

**Praise for the suspense novels of
TARA TAYLOR QUINN**

“Combining her usual superb sense of characterization with a realistically gritty plot, Quinn has created an exceptionally powerful book.”

—*Booklist* on *Behind Closed Doors*

“I was riveted from the first page to the last. *Behind Closed Doors* is a thoroughly enjoyable read.”

—*All About Romance*

“I could not put the book down; it is a character-driven, riveting story from beginning to end. Leave the lights on; *Behind Closed Doors* will scare you silly. I stayed up late into the night to finish, turning the pages at a rapid pace.”

—*Romance Junkies*

“With *In Plain Sight*, Tara Taylor Quinn delivers a riveting, suspenseful story...crackles with action

—*Bookreporter.com*

“Character-driven suspense at its best with rapid-fire pacing that makes you feel as if the pages are turning themselves.”

—Hallie Ephron, author of *Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel*, on *In Plain Sight*

“This character-driven thriller will hook the audience from the onset until the final new beginning.”

—Harriet Klausner on *Behind Closed Doors*

“*Behind Closed Doors* is a powerful, riveting read that’s impossible to put down. Tara Taylor Quinn writes a believable story.”

—*Bookloons*

“*Behind Closed Doors* is a thrilling suspense.”

—*Authors After Dark*

“One of the skills that has served Quinn best is her ability to explore edgier subjects.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Dear Reader,

We're in Phoenix, Arizona. Young men are being brutalized. A judge is receiving death threats. And a woman and her young son are missing. Several baby boys have died, apparently of SIDS—but some people are beginning to wonder if that's really the cause and they point to a pediatrician as the prime suspect. A larger-than-life scenario? Sure.

But come a little closer. At close range, things can look very different.

You trust the folks you've known and associated with for twenty years. You trust your most valued employee, your right-hand man. They've always been there for you. Or have they?

At close range, religion isn't always spiritual. Cops aren't always good.

And at close range, the person in the bed next to you might not love you at all.

What people say isn't always the truth—when you get close enough.

And up close, what you see is only one perspective.

At close range, you're mostly alone. Nothing is clear. And fear awaits.

Come a little closer....

I love to hear from my readers. You can reach me at www.tarataylor.com or P.O. Box 13584, Mesa, AZ 85216. Let me know what you think—and how you feel—about this book.

Tara Taylor Quinn

AT CLOSE RANGE



To Mindy Barney, whose intelligence, dedication and heart bring promise to a world that needs them, help to children who might otherwise be lost and cohesion to a family that loves you very much.

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Members of the Phoenix press filled her courtroom. Tension filled her gut. Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Hannah Montgomery leaned forward.

“We are back on the record with case number CR2008-000351. Would those present please identify themselves?”

Hannah heard the attorneys state their names for the record. She knew both lawyers well. Had been listening to them drone on for six days now in this trial that seemed as though it would never end.

But she wasn't looking at them.

Her eyes locked on the dark-suited man who'd just slipped quietly into the back of the room. There wasn't anything particularly remarkable about him. He was twenty-nine years old. Average height. Average weight. His straight brown hair was thick and short. Wholesome. Businesslike.

Hannah couldn't seem to pull her focus away from him. Because she'd been dreading this moment for the entire nine months she'd been administering this hideous case? If so, the nondescript man would have been a disappointment.

Surely an icon, a godlike figure to his followers, should stand out more.

He met her gaze and nodded, his expression properly respectful. Taking a seat in the second row, arms at his sides, he glanced around with an air more curious—more childlike—than controlling.

Jaime, Hannah's bailiff, cleared her throat, catching Hannah's attention.

Robert Keith, attorney for the defense, had reintroduced the young man at his side, Kenny Hill. Mr. Hill, wearing a navy suit today, made eye contact with the jury.

Just as he did every time he was introduced.

The eighteen-year-old had more bravado than years and sense combined. As had his Ivory Nation compatriot who'd sat in that very seat twelve months earlier, in a trial almost as long as this one. That kid, another young “brother” in Arizona's most influential white supremacist organization, had cried in the end, though, when Hannah had sentenced him to twenty years for breaking and entering, kidnapping and weapons theft.

Her judgment had been overturned on appeal while Hannah was taking family leave, mourning for the adopted son she'd lost to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. A mistrial had been declared and the young man was free.

Sweating beneath the black folds of her robe, Hannah glanced at Keith. “You may call your next witness.”

