

*Cheryl Norman*  
**RECLAIM**  
*my* **LIFE**



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Medallion Press, Inc.  
Printed in USA

*Accolades for*  
**RECLAIM MY LIFE** *by Cheryl Norman*

“Take one sexy small-town cop hero, add an intriguing heroine with a secret that will have you on the edge of your seat, mix together with a heavy helping of Southern flavor, and you have one terrific book. Reclaim My Life is a winner!”

*—Tracy Montoya, Harlequin Intrigue author*

*Cheryl Norman*

RECLAIM  
*my* LIFE

## DEDICATION:

To Joe Frye, who is more of a hero than he realizes. His generosity, analytical mind, talent, and sense of humor make him a winner in my book. He was the model for my fictional hero, Sheriff Wilson Drake, and he is so going to kill me for embarrassing him with this dedication!

Published 2009 by Medallion Press, Inc.

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Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro  
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-193475500-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
First Edition

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

My apologies to Columbia and Hamilton Counties (Florida) for rearranging their boundaries to construct the fictional Foster County.

A lot of people helped with research for this story. Any inaccuracy or implausibility is solely my fault. For weapons information, I am indebted to Charles Dove. I want to thank Brenna Michele Roth, D.V.M. for veterinary advice, as well as her mom, author and equestrian Jan Scarbrough. Thanks also to Chief Forensic Investigator Jeff Brocaw, of the Duval County (Florida) Medical Examiner's Office, and to my helpful source at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement who has asked to remain anonymous, for helping me with investigative procedures.

I'm indebted to my critique partner, author Dee S. Knight, for keeping my story on track. Thanks to Rachel, the world's best mother-in-law, for helping out in so many ways to keep me at the keyboard, and to my sister Jo for working as my unpaid publicist. To Cracker Barrel's two best waitresses, Joyce and Louise, and the Tuesday breakfast club, including Norman, Dave and Judy Peters, Susan R. Sweet, Tami Sandlin, and Mary Lou Hinkey, for feeding both me and my ego. To the Ladies of the Suwannee Retreat 2005—Judith Leigh, Nancy Quatrano, Elizabeth Sinclair, Kathleen McMahon, and Vickie King—thanks for brainstorming with me when this story was a germ of an idea called Dress Rehearsal.

Most importantly, thanks to my patient and supportive husband for never complaining about cold cereal for dinner so I can keep writing. You're the best and I love you!





## PROLOGUE

The assassin known only as Conger switched on the voice synthesizer and digital recorder then spoke into the telephone. A contract killer couldn't be too careful. "I received the packet."

"Good. Then you know where to make the delivery."

Conger mentally translated: *You know where the assassination target has been located.* "Yes. It'll take time because of the small-town factor."

"You know the timetable."

Translation: *Prevent the target from appearing when the case comes to trial.*

"I'll make the deadline—don't worry."

"We know of someone in place who may help you fit in."

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Conger worked alone but wasn't above using others to complete the contract. "Send me the details with half the package."

Translation: *Send information about the contact, along with half the fee.*

"Just remember, if you're exposed, you're on your own."

"I don't get caught. That's why I'm the best."

"At your rates, you better be."

If the Feds had a wiretap, they'd have no trouble identifying the voice of the client, Lexington's most prominent surgeon-turned-murderer-and-racketeer. Desperate to eliminate the eye witness who could send him to death row, Frank Sullivan, MD, needed the contract regardless of the price or the time it took to execute it. The slow legal process would give Conger plenty of time.

"I'm a perfectionist, which is why I won't be rushed." Besides, Conger had a number of other contracts to be fulfilled in the interim. Overlapping hits guaranteed a healthy cash flow.

"Agreed. Just get it handled."

Conger merely smiled, stopped the recorder, and disconnected.

# CHAPTER ONE

*One year later*

Most women would kill for her problem. Or at least give up their firstborn. Predisposed to leanness, Elizabeth Stevens needed to gain weight, but at what expense? Stuffing the last of a jelly doughnut into her mouth, she cringed, imagining her arteries clogging by the minute.

“Refill?” The waitress at Boyd’s Diner hovered with a pot of hot water.

“Yes, thank you, Lorraine.”

Lorraine fished a tea bag from her apron pocket and placed it beside Elizabeth’s cup. “We just pulled a batch of cinnamon twists from the oven. Can I get you one?”

She shook her head. Behind her, a man’s deep voice drawled, “You can bring me a couple, darlin’, along with coffee.”

Elizabeth recognized the voice without peeking at

its owner: Sheriff Wilson Drake.

“G’morning, Wil,” Lorraine greeted him.

“Good mornin’, Lorraine.” The sheriff pulled out a chair across from Elizabeth’s and sat. “How’s Professor Stevens this morning?”

She glanced up from her notepad and into steady green eyes. “Fine, Sheriff Drake. Just making a grocery list.”

Two weeks earlier, he had asked permission to join her for breakfast at the diner. Every morning since, he’d taken her consent for granted. Not that she would object. How could she? The guy was the town’s most eligible bachelor, as well as a hopeless flirt. Real eye candy, if you liked rugged blond men with taut, muscular bodies. She’d learned that his name being Drake was no coincidence. His ancestors had been the first settlers in Drake Springs.

She sensed his studious gaze on her but didn’t look up. Concentrating on her shopping list, she added ice cream along with real whipped cream and pecan pie. The town’s lone supermarket didn’t stock a lot of no-sugar-added products, so finding calorie-rich food wasn’t difficult.

She loved the bounty of fruits and vegetables, fresh from nearby farms that had two and three crops a year, but that was hardly the stuff of weight gain. Actually, Elizabeth’s *real* problem was far greater than needing to maintain her recent weight gain. Much greater.

“You’re frowning, darlin’. What’s wrong?”

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Never in a million years could she tell Wilson or anyone else what was wrong. She'd become a good liar in the past year or so. "I'm trying to remember all I need to buy at the store."

"It's obvious you still think like a city gal."

"Yes, Atlanta's pace is hard to shake." The lies came easily after a year of practice. She had to stay on her toes around the clever sheriff. "Why?"

He shrugged. "If you forget something, you go back. Miller's IGA is, at most, a half mile from everything in town."

"True, but I try to be efficient."

"Hmm." He waited while Lorraine slid a plate with two hot cinnamon twists in front of him, followed by a steaming mug of coffee. "I like efficiency in a woman."

"Thanks, Wil," said Lorraine, deliberately mistaking his comment. She winked at Elizabeth.

Reaching for her long braid, Elizabeth averted her gaze. Since childhood, she'd twirled the end of her braid around her fingers absentmindedly when nervous. Yes, the sheriff made her *very* nervous, especially with his flirting. *I like efficiency in a woman*, indeed. But she'd lost the long hair last year as part of her makeover. To cover her gaffe, she picked up her tea and sipped.

Wilson took his first bite of pastry, closed his eyes, and voiced an unabashed "*mmm*" sound.

She hid a smile behind her teacup. "It's that good, eh?"

“Oh, yeah.”

The guy sounded entirely too passionate about a piece of fried dough, although the tempting aroma of hot cinnamon did fill the entire diner. Maybe she should’ve ordered a cinnamon twist, too, since she’d had nothing to feel passionate about lately. The idea of *passion* and *Wilson* in the same sentence heated her skin, and she quickly ducked her head to hide her wayward thoughts.

Focusing on the paper placemat that featured a map of Florida, Elizabeth mentally pinpointed her location. Along the Suwannee River just a few miles south of the Georgia state line, the tiny town of Drake Springs—so insignificant it hadn’t earned a dot on the map, even though it was the county seat—sat far from the main highways and interstates at the intersection of two county roads.

Wilson finished the first of his cinnamon twists, then took a gulp of coffee. “Today’s the big day, right?”

She set down her cup and nodded. “That’s right. New term, new school year.”

“Still feels like summer.”

“It *is* still summer.”

“So what classes do you teach this term?”

“Shakespeare, all quarter. Comedies in the morning and tragedies in the afternoon.”

“I can’t say I’m a Shakespeare fan, but I bet you could convert me.”

She ignored that. “So what about you? Doesn’t the

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first day of class at the college give you some headaches?”

“Today? Not much. Yesterday, plenty. That’s when the roads got overloaded with traffic.”

“So I noticed.”

“It doesn’t help matters that the students move onto campus over Labor Day weekend.”

It boggled her mind why Charlotte Drake College of Liberal Arts chose to open the fall term on a Wednesday, especially following Labor Day. The entire week was a waste of time. She was so grateful for a good job, however, she’d hardly be the one to voice a complaint, especially to Dean Drake. She’d heard he was the sheriff’s brother and, though he was red-haired instead of blond, he did resemble Wilson.

The diner door burst open, and an African-American woman dressed in a deputy’s uniform rushed to Wilson’s side. “Sheriff, we have a—a situation.” The look she exchanged with Wilson led Elizabeth to believe *situation* was cop-code for *something we need to discuss in private*.

“Excuse me.” Rising, he nodded to Elizabeth, then turned to the young deputy. “Be right out, Jamie.”

Lorraine materialized with a white sack and Styrofoam cup, reminding Elizabeth of a NASCAR pit crewmember. “Here, Wil. Let’s make this breakfast to-go.”

He thanked Lorraine, grabbed his coffee and bagged pastry, then dashed out of Boyd’s Diner without paying. For all Elizabeth knew, he ran a tab. Or maybe Boyd’s

Diner didn't charge the county sheriff, as a courtesy.

She smiled at the waitress. "I'd say you've done that before."

"Yes, but not too often. Luckily, Drake Springs isn't a high crime city."

Drake Springs wasn't a city by any definition, but Elizabeth didn't comment. After living twelve months in the college town, she should've been used to the pace by now. In a way, she'd made the best of her situation by pretending she had no other life. In fact, she'd become proficient at deception.

Pretending kept her alive.



Deputy Jamie Peterson leaned against the fender of Wil's Jeep Grand Cherokee. "It's Doc Hodges, the missing vet."

Wil tossed the white sack onto his vehicle's passenger seat. Cathleen Hodges had opened the town's first veterinary practice more than a year earlier. She'd been reported missing over the Labor Day weekend. Wil figured she'd turn up sooner or later. Drake Springs was hardly a hotbed of kidnappings. "Did she show up?"

"You could say that." Jamie's usually full lips thinned. "Her body washed up at ol' man Reesor's dock."

*Body?* "Did she drown, you think?"

"Not unless she survived the bullet in her brain."



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Plus, there's no sign of her vehicle."

"Did you call Jacksonville?" he asked, referring to the medical examiner's office that covered Foster County.

"Not yet. I wanted you to know first."

"Did Brady stay behind with the body?" Wil had only twenty full-time deputies, eight of whom were off duty.

"Yes. He's securing the scene—what there is to secure. We each took photos." She pulled a cell phone off a clip on her belt. "You want me to call in the others?"

Wil shook his head. It wasn't as if the county was large enough to have a homicide division. Or any division. His small force worked in shifts to patrol and answer calls. After yesterday's hectic influx of college students, he opted to let them rest. "We'll work with the scheduled force for now."

She shrugged. "Reesor pulled the body out, so I don't know how much he contaminated any forensic evidence."

"How's the old guy holding up?" Wil worried about the town's octogenarian fisherman more than forensics.

"Pretty shook, if you ask me. He wasn't expecting a homicide."

"Who *was*?" Wil had been sheriff for almost two years, and this was Foster County's first murder in a decade or more. "I need you and Brady to keep the scene secure for the evidence team, then conduct a knock-and-talk. See if we can find a witness or build a timeline."

