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HATCHER



# *The Forgiving Hour*

## Prologue

**Boise, Idaho, May 1998**

The sky that Saturday in May was a brilliant, cloudless blue, sunshine kissing the earth with a promise of the summer to come. There was the scent of green on the afternoon breeze, and windows throughout the subdivision had been thrown open to let it in. Flowering trees were in full bloom; tulips and daffodils bobbed colorful heads at passersby, as if in welcome. Sprinklers kept time on neighborhood lawns with a steady *chick-chick-chick-swoosh ... chick-chick-chick-swoosh ...* while the laughter of playing children filled the air.

It was the perfect sort of day to meet one's future daughter-in-law.

Claire Conway checked the grandfather clock in the entry. Dakota and Sara should be arriving at any moment.

*I love her, Mom, and you're gonna love her just as much as I do.*

She smiled as the two-month-old memory filled her thoughts. She'd been living and working in Seattle on a short-term assignment for her employer, and Dakota had arrived for a visit. They'd just finished supper, her six-foot-four-inch son having polished off two helpings of his favorite casserole and, for dessert, a large slice of cherry cheesecake. And then he'd told her he'd met someone special and was engaged to be married.

It was difficult for her to accept that her son was old enough to be engaged, let alone planning a wedding for July. It shouldn't be this hard to accept, but it was.

At twenty-four, Dakota was six years older than Claire had been when she wed his father.

*And he's twice as mature as his father ever was, she thought with a twinge of the old bitterness.*

But mature or not, Dakota remained her little boy, all six-feet-plus of him. In her mind, she knew he was a grown man. In her heart, he was the towheaded kid with skinned knees, mussed hair, and a smile that made her melt on the inside.

*I love her, Mom, and you're gonna love her just as much as I do.*

Claire didn't doubt for a second that she would love Sara Jennings. She trusted Dakota's judgment. Besides being mature beyond his age, he was intelligent, kind, and generous, a man of integrity and deep moral convictions. If he thought Sara was the woman with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life, then Claire believed it too. Sight unseen.

*Sara's a little older than I am. Seven years to be exact. She thought it should matter—to me and to others—but I convinced her it didn't. She's made me the happiest guy in the world by accepting my proposal.*

The rumble of the Jeep engine pulled her thoughts to the present. She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly before walking to the door and opening it. Stepping into the afternoon sunshine, she watched as Dakota hopped out of the Jeep, then strode around to the passenger side of the vehicle. Once there, he offered his hand to help the young woman disembark.

Claire put on a welcoming smile. She knew Sara had to be even more nervous than she was, and she wanted to do all in her power to make this first meeting a pleasant one. It could set the tone for the rest of their lives. She wanted to prove that mother- and daughter-in-law relationships didn't have to be strained or antagonistic.

A glance at her son's face confirmed the depth of his feelings for the woman on his arm. A warm glow spread out from Claire's heart. To see him like this made all the difficult times of the past fade into obscurity.

Dakota shifted his gaze from Sara to his mother. He grinned. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, yourself."

"Mom, this is Sara. Sara, my mother, Claire Conway."

Claire offered her hand to the young woman, for the first time taking a good look at her. She was tall—at least five ten—and striking. She had cat-green eyes, long and curly burgundy-

colored hair, a flawless complexion, and a perfect figure.

For just a moment, Claire wondered if they'd met before. There was something familiar about her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Conway."

Claire gave her head a slight shake. "Please, call me Claire." That was much easier than trying to explain it was *Ms. rather than Mrs.*

The younger woman revealed a hesitant smile. "I'd like that ... Claire. Thank you."

"Come inside. I've got decaf ready, and I made a coffee cake for the occasion."

"You *baked*?" Dakota's voice was filled with mock surprise.

Claire shot him a censoring glance but couldn't maintain it for long. When he laughed, so did she.

