the rest of the family.

"I've set up a meeting with Connaught for nine a.m. tomorrow morning," Jackson added. "See what you can dream up between now and then."

"Tomorrow? I'm still working on the Dutton project."

"Pass it down the line. I want you on this one. You're the best we have."

As Jackson left, Michael set his briefcase on his assistant's desk. Helen Reed, a slender blonde with hazel eyes and creamy skin, slammed down the phone.

He looked at her in surprise. Helen rarely had words with anyone. She was one of the friendliest, nicest people he'd ever met. In fact, sometimes she was too nice. Her biggest fault was letting other people take advantage of her. "Something wrong?"

"Tony is back in town."

Anthony De Luca, his best friend and former brother-in-law -- the biggest troublemaker to come out of North Beach in the past fifteen years? He smiled at the thought. Not that he wasn't still pissed that Tony had taken off so soon after Angela's funeral. Tony could have stuck around. He could have helped with the kids, with the rest of the family. But as usual Tony had bailed out.

But he knew his friend had been devastated by his little sister's death, and he could hardly blame the guy for wanting to crawl away and lick his wounds. He'd wanted to do much the same thing. But that was the difference between them -- Tony

cut and ran whenever problems came up while he usually had to stay and clean up the mess.

"When you call him back, you can tell him--" Helen's voice faltered.

"Tell him what?"

"That I'm engaged to be married. That I don't need grief from him."

"Why didn't you just tell him that?"

"Because he wouldn't let me get a word in. He just kept talking about how he's bought a boat, and he's come home, and I should wear something sexy when he comes to pick me up tonight." Helen shook her head, bitterness filling her eyes. "As if I've been sitting here on the edge of my seat, desperately waiting for his call."

Michael didn't think it would be prudent to mention she'd done exactly that for almost six months, until she'd gone to a reunion party of their old high school gang and fallen in love with Joey Scopazzi.

"I'm sure he'll stop bothering you once he finds out about you and Joey."

"I hope so." Helen cleared her throat as she changed the subject. "I understand Mrs. Polking quit."

"She didn't like wearing green paint."

Helen smiled. "Too bad. Green might have been an improvement."

"By the way, any messages from Happy Hollow School?"

"No. Why?"

"I dropped the girls off there this morning. They must not have burned down the school yet."

"Shall I call another agency for after-school care?"

"Please. See if you can find someone with a sense of humor, someone pretty and fun, young." Michael suddenly saw Joanna in his mind, her warm brown eyes, her soft skin, her gentle manner -- her eerie resemblance to the woman he had sworn to love for all time. Maybe that's why he'd felt such a connection to her. It couldn't be anything else.

"I don't think Mary Poppins is available," Helen said. "Maybe you should think about getting someone for the girls on a long-term basis."

"I can't get a nanny to stay three weeks, Helen. One month would look long-term to me."

"I'm talking about dating again, meeting someone else. The girls could use a woman's influence."

"The only woman they want is their mother," he said, adding under his breath, "And they think they've found her."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." He looked up as someone called his name from down the hall. "Speak of the devil."

Tony De Luca strolled down the corridor, a big grin on his tanned face. He wore faded blue jeans, a light blue T-shirt, and a baseball cap. The guy never changed. While Michael grew older Tony seemed to stay the same, a happy-go-lucky, carefree guy.

He and Tony had met in sixth grade. They had been best friends ever since. When Michael's mother had decided to remarry for the third time and move to New York just three months before Michael's high school graduation, Michael had moved in with the

De Lucas, so he could finish his senior year. The De Lucas had given him the stable family life he had always wanted. When he married Angela he and Tony had truly become brothers.

"Talking about me again?" Tony asked. "Hi, beautiful," he said to Helen. "Miss me?"

"Uh, Tony. Check out the finger," Michael said pointedly.

Tony's grin faded as he looked down at Helen's hand. "What's that?"

"An engagement ring. I'm marrying Joey Scopazzi in three weeks." Her words came out rough and edgy.

"You're what?" Tony asked in a shocked voice.

"I'm getting married."

"But -- but why?"

"Because I..." She looked at Michael as if she couldn't remember why.

"Because you love Joey," he prompted.

"Right, because I love Joey."

"Joey Scopazzi? The kid who wore braces for eighteen years, whose glasses always slid off his face into his tapioca pudding? You're marrying him?"

"He doesn't wear braces or glasses anymore, and yes, I'm marrying him. I want a family and a house and kids, things you don't have any interest in." She stood up abruptly, clutching a batch of papers to her chest. "Excuse me, I have copies to make."

Tony shook his head in bewilderment as she walked down the hall. "Engaged? I can't believe it. She's been following me around since seventh grade. We've been dating on and off for twelve years. She's always been there for me."

"But you haven't always been there for her. She's an attractive woman--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you? I got three postcards from you in the past year, none with a return address."

"I can't believe she got engaged that fast. She knew I was coming back. I told her I needed time to think after Angela died."

"People take a couple of weeks to think, a month at the most. You've been gone almost a year." He opened the door to his office, and Tony followed him inside.

"So I had a lot to think about."

"Did you come to any conclusions?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." Tony smiled proudly. "I bought a boat, Michael. She's a beauty. Wait until you see her."

"The boat is here?"

"Yeah. The brother of a friend of mine has been sailing out of the San Juan Islands up north, but he needed some quick cash and decided to sell his boat."

"And you just happened to have some cash? What did you do -- rob a bank?"

"I saved it."

He laughed. "No way."

"I did. Okay, I had a few good hands of poker, too."

"Did you cheat?"

"Does it matter?" Tony asked with a grin. "Anyway, I came home to pick up the boat, say hello to the family, and see if Helen wants to go back with me. She would love the Caribbean."