

Chapter One

"What do you think you're doing?" Nurse Kate Rhodes asked the stranger standing beside ten-year-old Dillon's hospital bed.

The well-dressed man's hand stalled in the process of handing over a miniature sports car. Deep blue eyes rose from smiling down at the child, their corners squinting as they locked onto Kate's glare. A disarming grin quickly followed.

One she had no trouble resisting.

Her mission as a child had been not falling for her brother's southern charm. It was either that, or be in constant trouble for the mischief Martin could so easily talk her into. Now that she'd achieved the wise age of thirty-two, sophisticated, stuffed shirts brandishing easy smiles didn't rate a raised eyebrow.

"Visitation for minors is limited to immediate family only," she said as the tall, dark-haired man finished handing over the car.

"But, he knows Papa." What had been a withdrawn little boy flashed a megawatt smile.

The bruises mottling Dillon's right cheek and eye refused to allow Kate to celebrate.

His smile lit up the room when his papa was around. The two of them had been inseparable at the homeless shelter where Kate volunteered most of her free time away from the hospital. Dillon's unquestioning love for his only parent was what made this situation even harder to accept.

"Look what I got!" he exclaimed, his flawless English colored by a heavy South American inflection.

At least he was finally talking.

An electric green cast protected the thin arm holding up the plastic Corvette. A severe ankle sprain had been wrapped to stabilize the joint, and elevated to reduce swelling. Injuries resulting, supposedly, from Dillon's latest accidental fall--this time, down the Midtown Shelter's basement stairs.

An accident Manny Digarro had no better explanation for than that his only child was more clumsy than other kids his age. Accident prone. What's a father to do?

"That car rocks, tough guy." She smiled as she walked to the bed.

"It's the one Papa said we couldn't buy when we saw it in the store Monday night."

The same night the little heartbreaker had been rushed to

Atlanta Memorial's Emergency--for the third time in two months, Kate had discovered after reading his chart, though this was the first time he'd been admitted to pediatrics.

"The boy's father asked me to bring the toy by." The man's small-talk didn't distract her from his too-observant gaze. "Seems the nurses at the admissions desk are refusing to discuss Dillon's condition when Mr. Digarro calls. He wasn't sure of his welcome if he came himself."

If the hint of judgement in the man's voice weren't enough, the worry clouding Dillon's smile was all the motivation Kate needed.

"I'll speak with you outside, Mr... Mr.?" Her query was polite, but he was leaving.

The man merely smiled.

Was she supposed to swoon or something? Like she hadn't seen dimples and perfectly-straight teeth before!

Screw polite.

She half-dragged him toward the hallway.

"Play with your car for a minute, Dillon," she said over her shoulder.

She kicked at the magnetic device that secured the bottom of the door against the wall. The door wooshed shut behind them. She released the man's arm, stopping short of wiping her hand on her cartoon-covered scrubs.

Just barely.

"You're go out of here." She headed for the nurses' station to page security, picking up her pace when she heard his footsteps behind her. "I don't know who you are, but--"

He edged around her, putting his body between her and the nearest phone, bringing her to a skidding halt.

"I'm Stephen Creighton," he announced. "And I represent the innocent man you're so determined to keep away from that child in there."

"You bet I'm keeping Manny Digarro away from his child!" The pediatric nurse who'd rushed Stephen into the hall was furious. Indignant. "If he does show up here, which I suspect he won't, the staff won't let him anywhere near Dillon."

Stephen didn't have to read her name badge to know she was the Kate Rhodes Manny Digarro had warned him about. The homeless shelter volunteer who'd first befriended the immigrant family, then two days ago had lodged a formal complaint of child abuse with the Atlanta Police Department (APD).

"Mr. Degarro's done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment," Stephen insisted, the soul of reason. "You can't separate him from his son. Dillon fell down those stairs, and his father is beside himself worrying about--"

"From the looks of the old fractures on Dillon's x-rays, someone should have done more than separate your friend from his son years ago."

"Client," Stephen corrected. "Manny Digarro is my client. A good man that I'd be honored to call my friend--regardless of the color of his skin, his ethnic background, or his current inability to afford his own home."

Kate's eyes narrowed. If her spine got any stiffer, she'd break in two.

"This isn't about them being homeless, or from another country, or anything else but protecting an abused boy from further harm--by someone who's supposed to love him."

"My client does love his son, very much. He--"

--belongs in jail! Dillon has poorly healed breaks on both arms, his left wrist and right calf and ankle. Weeks-old contusions on his chest, to go along with the shiny new ones on his face. And don't get me started on the poor dental hygiene and the vitamin deficiency we suspect is causing his complexion to be at least three shades lighter than a healthy child's should be."

