



**KIDNAPPED**

**DEE  
HENDERSON**



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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*Kidnapped*

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*“Every one then who hears these words of mine  
and does them will be like a wise man  
who built his house upon the rock;  
and the rain fell, and the floods came,  
and the winds blew and beat upon that house,  
but it did not fall, because it had been  
founded on the rock.”*

MATTHEW 7:24-25

## PROLOGUE

Wedding guests crowded the reception hall, and the accumulated noise made it hard to carry on a conversation. Caroline shielded her sister's wedding dress sleeve from a guest turning abruptly with a piece of chocolate cake. She wished she could convince Sharon to find a place to sit for a minute instead of circling the room greeting every guest again. Caroline leaned in toward Sharon. "Who's the man talking with Mark?"

Her sister looked around people to see who her new husband was speaking with. "The good-looking guy in the tux and black tie? Mark's cousin, Luke Falcon."

Caroline's interest was piqued. Luke stood taller than most around him, watching the gathering, even as he held a glass and gestured occasionally as he spoke. Twice in the last ten minutes he had made a point of turning to keep track of where she and Sharon were in the crowd. He was probably keeping track of Sharon rather than herself, but it was still disconcerting.

Even from across the room she was aware the scrutiny came with neither a smile nor a frown; he just studied. It reminded her of the first days of a school term as wary students scoped out their new teacher.

“The cousin who’s an FBI agent?” Caroline asked. If Luke had gray eyes to go with that thick black hair, curling just a bit around his temples, and a pleasant voice to listen to, she knew what she would decide about him. She already liked what she knew about him by reputation.

“Yes. Luke arrived about twenty minutes before the ceremony; I heard his flight got delayed by bad weather.” Sharon picked up a piece of wedding cake from the refreshment table. Caroline gratefully accepted an offered cup of punch, her throat dry from the nonstop exchange of greetings.

“The photographer wants a few more wedding pictures in the chapel before we move over to the restaurant for the evening,” Sharon said. “Could you find Benjamin for me?”

“I can try.” Her nephew was incredibly proud of the fact he’d been allowed to stand up with Sharon and Mark and hold the rings for them. He wasn’t so thrilled at the realization that he had to wear the suit and tie even after the ceremony. Caroline wouldn’t be surprised to find Benjamin had made an escape to less confining surroundings once his duties were done.

She left Sharon at the refreshment table with the minister’s wife and started the search. Small boys were not easy to locate in a sea of adults. Benjamin had slipped behind some chairs to join Mark and Luke, his tie still on but tugged loose, and what looked like a stack of baseball cards in his hand.

Relieved to spot him, Caroline headed across the room. Mark saw her coming and leaned down to say something to Benjamin. Moments later her nephew came to meet her, parting the adults in his way like a general going into battle. “I’m to rescue you.”

“Good, I need rescuing.” She let him catch her hand and tug her toward the guys.

“Mr. Luke, this is my aunt Carol.”

She wasn’t ready for the instant introduction, but she smiled and offered her hand. “Caroline Lane.”

“Hello, Caroline. Luke Falcon,” he replied, shifting his glass to free his hand.

Baritone—a really nice baritone that had a mellow smoothness and matched his nice smile. She liked it instantly. She held his gaze as he took her hand and she liked what she saw: realistic, grounded. He must have seen too much in his job to have the eyes of a dreamer. Luke was taller than she had realized and not quite as handsome as she first thought. Too much living showed on his face.

When he released her hand, she wrapped both of hers around her glass of punch and realized it was time to take a breath. He looked good in the tux, relaxed. No one should be that comfortable in a tux. He was studying her again, but in a casual way, having apparently made up his mind about her.

She glanced at Mark, quickly smiled, and looked down at her nephew, much more at ease with someone a third of Luke’s age.

Benjamin slid a badge bigger than his hand into his suit pocket so it rested shield out. “Aunt Carol, I’m going to be a lawman too.”