“The defense calls Bobby Donahue, Your Honor.”

“Mr. Donahue.” She forced herself to look at him again. And to look away. “Please step forward and be sworn in.” She indicated Jaime, who'd risen from her seat to Hannah's left.

“Please raise your right hand and state your name.” Jaime's voice didn't falter, and Hannah made a mental note to congratulate her youngest employee. Jaime had been nervous at the prospect of facing this dangerous leader.

“Bobby Donahue.”

Bobby. Not Robert. Not Robert G. Just Bobby.

Bobby, who couldn't appear that morning, in spite of the subpoena, due to a Wednesday church service he'd officiated without absence for more than five years. Bobby, who'd offered to appear in

service he'd officiated without absence for more than five years. Bobby, who'd offered to appear in her court at 1:30 that afternoon instead.

In the interests of justice and saving the state the money it would cost to enforce the original subpoena, Hannah had approved the request.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth..."

Jaime's voice faded as Hannah watched the witness, getting too clear a glimpse of the man's eyes. Ghost. God. Infallible. Unstoppable. All words she'd heard applied to Bobby Donahue over the years.

"I do." Donahue regarded Jaime with apparent respect.

He's vindictive. That was the warning Hannah and her staff had been given by other court employees, the press, even the honorable William Horne, Hannah's social companion and fellow judge who'd officiated far more Ivory Nation trials than Hannah.

While he had yet to get caught at any offense, Bobby Donahue never allowed a wrong to go unpunished, a disloyalty to go unavenged.

Or so they said.

And Hannah, having fought her way off the streets and into college, didn't compromise the law for anyone.

Dr. Brian Hampton was not in the mood to cooperate. Especially with a reporter. And dammit, why wasn't Hannah answering her phone? She'd said she was staying in her chambers for lunch, preparing for the afternoon session of a trial that was taking far too much out of her.

That last was his assessment. Not hers.

Not that he'd told her so. As a friend he'd earned the right to speak frankly with the beautiful, blond, too-smart-for-her-own-good woman. But he'd also learned when it was best for him to keep his mouth shut.

Hannah Montgomery had mastered the art of independence.

Right now, he needed her to answer the private line that rang at her massive cherrywood desk.

When his call went to voice mail a second time, Brian shoved up the sleeve of his blue dress shirt with barely controlled impatience, glancing at his watch. And stopped. Hell.

Where had that hour and a half gone? Last he'd looked, it had been barely noon. And now it was quarter to two?

He'd only seen...

Brian paused. Counted.

Okay, he'd seen seven patients in the past hour. Seven patients under four. Which explained the missing hour.

The explanation didn't help him at all.

He'd had a message that morning from a polite *Sun News* reporter who wanted to talk to him "at his earliest convenience." As long as Brian's convenience happened sometime that day—otherwise he was going to print his story with a "no comment" from Dr. Hampton.

His story. That was all. No hint about the content. Or even the topic.

For Brian, a man who spent his days with people under the age of twelve and his nights largely alone, a meeting with the local rag was not a comfortable proposition.

And what could they have on him anyway? His biggest offense was an inability to keep track of

time, arriving either very early or very late—no prejudice either way—to just about every appointment he'd ever had.

As much as he tried to come up with even a parking infraction—or an unpaid speeding ticket—there were none

there were none.

He hadn't had his stereo on in weeks, didn't have anyone around to yell at, hadn't thrown a party since graduating from med school. And the only woman he'd slept with in the past year was his steady girlfriend, Cynthia, a twenty-seven-year-old single mother, so an exposé of his wild lifestyle was out of the question.

Of course it was possible, probable even, that they wanted him to corroborate a juicy story about someone or something else.

The only juice he could think of was the glass of cranberry he'd gulped that morning.

Still, the thought of the four o'clock appointment he'd scheduled unsettled him. Brian did enough public speaking on behalf of his newest passion—the fight against SIDS—and he'd been misquoted enough to be wary of talking to the publication known for making mountains out of molehills that didn't exist.

This was a time when a man called on the help of his friends.

Friend.

The woman who was well connected enough to know, firsthand, practically every *Sun News* reporter in the city.

Where was his judge when he needed her?

“Do you know this man?”

“I do.” Bobby Donahue identified the defendant.