"Knock-and-talk? All we have is old man Reesor."

"I want every homeowner along that section of the river questioned, Jamie. Somebody might have seen or heard something that didn't seem reportable at the time." Wil suppressed a sigh. They had a slim chance of finding evidence involving a floater, but he couldn't afford to overlook any opportunity to find a clue.

"What about the state guys?" she asked, referring to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. "Won't they have to be involved?"

"Definitely." Tiny Foster County had no crime laboratory or medical examiner. "I'll call the ME and FDLE and meet you back at Reesor's dock. I need that missing person report."

Jamie nodded. "I'll have it for you when you get there."

She left Wil standing in front of the diner. Dread settled over him. He had his first homicide as sheriff. True, he'd been lucky his term's first year, but this was Foster County, not Duval County, where he'd spent too many years as a detective. Drake Springs was his retreat, his home again after many years, the tiny part of Florida few knew about or paid attention to. The proverbial Main Street, U.S.A.

Or did such a place exist anymore?

His cinnamon twist forgotten, Wil tossed the coffee cup into the trash and then jumped in the Jeep. The sheriff's office was one block behind the courthouse on Court Street, walking distance from Boyd's Diner.

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Much as he'd like to make the calls from his own desk, he vetoed the idea and drove directly to Gabe Reesor's place on the river. Talking on a cell phone while driving was a safety hazard he'd warned others about, but today he'd make an exception and multitask. He needed to be at the crime scene without delay.

At the Alibi Bar, located right at the "City Limits" sign, Main Street narrowed to a two-lane county road. Thick growths of blackjack oaks blocked the morning sun to form a tunnel of shade along the blacktop. Wil made his calls, thankful for speed-dialing and no traffic, while racing toward Reesor's. Slowing for the turnoff, which was little more than two tire tracks in the dirt, Wil saw movement in his rearview mirror. Another vehicle closed in on him. Painted cream and black, the Chevy Blazer sported a blue and red light bar on its roof.

*What the hell—?*

Just his luck to have Adam Gillespie, Drake Springs's police chief, arrive at the scene. Never mind that it wasn't within Adam's jurisdiction. Adding to Wil's frustration, Adam's mother, who owned the town's newspaper, thought nothing of pumping Adam for details to spice up the *Drake Springs Democrat*. How had Adam found out about the homicide so quickly? Wil would just as soon have his prostate checked than field questions from his adversary.

Adam had opposed Wil in the election, though Wil

doubted he really wanted the job. Drake Springs had hired the police chief with a decent salary and benefits, whereas the county sheriff's position was political. Job security was in the hands of the voters every four years. But what did he know about Adam's motives? The grudge between them predated the sheriff's race by decades.

Ignoring Adam's arrival, Wil bolted from his Jeep. He slowed at the steep incline of Reesor's boat ramp, where he spotted his two deputies. Jamie Peterson, the younger of the two, stood to the side as if avoiding contact with the corpse. Probably was, not that he blamed her. New to law enforcement, Jamie had never worked a homicide until today. Brady Newcomb, a four-year veteran with Foster County's sheriff's office, stood at the dock with his roll of yellow crime scene tape, which he'd strung generously through the palmettos and pines.

Because of the summer's drought, the water level in the Suwannee River had dropped so low that the end of the ramp jutted over the water instead of under it. Elderly Gabe Reesor sat in a webbed lawn chair in the shade of a nearby oak, protected from the sight of the dead woman by the wooden dock that bordered the boat ramp. At the edge of the cement lay the body of Cathleen Hodges, hardly recognizable. Wil stooped for a closer look.

Twigs and debris tangled with Cathleen's long, brown hair. Her once-olive skin was bleached white, her mahogany eyes missing from their sockets, no doubt

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victims of Florida's waterfowl population. Bloated and grotesque, she bore little resemblance to the thirty-something veterinarian who'd opened her practice last year. Without touching the corpse, Wil couldn't be sure but guessed rigor mortis had already set in. She'd been reported missing Monday after having last been seen Friday. She may have been dead for days.

Just as Jamie said, a small bullet hole punctured the deceased's temple. From Wil's experience, he figured twenty-two caliber at close range. Who had shot Cathleen Hodges and why? Did Foster County harbor a killer, or was he an outsider? From behind Wil a shadow fell, shading him and the corpse from the morning summer sun. Without turning to look, he knew it was Adam.

"Gunshot wound to the temple." Adam Gillespie's voice boomed with authority. "So this was no drowning."

"We'll know more after the postmortem." Wil stood but didn't turn to face Adam. Instead, he addressed Brady and Jamie. "The ME's office is sending someone now. Should be here in an hour."

"Did you talk to Reesor?" Adam asked. "I understand he discovered the body."

Wil turned to face him. "As you're well aware, I just got here. I'm handling the crime scene, so you can relax and go back to your own jurisdiction."

"My family still owns land out here." He gestured to the opposite bank of the Suwannee. "I have a personal interest."

“Interest doesn’t include investigating a crime in the county.”

Adam’s mouth widened into a friendly grin, one Wil knew was meant for his audience’s benefit, not his. “Now, no need to be territorial, Sheriff Drake. I’m here to lend my assistance. Your force isn’t equipped to handle a homicide investigation.”

“Neither is yours, Chief Gillespie, which is why we have FDLE.” Wil didn’t want to antagonize Adam further, so he softened his tone. “Seriously, I do appreciate your offer to help.”

Adam nodded. “Call if you need me.”

Wil watched Adam retreat up the ramp. Brady ran a hand through his thick salt-and-pepper hair and moved closer to Wil. “I know we’re supposed to be on the same team, Sheriff, but I don’t trust him.”

Wil couldn’t afford to let a personal feud interfere with the job. “You can trust him, Brady. He’s a good lawman. He just doesn’t like me.”

Brady snorted. “I’d say the feeling is mutual.”

The origins of the hostility between the Drakes and the Gillespies had been clouded by the years and the gossip to the extent that Wil couldn’t have explained them if he wanted to—which he didn’t, and certainly not to members of his force. No point in fueling rumors. “I don’t dislike Chief Gillespie.”

“I heard you dated his sister.”

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He'd dated both sisters, not that he'd discuss that with Brady or anyone. "That was high school, a long time ago."

Something in his tone must have alerted Brady that the subject was closed, because he wisely changed the subject. "I took Mr. Reesor's statement, but do you want to question him, too?"

"I'll talk to him."

Jamie pulled folded paper from her breast pocket. "Here's a copy of the missing persons report on the victim."

"Thanks. Did you know her?"

Jamie shrugged. "Sure. She neutered and declawed Chigger, my kitten. How about you?"

"I talked to her a couple of times. She gave Sophie her rabies shot last month."

Actually, Cathleen Hodges had flirted with Wil, but he wasn't going to mention that to his deputy. Cathleen had certainly been attractive, although the image of her bloated corpse now superseded his memory of her.

Wil stepped into the shade of a clump of crepe myrtles and took a moment to scan the printout. He came to the names of those who'd last seen Cathleen Hodges before her disappearance. She'd had dinner with three friends at the Hurricane Lantern, Drake Springs's only decent tavern, and was last seen pulling out of the parking lot. No one reported seeing her after that, but someone had seen her. And that someone had murdered her.

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Kris Knight, one of the friends who'd last seen her, filed the missing persons report after Cathleen Hodges had missed a breakfast meeting, failed to answer her telephone all weekend, and hadn't shown up at her veterinary practice yesterday. Miss Knight taught English at Foster County High School. Wil had met the woman and knew a little about her. She wasn't his type, so he hadn't followed up their few conversations with a date. Oh, she had the looks: tall, thin and willowy frame, long brown hair, lush eyelashes that framed brown eyes. Her eyes reminded him of Elizabeth's, the color of fine bourbon, hidden behind glasses that—

*Whoa, Wil.* Unfortunately, too many things reminded him of Elizabeth Stevens. She seemed to lurk at the edges of his mind on a regular basis, sidetracking his thoughts. Giving himself a mental shake, he turned his attention once more to the report. As if conjured up from his imagination, the name Elizabeth Stevens appeared with the names of the women last seen with Cathleen Hodges. Elizabeth was the newcomer in Drake Springs who interested him most and whom he knew the least. For whatever reason, she kept her distance.

The deceased's third dinner companion was Sunny Davis, an attractive blonde who seemed to be the only one of the quartet who was married. Her husband, Ian Davis, ran information systems for the college. All four women were fairly new to the area, which was why Wil



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made a point to learn what he could about each one. None of the three women seemed a likely murder suspect, but he'd have to question each of them.

Wil strolled over to where Gabe Reesor sat. He saw no reason to question the older man. He had an hour to kill before either FDLE or the medical examiner would arrive, though, and he wanted to see for himself that the old guy wasn't distressed by the morning's discovery. If only Wil could say the same for himself.

Reesor lived in a single-wide mobile home on stilts located a few yards from his boat ramp and dock. A lifetime spent on the river had leathered the fisherman's already dark skin. Cataracts clouded his eyes, but his other senses seemed sharp as ever. Thin and wiry, he got around better than some men decades younger. He'd supplied Boyd's Diner and Miller's IGA Market with fresh fish until he'd retired last year.

"H'lo, Wil." Reesor straightened in his chair at Wil's approach. "Sheriff Drake, I mean."

Wil squeezed the man's shoulder. "Mr. Gabe, you've called me 'Wil' all my life. No need to change that just because I won an election."

Reesor's dark face split into a grin, revealing a few gaps from missing teeth. "Yeah, I used to chase you young daredevils outta my cave, especially that little sister of yours. Ain't seen her in years, though. Where's she been?"

Wil hadn't seen much of his sister, either. "Taylor

travels the country taking photographs, mostly for spe-lunking magazines, travel journals and such.”

Reesor’s smile disappeared. “I expect you want to talk to me ’bout finding that body.”

“No need. You already gave your statement to Deputy Newcomb.” Wil gave Reesor’s shoulder another squeeze. “Heck of a way to start your morning, though, isn’t it?”

“Worse for that poor woman.”

“Yeah, I can’t argue with that.”



“Are you entertained by murder, gore, witchcraft, and the criminal mind?” Mouths dropped, and eyes widened at Elizabeth’s words. Good. She had their attention, at least for the moment. She’d had no idea if her approach would be effective, but it had worked on her as a student years earlier, and it’d worked today on her morning class.

She left the platform to pace in front of the students. “You’re here to study Shakespeare’s tragedy plays for the next ten weeks. Violence and suspense fans, you’re in the right class because this is the Shakespeare we’ll be reading this quarter.”

The inevitable smart-ass raised his hand and said, “I’m just here to get a humanities credit.”

Some of the students giggled. Elizabeth stared at the young man and cocked one eyebrow as she’d seen

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her grandmother do a thousand times. “Let’s hope you aren’t squeamish.”

The din receded. She returned to the podium, where she’d dumped her stack of handouts. Gripping the edge of the lectern, she drew a deep breath. “Where do Hollywood writers get ideas for popular films? Shakespeare.”

Their attention piqued, they listened to her opening class lecture, the one that put Shakespeare on familiar ground. “Those of you who previously studied the comedies with me remember the twins switched at birth.”

A student from her previous term called out, “*Comedy of Errors*.”