“It looks great.” And it looked real. She silently gave Luke credit for being comfortable around kids. Adults who didn’t spend much time with them either treated her eight-year-old nephew as if he were half that age or expected him to behave with the maturity of a young adult.

“You would make a great lawman one day,” she concurred, brushing Benjamin’s honey brown hair back from his forehead with a quick swipe and dislodging the confetti. “I’m afraid your mom needs us for a few more pictures in the chapel.”

“More? They already took a hundred.”

“Just a few more. Then she said you could lose the coat and tie.”

“About time.”

Mark laughed and held out his hand. “Come on, buddy. We’ll go help your mom look beautiful.”

Caroline risked meeting Luke’s gaze. The man was still watching, a slight smile playing around his mouth. “You’re welcome to join us. We’ll be moving over to the restaurant after the pictures are complete, and I think—”

His pager went off, interrupting her. “My apologies.” He glanced at the number but didn’t make a move to return the call. “You were saying?”

“Just that it will be a bit less chaotic.” She nodded to the pager. “Trouble?”

He looked to make sure Benjamin had moved out of earshot. “I’m working a murder case. Life is a bit hectic today.”

“I’ll be glad to save you a place if you need to go make some calls.”

“They can wait.” Luke looked tired. It wasn’t in his posture or expression but in his eyes.

She found her own nervousness disappearing and in its place a comfortable concern starting to bloom. They would see each other for decades to come at family gatherings; he was safe to treat as family. “Then you must come over to the restaurant. It will be quieter, and you can have something more substantial to eat for dinner than cake.”

“I’ll do that. It was a beautiful wedding, Caroline. You did a nice job.”

She felt a blush start and hated the fast warmth. “Thanks, I enjoyed helping Sharon put it together.”

He just smiled at her demur. Someone had been telling him details she thought were private. Sharon had needed to work more hours on call at the hospital in order to get time off for the honeymoon, and Caroline had been able to stagger her summer job hours so she could help with wedding preparations. Making

it a perfect day had been her gift to her sister. She hadn't realized others would hear about her efforts though.

"Mark's happy. It's nice to see," Luke said.

"So is Sharon."

"Benjamin mentioned he gets to spend the next week with you?"

Caroline nodded. "We're going on day trips to a nearby ranch to ride horses."

"An ideal vacation for a young man." Luke set down his glass and tugged a pen from his pocket. He wrote a number on his napkin and offered it to her. "If you need anything in the next week, call me. I'll be back at my Sandy Hill home for the foreseeable future. Just in case Benjamin tumbles off one of those mighty steeds as he does battle with imaginary dragons. Mark and Sharon will be more than a few hours away."

"I appreciate it." She memorized the number as she folded the napkin in her hand. "Benjamin is serious about the badge and the idea of being a lawman. I'm sure he'll be asking you some questions over dinner."

"He already asked if I would teach him to shoot."

"And what did you say?"

He smiled. "Ask Sharon."

Caroline ran her tongue around her teeth. "Smart man. I need to go get my picture taken."

"Hmm. I'd like one."

"A wedding picture?"

"That too. If you keep blushing like that, the photographer will get a wonderful photo."

"You're not supposed to notice."

"That would be a shame."

She smiled back at him, unable to resist his subtle flirting. "You can comment then."

He offered his arm. "Let me see you safely to the chapel."

She rested her hand on his jacket sleeve. Her long dress made walking with a natural stride impossible, but he adjusted to the constraint from the first step. The crowd parted for them. At the door to the chapel, Luke's pager went off again. Caroline slid her hand from his arm. "They'll just keep trying to get your attention. You might as well make your calls. I'll make sure we wait for you."

He looked at the number on the pager. "Unfortunately true. Go finish your work of the day while I finish mine, and then come keep me company tonight so we can talk without distractions."

She wasn't used to someone so swiftly claiming her time, but she laughed, appreciating it and him. "I'll do that." She smiled as she walked into the chapel, wondering just how much of her own life was about to change as a result of this wedding day. She wasn't one for taking great adventures, but occasionally—a little diving into the deep end of life might get interesting, and she was in a mood tonight to find out.