Robert Keith's next questions were rote, but necessary to establish a fair trial. And a fair judgment from a jury who'd been sending Hannah pleading glances since the first day of testimony. That was when prosecutors described the sodomy and three-hour beating death the nineteen-year-old victim had suffered, allegedly at the hands of kind-looking Kenny Hill, whose affluent parents were sitting on the bench directly behind him. Right where they'd been every time their son's case had been on the docket over the past many months.

The victim, Camargo Cortes, was an illegal immigrant and, had he lived, would have stood trial for statutory rape of the seventeen-year-old daughter of the newly elected Arizona senator, George Moss.

When pictures of Cortes's body had been shown, Hannah had had to excuse two jurors to the restroom to be sick. At the request of the defense, she'd later dismissed both of them.

She wasn't taking any unnecessary chances that might result in a motion for mistrial. With luck no one would have to repeat the past six days, to see the things that those present in the courtroom had seen.

With luck, Kenny Hill would be put to death.

Brian worked through the half hour he'd allowed himself for lunch. Three-year-old Felicia Summers had had a sore throat on and off for more than a month. He wouldn't be overly concerned except that the child was underweight. And had already had her tonsils removed.

He didn't even want to think about leukemia. Or any other serious condition. Certainly didn't intend to alarm her parents at this stage. But he'd ordered blood work, just to be sure, and went down before his two-thirty appointment to get the results.

A day that had been diving rapidly now sank completely.

“Mr. Donahue, where did you and Mr. Hill meet?”

“At church.”

“How long have you known each other?”

“Most of his life. His parents and I have attended the same church for more than ten years.”

With a short nod Donahue acknowledged the older couple sitting hands clasped on the front

With a short nod, Donahue acknowledged the other couple sitting, hands clasped, on the front bench. The corners of Mrs. Hill's trembling lips turned slightly up, before she lowered her gaze. Her husband, a bit more successful at hiding intense emotions, nodded back.

Both of them spent most of their courtroom time staring at the back of their only son's head.

Character reference questions continued for the next forty-five minutes. Hannah attempted to show no reaction to the jurors who continued to look to her for guidance. If she believed this witness, they would, too.

And if she didn't...

This was a jury trial for a reason. It was not her job to decide this particular verdict. She was here to officiate the process. To allow or disallow testimony. To apply the law when attorneys, in the name of winning, veered away from it. Or challenged it.

She was here to ensure that the defendant's rights were upheld.

They were talking about possibly taking a man's life here. A young man. Who deserved to die if indeed, he'd committed the horrendous acts that had ultimately left another young man dying an atrocious death.

"Where were you on the night of March 9th of this year?"

"That was a Sunday," Bobby Donahue said.

Robert Keith nodded, his shoulders squared in front of the witness box. "That's right."

The chief prosecutor, Julie Gilbert, narrowed her eyes.

"I was in church."

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"Can you tell the court why you remember this so specifically?"

"Once a year we have a joint Sunday-evening meeting, combining the usual men's Sunday-night gathering with the women's Wednesday-morning assembly. It's always the second Sunday in March."

"What hours were you in church?"

"The service started at five and ran until almost midnight."

"With a meeting that long I'm assuming people come and go?"

"No. The doors are locked the entire time. Not to keep people in, but to prevent interruption. Our services, particularly that once-a-year meeting, are sacred to us. That's why I remember the date. These special gatherings are very emotional and interruption breaks the spirit."

"But the doors could be unlocked. Someone could become ill. People would need to access the facilities. Surely, if a person was careful, he could leave without disturbing you."

Donahue shook his head. "The sanctuary is self-contained. There are bathrooms at one end. And a small kitchen, too, with an attached nursery. I'm the only one with a key."

Horrified, Hannah kept her eyes on the file in front of her. She'd heard stories about the infamous white supremacist "church," but never in this much detail.

"So if someone comes late, say, maybe they have a flat tire, they miss this once-a-year, spiritually enriching meeting?"

"Of course not," Donahue said. "One of the brethren always volunteers to keep his phone on vibrate for just such emergencies. Members are notified of the number the week before."

"Then you'd interrupt the meeting to unlock the door?"

The witness remained straight-faced and serious. "Hymns are strategically placed throughout the meeting to allow for any interruptions."

"Do you remember whose cell phone was on vibrate that night?"

"Matthew Whitaker."

Hannah recognized the name from the defense's witness list. The man was slated to be called to the stand next

“And did Mr. Whitaker notify you of any such calls?”

“Yes.”

“Who called?”

“Kenny Hill.” Of course.

“At what time?”

“Five forty-five.”