“Right. Any of you see that old Bette Midler and Lily Tomlin movie, *Big Business*? Two sets of identical twins, switched at birth. Same story, just updated. This quarter we’ll study more familiar storylines. *Romeo and Juliet*, a well-known story retold countless ways, is perhaps most famously updated in the musical *West Side Story*. How about you sci-fi fans? Anyone remember a classic from the fifties *Forbidden Planet*?”

The smart-ass nodded now, his expression changed from mildly bored to mildly interested.

She smiled at him. “Try reading *The Tempest*. Same story, different planet. And if you think the movie *The Departed* was violent, wait until we study *Titus Andronicus*. Shakespeare’s first drama has violence and

gore that would trouble *today's* censors."

Movement by the door distracted her from the lecture. A face filled the door's glass window. Not just any face, but the sharp angular jaw, blond hair, and strong nose suggestive of Norse roots. Wilson Drake.

She gathered her handouts and her composure. "Uh, but I'm getting ahead of our syllabus. Here are your assignments for this class. Please review them and be ready to discuss the setup for *Hamlet* on Friday."

She concentrated on distributing the handouts, trying to ignore the butterflies in her chest. Why was Wilson here? The bigger question: Why did his visit to her classroom "throw her into a tizzy," as her grandma was fond of saying?

Twice today she'd thought about her grandmother, and the ache in her chest replaced her nervous flutters. She missed her grandmother so much, just as she missed all of her family. And her horses. Oh, how she'd love to go riding again, but she couldn't. Anything she loved or would normally enjoy was taboo. Deviating from her new persona even once could get her recognized. She lived life in a bizarre alternate universe.

She pushed aside her self-pity and dismissed the class. Gathering her notes and handouts, she slid them into her briefcase and waited for the sheriff to approach her. He pushed his way through the crush of exiting students toward the lectern, clutching a thin stack of paper.

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“What brings you here, Sheriff Drake?”

“Ah, Elizabeth, darlin’, I keep telling you, you can call me Wil.” Mischief lurked behind his serious eyes.

“And you can address me as Professor Stevens, *Sheriff*. I’m on duty here.”

“So am I.” All mirth evaporated from his expression. “We need to talk. In private.”

The law wanted to talk to her? No! She’d been more than careful. She’d been perfect. What could she have done that betrayed herself? All the blood in her head seemed to drain to her feet. Her vision blurred. Grabbing the lectern, she steadied herself.

Her appearance must have alarmed him, because he gripped her elbow. “Hey, are you all right?”

She opened her eyes and met his gaze, hoping to see his face frowning with concern. Instead, she saw suspicion.

*Oh, dear God, he knows.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Wil released her elbow but couldn't rid himself of the questions flooding his mind. Elizabeth Stevens couldn't be a murderer—he'd bet his career. So why did she look at him with guilt written all over her face? Judging from her reaction, he was sure she knew *something* about the Cathleen Hodges homicide. Except he hadn't mentioned it yet. Did Elizabeth know they'd found her body?

"Is there someplace we can go, like your office?"

"Yes, my office." She seemed to regain her composure. At least she no longer appeared about to pass out. "It's upstairs."

He followed her into the hall, then escorted her up the stairs to her second-floor office. The walk-in closet in the family house at Drake Oaks was no smaller than the windowless room. She flicked on the fluorescent lights

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on her way to her desk, where she dropped her briefcase on top. Scooting behind her desk to sit, she offered him the only other seat, a hard metal folding chair.

“What’s this about, Sheriff Drake?”

Tempted to push her to tell him why she’d nearly collapsed in her classroom, he forged ahead, focusing on his investigation. “It’s about Cathleen Hodges.”

“Cathleen? Is she all right? Kris said she hadn’t—”

“She’s dead.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened, her mouth forming a large O. “Oh, my God! What happened?”

“We’re waiting for the autopsy, but she appears to have died of a gunshot wound.” Wil watched her closely. Her shock seemed genuine, but what about her earlier reaction? Did she have her own reasons for avoiding his questions?

“Was it self-inflicted?”

“Why would you ask that?”

She avoided his gaze, paying an excessive amount of attention to the combination lock on her briefcase. “What’s the alternative—murder? Either scenario is terrible.”

“All I can tell you is we are investigating it as a homicide.” He slid a small notebook from his pocket. “I need to ask you about Friday evening. You may be the last person to have seen Cathleen Hodges alive.”

Her eyes filled, but she blinked furiously and held the tears at bay. He liked that in a woman. In fact, he liked

too many things about Elizabeth Stevens. Nonetheless, he had to question her, his personal feelings aside. Before being elected county sheriff, Wil had been a detective. A damned good detective. He'd find out what—if anything—Elizabeth Stevens was hiding. Right now he needed to focus on his case.

"The four of us—Cathleen, Sunny, Kris, and I—get together about every week for a girl's night out. Nothing wild. No bar hopping or anything. Just dinner and talk. Laughs." She shrugged and met his gaze. "We usually go downtown to the Hurricane Lantern, although a few times we've driven over to White Springs to eat at the Telford Hotel."

"But last Friday you ate at the Lantern, right?"

"Yes. Sunny usually organized our get-togethers, depending on Ian's work schedule."

"The four of you were new to Drake Springs, right?"

Elizabeth nodded. "That was our bond. None of us knew anyone else here, so we gravitated to each other as newbies."

"How did you first meet?"

"Sunny and I met at the bookstore on campus and struck up a conversation about where to buy house wares in town—you know, stuff like dish drainers, paper towel holders, and such—and I invited her to go with me to the dollar store that afternoon. Her husband met us for dinner at the Hurricane Lantern, which was the first



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time I'd eaten there. I'd mistaken it for a beer joint."

"Well, it does look rustic on the outside."

"Rustic? That's putting it mildly. Anyway, that's how Sunny and I became friends. We take turns cooking for each other one night a week, and then we go out one night a week with Kris and Cathleen."

"So how did you hook up with them to start the weekly dinner thing?"

"Ian's cat got sick, so I rode with them to take the cat to the vet, who turned out to be Cathleen Hodges. Her practice was new, and she needed to spread the word that she was open for business. Sunny and I offered to pin up business cards around campus. We both sensed that Cathleen didn't really have friends in town, so we invited her to join us for dinner the following Friday. Anyway, Cathleen did all she could for Bebo, but he had to be euthanized."

"And Kris Knight? How did she come to be part of your foursome?"

"The very Friday night we rode over to The Telford Hotel in White Springs—"

"Your first outing with Cathleen Hodges?"

"Yes. So that night at dinner, we saw a woman dining alone at the next table. We felt sorry for her and asked her to move to our table."

"Sunny's husband didn't go?"

"No, he does a lot of systems maintenance routines

at night, which is why Sunny's on her own."

"Then you, Sunny, and Cathleen invited a lone diner to your table. Was that Kris Knight?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Turns out she had just moved to Drake Springs, too. She teaches English at the high school. She fit right in, and we made plans to meet again the next week. You know the rest."

"Okay, so this past Friday night you met for dinner at the Hurricane Lantern. Did anything out of the ordinary happen, like overly friendly advances by other patrons or any altercations with other customers? Anything like that?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Not a thing. To an outsider, it would've been boring dinner conversation."

"I need for you to tell me everything about that night, even the dinner conversation."

"I'll tell you what I remember, but you'll need to ask Sunny and Kris, too."

"I'll be talking with them."

Elizabeth inhaled a lengthy breath, then slowly exhaled. "Kris arrived first and got us a table. I don't know how long she'd been there when I arrived—"

"What time was this?"

"We'd agreed to meet at six. I was about ten minutes early. Anyway, Kris and I ordered iced tea—" She gave him a brief smile. "Not the alcoholic variety. I told you we were real party animals. Anyway, we had our drinks by the time Cathleen came in. Sunny arrived last, right

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at six. You sure you want all these details?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Well, I think Cathleen ordered a Diet Coke. Sunny wanted ice water with lemon. I think. I mean, how important is it to know what we ordered?”

“Tell me everything. I’ll decide what’s important.”

The contents of Cathleen’s stomach, for instance, could help determine how long after Friday’s dinner she’d died.

“I ordered one of those big fried Vidalia onions and shared it with everyone for our appetizer. Then our waitress, whose name was Joyce—I remember because we ask for her anytime we go to the Lantern. She’s great.”

“I know her.” He made a note to question Joyce Winston. Her husband, Devon, was one of Wil’s deputies. “So what about Joyce?”

“She told us about the special, which was deep-fried catfish fillets with cheese grits, green beans, and sliced tomatoes. Cathleen and I got the special, Kris ordered the barbeque chicken plate—I believe that came with slaw and fries—and Sunny ordered hamburger steak with mashed potatoes smothered in a mushroom-and-onion gravy.” She paused, then added, “Cathleen and I chose wisely. The catfish was amazing.”

He jotted down details of the meals. At least the women weren’t obsessive dieters on their night out. On second thought, he’d never seen Elizabeth fixate on dieting.

She seemed comfortable with her curves. In fact, there didn't seem to be a vain bone in her body, which was one more thing to like about her.

*Focus, pal.* "What did you talk about during dinner?"

"Gasoline prices and whether we were better off to visit the nearest mall in Valdosta or pay shipping prices and order online." At his nod, she continued. "I said I preferred mail-order because even if it didn't save money, it saved time. Sunny and Kris agreed that I failed to grasp the female ritual of going shopping. Cathleen contended that frequent online shoppers were often rewarded with a free-shipping offer, in which case she sided with me. And your eyes are glazing over."

He grinned. "Are not. I'm fascinated, really." Unfortunately he'd heard nothing that helped his murder investigation. "What else did you discuss? Seriously, it could be important."

"All right. Let me see." She chewed her bottom lip and frowned. "We discussed our . . . this is a bit embarrassing—"

"Sorry, but I need to know."

Elizabeth removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes, then slid the glasses back on. "We debated at what age a woman should give up on having children. You see, only Sunny is married, and she's the youngest of us at twenty-nine. The rest of us are on the downhill side of thirty-five, and you know what they say about the ol' biological clock."

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He resisted asking her if she wanted kids. He'd be forty in a few weeks and felt time running out on his own opportunity to settle down and raise a family. Such talk wouldn't further his interrogation of Elizabeth, however. "Do you know if Cathleen Hodges was involved in a relationship?"

"She said she wasn't. Neither is Kris or I, which is why the topic came up. Even if we met Mr. Right this year, we figured we'd be forty before the courtship, wedding, and pregnancy ran their course. And none of us has found Mr. Right, which became our next topic of conversation: Men."

He looked up from his notebook to see if she was smiling. She wasn't. He'd love to know the story behind her frown but couldn't afford to be sidetracked now. "Go on."

"Kris and I agreed that after ridding ourselves of losers, we weren't going to try marriage again—"

"You were married?" The question slipped out before he thought better of it.

"No, Kris was. I had a dangerously close call but broke the engagement." She didn't seem to mind the question but volunteered no more.

"What about Cathleen Hodges?"

"No, she'd never married. She told us her animals were children enough for her."

"Did Cathleen mention dating anyone after moving here? Or any old boyfriends who might've come calling?"

“Not Friday night, but wait a minute.” Elizabeth grabbed the sides of her head with both hands. “Oh, God, this could be important! She once said she’d been in an abusive relationship a couple of years back. She’d had to take out a restraining order on the guy but still didn’t feel safe. Finally, she’d moved halfway across the country to get away from him. But she didn’t mention his name, and she said she hadn’t heard from him since she relocated.”

Wil wrote down the information. He would run a check on her veterinary license and track her back to her former location. “She say where she was from?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I thought she moved here from Auburn, Alabama, but now I don’t think so. I think that’s where she attended vet school.”