"Would you like to walk awhile?" Luke leaned down to be heard as he paused behind her chair at the restaurant table.

The bride and groom were away, and the guests were dispersing. Caroline nodded. She needed to stretch her legs and get some fresh air before she called it an evening. It was either accept the invitation or admit to herself she was too flustered by his attention to do so.

He held her chair for her, caught up his jacket from the back of his chair, and said good night for them both. The hotel where she was staying adjoined the restaurant, and Luke escorted her through the restaurant to the garden path connecting the two buildings.

He'd waited for her in the hotel lobby earlier while she went up and changed from her wedding finery to something more

comfortable for the evening meal. He had left his tie in the car and turned up the sleeves of his white shirt to his elbows and relaxed, while she had just lost her bravery.

“I learned a lot about Sharon and Benjamin at dinner. Now tell me about Caroline Lane.”

Caroline wasn't sure how to answer. “There's not much to tell. I grew up in Benton, went away to college to get my teaching degree, and returned to Benton when I graduated. I've been teaching fifth grade at a private Christian school ever since.”

She caught his smile at how she summarized her life. “You love to teach.”

She glanced away to inspect the flowers along the garden path. “Yes. I grew up thinking of myself as a teacher, the same way my sister wanted to be a doctor.” He didn't ask another question, and she tried again to get him to talk about himself. So far this evening he'd smoothly turned aside questions by other guests at dinner. “Did you always want to be in law enforcement?”

“I like making the world a safer place.” His smile reminded her of Mark's—self-knowing, touched with humor. “That makes being an FBI agent sound grander than it is, but the job suits me. There aren't a lot of gray areas to crime.” He gestured to the bench up ahead, and she moved that direction, taking a seat.

She noted that while he said the job suited him, he hadn't added that he enjoyed it. She knew it couldn't be that pleasant, the way his days unfolded. He'd come to the wedding with a murder investigation underway, and even through dinner he'd received two more pages. It was obvious that when he was quiet, his thoughts hadn't been on the conversations around him but rather on the details of a case that left him looking grim. “It's nice to have this day over; it's been long.”

“Very. Do you think Sharon and Mark getting married was a good idea?”

She turned startled eyes toward him. “Don't you?”

“It’s just a question, Caroline.” He stretched out his legs and folded his hands across his chest, relaxing as he had earlier when talking with Benjamin, like a load was shifting off his shoulders.

“It took Sharon a long time to get over the death of her first husband, and as time passed, I wondered if she’d ever want to move on. Mark—he made her laugh again like I hadn’t heard in a long time. Sharon enjoys being married, being a wife. So yes, I think it will be a good marriage. They love each other a lot.”

“My cousin has been career focused since college. He waited so long to marry, I admit I was surprised when I got his call. I understood once I met Sharon. Mark already loves Benjamin like his own.”

Maybe it was the day and the direction of her thoughts today, but Luke sounded wistful. Caroline hesitated but asked the burning question anyway. “Have you ever been married?”

She knew so little about Luke Falcon. While Mark had mentioned him often and spoke highly of the man, his remarks hadn’t included many hard facts.

“No. I came close back in college, but the timing never seemed to work out. Jenny and I dated through high school and college, but I ended up going to one coast and she to another for graduate work.” His expression cleared. “I’m glad now in a way; it would have been hard on her. Some people have a life that can be shared more easily than others. My partner is married. Jackie’s got two boys and a husband who adore her. I watch them and often wonder how they’ve made it work.”

“You’ve got a job that’s hard to leave behind at the end of the day.”

Luke nodded. “The day they invented the pager and mobile phone was the day police work fundamentally changed for the worse. The job’s changed me,” he admitted. “Didn’t someone once say something about the sadness of innocence lost? A few years at this job took away a lot of good assumptions I had about people.”

He shook his head. “How did we get on such a morbid topic as work? Are you and Sharon big into holiday traditions?”