The time of the attack, which had been announced during opening arguments, and ad nauseam since, had been established at between seven and ten on the evening of March 9th.

“Did he say why he was late?”

“There’d been an accident on the freeway.”

Glancing at Julie Gilbert, assuming the prosecutor would be writing a note to verify that there was record of a crash on I-17 on the date and at the time indicated, Hannah was disheartened once again. The woman’s pen was still.

There was no guarantee that the accident had been reported to the police, but even a mention of no record could significantly weaken Donahue’s testimony.

Face impassive, Hannah continued to preside objectively.

“What time did you let Mr. Hill inside the sanctuary?”

“At five-fifty-four.”

“At what time did you next unlock the door that night?”

“Just before midnight.”

“And you’re absolutely certain that no one, specifically Mr. Hill, left the sanctuary before then?”

“I’m positive.”

Keith, expensively dressed from his silk tie to the tips of his shiny black wing tips, requested that an order of service be admitted as evidence.

It was recorded. And then the attorney approached his witness.

“Do you recognize this?”

“I do.”

“Please tell the court what it is.”

“The program for this year’s combined service.”

“And what is the date printed at the top?”

Bobby Donahue leaned forward to read it, as though he didn’t already know the answer.

“March 9, 2008.”

Slowly approaching the jury, Keith gave each of them a chance to read more than just the date of the program he held out for them to see. There followed a listing of well-known Christian songs that were slotted to be sung. Scriptures to be read.

A sermon to be heard.

“Tell me, Mr. Donahue, do you log the attendance at these church gatherings?”

“Yes, we do.”

“And did you that day?”

“Of course.”

Keith pulled out another exhibit. Had it admitted. When asked, Ms. Gilbert didn’t object, but she looked as though she wished she could.

“Is this that log?” Keith held a black, leather-bound book open to a page halfway through.

“Yes.”

“And what is the last name on the entry?”

Again Donahue leaned forward. “Kenny Hill.”

“Were you present when Mr. Hill signed this register?”

WERE YOU PRESENT WHEN MR. HILL SIGNED THIS REGISTER?
“Yes.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Because I offer it personally to every member to sign.”

“Doesn’t that take a long time?”

“Not really. I stand at the door and the brethren sign in before entering the sanctuary. I greet each and every member upon arrival. I make it a point to be accessible to everyone.”

Or did he make it a point to keep everyone firmly under his domination?

Donahue lifted one shoulder slightly. And Hannah shivered. “In Kenny’s case, I remember distinctly because he came late. He signed in alone. On a break.”

Another piece of evidence was admitted. A small envelope. The kind many churches distributed to their members for offerings. This one was signed and dated by Kenny Hill. And then a cancelled check, dated the same day with the same signature was produced.

It had a Monday, March 10th bank stamp on it. All the evidence was circumstantial. When Julie crossed, she’d be able to point out the possibilities of forgery, money dropped off before or after the church service. But if she left the shadow of a doubt in the mind of even one juror, Hill would go free. That was the risk she took when she slapped a capital charge on the case. It was the only charge that required the jury to be convinced beyond the shadow of doubt.

Any other charge would have carried only reasonable doubt stipulations.

The prosecutor knew that. She’d been confident. Hannah wasn’t as confident. And maybe Julie wasn’t either, now, judging by the look on her face. Hill was going to walk. He’d brutally murdered a young man who’d done nothing more than make love with a girl who loved him back. Cortes had spent the last six hours of his life being tortured in ways a human being shouldn’t even know about.

And Hill was going to walk free, out into the streets to act again.

“Mr. Donahue, did you see the defendant speaking with anyone that night?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

Donahue mentioned a couple of other names from the witness list Keith had submitted at the pretrial conference.

“I have no further questions, Your Honor.”

Julie Gilbert did her job well—the car accident notwithstanding. But then maybe she’d remember to confirm the accident without a written reminder. She could bring the information up later if it helped her case. Or maybe she’d already heard this part of the testimony during her own interview with the witness. Maybe she’d already confirmed it.

And maybe Hannah needed to quit worrying and stick to doing her job. She was no longer a prosecutor.

No longer charged with bringing the bad guys down, but rather, with protecting the rights of everyone who entered her courtroom—victims and defendants alike.

Bobby Donahue didn’t leave the stand for another hour and a half. And not until after it was established that the church registry could have been forged. The check dropped off anytime that day. But Bobby Donahue was absolutely positive he wasn’t mistaken about Hill’s presence in church at the time of the murder. He assured the court that he could produce more than 200 other witnesses to the same.