Wil tried to remember his one visit to Hodges Animal Clinic, when he’d taken his golden retriever for her rabies vaccine. He’d seen a diploma on the wall. What university was it from? It’d be easy enough to search the premises. He made a note to have Brady secure the vet’s office. It’d give his deputy an excuse to string more yellow tape.

“What time did she leave the restaurant?”

“We all left together. It must’ve been about seven thirty or so. There were people waiting for a table, so we paid and went to the parking lot, where we chatted another few minutes. Then we said our goodbyes and went

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our separate ways.”

Wil scribbled, catching up with his notes. He should’ve brought his recorder but had left it in his desk. He’d not started his day planning for a homicide investigation, but that didn’t excuse his ill-preparedness. Law enforcement officers couldn’t afford the luxury of complacency.

“When you left, did you notice where Hodges was parked? See her get into her car?”

“She parked next to the street, the first slot off Main.” Elizabeth stopped for a moment and frowned. “If someone had been hiding in the back of her minivan, we couldn’t have seen him.”

The missing person’s report included a description of the victim’s minivan. “Anything else you remember her saying, either Friday night or anytime that might help us find her killer?”

“No. In fact, I can’t imagine anyone wanting to hurt her. Everyone seemed to like her, and she was building a good veterinary practice here. She was as gentle with people as she was with animals.”

“Well, some animal murdered her.”

She nodded. “I wish I knew more to help you catch him.”

He handed her a business card. “Call if you remember anything else, okay? Anything.”

Frowning, she stared at the card and nodded. “I will, but I’ve told you everything.”

At a loss to explain why, Wil left the interview dis-

couraged. Sure, he had a couple of leads, but what was Elizabeth Stevens *not* telling him?



*Thank God, he's gone.*

Groaning, Elizabeth removed her glasses and scrubbed her face with both hands. All energy drained from her body at Wilson Drake's departure, and she slumped over her desk. She'd hardly expected one of her new friends to be murdered! What was she—a jinx?

She reached for the end of the braid she no longer had. Even after more than a year, she cringed when she caught her reflection in a window or mirror. Instead of the image of what her brother called a "reed thin" body, she saw an inflated version of herself, wearing scholarly glasses and a ghastly wig. Except it wasn't a wig. She'd donated her long, chestnut mane to the Cancer Society and bleached out what remained.

She knew she couldn't remain in Kentucky with a price on her head. She'd accepted the offer of entering the Witness Security Program, but she'd underestimated the sacrifices she'd make to stay alive. She'd committed no crime yet lived far removed from all she knew and loved, possibly never to return, taking on a new identity and all it entailed.

How fair was that?



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How ironic that she now ran the drama department. She'd mastered wearing a mask and acting the part of a fictitious character. So ingrained was her new name and invented biography, she'd all but forgotten she was born Sofia Desalvo. She thought of herself only as Elizabeth Stevens, dowdy professor of English. If she indulged in remembering the woman she used to be, she might slip up and betray herself. Her handler made it clear that she had to stay in role at all times and trust no one.

The U.S. Marshals selected Drake Springs because of its low profile and nonexistent crime rate. They'd assured her no hit man worth his salt would dare venture there. He'd stand out worse than Joe Pesci in Alabama in the movie *My Cousin Vinny*. She tried to tell her handler that the man who wanted her dead wouldn't hire a stereotype. No, the pillar of the Lexington community and well-regarded physician attended church, belonged to all the right charity organizations, and was a bona fide Kentucky Colonel. His thugs would fit right in anywhere in the southeastern United States.

She'd requested California, preferably San Diego, where the weather was perfect and she could lose herself amongst millions of its citizens. Or Anchorage, Alaska, too far from Kentucky for the crime syndicate to bother. But according to her handler, her Southern accent was too difficult to change in a short time and would surely give her away. She'd given up her business and profession,

severed all contact with her past, and memorized a new life story. Now here she sat, right where a killer had slain a woman about her age. A veterinarian, no less.

*Oh. My. God.* Suddenly a thought so frightening, so awful, seized her, shaking her body with a terrible quaking. Their witness was a thin, brunette veterinarian. Could it be? Had Sullivan's men traced her to Drake Springs, Florida, and then killed the wrong person? If so, Elizabeth was partially responsible for the death of Cathleen Hodges.

She fumbled with the combination lock on her briefcase, opening it on the third try. Digging out her cell phone, she turned it on to check for signal strength. Cell towers were scarce in this part of Florida, but she managed to get a call through to her handler only to be told to call back from a landline. In her turmoil, she'd forgotten about the rule against calling wireless. She redialed from her desk phone, then related what little she knew about the murder of her friend.

"Agent Cory, she's a veterinarian and is very similar in appearance to me, or the former me. Don't you think I should tell the sheriff what's going on?"

"We can't take that risk, Elizabeth." The use of her new name sounded strange coming from him, although he'd been the one to emphasize the importance of never using her real name. She'd mastered saying *Elizabeth Stevens*. "The state agency is aware of your situation and

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can run interference with the locals. You keep quiet.”

“Sure, all right. But is it possible my cover’s blown and I *was* the intended victim?”

“We have no intelligence to support that. But keep me informed. Be careful.”

She ended the call. Talking with her WitSec handler had not eased her anxiety. “Be careful,” he’d said. Great. She lived life walking a tightrope. How much more *careful* could she be?

The desk telephone jingled, startling her with its shrill tone. “Professor Stevens.”

“Hi, Liz. Just calling to remind you about din-din tonight.” For unexplainable reasons, Sunny Davis insisted on calling her “Liz,” just as she called Cathleen “Cat.” She’d been unable to shorten Kris’s name, so Kris had escaped getting one of Sunny’s cutesy nicknames. It might have been her way of coping with a moniker like “Sunny.”

Elizabeth *had* forgotten about tonight’s dinner and everything else except Cathleen’s death. “What time again? Six?”

“Come over whenever you want, but we’ll probably eat at six.”

Big surprise. Sunny always wanted to eat dinner at six.

“I’ll be there. I’m bringing dessert, though.”

“Ian’s cooking. I’ll tell him. Hope you like spaghetti.”

“Love it.” She almost said, “Are you kidding? I’m Italian.” But Elizabeth Stevens was not Italian. “I’ll see

if the IGA Market carries spumoni.”

Sunny snorted. “Good luck. Just bring any kind of ice cream.”

She paused, then quietly said, “I suppose you heard about Cathleen.”

“That she’s missing? Yeah. That’s so strange—”

“No, she’s—” she could barely get the words out. “Oh, God, Sunny . . . she’s dead.”

“Shut up!”

“I’m serious. Someone murdered her. The sheriff questioned me about Friday night. That’s the last anyone saw her. He’ll be talking to you and Kris, too.”

“I can’t believe this. Who’d want to harm that nice woman?”

“That’s what I said. I can’t imagine.” But she *could* imagine, and the possibilities chilled her.

No matter what her handler had said, Elizabeth could’ve been the intended target. If so, what happened next, when Sullivan realized the witness against him was still alive? She shivered as if someone had just “walked over her grave”—another favorite expression she’d learned from Grandma.

This time her grandmother’s proverbs offered no comfort.



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Wil left Foster County High School, where he'd questioned Kris Knight in the faculty lounge after school, and headed for his Jeep. He'd learned little to help his investigation, but he had one more of the victim's dinner companions to interview. He had an appointment with Sunny Davis later in the evening at her home. He could've gotten to her earlier if he hadn't spent time on the computer.

His gut had told him to look closer at Elizabeth Stevens. Or maybe it was another part of his body. Torn between wanting to know her better and wanting to know more about her, he'd searched through both internet and law enforcement files to find any records on her. When he had more time, he'd dig deeper, but at least he knew she didn't have a record. So why did she seem uncomfortable with conversations about her past? Or was he being insensitive to her grief? After all, she'd lost all of her family not long ago. She'd moved to Florida to escape painful reminders of the tragedy.

He climbed into his Jeep and started the engine so the air conditioner could tackle the oven-temperature interior while he went to work scrubbing off dead love bugs. Within a minute, he'd worked up enough perspiration to dampen his uniform shirt, and soon he'd removed all the bugs' carnage. During the months of May and September, the mating black insects plagued afternoon motorists throughout Florida. Natives prepared

themselves by carrying squeegees and window cleaner.

By the time he plopped down in the driver's seat, the interior had cooled. Checking the battery level on his cell phone, Wil grabbed his DC adapter and plugged it in. His phone had gotten a heavier workout than usual today, thanks to the Hodges homicide. He plugged in the charger and immediately got another call.

His brother's voice greeted him. "Wilson, did you forget dinner?"

"Sorry, Sam. I've been investigating a murder."

"I heard. Listen, you still need to eat. Meet me at the Sub."

"The Sub?" Wil would sooner grab a stale vending machine sandwich than dine at the student union building surrounded by noisy teenagers. "What happened to meeting at the Lantern?"

"I'm not the one who forgot. In fact, I'm calling from their parking lot."

Wil was a mere fifteen minutes late, but Sam wasn't a patient guy. "Go back inside and grab us a table. I'll be there in two minutes."

Wil disconnected. Except for the occasional dinners, he'd not spent time with his brother for a while, but he wasn't above mixing business with pleasure. He might be able to catch Joyce Winston and question her about Friday night. Waitresses—especially experienced ones like Joyce—had their fingers on the pulse of a restaurant

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better than anyone.

He parked beside Sam's Saturn, left his phone plugged in to charge, then headed inside. Sam already had a tall glass of iced tea waiting for him, for which Wil was grateful. He slid into the booth across from his brother. Not even two years apart in age, Sam and Wil could've passed for twins, except for their hair color. Sam had his dad's red hair, whereas Wil had his mother's fairer coloring. Their younger sister favored their mother but had the Drake flaming-red hair.

"Thanks for waiting. It's been one helluva day." The sugary tea was too sweet for Wil's taste, but the icy liquid quenched his parched throat.

"Did you know the woman who was killed?"

"I'd met her. She was nice. Sophie liked her."

Sam chuckled. "That adorable mutt loves everybody, doesn't she?"

"She must. She puts up with me." He finished off the iced tea and sighed. "Also, she's good for Dad. He seems to enjoy her company when I'm working."

"How is Father?"

"Good, considering." Wil resisted suggesting that Sam stop by and see for himself. After all, Sam had been there for their father when Wil hadn't. "Who's our waitress tonight?"

"Louisa. The one you call Weezie. Here she comes with the pitcher of tea."

"You're psychic, darlin'," Wil said, holding up his empty tumbler for a refill.

"No, Sheriff, just a terrific waitress." Louisa Montoya's black eyes flashed with merriment. She and her husband, Carl, who ran a fuel station and wrecker service on Coronado Street, were expecting a baby and told everyone they met about it.

"How many more months till the blessed event?" Wil already knew the answer but couldn't resist the inevitable beaming response.

"Three. Carl's already buying him toys for Christmas." Smiling, she smoothed her denim apron over her pregnant belly. "You guys need a few minutes to decide?"

Sam answered, "I'm ready. Wilson?"

"I don't know why I even look at the menu, Weezie. Just bring me an order of your catfish fillets." One more thing to remind him of Elizabeth. She shared his appreciation for good catfish.

After Sam ordered, Louisa carried the pitcher of iced tea to the table behind theirs, and Sam frowned. "She still doesn't write down any of her orders. I'm astonished she gets them right."