“The important things about blending families.” She nudged off one shoe and drew her leg up under her, smiling as she considered his question. The traditional days to celebrate mattered a lot to her, if only because they provided excuses to stop and reconnect with friends and family. If she had her wish, every one of them would be a big deal.

“The very important things,” he agreed. “What should I know first?”

“We’re a close family.” Because she thought he was alone too much in his life, she searched her memory for all the events that would clue him in on how that was about to change. She smiled. “Next time he sees you, you’re sure to get a Benjamin welcoming hug. He’s into establishing his circle of important people right now, and getting a dad and an ‘uncle’ in a matter of a day is a big deal for him. This wedding anniversary will be more than just a day for Mark and Sharon to remember.”

She pushed her hair behind her ear. “I like Christmas best. Snow, the smell of fresh-cut pine, and hot cider. I start piling gifts away in October, and around the second week of December the tree goes up. Benjamin likes to try to guess the gifts.”

“Would it be a bit scrooge of me to mention I often choose to work the Christmas Day shift? By the end of December I’ve had about as much Christmas as I want for the year.”

“It does get a bit overwhelming when Christmas music starts in November. We’re more traditional about birthdays—there’s always a favorite meal and a cake, and depending on what seems most important, either a trip somewhere or one significant gift. It’s always been kind of like a wish-come-true day for us.”

“I like that idea.”

“You do celebrate birthdays, don’t you?” Caroline teased.

"I take the day off if possible—leave the pager at work—and find somewhere off the beaten path to explore."

"Time being the most precious gift of all, given the demands in your year?" Caroline asked.

"Yes."

"Where have you explored?"

"Caves, forests, underwater reefs, shipwrecks. I went sky-diving one year and about ended up with permanent vertigo."

"Do you have plans for this year?"

"I'm getting old. I'm leaning toward horseback riding for the day followed by a steak grilled over the fire. No more walking."

She laughed, suspecting he could probably do a ten-mile hike on a bad day without breaking a sweat. "That sounds like a nice day to look forward to."

"Have you settled on plans for your News Year's Eve yet?"

"No."

"Spend it with me. Those two days I will have off, and I'd enjoy sharing the celebration with you."

"Thank you, Luke, but you don't need to save me from being sad. I won't have Sharon and Benjamin with me for the holidays this year, but it won't be so bad."

"I'm asking purely for selfish reasons."

"It's over two months away. You might change your mind."

"I won't."

"I admit, you're puzzling me. It seems like an odd request, asked so far in advance."

"Not from where I sit."

She didn't quite know what to say. She slowly nodded. "Okay. I'll block off New Year's Eve and Day as taken."

"Thank you." He leaned back to study the hotel. "What time did Karla say she was bringing Benjamin back to the room?"

She glanced at her watch. "I've got another twenty minutes

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before the pool closes. Benjamin will stay in the water until the last minute and ask to swim again first thing in the morning.”

“Then there’s time for coffee.” Luke rose and offered her his hand. “You prefer the flavored kind I noticed.”

She let him pull her to her feet and balanced against him while she slipped back on her shoes. “A touch of French vanilla makes coffee so much more memorable.” Like this evening had turned out to be memorable. She was glad she had joined him.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *One Year Later*

Mark Falcon knew success and enjoyed it. As the late afternoon sun came in the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office, it reflected off the architecture awards on the side table, a rainbow painting the wall. His son made the shadow of a barking dog in the blue and purple bands. Mark judged the distance and made a bear appear, which moved in to gobble up the dog.

Benjamin laughed. “Your hands are huge, Dad.”

The boy’s wonder combined with the name *Dad*—he had done a few things very right in his life, and marrying Sharon and adopting her son last year were near the top of the list. “Yours will one day be as big.” He made the shadow of a tree house. “The tree house blueprints should be done printing. Why don’t you go see?”

Benjamin dashed from the office to the open drafting room. Mark followed at a more relaxed pace. Nine now, with a touch of MacGyver in his unquenchable curiosity, his son seemed to be thriving under his attention. Mark was trying to rearrange his life to provide that time, but he had worried about the transition.