"Do you find oral hygiene and a healthy glow common amongst the homeless people you work, Nurse Rhodes?" Stephen included a casual smile with his question, free of charge.

She crossed her arms. "Once we have the results of the battery of tests Dillon's pediatrician ordered, I'm confident--"

"What tests? Manny's signed no consent forms for treatment, let alone--"

"In the case of suspected abuse, the doctors can sign on the child's behalf. The tests have been run. Once their results are

in, not being able to visit Dillon will be the least of your client's concerns. Until then, Manny Digarro should be thankful that restricting his access to the pediatric floor is the only option the other nurses and I have."

The golden-haired, green-eyed beauty's chest rose and fell. Warm eyes that had smiled down at Dillon sparked with fire.

It was inappropriate, under the circumstances, to find Kate Rhodes' temper tantrum arousing. But that kind of passion was hard to come by in Stephen's world--especially in the defense of another person's wellbeing. Certainly not in someone so meticulously put together, Stephen would bet tomorrow night's poker stake that Kate rarely let a hair slip out of place, let alone her emotions.

Too bad this wasn't the time or place to push her buttons further, just to see what she'd do next.

Work the case, man.

"You only met the Digarros a week ago," he said, as if reason would work any better the second time around. "You didn't see Dillon's accident. Admit it. You don't know for sure what happened, any more than I do."

"Dillon fell, violently, down a flight of stairs. Only his father seems to have witnessed it, just like all the other accidents. What else do I need to know?"

"Manny's no more a threat to his child than I am," Stephen assured her. "He's--"

"An abusive bastard who's never going to hurt his son again! Dillon is terrified. He's barely spoken to anyone since he got here."

Stephen blinked. Focused past the righteous indignation that he'd label racism or blind ignorance on someone else. There was genuine fear in Kate's voice.

Most people took one look at impoverished immigrants like the Digarros, and saw someone they couldn't trust. A threat they didn't want to be any closer to than they had to be. But Kate Rhodes spent several evenings a week up to her elbows in the homeless community. Shielding them from a world often too careless about the wellbeing of the weakest and most deserving of there care.

And now she was on a mission to protect a child she'd convinced herself had no one else on his side.

"Manny Digarro's terrified, too," Stephen countered. "He's watched his son have one accident after another, and tried to protect him the best he could, while working countless dead-end jobs to keep them off public assistance. Now he's being told that's not good enough. That Dillon doesn't belong with him. I'm here to make sure someone in this hospital listens to my client's side of the story, before a terrible mistake is made."

She sized up his Brooks Brother's suit.

"Where did Manny dig you up," she wanted to know, "if he's struggling so badly?".

"At the legal aid center where he'd heard someone would listen to him, instead of taking one look at his ethnic background and worn-out clothes and figure he was a no-account bastard who beats up on his kid to get his jollies."

Her eyes widened. But instead of biting back, she breathed deeply and squared her shoulders.

"Bait me all you want, Mr. Creighton. But my first clue your client was a no-account bastard came while assessing the damage done to Dillon's body, not Manny's fashion sense. And you've gotten all the details about Dillon's condition that you're going to get from me. Leave, Mr. Creighton, or I'll have security make sure you do."

He stood his ground, soaking in the honesty and integrity rolling off of her. Kate Rhodes wasn't on some blind mission to punish an innocent father for socio-economic circumstances he couldn't control. Instincts that had never let Stephen down screamed that this woman could help his client, if he could only get her to listen.

She headed around him. He grabbed her arm, his mistake instantly obvious.

She didn't jerk away from his touch. She cringed. The agitated breathing that she'd brought under professional control just moments before, stopped completely.

Frightened eyes snapped to his face, then dilated, before her gaze flinched away.

"Let me go," begged the woman who'd just verbally handed him his ass. "Please, let me--"

Stephen released her, raising his hands to show he meant no harm, the same way he'd sooth a skittish animal.

She flinched.

"Is everything okay, Kate?" A tall man dressed in blue scrubs, a stethoscope draped around his neck, stepped to her side. He glared at Stephen. "What the hell do you think you're doing!"

Making a mess of things.

"Mr. Creighton was just leaving," Kate answered. "Robert, would you call security to help him find the door?"

"No need." Stephen edged away.

He buried his hands in the pockets of his winter-weight trench coat. His fingers wrapped around the stack of business cards he always carried. Drawing one out, he handed it to the doctor. He studied the beautiful nurse until she looked up at him.

"I'm sorry I upset you. But please, if you change your mind about helping the Digarros, call my cell any time of the day or night."

He walked toward the elevator, cursing the fear and confusion still clouding Kate's eyes. Eyes that seemed incapable of hiding whatever she was feeling. The eyes of someone who would fight just as hard for the patients in her care, as he did for

his clients.