"Like she says, she's a terrific waitress. She has a great memory." But she hadn't been the one to wait on the foursome last Friday night. "I'd hoped to talk to Joyce Winston, but I don't see her."

"She has the night off," Weezie yelled from the next table.



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Wil chuckled. "Weezie also has excellent hearing."

Sam lowered his voice. "Does Joyce have something to do with your case?"

"I don't know yet, but she waited on the victim Friday night. It may have been her last meal." Wil shrugged, already weary of working the homicide. "Anyway, you know about my day. How was the first day of classes at the college, Dean Drake?"

"Slow." Sam took a long sip of his iced tea. "It's a small college, not the University of Florida. I'm sure you'd be bored with what goes on there."

The hint of contempt in Sam's tone didn't escape Wil's notice. He'd been talking down to Wil for so long, it was probably too difficult to break the habit if he wanted to. Sam, the scholarly one in the Drake family, had always put down Wil's choice of career. So had their father, not that it mattered anymore. Since the stroke, Dad seemed glad to have Wil around. "No, I don't think what you do is boring."

Sam took another drink of iced tea before saying more. "We had a few scheduling problems, but not nearly as many as we did before updating our computer systems. The new IT administrator I hired last year is a genius."

"What's his name?"

"Ian Davis."

"Right. His wife is Sunny Davis."

"Yes, she took over the bookstore, for which I'm

grateful. The downside of a small college is the pay is low and the turnover high.”

“How’s she working out?”

“Great, not that I was in a position to be selective. Victoria left me in a bind by taking that job in Tampa.”

“Maybe it was revenge. After all, you did dump her.”

Sam made a face. “Please! Let’s not revisit my love life. So why the questions about Ian and Sunny Davis?”

Wil trusted his brother but not eavesdropping patrons of the Hurricane Lantern. “No reason. I just like to know the folks in my county.”

“How strange to hear you refer to Foster County as yours.”

“Yeah, I left it for awhile. But it’s home, Sam.”

Sam nodded. “Yes, it is. If only our little sister would figure that out . . .”

“Taylor has the wanderlust.” Wanderlust hadn’t been Wil’s problem, but he was tired of trying to explain his life’s choices. “Have you heard from her lately?”

“I get e-mails from her, but nothing personal. Usually insipid jokes I’ve seen a dozen times, or some sentimental slop. She sends them en masse, so you probably get them, too.”

“I get forwards, but as you say, nothing with any news about her or where she is.” Although Wil had her cell phone number, he couldn’t remember using it since their father’s stroke. “Maybe I’ll see if she’ll come home

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for Thanksgiving. It'd be good for Dad to have all of us at the house."

Sam guffawed. "Why? Are *you* cooking?"

The crazy idea of inviting Elizabeth Stevens, the woman who'd lost all her family in a tragic fire, popped into his mind. Holidays must be lonely for her. "Maybe I will."



Elizabeth shoved the carton of Italian ice into Sunny's cramped freezer. "Miller's IGA didn't have spumoni, but this is Italian."

Ian turned from the steaming pot on the range. "It was nice of you to bring dessert."

She backed out of the apartment's cramped kitchen. "It's the least I could do if you're cooking me dinner."

"It seems wrong, doesn't it?" Ian said.

"Your cooking dinner?"

"The three of us having a fun night of spaghetti when Cathleen Hodges has died. I feel guilty—"

"I know what you mean, Ian. She's been on my mind all day."

Sunny reached past Elizabeth to grab the bottle of Chianti on the counter. "Mine, too, but going without dinner won't bring her back."

"We'll toast Cathleen's memory at dinner." Elizabeth followed Sunny to the dining table.

Like most apartments of its vintage, Sunny and Ian's had a narrow galley kitchen with an L-shaped living and dining area. Sliding glass doors off the dining area led to a claustrophobic nightmare of a balcony. One of the two bedrooms was crowded with computer equipment and various electronics—Sunny referred to it as Ian's inner sanctum. Elizabeth couldn't deal with such chaos, but Sunny didn't seem to mind. She managed to keep the rest of the apartment tidy and clean, evidently banishing Ian to the one room.

Sunny's blond hair was pulled into a short ponytail, with wayward strands feathering her face. She placed wineglasses beside each plate. The dishes resembled Elizabeth's own, plain white Corelle, nothing fancy but very serviceable. She'd immediately been drawn to Sunny's no-nonsense efficiency.

*I like efficiency in a woman.*

Wilson Drake's words from this morning tumbled into her mind. Thoughts of the guy intruded entirely too often to suit her. The last thing she needed was involvement with a man, especially a lawman. Intimacy carried too high a price. How could she build a relationship on a lie? Her body seemed to ignore her warnings, however, and warmed at fantasies involving the handsome sheriff.

Except for toasting Cathleen, Elizabeth intended to drop the subject of their friend's murder. Not only was it distressing dinner conversation, but it especially

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disturbed Elizabeth. She couldn't shake the irrational notion that she had brought death to Drake Springs.

Sunny handed her the Chianti and a corkscrew. "Are you any good with these things? I'm pitiful."

"Sure." She couldn't admit as much, but she'd opened more bottles of wine than she could remember for parties when she'd been in vet school. Elizabeth Stevens attended Georgia, not Auburn, though. It wouldn't do to dwell on secret memories, so she pushed aside the thoughts as forcefully as she punctured the cork in the Chianti bottle.

"Ian's no better at opening wine than I am. If it's not computer coded, forget it."

She handed Sunny the opened bottle. "Except for cooking."

"Don't get your hopes up," Sunny whispered. "I found two empty Prego jars in the trash."

She laid the cork and corkscrew on the table. "You know, as long as I don't have to cook it, it'll be fabulous."

"Maybe you don't like to cook, but you can. You served us a great meatloaf last Sunday."

Elizabeth smiled. "I can, on rare occasions, make a decent meal."

"By the way, are we still on for Saturday?" Sunny poured the wine into goblets that matched the ones Elizabeth had purchased at the Family Dollar Store, the closest thing to a department store in Drake Springs.

"The shopping trip to Valdosta?"

"Yes, just the two of us. I'll pick you up at the diner. We can do breakfast before we leave."

"I'm willing to drive—"

"That pickup truck? No offense, but I'd rather we take my car." She placed the bottle of wine on the pass-through beside the doorway to the kitchen. "Now, let me get the garlic bread."

"Coming through!" Ian sidled past Sunny in the doorway, hoisting a large platter of spaghetti topped with sauce and shredded Parmesan. He placed it in the center of the dining table. "Ladies, dinner is served."

Elizabeth forgave him the jarred sauce when she saw the fresh grated Parmesan. "Looks amazing, Ian. I can't wait to dig in."

"Yeah, I apologize for being late. I'm a slow cook."

Sunny wrapped one arm around his neck and pulled him to her for a noisy kiss. "But a sexy one."

Elizabeth smiled at the newlyweds. If ever there was a mismatched couple, it was the Davises. Sunny was petite and full of energy, with breathtaking beauty that needed no makeup. The quintessential blue-eyed blonde, she wore a lot of makeup, but it wasn't necessary.

Ian, on the other hand, was stout with the beginnings of a pot belly, probably from too many hours sitting behind a computer. His thick glasses hid large brown eyes and rested on a too-wide nose. His receding hairline threat-

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ened to take over his entire head. Words like *nerd*, *geek*, and *dweeb* had come to mind when she'd first met him.

According to Sunny, they'd married after a brief, wild courtship and were approaching their first anniversary. Although they were opposites in appearance, Ian was good-natured, fun, and friendly, and openly worshipped his wife. Sunny seemed to adore him. What else mattered? It was more than Elizabeth could expect to have, at least anytime soon.

When they were seated, Elizabeth raised her goblet of wine. "To Cathleen. We'll miss you, friend."

"To Cathleen." Ian clinked his glass against hers.

Sunny touched glasses with hers. "Rest in peace, Cat."

After a stretch of silence in which the three slurped spaghetti and sipped Chianti, Ian turned to his wife. "You're going shopping Saturday? I thought you said you were visiting your mom this weekend."

Sunny grimaced. "Oh, crap, that's right. Can we go tomorrow after your last class? We can do dinner in Valdosta."

Ian nodded. "I need to spend time in the data center, so you two go on."

"Doesn't your mother live in Boston?"

Sunny nodded, waiting until she swallowed to answer. "Yes. I'll be back Sunday night."

Elizabeth helped herself to a slice of buttery garlic bread. She couldn't help but wonder how Ian and Sunny

could afford the expensive airfare, but perhaps Sunny's mother paid for the tickets. Anyway, it was none of Elizabeth's concern. "Do you want me to drive you to the airport?" she asked.

"No, I'll drive. I can leave my car at the long-term lot."

No surprise there. Sunny wouldn't want to ride in Elizabeth's small pickup all the way to Jacksonville when she could drive her luxury car. "Well, I know you'll enjoy visiting your mother."

"I'll miss you, honey," Ian said.

"I know, but it's just for a couple days." Sunny leaned back and grabbed the bottle of Chianti from the pass-through. "Refills, anyone?"

Ian held up his empty glass. "What time is the sheriff supposed to get here?"

Sheriff? Elizabeth groaned. "Not another setup!"

Sunny glared. "After the way you treated the last man we introduced you to? Not in this lifetime, babe. We learned our lesson."

"Introduced me to?" That wasn't what had happened, but why try to debate the issue? To be fair, there had been just the one time, when they had invited Ian's manager as Elizabeth's dinner date. "You were matchmaking, and he didn't appreciate it any more than I did."

Sunny pouted. "You both made that clear, which is why I've given up my quest for finding you Mr. Right."

"We care about you, Elizabeth. We just want to



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see you as happy with someone as Sunny and I are. We didn't mean to meddle."

Chagrined, she apologized. "I overreacted when you said the sheriff was coming. I just figured—"

Sunny snorted. "In any event, I wouldn't try to set you up with Wilson Drake. He's hardly your type, Liz."

Elizabeth bit back a "why not?" and stayed quiet. She didn't have to ask. Wilson Drake wouldn't be interested in chubby, dowdy Elizabeth Stevens, no matter how much he flirted with her. He flirted with any woman, even those double his age. So why did Sunny's remark rankle?

"He wants to talk to me about Cat Hodges, not that I'm much help. Kris knew her best, I think."

"He interviewed me this afternoon. I get the impression he's desperate for any clues."

"Yeah, and I doubt they'll catch whoever did it."

Ian frowned at Sunny. "Why do you say that?"

"Because crimes against women are never given the focus and attention of crimes against men. It's just sexism at work."

"You're always singing that song, and it's not true." Ian grabbed another slice of the garlic bread. "This sheriff may surprise you."

"Maybe. Frankly, I hope he does catch the guy. Who's to say he won't strike again?"

Sunny's words burned into Elizabeth's mind. She feared that he *would* strike again, and next time *she* could

be the victim.

While Ian and Sunny chatted about what movies to order from Netflix, Elizabeth rushed to finish her pasta. She pushed aside her wine to keep a clear head. Her nerves atwitter at the mere thought of Wilson Drake, she *so* didn't want a third encounter with the sheriff today. Nor did she relish driving home alone after dark.



Wil had to turn on his headlights by the time he turned off County Road 471 and idled through the entrance to Drake Oaks, the family homestead. His grandparents had bequeathed the estate to his dad, who now lived in the main house alone except for the visiting nurses. Wil had chosen to live at Drake Oaks but in a bungalow on the river. Once his parents' starter home, it was the type of house a realtor would advertise as a handyman's special. Wil aptly referred to it as either Work Haven or Money Pit.