He was confident now that keeping the family in Benton, Georgia, an hour and twenty minutes outside Atlanta, had been

the right decision. The schools were good, the hospital and medical clinic where Sharon continued to work top-notch, and the town still had open land and woods around it. Mark didn't mind the occasional commute to Atlanta when business required it; the pace in Benton better fit what he wanted for his family.

He watched his son carefully tear the blueprint from the wide printer. "It's perfect."

Mark picked up an empty carrying tube. "I'm glad you like it. We'd better stop by the lumber mill this weekend to order our supplies. By the end of October you'll be inviting your friends over."

"You'll teach me to use the saw?"

"I will. You can even make the trim if you like; we'll finish this tree house right. A good architect always finishes the finer details." He offered Ben a pen and an official label for the blueprint tube. "What do you say we pick up your mom and get dinner? I'm starved."

Sharon tried to keep her last patient appointment to no later than five on Wednesday nights so they could have a family night. The last couple of weeks their dates had been hot dogs from a street vendor and rented in-line skates at the park. For a practical doctor, Sharon didn't always act much older than her son.

"Can we invite Aunt Carol?"

"If she's free." Mark had a soft spot in his heart with Caroline's name on it. She had introduced him to Sharon. "Call her and see."

They ended up at the mall after eating at the pizza buffet. It was Benjamin's idea of the perfect evening and Mark would agree. He walked with his wife window-shopping while Caroline and Benjamin invaded stores to compare toys and laugh at silly things like fish wind chimes and talking doorbells.

He paused with Sharon at the upper floor courtyard, waiting

for Benjamin and Caroline to catch up, and couldn't resist leaning over to kiss his wife. A year since their honeymoon and she could still make him forget his name.

Mark reluctantly ended the kiss. "Tell me you don't have early rounds tomorrow."

She smiled slowly. "Nine o'clock."

Mark rubbed his thumb on Sharon's shoulder blade, appreciating the answer, and even more the promise in her smile. A guy didn't deserve to be this happy. He couldn't resist reaching up to touch her face and trace her smile and the perfect little dimple next to it. "I'll take the morning off and drive you in to work, then take Benjamin to school." His words were simple enough, but the huskiness in his voice conveyed a return promise for tonight. He hoped Benjamin would find a book and volunteer to turn in early with his Snoopy desk light on. It was time to go home. Mark slid his hand down to grasp Sharon's, looked around, and didn't see Benjamin.

"He's across the way at the pet store scoping out the puppies," Caroline offered. She was leaning against the railing overlooking the lower level, her attention focused across the walkway at his son.

The faint blush coloring her cheek and the back of her neck made Mark squeeze Sharon's hand, move to the railing, and lean forward to see Caroline's expression. "Sorry."

She smiled even as her blush deepened. "Don't be." Caroline watched Sharon join Benjamin at the pet store window and laugh with him as one of the puppies rose to plant his feet on the glass. "My sister deserves to be happy."

"So do you."

"I am happy."

"Hmm." Mark thought she was, to the extent she didn't know what she was missing in life. "Would you like a date next week? I know a nice guy who's interested."

“You know I’m seeing Luke.”

“My cousin could use some competition. He’s cancelled on you too often due to work.”

“He’s been busy.”

“No disrespect to Luke, but he’s had a year to get his priorities sorted out. Work followed him to the wedding, and it’s still following him. I’d say that’s enough time to reevaluate things. Besides, you would really like this guy, Caroline. Let me at least introduce you.”

“Is he an architect or in construction?”

“He owns a furniture business.”

She turned to rest her back against the railing. “He sounds more interesting than your financial adviser.”

“Who thought you were adorable and was crushed when you politely declined a second date. Come on. You’ll enjoy yourself. You ought to take me up on an introduction at least once a year.”

She answered his verbal nudge with a smile. “Next week—” She shook her head. “Sorry, school extracurricular events are just getting started, and I’ll be tied up with registration and scheduling.”

“And the following week you’ll be busy grading papers.”