Before the afternoon was over, Hannah could pretty much read her jury.

The defense had managed to establish a shadow of doubt. The state was going to lose.

Society was going to lose. And there wasn’t a damn thing Hannah could do about it.

Kenny Hill gave her a barely discernible smile. Hannah felt it clear to the bone. And shuddered.

Was her name already on a retribution list?

was not name already on a contribution list:

Brian missed the *Sun News* interview. In fact, he forgot all about it until he saw Hannah's number flash on the screen of his cell phone at six o'clock that evening. As always when he was at work, the phone was on silent. Glancing at the blinking light on the corner of his desk, wishing he could answer the call and escape into friendships and gentler topics, he focused, instead, on the middle-aged couple across from him.

"As far as I can tell from this preliminary test, it's in the early stages," he told Felicia Summers' parents, sliding a box of tissues toward the petite, slightly graying woman sitting there clasping her husband's hand.

Lou Summers, a technician at a local helicopter manufacturer, didn't make the kind of money that would support the care his toddler was going to need, but he had insurance benefits that would cover it just fine—unlike many of the guardians of Brian's young patients.

"Is she going to die?" Lou asked.

It was the question he'd been dreading. A question no one was ever prepared for.

"Possibly," he said, his gaze direct as he met first Lou's and then Mary's worried scrutiny. "But maybe not," he added, speaking with a calm that hid the churning in his stomach. "We caught it early. If we can get her into remission, she has a good chance. So, next week I'm sending you to the best pediatric oncologist in the state, Jim Freeman. He'll take excellent care of Felicia. She's going to love him. And so will you...."

Contrary to his usual practice, Brian didn't return any calls on the drive home. The world could wait until morning. So could the thoughts trying to worm their way into his consciousness. Losing himself in the noise blaring from his car stereo, the old Eagles hit "Take It Easy," Brian sped along the freeway. The music reminded him of earlier days, easier times. He made it through the first song on the greatest hits CD without allowing his thoughts to take over. Soared through the next one, swerving his sleek, high-performance car in and out of traffic as though he was eighteen instead of thirty-eight. And then the speakers screamed, *He was a hardheaded man...*

Brian slowed down. He'd been there. Done that.

She was terminally pretty.

Terminal. There was that word again.

Back in college, he'd figured life in the fast lane meant having the money to travel to exotic places, to eat out several times a week, frequenting all the finest restaurants. Having season tickets to Broadway Across America at Gammage Auditorium and the Phoenix Symphony and being recognized in all of Phoenix's and some of Vegas's and L.A.'s most elite clubs.

He'd figured the fast lane was about money. And, like his father before him, he'd intended to have a lot of it.

Tonight, the fast lane meant a way to get home more quickly. It meant knowing that a little girl might have to cram a whole life into five or six years.

It meant living every moment because it might be your last.

It meant drinking to escape the sounds of shrieking metal, of Cara's voice crying out. Of sirens. And his own wail of pain.

When "I vin' Eyes" came on he thought of all the women he'd known in the ten years since

which Lynn's eyes came on the thought of all the women he'd known in the ten years since Cara's death—experienced women like the one in the song escaping her rich old husband with hands as cold as ice to visit the cheatin' side of town and the lover with fiery eyes. He hadn't sought out married women, though he hadn't paid that much attention to marital status, either. He'd gone strictly for mutual pleasure, mutual escape. No strings attached.

He used to imagine it was Cara's body he was sinking into. Never once, since his beautiful wife had died in his arms at the side of the road, due to the recklessness of a teenage illegal immigrant, had he made love to a woman with only that woman on his mind. The woman, as soon as he undressed her, became nameless. A fact that didn't endear him to anyone—particularly himself.

And as his surround-sound system crooned about coming to his senses, Brian grabbed his cell phone and dialed. There might not be a lifetime to get on with it.

"Cynthia?" he asked as his call was answered on the first ring.

"Hey! What's up?" Cynthia's enthusiasm took away some of the chill he felt even in the hundred-degree September heat.

"Not much," he said, then added, "How about bringing the little guy over for a dip in the pool?"

"Sure! I'd love to. Joseph? It's Brian! You want to go swimming?"

The polite "yes, please" he heard in the background brought a smile to his face. There'd been a tinge of excitement in the four-year-old's tone. What a difference from the solemn, completely silent child Brian had first met at the free clinic almost a year before.