Someone he'd have found himself wanting to know better, if he wasn't so certain she was wrong, dead wrong, about the cause of Dillon Degarro's injuries.

And that her mistake could very easily ruin his client's chances of starting a new life in this country.

"What was that?" Kate's ex-husband asked.

Robert was intentionally blocking her view of the lawyer's retreating back, shielding her the way he'd tried to protect her during their marriage. The way she'd refused to let him. He'd always wanted to mean more to her than she could handle.

To save her from things they'd barely talked about.

It wasn't in her nature to be saved. It wasn't in Robert's to back off when someone needed help. Exit one marriage, but thankfully their friendship had survived.

And for the first time, as Kate peered around his tall frame to watch Stephen Creighton disappear in the elevator, she was thankful for Robert's coddling. Because there had been something in the lawyer's earnest expression, in his voice, that made her want to doubt what her own eyes were telling her.

To believe that an abused child belonged with the man she was certain had hurt him.

"That was nothing," she assured her ex.

"You okay?" Robert rubbed the same place on her arm

Creighton had grabbed. His other hand held up the man's fancy, embossed card. "Who--"

"He's a lawyer for some legal aid center." She glanced toward Dillon's room. "Manny Digarro sent him."

"The father of your banged-up kid from the shelter?" Robert was Atlanta Memorial's head neurosurgeon. He worked twenty-hour days, two floors above pediatrics, but hospital gossip spread faster than the common cold. "The man's already lawyered up?"

"Yeah. The police were notified by the ER attending, and I filed a report about what I saw at the center. They don't have enough evidence to arrest Manny yet, and we're running more tests to try and figure out how badly Dillon's been hurt. But a fall down stairs couldn't have done all that damage, and there are too many signs of neglect to ignore."

"Sounds like you're doing the right thing. Just don't get too sucked into it."

"Yeah."

Except she was already in.

Deep.

She'd all but tackled Stephen Creighton, to get the man out of Dillon's room. He'd only been doing his job. But handsome lawyers with earnest expressions didn't change the truth. X-rays and broken bones didn't lie, no matter how much Dillon seemed to miss his father. And the truth was something Kate had promised herself to never rationalize away again.

She took the business card from Robert, tore it in half and smiled. And she kept smiling as she tossed it into a nearby trashcan, reassuring herself that she'd already put out of her mind how gentle the lawyer had been with her vulnerable patient. How sincere his assurances had sounded.

Only she'd glanced at the address on the card as she'd ripped it in two. And she'd committed the name of Creighton's center to memory--Atlanta Legal Aid.

Damn easy-going, Southern men.

Dillon kept his eyes squeezed shut.

The grown ups were done arguing in the hall, but the shaking wouldn't go away--the shaking that didn't happen when it was just him and his papa.

Papa never got angry.

That nice nurse, Kate, was mad at Papa. Just like she was mad at the man who'd brought Dillon the car. And some other voice had been arguing with them, too.

Dillon just wanted to go home.

Not to another shelter, or another city. He wanted to go back to Colombia with Papa. Except there were angry, scary people there, too.

Kate had been so nice at the shelter. She'd taken care of him when he'd been stupid and hurt himself--again! She'd been with him almost all the time at hospital. He wished she'd come

back, even if she was mad at Papa.

She didn't like Dillon being hurt and scared, and she thought it was Papa's fault. She was wrong, but she was worried, and that felt good. There'd never been anyone else to worry, but Papa.

He felt under the blanket with his good arm. His fingers brushed the car he'd hidden away. Kate didn't know it was the first toy Dillon had had since leaving Colombia, or how much of a risk Papa had taken to send it.

We have to be able to move at a moment's notice. We can't risk taking anything that someone's seen us with. That's all they'd need to track us.

Atlanta was the longest they'd stayed anywhere since leaving home. They wore other people's clothes. Dillon's toys were whatever the shelters had. Everything had to be left when they moved. Everything but the clothes they were wearing, and then they got new stuff that wasn't theirs, as soon as they arrived at the next place.

He was tired of broken toys, clothes no one else wanted, and all the people he wasn't supposed to talk to. Kids who couldn't be friends. All of it left behind, as soon as something spooked Papa and it was time to move again.

Except now he had his car.

Did that mean they could stop running?

Wait there for me. Try to get better. I'll come get you when

it's time, Papa had said as the ambulance men took Dillon away.

When it was time...

Time to run again.

Dillon squeezed the car against his side, missing his papa, missing home--even though home was what Papa was protecting Dillon from the most. Papa was worried about him. The doctors and nurses here were worried. Everyone was worried about everything, but what really mattered.

When were the men after his papa going to go away for good? When would it be safe to stop running? To be someone real? To have real friends and real toys, without waiting for it all to disappear?