“What can I say? A fifth-grade teacher’s time is in high demand.” She patted his arm. “I’m comfortable being single and still looking. Marriage is work.”

“But the compensation is high.” How Caroline ended up shy when her sister was an extrovert was a mystery, but he thought it rather a nice one. He was going to help her find a relationship that worked; he had set his mind on it. She was just going to take someone special. He thought it was Luke, but that wasn’t coming to pass as he’d hoped, much to his disappointment. Mark leaned down to pick up the new package resting near her feet. “I see Benjamin found his kite.”

“It will need a lot of string and running room to launch it.”

“Those are the best kind.” He slipped the receipt in his billfold, then tugged out the money to repay Caroline, and tucked it along with an extra twenty in the side pocket of her purse. “Go to a movie on me.”

“Thanks, Mark.”

“You’re welcome, and please rub off on your nephew a bit more. I had to tug the fact he wanted a kite out of him.” He added the sack to those he carried. Benjamin was just beginning to accept that it was okay to ask him for something. “He’s frugal to the point of making me feel like the kid and he the adult.”

“He’ll grow out of it by the time he gets a driver’s license and wants to borrow the car and twenty bucks.”

“I hope so. Ben’s making me feel guilty about being rich. It’s been a while since that emotion was around.”

Caroline laughed and he smiled back. She had long ago given him the gift of liking him regardless of what he owned.

He remembered what he meant to ask earlier, and Mark’s smile faded. “Any more hang-up phone calls?”

Caroline’s smile disappeared too. She shook her head.

Someone had developed the habit of calling her at 6 a.m. and hanging up when she answered. “You’ll tell me if they start again?”

“Yes.”

He searched her face, looking for any indication she was merely being polite. If he thought trouble was blowing in again, he’d mention it to Luke. Hang-up phone calls had started the trouble for her last year, and Mark wasn’t going to let it flare up again without reacting early.

Luke and Caroline had gone several tense rounds last fall over what to do. Luke tried to protect her against an unidentified person on the edge of stalking her, and Caroline found Luke’s concern smothering. Mark didn’t want to open that can of

worms again now that they were finally getting their relationship back on track, but if trouble had returned, ignoring it wouldn't help. Mark understood the edgy concern Luke felt—a few of the “gifts” involved had been sent to Sharon to be delivered to Caroline.

“You’ve got that look again. That protective, in-your-domain, determined look,” Caroline remarked.

“You *are* in my domain,” Mark replied, keeping it low-key, still feeling out the boundaries she’d accept.

“I appreciate it, but let this be.”

If she was denying getting calls, he didn’t have much choice. “I’ll let this be.”

She smiled her thanks. A guy could get lost in that smile. It was time he reminded Luke a year had passed. If the man wasn’t so busy with work, he would have long ago realized just how special Caroline was and made their relationship permanent. “Are you going to join us for Labor Day weekend in Atlanta?”

“I’ll have to bring some work along, but Benjamin insists I come see his Atlanta Braves in person.”

“I’m glad.” He’d known if he set Benjamin to the task he’d get a yes. “Plan to come Friday and stay through Monday evening.”

“We’ll talk about it.”

Sharon and Benjamin joined them, and Mark squeezed her hand and let the matter drop. He stepped forward to offer the sack holding the kite to his son. “Let’s go home, buddy. I want a rematch on the video game.”

Caroline slowed her sedan and lifted a hand to acknowledge Benjamin’s wave as Mark pulled into his driveway. It wound back to the home he had designed and built with a family in mind. An evening at the mall had been a nice time. She appreciated

the fact Mark went out of his way to include her occasionally in their family nights.

She clicked her headlights to high beam as she entered the heavier woods, glad the country road was rarely traveled except for residents who lived in the area. Down an incline, around a forty-degree curve to the left, she slowed and made a sharp turn into the gravel driveway to her house. The headlights bounced off trees and hanging branches and cast moving shadows along both sides of her car.