His interview with Sunny Davis hadn't taken long since she corroborated what he'd heard from Kris Knight and Elizabeth Stevens. Of the three friends, Sunny claimed to be closest to Elizabeth. He wondered a bit about their friendship, since they didn't seem to have a lot in common. Maybe it was her Northern accent or her heavy-handed makeup, but Sunny seemed too preten-

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tious. She lacked Elizabeth's down-to-earth naturalness.

Pulling to a stop outside his father's house, he hesitated, fatigue settling in bone-deep. Usually, he looked forward to checking on his dad before heading home. How strange to think of his sixty-five-year-old father as an old man when he was almost twenty years younger than Gabe Reesor. But Gabe hadn't suffered a crippling stroke. Maybe Wil was exhausted, but he wasn't too tired to give his dad a few minutes of his time.

He climbed out of the Jeep, then headed up the steps to the front porch. A matching second-story porch had been screened in above it, enabling folks to enjoy the view of the river without gnats and those annoying love bugs. Because of Dad's confinement to a wheelchair, he no longer enjoyed that porch or anything else on the upper floors of the house. Wil had installed a ramp so his father could leave the house, but as far as Wil knew he rarely used it.

Wil stepped inside the foyer and called out, "Dad?"

Sophie trotted into the hall to greet him, tail wagging and nails tapping against the hardwood floor. Wil bent down and hugged the golden retriever's head, playfully scratching her behind both ears.

"In the den." Dad's voice was softer since the stroke that had paralyzed the left side of his body. Fortunately, speech therapy had restored his speaking skills, if not his volume.

The den, located at the back of the first floor behind

the dining room, had been converted to a multipurpose room for his father. Once an outspoken Foster County commissioner, successful businessman, and community leader, Harold Drake had deteriorated into a pale recluse. His hair, once as red and thick as Sam's and Taylor's, had thinned and grayed. His waist had thickened, his legs shriveled.

A hospital bed in the far corner of the paneled room hid a portable potty chair for those times when he couldn't make it to the bathroom near the kitchen. Stripped of carpets, the cedar plank floor bore scars from the wheels of his wheelchair. A small round table with two chairs borrowed from the dining room suite provided the only other seating area. An entertainment center took up most of the wall opposite the bed. The forty-two inch plasma television occupied most of his waking hours but was muted on The Weather Channel.

"How's it going, Dad?" Wil perched on the edge of one of the chairs. Sophie went to the throw rug in front of the television, made a circle, then plopped down.

"That tropical depression off the coast of Africa is headed this way." Dad gestured with his one working arm toward the television. "They say it's well-organized."

"It's that time of year." But Wil didn't want to talk about the weather. "How do you feel today?"

"Hungry." Dad wore a clean pair of pajamas. In the past few months, he'd made progress in dressing himself, al-

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though it still was a slow struggle. He'd given up zippered flies and gone with elasticized waistbands. "Glad you're here," he said. "Let's eat something."

Wil chuckled. "Sure, what do you want me to fix?"

"See if Hazel has any of that frozen shrimp in the freezer. She knows I like that."

Dad's love affair with deep-fried shrimp most likely had contributed to the stroke. For at least twenty-five years, the doctors in Lake City had cautioned him about his cholesterol numbers at every checkup. But Wil saw no point in lecturing him now. His father had too few pleasures in life. Besides, he needed Wil to be a son, not a nursemaid. Too bad Sam hadn't learned that lesson.

"Come on into the kitchen, and we can talk while I cook." Wil left the den before Dad could protest, forcing him to wheel his chair out of the room and across the back hall. Sophie followed, collapsing on the mat in front of the back door.

"I heard about that girl's murder. You got any leads?"

Wil pulled out the box of breaded frozen shrimp and gave a weary sigh. "I don't want to talk about the case, Dad."

"Hey, who am I going to tell?"

He closed the freezer door and faced his father. "It's not that—"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Yes, of course, I trust you." Wil returned his attention to his cooking and searched the lower cabinets until he

found the electric Fry Baby. He filled it with two cups of peanut oil and plugged it in to heat while he tried to figure out whether his father was angry or hurt—the last thing Wil intended, in either case. “I’ll tell you what I’ve learned so far.”

While he set the table, Wil related everything, from the condition of Cathleen Hodges’s body to his interviews with her friends. He explained what his deputies were doing, and what precious little FDLE had collected for testing. With a lot of luck, the medical examiner would find forensic evidence on the body.

“What about her car?”

“We’ve posted an APB for the vehicle. Tomorrow, I’m going to search the victim’s home and office for clues to her contacts, appointments, or anything that might be worth following. Until the medical examiner in Jacksonville gives me time of death, I can’t check for alibis. For now, I’m spinning my wheels and getting nowhere.”

“So the murder victim was last seen having dinner with three other women. Any of them suspicious?”

“Not in the least. They met weekly to socialize, but I’m not certain they knew each other well. All three seem shocked by the death of their friend. They remember her mentioning an abusive boyfriend in her past, which is why I want to go through her personal belongings tomorrow. I need to follow up on that lead.”

“You’re a smart detective. Follow your instincts.”

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*Smart detective?* “Gee, Dad, that sounded almost like an endorsement.”

“Don’t get sassy with me—”

“Come on. Don’t pretend you weren’t disappointed with my going into law enforcement.” Wil lowered the shrimp into the hot oil and set the timer. “Or does holding public office make it more respectable now?”

Dad stared at the useless hand lying in his lap. “That was a long time ago.” He raised his chin and glared at Wil. “How long before we eat?”

“Just a few minutes. Sam and I ate earlier at the Hurricane Lantern, but I’ll drink a glass of tea with you.”

“There’s plenty of that in the fridge.”

Sure enough, when Wil opened the refrigerator, he discovered Hazel had filled a gallon dispenser with brewed iced tea. All his father had to do was place his glass on the shelf below it and use the spigot. Most of the first floor was wheelchair accessible and convenient for his father to do as much for himself as possible. He might have been able to fry his own shrimp if he’d been able to reach the countertop.

“So how is Samuel?”

“Opening day for the new school year had him busy, but he says it went well.” Wil used the ice dispenser on the fridge door to fill two tumblers before adding the tea. He set both glasses on the table and turned back to the Fry Baby, then drained the fried shrimp on a paper

towel. “What do you want with your shrimp?”

“Whatever’s in the fridge. See if there’s some of Hazel’s slaw left.”

Wil found a Tupperware container of fresh coleslaw and filled a plate that would’ve passed for a platter at the Lantern—if he’d added fries—and placed it in front of his father. Sitting down across the table from Dad, he gestured toward the meal. “Dig in.”

Dad polished off the food within minutes while Wil sipped his tea, barely sweetened, just as he preferred. He resisted wiping his dad’s face or helping him fork the slaw into his mouth. He’d grown accustomed to the mess from his father’s meals and ignored it. Dad wouldn’t appreciate the help, anyway. He took pride in doing for himself. At least the stroke hadn’t totally debilitated him, but it saddened Wil to see his father’s mind, sharp as ever, trapped in a broken body.

“Thanks.” After he finished eating, he one-handedly stacked his dishes and pushed them toward Wil. “Can you rinse these for me? Hazel will have a fit if I don’t load the dishwasher.”

“Sure.” Wil took the dishes to the sink. Sophie trotted over in a hopeful search for scraps, but Dad had cleaned his plate. His appetite had improved since the stroke. Two or three years ago, he’d had to be coaxed and cajoled to take more than a bite. “Anything else I can get for you?”



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Dad shook his head. "Keep me posted on this murder. Maybe you can bounce ideas off my hard head."

Wil smiled at that, then sobered, reading between the lines. His father needed a purpose. For too long he'd felt useless. Maybe he and Wil could help each other. "You know, I do need a confidant, if you're sure you don't mind my picking your brain."

"Slim pickin's, son, but be my guest." He patted the grease from his mouth with his napkin, doing a remarkable job of cleaning up with one hand. "If you're as good a lawman as you are a cook, you'll figure out this murder in no time."

His father's praise caught him off guard. Twice in one evening? "I doubt that, but we'll see." He drank the rest of his iced tea, then added the glass to the dishwasher.

"Nonsense. Have you talked to Adam Gillespie yet?"

"Only to run him off the crime scene. It's not his jurisdiction, Dad."

His dad snorted. "I'm not talking about Adam Gillespie, chief of police. I'm talking about Adam Gillespie, *Romeo*. Ask him about taking that girl for a boat ride down the Suwannee a couple weeks ago."

"What girl?"

"You know, the one who got murdered. The vet, Cathleen Hodges."

## *CHAPTER THREE*

The next afternoon, Elizabeth opened the door to her pickup and stepped back. The blast of heat from the interior felt like a gust from her blow dryer set on high. The lenses of her eyeglasses fogged in an instant. She cursed herself for not placing the reflective solar shields on her dash. After suffering her second summer in the sunshine state, she should've known better. Shade from the huge live oak bordering the faculty parking area spread toward her truck, but too late to offer relief from the pent-up heat. She tossed her briefcase onto the seat of the cab and locked the door.

Sunny's high-pitched voice called out her name. "Are you ready?"

Elizabeth cleaned her fogged glasses with the hem of her shirt, then tucked it back into her waistband. "Let's

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do it.” She fell into step beside Sunny and headed toward the staff parking lot.

“You’d think we’d get a nice tropical shower to cool things off.” Sunny unlocked and started her car with her remote. Unlike Elizabeth, she hadn’t forgotten her solar shades, but the interior of the black Lexus radiated heat nonetheless.

Sunny seemed as in love with her Lexus as she was with Ian, not that Elizabeth blamed her. The car was new, luxurious, and expensive—again raising questions in Elizabeth’s mind about Ian and Sunny’s finances. They lived in a cramped apartment, both working for a college notorious for its lower-than-average salaries, and lived modestly for the most part. Sunny rarely drove her luxury car, opting to bicycle the short distance to work when she didn’t need to drive; but she took frequent trips, like this weekend trip to visit her mother. She may have come from a moneyed family or had a wealthy ex-husband in her past, though she’d never said. Ian didn’t seem troubled by her spending—but, then again, the marriage was still new.

Elizabeth kept her uneasiness to herself. Who was she to evaluate anyone’s relationship? Her one stab at a serious romance had demonstrated her poor judgment of character. She should’ve listened to Grandma. After her broken engagement, she’d sworn that any man she’d consider marrying would have to pass the Grandma litmus

test. Instead, she'd landed in an even bigger mess and most likely would never see her grandmother again.

"What's the matter, Liz? You look on the verge of tears."

Elizabeth was ready with another lie, although this one carried some truth. "I guess I can't stop thinking about Cathleen."

"Yeah, me too. Getting away from here for a few hours will help get our minds off it."

Sunny left the campus and took Main Street out of town toward Highway 41, which took her to a state road that connected with Interstate 75. Within minutes they headed north, crossing the state line into Georgia. Although the Lexus was a nice ride, Elizabeth would've been more at home in her Chevy S-10 pickup. WitSec, as her handler referred to the Witness Security Program, gave her the almost-new truck, standard shift transmission, fully loaded with options including OnStar. She liked shifting gears and had rarely owned an automatic. She'd made an exception with her mobile veterinarian van, but that seemed a lifetime ago.

As soon as they hit the interstate, Sunny resumed her ongoing campaign to give Elizabeth a makeover. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Liz, but have you thought about a new color for your hair? I think you'd look bitchin' as a brunette."

