



NEVER AGAIN GOOD-BYE

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

Kidnappers don't look like criminals, Wes Grayson thought as he moved closer behind the young woman he'd been watching for the last half hour. At least, that was what he'd told his daughter so many times. They looked trustworthy and pleasant, and that was how they deceived.

Why, then, was it so hard for him to believe that this five-foot-three, hundred-pound woman, who looked barely old enough to qualify as a legal adult, was about to strike?

Yet he'd seen her behavior himself, and it was suspicious, if not threatening. Moving closer without making a sound, he held his hands poised to catch her if she tried to run when she realized she'd been seen. The shutter of her camera clicked, and she stepped deeper into the shade of the pine trees that edged the park, adjusted her lens, and focused again.

With eyes narrowed in a natural squint from years of construction work in the harsh Louisiana sun, Wes followed her aim to the children scaling the monkey bars and watched the camera pan to the right as his seven-year-old daughter left the cluster of her friends and went to her babysitter. A vein in his temple throbbed with the pressure of waiting. Why had the police department taken so long to respond to his call? Did they think she'd hang around indefinitely?

As if in reaction to his thoughts, a Shreveport PD squad car pulled up and two uniformed officers got out, hiking up the waists of their pants and glancing around as if wondering which tree to settle under for their afternoon nap. The woman spotted them and snapped her camera back in its case. As she took a step back, Wes moved within grasping distance.

She smelled of apricots, he thought as the early spring breeze rustled the black wisps of hair that had escaped from her long braid. Criminals didn't smell like apricots, did they? And they didn't have that look of vulnerable fragility or wear designer jeans and silk blouses.

But this one did. Drawing his brows together, he watched her partial profile as she looked across the park at his daughter.

Her suspicious interest in Amy sent a chill of panic through him, and Wes clenched his teeth, silently willing the policemen to hurry. But when they stopped at his baby-sitter, who had no idea that he had been standing in the shadows behind a potential kidnapper for the last half hour, Wes had no choice but to take matters into his own hands.

Carefully he reached out and grabbed her arm.

She jumped and tried to jerk free. "Let me go!"

"Why?" he asked through his teeth. "So you can keep stalking innocent children?"

The depth of her dark eyes as they searched his was unexpected, and for a fleeting second, he wondered if a criminal would really look so scared. Wouldn't there be some harshness in her eyes, some cold glint of evil intent that couldn't be concealed?

"Stalking?" she asked quickly. "Is that what you think?"

"You tell me," he said, remembering the woman who had wept when her child was kidnapped from a park across town the previous week. He and other members of his church had joined the effort to search for her, but to no avail. "I want some answers, and they'd better be good."

"Answers to what? I haven't done anything."

He smiled at the guilt in her voice, guilt that told him he was not making a mistake. "Tell it to the cops," he said.

"The cops?" Her voice was high and incredulous, and the woman swung around, this time managing to free her arm. "You called the police?" A look of terror sprang to her eyes, and her lips trembled. "Why? What did I do?"

She was backing away, trying, Wes realized, to gain enough distance to break into a run.

Before she could get far he grabbed her again and, in one swift movement, twisted her arm behind her back, immobilizing her completely.

"Let go of me!" she hissed again. "And tell me what I've done!"

His voice was equally harsh. "You've been sneaking around here snapping pictures of my daughter."

"Your your daughter?" Her voice caught, and her gaze snapped to the child on the playground. "She's your daughter?"

Her question was as close to an admission of guilt as he needed. His lips grew taut against gritted teeth, and he jerked her arm harder, heard her gasp, and told himself that he was right: She *was* after his daughter. Amy had almost been the next child to go. Roughly he pulled her out of the shadows and toward the growing crowd of people at the center of the park.

“Wait!” Despite the grueling twist of her arm and the pain it inflicted, the woman held back. “I don’t want to go over there.”

“Well, that’s just too bad, isn’t it?”

But she ground in her heels and refused to move without being dragged. “Please,” she bit out. “Make the policemen come over here. I don’t want to frighten the children.”

Wes stopped at her words and studied her curiously. What did she care about frightening the children? Was she afraid of blowing her cover, ruining her chances of earning their trust so she could take them of their own free will? Or was it real concern? Did she care about their ability to sleep easily at night, about tainting the joy they found in the park?

Still holding her against him, Wes glanced toward his daughter and considered the woman’s request. She was right. The children would be told. Things didn’t need to be confused by creating an uproar. He saw his baby-sitter stand up, spot him, and point him out. The policemen started toward them.

“I haven’t done anything,” the woman muttered, looking over her shoulder with eyes that could have convinced him of her innocence if he hadn’t witnessed her actions himself. She seemed more afraid than he was. “They can’t arrest me for taking pictures.”

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