"Like I told you, Sara, Mom nearly forgot how to find the kitchen after I moved out. Now she only cooks at Thanksgiving, at Christmas, and on rare special occasions ... like this one. Right, Mom?"

"Right."

Claire led the way into the house, then left Dakota and Sara in the living room while she proceeded into the kitchen. She heard the young lovers conversing softly as she poured coffee into three china cups and placed them beside the creamer and sugar bowl on a polished silver tray. Even from the other room, she could discern the happiness in her son's voice. Again, she was warmed by it. What mother wouldn't be?

Dakota's early teen years had been hard ones. He'd gotten into more than his fair share of scrapes, taking out his anger and bitterness with rebellious and sometimes reckless behavior. Of course, his anger and bitterness had been no worse than her own, betrayed as they'd been by his father.

Remembering her ex-husband brought a frown to Claire's brow. Foreboding followed on memory's heels, a sense that something was about to go wrong.

But that was ridiculous. Nothing was going wrong. There was no room for anything but joy in this house today. The past was the past. Today they were celebrating the future.

Coffee tray in hand, Claire stepped through the kitchen doorway, then paused, unnoticed, to

observe the two young people. Sara was looking at a display of photos on the mantel. Dakota stood with his arm around her shoulders, smiling contentedly.

“Who is this?” Sara asked him, pointing to a framed snapshot.

Dakota glanced at it. “That’s me and my mom when I was ... oh, about five, I think.”

“Where was it taken?” Sara sounded odd.

“That’s our old house on Garden Street. It’s where I grew up. Mom sold it after she got a divorce, right after I finished grade school.”

“Dakota ... what was your father’s name?”

Lowering his voice, he answered, “I’ve told you why I never talk about him. I promised Mom I wouldn’t.”

Still, after all these years, he was keeping his promise to Claire, a promise she never should have asked him to make. It had been wrong of her to ask it, no matter what the reason. At the very least, she should have released him from it this spring.

She almost spoke up, almost told him so, but something kept her silent ...

Something about Sara.

The younger woman looked up into Dakota’s eyes with an unwavering gaze. “What was his name?” she repeated in a hoarse whisper. “I need to know. I *have* to know.”

“Does it matter that much to you?”

“Yes. Yes, it does.”

Claire was struck again by that sense of impending doom. Something was pressing on her lungs, an enormous, unyielding weight. Each breath came hard.

At long last, Dakota answered Sara’s question. “Porter. His name was David Porter.” There was no bitterness in his reply. He’d forgiven the man long ago. “Why?”

As if sensing Claire’s presence, Sara turned. Her eyes were wide and filled with horror. “Claire ... *Porter? Dave* was your husband? He’s Dakota’s father?”

Claire remembered now. She remembered where she’d seen Sara before. The coffee tray slipped from her hands and crashed to the floor.

It had been twelve years, and the young college student had become a woman. Sara had changed. Her hair was long, full, and curly instead of cropped short. Her figure had blossomed,

no longer the stick-thin girl she'd been. She'd grown only more beautiful with the passage of time.

But it *was* her.

"What's going on?" Dakota asked, glancing back and forth between his mother and his fiancée in confusion.

Sara looked at him. Her voice quavered as she asked, "Did your dad call you Mikey?"

"Where did you hear that?"

Sara took a faltering step backward, out of his reach. "It can't be. It can't. God wouldn't do this. He wouldn't do this to us." She shook her head, almost keening the words. "He wouldn't do this."

"Would someone *please* tell me what's going on?" Dakota looked from his fiancée to Claire. "Mom?"

Sara turned toward her too. "Say it isn't true. Please say it isn't true."

But Claire couldn't comply.

Because it *was* true.

Her thoughts hurtled back twelve years to the first—and only other—time she'd seen Sara.

Sara Jennings ...

The other woman ...

The girl who'd destroyed Claire's marriage, her home, her life.

Hell was real. Claire knew it ... because she was in it now.