"I don't want to be a brunette."

"Okay, how about going blonder? Highlights,

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maybe. Something to perk up your look, you know?”

“I appreciate your interest, girl, but let me keep the look I’m comfortable with.”

She’d deliberately made herself into a mousy, nondescript person to avoid drawing attention. Sofia Desalvo had been a striking, model-thin brunette with impeccable taste and style, or at least compared to Elizabeth Stevens. Elizabeth was as ordinary and as plump as she could make herself, wearing black-rimmed glasses she didn’t really need.

But Sunny’s ambitions to update her image were not to be derailed. “Okay, but let’s at least get pedicures, all right? I think a pedicure is the ultimate extravagance.”

Elizabeth decided she’d have to choose her battles and acquiesced this once. Unlike Sunny, with her anklet and toe rings to show off, Elizabeth never wore sandals in public. What harm in a pedicure? “Sounds like fun. Is it expensive?”

“In Boston, yes. In Valdosta, I doubt it. In fact, I think they have a nail salon in the Wal-Mart.”

“You’re on.” Elizabeth chuckled at the incongruity of traveling in a Lexus to Wal-Mart for a pedicure. “Do you miss living in Boston?”

“Huh?” The question seemed to surprise Sunny. “No. I haven’t lived there in a while, anyway. I’m happy wherever Ian is. If his job had been in Nome, Alaska, that’s where I’d be now.”

## Cheryl Norman

Not for the first time, Elizabeth envied the couple's relationship, even if she didn't understand it. "Ah, love." She hammed a long sigh, which was rewarded by Sunny's giggle.



An hour later, Elizabeth sat in a chair across from Sunny's while an Asian man applied scarlet enamel to her toenails. A pedicure, complete with whirlpool footbath, was a new experience for Elizabeth—one she admitted she'd like to repeat. She'd indulged in a hot, sexy color, knowing her toes would be concealed from the public. It'd been a long time since she'd enjoyed a guilty pleasure.

"This was a great idea, Sunny. Thanks for suggesting it."

"Sure you don't want a manicure, too?"

She checked her watch. "Not tonight. We want to hit the mall, and we still haven't had dinner."

Sunny laughed. "You are so food-focused. You need to start bicycling with me."

Elizabeth snorted. Sunny may have loved her Lexus, but she *adored* her yellow all-terrain bike. She rode it all over campus. Even her precious Lexus had a special bike rack on the trunk to which she attached and locked the bicycle. "Tell me, which one do you love more—your car or your bicycle?"

"No brainer, Liz. My bike. Cars make life easier, but they pollute and cost money to drive."

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“And keep you dry in the rain.”

“My bike keeps me in shape, but it also helps relieve stress, you know? I just love my long rides, away from town and traffic. Helps clear my head.” Sunny’s waxing poetic about cycling was nothing new.

“I know the distances you ride. Trust me—cycling with you would do more than clear my head. I’d have to have the bicycle seat surgically removed.”

“We’ll start out slow and easy. Come on. It’d help you trim down.”

Just as Elizabeth feared. “I’ll pass.”

Sunny frowned. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I’m concerned for your health.”

“I know you are, but I just don’t have that fitness gene.” In truth, Elizabeth missed physical activity, especially horseback riding. She related to Sunny’s love of long, solo rides, whether by wheel or by hoof.

Dammit, it wasn’t fair that she had to deny everything about herself! Her handler had warned her repeatedly to avoid any typical behavior or habit. She could betray herself without telling a soul if she wasn’t careful. So far, everything she’d done, including this wild pedicure, had been opposite of the behavior of the person she’d left behind—and had also kept her out of danger.

Thoughts of danger resurrected her worries about Cathleen’s killer. “Sunny, maybe you should stick close to town on those solitary bike rides, at least until

Cathleen's murderer is caught."

"All the more reason for you to dust off your bike and ride with me."

Elizabeth chuckled in spite of her concern for her friend's safety. "Nice try. But I don't have a bike to dust off."

They tipped their stylists, paid their bills, and picked up a few items at Wal-Mart that the local stores didn't carry. "Where do you want to eat?" Sunny asked when they'd checked out.

"Your choice, girl." Before going into the Witness Security Program, Sofia Desalvo would never use expressions like "girl." Her new persona, Elizabeth, liberally peppered her vocabulary with such.

Sunny drove to a chain steakhouse, famous for its stuffed animal heads on the walls staring at the diners. After they ordered, Sunny flashed a wide grin at Elizabeth. "Now, admit it. The pedicure was worth every penny."

"Yes, it was." A pang of regret squeezed her chest. "Still, I can't help feeling guilty. We're doing something frivolous and fun, when our friend is . . . dead."

Sunny nodded, sobering. "I feel the same. But this is exactly the time we need something frivolous and fun. It's therapy. I'm sure Cat would approve."

Elizabeth's cell phone rang. Or more accurately, played her Shania Twain ringtone. "Hello."

"Hey, it's Kris. Where are you?"

Elizabeth glanced across the table at her friend and



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mouthed, *Kris*. “Valdosta having dinner. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought if you weren’t busy, we could go out for a beer. Since you’re an hour away, forget it. I’m just feeling bummed about Cathleen.”

“Me, too, girl. She’s been on my mind all day.”

“I wonder what kind of funeral arrangements her family will make. Have you heard?” Kris asked.

“Not yet.” Unbidden, the image of Sheriff Drake popped into her head. “Maybe we could ask the sheriff.”

Across the table, Sunny did an eye roll and said, “Why don’t *you* ask him?”

Elizabeth glared. Why did Sunny tease her about Wilson Drake? Why had she said, “He’s hardly your type, Liz.”?

“Well, I won’t keep you. I just thought if you weren’t doing anything—”

“Plan on coming over to my place tomorrow evening, and we’ll order pizza from Vinnie’s.”

“Thanks. I’ll take you up on that. Want to invite Sunny, too?”

“She’s going to visit her mother over the weekend. It’ll just be us two.”

“I’ll bring beer and see you around five.”

Elizabeth ended the call and shoved her cell phone into her purse. “Kris is feeling down about Cathleen’s murder.”

“I guess we should’ve invited Kris to come with us

today. I didn't think."

"She had PTA tonight, remember?"

Sunny shrugged. "You know, Kris is going to take Cat's death the hardest. I think they'd gotten quite chummy."

Elizabeth didn't argue, but she'd connected with Cathleen, too. She and Cathleen shared a love of animals and a career in veterinary medicine, although Elizabeth couldn't admit as much. They'd even attended the same vet school, although at different times.

Elizabeth had abandoned her veterinary practice, just as she'd deserted everything else she'd loved and taken for granted. Not that she wasn't grateful to be re-located out of harm's way. Cathleen's murder spooked her, though. Had the Witness Security makeover been for nothing?



Friday morning, Wil took time for breakfast at the diner, telling himself it was to check with Elizabeth. Maybe she remembered something to add to her statement about Cathleen Hodges. Who was he kidding? Elizabeth intrigued him, no doubt about it. Refreshingly candid and natural, she measured up to everything on his prospective *Mrs. Wilson Drake* list. The fact that his mind had leaped to thoughts of marriage when he had yet to get to

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first base with the woman didn't faze him. First base? Hell, he hadn't even stepped up to the plate yet.

He stopped by her table. "This seat taken, Professor Stevens?"

She cocked her head and smiled. "Be my guest, Sheriff Drake."

Lorraine materialized with a large mug of black coffee. "What'll it be, Wil?"

"Better make it toast, bacon, and eggs, darlin'. I don't know when I'll get lunch."

"Busy day?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, I'm meeting with FDLE about the homicide. Later I have a disaster meeting." Not to mention his planned search of the murder victim's home and office.

"How do you know the meeting is going to be a disaster?"

That made him chuckle. "No, it's a meeting about planning for a disaster. This is the height of hurricane season, and I have a regular meeting with the mayor, chief of police, rescue, and FEMA to evaluate our preparedness."

She picked up her cup, the steam from her hot tea fogging her glasses. "Well, I hope it's just a precaution. I've never experienced a hurricane, and I'd rather not, thank you very much."

"We were lucky last season. With this year's drought, we could probably handle a rain dump without fear of flooding. But the winds can be devastating."

Removing her glasses, she treated him to an unobstructed view of her thickly lashed eyes. Using a paper napkin, she dried the vapor from the lenses. "As far inland as we are, how likely is it that Foster County would be hit by a hurricane?"

He took a much-needed drink of his coffee before answering. With a homicide on his mind, he really didn't need the additional worry of hurricanes. "This area averages one every thirty or so years. The last was in 2004."

"I thought Florida had frequent hurricanes, certainly more often than thirty-year intervals."

"Northeast Florida is less vulnerable than the rest of the state."

She slipped on her glasses. "Oh, so statistically speaking, we shouldn't have to worry."

"Theoretically." He didn't add that 2004 brought two hurricanes to the area in less than a month. He'd been living in Jacksonville at the time but remembered the flooding and downed trees at Drake Oaks. He and Sam had helped their dad with the cleanup, in a time when Dad could still handle a chain saw and axe.

"It doesn't hurt to be prepared, I guess."

"We *have* to be prepared. Even if a storm misses us, it can cause power outages that affect us in a number of ways. Evacuations from the coast create traffic gridlocks." He met her gaze over his coffee cup. "Now *your* eyes are glazing over."

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“Are not.” She tossed back his words from Wednesday’s interview with a smug grin.

“I’m hoping the disaster preparedness meeting is a waste of time, darlin’.”

“But you’d advise me to follow that emergency checklist that comes in the weekly paper, right?”

Lorraine returned with a plate of French toast topped with warm syrup. “Bingo, sweetie. Don’t wait until the last minute to try to stock up on drinking water and batteries in this town.” She served the plate to Elizabeth, teasing him with the aroma of hot cinnamon and melting butter.

“Is it too late to change my order to French toast?”

Lorraine crossed her arms. “Yes, it is. You want me to bring you a side order, though?”

He laughed. “Better not. I’ll just sit here and drool over the professor’s.”

Elizabeth pushed her plate toward him. “Want a taste?”

The offer took him by surprise, but he quickly recovered. “Sure.”

Unwrapping his utensils from the paper napkin, he forked off a corner of French toast and slid it into his mouth, savoring the intimacy of the act as much as the rich flavor. Maybe it wasn’t much, but he felt as if he’d made progress—a baby step—in his pursuit of Elizabeth Stevens. At least he was in the dugout.

“Well?” She gazed at him with eyes as dark and liquid as the warm maple syrup. “Isn’t it absolutely the best?”

“Absolutely.” But Wil was talking about more than the French toast. “Thanks.”

“Here you go, Wil.” Lorraine served him his breakfast then nodded toward Elizabeth’s plate. “Boyd uses real French bread, sweetie. None of that sissy sandwich bread—no, sirree. And the syrup is real, too, from maples in Vermont.”

“Tell Boyd it’s wonderful.” Elizabeth pulled back her plate and dug in.

Wil ate his eggs quickly, sopping up the yolks with his toast. Chewing on a slice of crisp bacon, he remembered what he’d wanted to ask her. “I had another question for you.”

“Sure, what about?”

He lowered his voice. “Do you know if Cathleen Hodges went out with the chief of police, Adam Gillespie?”

She squinted her eyes in a thoughtful frown. “The guy who looks like Keanu Reeves?”

Keanu Reeves? Wil struggled to place the name. “I assume he’s a celebrity?” Expecting her to roll her eyes at his ignorance, he was surprised when she apologized instead.