That first day, when he'd seen Cynthia there at the free clinic, chewing the nails on one hand while she rubbed her sick son's back with the other, Brian had just wanted to help ease the burden of worry. But it wasn't long before he'd had to pass Joseph's professional care on to one of his trusted associates because he was seeing Cynthia as much more than his patient's mother.

She'd been struggling financially since losing her uninsured ex-husband in a car accident the previous year and even before he'd started dating her Brian had hired her to replace the bookkeeper who'd just quit. He suggested that she go into his office in the evenings so he could watch Joseph for her and save her the cost of a sitter.

She'd readily agreed and had been keeping his books balanced to the penny ever since. Cynthia was smart. Caring. And vulnerable. She was the first woman he'd dated more than twice since Cara's death.

"Cyn? Bring nightclothes, too." Brian's voice softened on that last request.

"You got it." The response was more eager than he deserved, and just what he needed.

It was time to move on.

Hannah was not having a good day. Though she'd parked in her reserved, covered spot, right next to another judges-only covered spot, her two-year-old gold Lexus GS—originally bought for child safety but now appreciated for the luxury it afforded after a stressful day on the bench—had a key scratch marring its perfect paint job. Running from the driver's-side mirror to the back bumper, it wasn't a little scratch. And it wasn't superficial. She could see down to the metal.

It happened. Everyone knew where the judges parked. And in spite of security, every once in a while one of their cars was egged. Or had its tires deflated. Two of her peers had found threatening notes during Hannah's years on the bench. A half-dozen or so times there'd been reports of cards left on windshields by zealous reporters. Once she'd heard about a letter taped to a door; it was from a

relative of a young woman about to be sentenced. She should have expected her turn to come.

Just not today.

Not when she'd had Kenny Hill and Bobby Donahue in her courtroom. Of course, she'd also spent the morning with more than fifty family members and friends of other alleged lawbreakers as

open the morning with more than fifty family members and friends of such alleged lawbreakers as well, on pretrial motions, pleas and arraignments. Any number of them could have been pissed at her.

Or maybe some local high school gang had made keying a judge's car a requirement of new-member initiation. Hannah didn't automatically assume that Kenny Hill or any of his "church" brethren was behind the vandalism. But she couldn't assure herself that they weren't.

After fifteen minutes with security, waiting while pictures were taken and listening to the older sheriff's deputy drone on, Hannah felt a little better. She still had the ugly scratch that meant a day in the shop, a loaner that would probably smell and the loss of her insurance deductible, but apparently there'd been several other keyings in the area that were thought to be gang related. It was going to cost her. But she hadn't been specifically targeted.

A fitting ending to the day.

Too bad she'd already agreed to meet William for dinner. As fond as she was of her former law-school classmate and fellow judge, she'd rather go straight home, turn up the air-conditioning, run a hot bath in her Whirlpool tub, then have a good soak and a cry.

He knew her name. As he felt the pressure building, felt his climax coming, Brian kept his eyes open, focusing on the woman lying next to him, moving her hips in tandem with his. Eyes closed, her mouth slightly open as she moaned, Cynthia Applegate was a beautiful woman.

"Ah, Cynthia," he said, emptying himself into her. "Yes." He felt her answering tremors as she came, pulses of release that contracted around him, completing an intense moment.

She sighed. And smiled. Opening her eyes.

"I love you," she said. It wasn't the first time.

Pressure built again—less pleasurable this time.

"It's okay," she continued, lifting a finger to his lips as he tried to speak. "You don't have to say anything. I don't expect anything from you. I just wanted you to know."

He should speak anyway. She deserved more than the long kiss he gave her, so Brian caressed her in the way he knew she liked, bringing her to a second orgasm. It wasn't enough. But it was a start. More than he'd been able to give any other woman.

And during the aftermath, as he lay with her, there was none of the usual letdown, and not as much of the guilt. As always, an image of Cara's face after they'd made love appeared in his mind. Her features were hazy. Quickly replaced by another sight. His wife's face smeared with blood. His and her own.

And then the sounds replayed themselves. Her cries as she tried to free herself from the wreckage.

And the young man's words as he stood outside their smashed vehicle. "Won't do no good for them to deport me. I'll come back."

The words were in his native tongue. But Brian had spoken Spanish fluently since college.

"Let me out!" It took him a second to realize it wasn't his panicked, dying wife he was hearing.

Cynthia was already out of bed.