She pulled into the garage and parked, the darkness total as she shut off the car. Her keys held as weapons between her knuckles, she walked to the farmhouse, opened the kitchen door, and flipped lights on inside. The kitchen counters were clear, the spider fern turning slowly in the movement of air, a faint steady click and then the icemaker dumped ice. She was alone.

She shut off the alarm system and walked over to touch the new message button on the answering machine. The single message was the library confirming that a requested book was in. Whoever had been calling her had moved on. The troubles last fall had been more than enough for both Luke and herself: phone calls, unexplained small gifts, that last frightening bouquet of roses. The matter was behind her now, and she wanted it to stay buried.

Caroline moved toward the hallway, stepping out of her shoes and tossing them toward the steps. When Sharon and Benjamin had lived with her, the living room was often strewn with toys and the cupboards filled with the basics that little boys loved. The house was too quiet now, and the holes on the shelves where Sharon's knickknacks had been were still waiting to be filled.

Caroline sorted the mail she'd picked up at the roadside mailbox after school and took the two magazines with her to the back patio. She turned on the outside lights and looked around the backyard and woods before settling into a chair. The backyard

was her special domain, the terraced flower beds and winding walkways her creation.

She flipped through the first magazine. What would she do with a garlic press? She turned down the corner of the catalog page, marking it as a good illustration to use during her chef elective. Somebody in the class could find an Italian recipe that called for the use of this special gadget. Pungent foods tended to get the boys interested in at least trying cooking for themselves.

Caroline thought again about Mark's offer to set up a date and knew she would eventually say yes, if only to sidestep the friendly pressure. Mark was right; Luke had been busy lately, and she had been content to let their relationship drift and not press the issue. She longed for a deeper relationship with Luke. She wanted more, but it hadn't happened over the last year. Maybe it was time to let go of that hope and move on.

*I'm not sure what to do, Lord. Luke is not the kind of guy you push. I'd like to be more than casually dating him, but I don't know how to get that to change. I can't compete with his work, and I'm smart enough not to try. I just don't think he's ready to settle down.*

It was so easy to love Sharon and Benjamin. During the last several years since Sharon's first husband had passed away, Caroline had poured her time and love into helping her sister with Benjamin. It had been a joy to do so. Loving her students was easy too, for she could find ways to help them enjoy school.

But figuring out how to love Luke—he was nearly as much a mystery after a year as he had been the day of her sister's wedding. She admired what she saw in him and thought loving him would be richly worth it, but she didn't know how to get inside his head. He wasn't a man who easily shared much of himself.

The phone rang. Caroline waited for the answering machine to kick in, not willing to answer any calls without first screening them. She hoped there never was another heavy breathing phone

call while Luke was around. The man was a bit frightening when he shifted into work mode.

The phone stopped ringing.

Caroline closed the magazine. Uneasy now with the night around her, she rose. She stepped back inside the house and shut the patio door behind her. No one was out there. No one. But she didn't like the feeling on the back of her neck, wondering if someone was watching again . . .

He watched her rise from the chair through the zoom lens and took one last photo. He'd rattled her with the phone call. He didn't like it when her smile disappeared and those worry lines reappeared, but at least the call had gotten her to look up so he could get the silhouette photo he wanted.

Going by touch, he slowly advanced the film to minimize the clicking sounds. He'd need to develop the photo with care given the backlighting from her house, but he thought all the photos from tonight would turn out.

Leaves tickled his face as he turned to follow lights coming through the trees. A car slowed through the turn in the road and then drove past Caroline's driveway.

Months of watching Caroline had shown she rarely had company after sundown. Her routine was stable—relax on the back patio, go inside and fix dinner, move into the family room to review lesson plans while she watched some TV. If only Caroline could see herself as he did, she'd understand why he had come back.

He was smarter now on how to approach her. He had photos of Benjamin, and he had just about finished his photos of Sharon. He slid the camera into his bag. Easing from the log on which he sat, he moved deeper into the woods.

He would fit into Caroline's life this time, not intrude. Luke would be out of her life soon and Caroline would be all alone again—and his.