"Let me out!" Panic filled the childish voice. "Let me out!"

By that third call Brian was halfway down the hall to the spare bedroom where Joseph Applegate slept when he and his mother spent the night—something that had only happened on weekends. Occasionally.

"He's at it again." Cynthia's voice also held a bit of panic as Brian caught up to her. She stood back as Brian raced to the boy, grabbing him off the chair by the window where Joseph was pulling at the blinds and pounding on the glass.

"No!" he screamed, kicking and nunching, as Brian wrapped his hands around the youngster's

NO. He screamed, kicking and punching, as Brian wrapped his hands around the youngster's waist, removing him from immediate danger. "No!"

"You're all right now, Joseph." Brian spoke in quiet, reassuring tones, holding on to him until, spent, the boy fell limp in his arms. He handed Joseph to Cynthia.

"Shh, baby, it's okay." Cynthia's voice was calmer now that she was with her son, holding him. Now that he was safely away from the window. Clothed in the robe she'd pulled on as she'd run from Brian's room, she held Joseph to her, speaking softly but firmly.

Joseph snuggled his face into his mother's chest, breathed a ragged sigh and settled back to sleep.

"He's soaked," Cynthia whispered, rocking the boy as though he weighed nothing. Once his breathing was even, she quickly laid him on the bed, changing his soiled disposable undergarment with the ease of practice. She'd been handling the boy's sleepwalking episodes far longer than Brian had.

Brian gave the small head a professional caress. The toddler was cool to the touch. "He'll probably sleep fine now until morning."

"And as usual he won't remember anything, so we still won't have any idea what's causing this." She sounded tired, resigned, but worried. At Brian's recommendation she'd taken Joseph to Dr. Roberta Browning, one of Arizona's best pediatric psychiatrists; Brian had already run every medical test he could think of, and found nothing to explain Joseph's symptoms.

There was no sign of internal organ illness. No sign of physical or sexual abuse.

If the lack of answers frustrated Brian, it had to be excruciating for his mother.

"Something must have happened when he was with his father." He repeated what he'd told her before—the same thing Roberta had said. It wasn't much of an explanation.

It was all they had. "It's odd that he doesn't mention the father he saw regularly," Roberta had told Brian. Though Joseph's parents had been divorced since he was a baby, Donald Applegate had had regular visitations until his death.

Brian had asked Cynthia about it. Other than the fact that her ex-husband had had another lover while married to her, she'd said nothing negative about her son's father. It was obvious, at least to Brian, that she still carried feelings for the man whose life had been cut short.

That was something they had in common. Unexpectedly losing someone they loved.

Brian took one last look at the window, wondering what would have happened if it had been open—what could happen in the future, if they didn't get things under control.

"Let's bring him in with us just in case," he said now, an arm around Cynthia's shoulders as he led her back down the hall.

The boy needed security. Whatever was causing the sleepwalking, whatever was causing the bed-wetting, might never be known to them, but the symptoms could still be treated. The cure, Brian was certain, especially in one so young, was a stable, two-parent home environment. An environment like the Summerses had to offer Felicia.

An environment he could offer to Joseph and his mother.

"Have you seen the *Sun News*?" Hannah didn't bother with a hello when Brian finally answered his phone at four forty-five the next afternoon. She'd just come off the bench to be handed a copy of the weekly paper by her judicial assistant. Brian's picture took up half the front page. Hannah's name was in the second paragraph.

"Hannah? No, I've had back-to-back patients since I got in this morning. To be honest, I'm not even sure what time it is. What's up?"

Relieved that he hadn't been broadsided, that she could break the news to him gently, Hannah silently reread parts of the article. Her protective instincts reared all over again.

secretly reread parts of the article. Her protective instincts reared up over again.

“They’ve gone too far this time,” she said, pissed off and ready to take someone on. “It says here that you refused to comment.”

“Only by default. I had some bad news to deliver to the parents of a three-year-old. The reporter completely slipped my mind.”

Immediately taken back to her own experience as the parent of one of Brian’s patients, remembering the strength he’d given her when she didn’t have enough of her own, Hannah glanced away from the paper.

Kids were supposed to be free from worry, from stress and pain. Childhood was for naiveté and laughter. Playing. No responsibility.

Or so they said.

“Is the three-year-old going to be okay?”

“It doesn’t look good.”

Holding back the tears that would fall if she’d let them, tears that she’d grown adept at fighting over the past year, she looked again at the article while questions she couldn’t ask raged through her mind.

How long had the little girl been sick? What were her symptoms? How old were the parents? Were they a close family? Were there other kids? Did they have the resources for treatment? Was there any hope?

“So how bad is the article?” Brian’s question brought her out of a nightmare and into a mess.

“Bad,” she told him, because that’s how they were. Always honest. Always there for each other. Loving but never lovers. “Someone’s done a lot of talking out of turn followed up by incompetent research.”

“Okay.” His tone told her to get on with it.

“They say that there’ve been an unusual number of SIDS deaths in the valley over the past year....”

“That’s not true. Our educational seminars have had an impact already. The statistics are changing.”

“Yeah, they mention that.” Hannah’s voice dropped. Since shortly after her son’s death, she and Brian, a mother and a doctor, had been traveling around the state speaking to groups of expectant parents, offering two different perspectives but delivering the same message. There were ways to lessen the chances of SIDS. Easy ways. “Which is why it’s a concern to this reporter that there’s one doctor who’s seen an upswing in sudden infant deaths among his patients.”

“Me.”

“Right.”

His silence was difficult to take.

“He doesn’t name his source but he claims that he’s gone through public records to verify his facts.”

“Which are?”

“You have three-hundred percent more cases of SIDS than any other doctor in the city.”

Again, he said nothing.

“Is that true?”

“If every other doctor in the city averages one death a year, yes.”

“You’ve had four.”

“And you knew about all four of them.”

Yeah. She had. She just hadn’t realized...

“He says that all four of your patients were Hispanic babies.” Hannah could hardly hear the words she was sneaking for the undertones in this conversation. If Brian

words she was speaking for the undertones in this conversation. It Brian...

But that was impossible. She'd known him since college. Had loved him like a brother. He'd been a great friend. And a great husband to her best friend, Cara. More, he'd helped Hannah adopt Carlos, had been her son's doctor and watched over Carlos as diligently as if the baby was his own. His and Cara's.

Cara. He'd taken her death hard.

Hard enough to quietly, gradually, unhinge him as the article implied?

"You know better than anyone how much time I dedicate to SIDS awareness, education, research and fund-raising." Brian's voice, lacking any hint of his usual charm, fell flat.

"Yeah," she said, also remembering the months after the accident. The bitterness that had poured out of Brian in his darkest moments, usually after imbibing more alcohol than he'd had during even the most raucous college parties. His wife, the only really close female friend Hannah had ever had, was killed by an illegal immigrant—a young man who'd crossed the Arizona/Mexico border with his parents as a child, without paperwork and, therefore, without the means to take drivers' training or get a license.

"The fund-raising is part of the problem."

"How so?"

"Without some SIDS deaths, there'd be no funding."

"Without SIDS, we wouldn't *need* the funding."

"The implication is that some of the funds we raise line your pockets." Hannah didn't believe it for a second. If for no other reason than because Brian didn't need the money. That wasn't the implication that bothered her.

"You know me better than that," he said when she didn't continue.

"I think he only put in that part to explain away the volunteer time you spend on behalf of SIDS victims. They can't write an ugly exposé and have you coming off looking good."

"So why write one at all?"

And here was the real problem.

"It talks about Cara and the accident."

Hannah could tell by his silence that he was hurting. And she hurt with him. Even while looking for reassurance that he was as sane as anyone. As incapable of killing another human being as she was.

"There's a picture of the car, a line about you screaming at the other driver while they tried to crush Cara free from the wreckage."

"Which I don't remember at all," he said softly.

Brian had hit his head in the accident. His memories were select. The doctors had warned that he might never remember everything.

"And they talk about the trial..."

"And the fact that the kid wasn't tested for drugs at the scene? That he got away with some misdemeanors and a few months in jail?" Even while she understood his anger, shared it, it scared her for a second.

Because she was stressed. Worn out. Not at her best.

"What's this got to do with SIDS?"

"They imply that you're trying to rid the state of immigrants because of Cara. They printed a picture of you, taken ten years ago, at that rally downtown..."

"For stricter enforcement of immigration laws, I remember. But this guy can't actually think that because I support immigration patrols, I'd resort to murdering innocent children. I'm a pediatrician, for God's sake!" Brian's incredulity struck a chord in Hannah. Her momentary doubts dwindled into nothing—the result of a long day, a long week. A trial that still hadn't ended.

"Crazy huh?" she asked her dear friend. Cara's death had changed Brian forever. Changed them

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