“That’s a habit of mine—relating everything to movies. I forget most people have a life away from the DVD player.”

“Most people don’t know much about Shakespeare, and you’re an expert.” He didn’t know why he said such a thing, but her remark confused him. “Would you have

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me believe a beautiful, intelligent woman like you spends all her spare time watching DVDs?”

“Escapism.” She sipped from her cup of tea. “To answer your question, I’m sure Cathleen never dated Chief Gillespie or anyone else in town. I’m almost positive. But Kris did. She’s the one who refers to the guy as a Keanu Reeves look-alike.”

“Kris Knight?” Could his dad have been mistaken when he’d thought he’d seen Gillespie with Cathleen? He’d seen the pair in a rowboat, from a distance of about two hundred yards. Both Cathleen and Kris had long, brown hair and were of a similar stature and age.

“Yeah, Kris went out with Gillespie a couple times but said it didn’t work out. You’d have to ask her why.”

“No need.” He *would* ask, but he wouldn’t say so to Elizabeth. The last thing he needed was for a rumor to get back to Gillespie that Wil was looking at him as a person of interest in the homicide.

Elizabeth leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Well, she’ll be at my place tonight, if you want to question her. We’re having pizza and beer. Want to join us?”

Again, she’d blindsided him with the unexpected. An invitation to her house? He wasn’t about to question the thaw in her attitude, whatever the reason. After weeks of one-sided flirting, he was finally getting a break. Not that she’d asked him for a date—they wouldn’t be alone, after all—but could he afford to pass up the op-

portunity? “I just might do that. In fact, why don’t you let me bring the pizzas?”

“Sure, that’d be great.” Now it seemed her turn to be surprised. “Vinnie’s has a special on three mediums.”

Since Vicente Vega owned the only pizza parlor in Drake Springs, they didn’t have to decide anything but toppings. “Vinnie’s actually Mexican, you know, and his Mexican pizza is the best. Have you tried it yet?”

“No, but I’m game. Kris is usually agreeable about food.”

They settled on a time, and he took down Elizabeth’s address—not that he needed it. He’d patrolled her street more than once, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Since she’d probably consider that stalking, he wouldn’t admit his adolescent behavior, especially now that he’d made a bit of progress with her. He left the diner with an optimism at odds with the workday that stretched ahead.

In the baseball game metaphor of his love life, he’d finally picked up the bat.



Wil met Jamie Peterson at Hodges Animal Clinic on Main Street, where Cathleen Hodges had established her veterinary practice. Although Jamie was his least experienced deputy, she was also his most conscientious and meticulous employee—with the possible exception of Zelda Brooks, his secretary. Jamie had the makings of a



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detective and would probably leave the small county sheriff's department after a few years' experience, not that he blamed her. Hadn't he pursued a career away from Drake Springs? She could draw a higher salary in a city the size of Jacksonville, or even a small city like Ocala or Gainesville.

He held the keys he'd picked up from Otis Gibbons, the realtor in charge of managing the property. "Nobody's been in here since the murder, right?"

"Wrong. Before Brady got over here, the doc's assistant had opened the office, just as she had the day the doc went missing. She said she had a couple of animals in the kennels that needed attention."

"Are they still here?"

"No, she delivered them to their owners since Brady told her not to allow anyone inside."

"Good." He unlocked and opened the door. The odors of antiseptic and wet animal fur greeted him.

"What are we looking for?" Jamie whispered the question as if the killer lurked in the next room.

Flipping the light switch, Wil turned on the row of fluorescent fixtures overhead. "Her appointment calendar, her diploma, anything that gives us information about family or people she'd been in contact with."

Hodges Animal Clinic occupied a converted shotgun-style house, with the former living room serving as the reception area. Part of the interior wall had been cut

to desk-level and had a large metal desk and file cabinet shoved against it in the next room. The floor shone as if from a recent mopping. Sturdy metal and wood benches offered seating for pet owners, and ceramic bowls in the corners held water for the patients.

“Brady notified her parents yesterday.” Jamie’s voice returned to its normal volume. “He got their names from the landlord.”

“Yes, I know.” Wil had delegated that unpleasant task to Deputy Newcomb. “They live in Arkansas, right?”

“Yes, in Magnolia.” She followed Wil into the office area, where a desktop computer filled the desk corner. “Brady and I found their number on the internet after we got the names. See, Doc Hodges’s father died and her mom remarried, so the last name was different. Mr. Gibbons said when Hodges signed the lease, she’d insisted that her personal information be kept confidential, almost like she was hiding.”

“Abusive ex-boyfriend—from what I found out from her friends.”

Jamie brightened. “Did they have a name for this ex?”

“No, but that’s one item we’re looking for.”

“Does Brady know about the abusive ex?”

“He didn’t when he called her parents.” Wil snapped his fingers. “Good thinking. I’ll have him talk to her mother and see if she can give us a list of names of old boyfriends.”

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“What about searching her home?”

“She lived in the double-wide in back, right?”

“Technically, it’s around the corner on Ortega Avenue.” Jamie referred to the cross street beside Hodges Animal Clinic.

“I have those keys, too. Why don’t I leave you here while I comb through her house?”

“Sure, boss.” She bent beneath the desk to turn on the power strip. “This looks like a good place to start.”

“Good thinking. You know your way around computers, and that’s as likely a place as any for her to store calendars and addresses.”

The monitor came to life and the hard drive whirled. “What time’s your meeting with FDLE?”

“Not until this afternoon, so take your time and be thorough.” Wil didn’t miss the disappointment in her eyes. He slapped his forehead. “God, Jamie. You’re the last person I should remind to be thorough.”

She broke into a smile. “Thorough is my middle name.”

Leaving her to sift through the victim’s computer files, he made a pass through the rest of the building. The former bedroom was an examining room, judging from the tall stainless steel table in the center and the pet scales in the corner. The kitchen still looked like a kitchen but probably doubled as the surgery room, since two tall cylinders of some kind of gas, surgical tools, and a locked cabinet filled with medicine crowded the sink

and refrigerator. The utility room held nothing but six empty kennels.

He let himself out the back door, through the side gate of the fenced dog run—careful of where he stepped—and into the back door of Cathleen Hodges's house. Turning on the light, he found himself standing in the kitchen. A quick walk-through revealed a typical three-bedroom, two-bath double-wide mobile home. One bedroom, about the size of Elizabeth's windowless office, was unfurnished, obviously used for storage. A small sleeper sofa and desk filled another bedroom that wasn't much larger.

Atop her bed in the master bedroom lay a laptop computer. A telephone line ran from it to the telephone jack. E-mails could hold a clue. He unplugged the laptop and tucked it under his arm. He'd have Jamie examine it later. After searching every drawer and table, he turned up little in the way of mail. He stuffed the envelopes in an evidence bag. The usage details in her wireless bill could be useful.

He finished his search, finding no address books, no high school annuals, nothing much in the way of mementos, except for an abundance of photos. Pictures were stuck everywhere. Just nothing that seemed helpful. Nonetheless, he collected any that pictured other people with her. He'd need to identify everyone in the photographs.

Locking up the house, he stepped outside into the

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harsh glare of sunlight. Back at his Jeep, he stuffed his collection of materials into his homicide case folder. After his meetings, he'd sift through, looking for any clue that might lead to the killer's identity. He returned to Hodges Animal Clinic to see what Jamie had uncovered with the computer.



Friday afternoon, Elizabeth stopped for a twelve-pack of Budweiser and a six-pack of Coke at Miller's IGA Market, where she ran into Kris Knight at the checkout. "Hey, girl."

Kris stared at Elizabeth's purchases. "I thought I was bringing the beer."

"You are." Of course, Kris had chosen Bud *Light*. "But we're having another guest, and I wanted to have plenty. I'm not sure whether he'll drink beer or soda, so I got both."

"*He?*"

"I'll explain in a minute." She didn't need the entire county to know she'd invited the sheriff to her house for pizza. She accepted her change from the curious cashier, then turned to Kris. "See you at my place."

"I'm right behind you."

Elizabeth's house, which she'd been able to buy thanks to WitSec staking her the down payment, was on Park Street, seven blocks from the grocery. What it

lacked in style it made up for in low-cost living. Well-insulated, the concrete block structure rested on a cement slab foundation. The house rarely made a sound except when rain pelted its metal roof, a soothing sound she'd missed with the summer's drought. The shutters, painted green to match the roof, were too wide to be attractive but offered genuine hurricane-strength protection for her large glass windows when closed.

She'd not given the shutters a thought until today, after hearing about the disaster preparedness meeting. The cloudless sky appeared nonthreatening, however, and no storms were brewing off the coast according to the tropical update on the radio. She parked in the shade of her carport, which she'd swept clean the previous morning. Her front lawn boasted one magnificent live oak in the center that shaded the yard and both picture windows like a giant umbrella. The fact that it frequently littered her driveway and carport with dead leaves and twigs was a reasonable trade-off. Someday she planned to create a garden in the bare sand beneath it, assuming she stayed in Drake Springs.

Behind her, Kris turned in to the concrete driveway and parked her compact car. She met up with Elizabeth at the side entrance off the carport. "Let's get the beer in the fridge before ordering the pizzas. I want them to stay cold."

Elizabeth shut the door with a bump from her hip.

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"We don't need to order pizzas. Our guest is bringing them."

Kris straightened. "Spill. Who is this mysterious man?"

"The sheriff, Wilson Drake."

Kris slid her fridge pack of Bud Light on the bottom shelf. "Wilson Drake? You go, girl!"

Rearranging jars and cartons, Elizabeth made room for the chilled soda and beer and then closed the refrigerator. "Honestly, I don't know why I invited him. The words tumbled out of my mouth as if I were possessed by an alien. A stupid alien."

"Hey, don't call my friends stupid." Shaking her finger in Elizabeth's face, she added, "The real question is, why invite him when I'm going to be here?"

"Oh, Kris, it's not like it's a date. I don't know. I just—"

"The guy likes you. You said he eats breakfast with you at the diner. Give him a break."

With a sigh, Elizabeth told her about Wednesday night's dinner at Ian and Sunny's, including her misunderstanding that the couple planned to set her up with the sheriff. "Sunny said, 'He's hardly your type, Liz.'"

"Why the hell not?"

Elizabeth couldn't contain her grin, especially since her first reaction had been the same. "Thanks. Anyway, I think I took it as a challenge."

"I think you may be exactly his type. Both Cathleen

and I, at different times, hit on the guy, and with no success. He never asked either of *us* to join him for breakfast.”

“Cathleen? I didn’t think she dated at all. She seemed so down on guys after her—”

“Cathleen didn’t date. But she once confided in me that she might if Wilson Drake would give her the time of day. Apparently, he only has time for you, dear.”

“Don’t blow this out of proportion. He’s bringing you and me pizza. Period.” Elizabeth may have invited him in a moment of insanity, but she held no illusions about his reason for accepting. He wanted to question Kris about dating Adam Gillespie, and Elizabeth merely expedited the mission.

“Hmm.” The laugh lines around Kris’s chocolate brown eyes crinkled. “We’ll see. But just for the record, I’m leaving before dark, and it has nothing to do with trying to leave you alone with the hunky sheriff.”

She nodded. “I know. Until Cathleen’s murderer is arrested, I don’t think any of us should be out alone, especially after dark. I gave Sunny a lecture about her solo bicycling, too.”

Kris snorted. “Yeah, as if Ian would ride a bike with her. I still can’t figure what she sees in him.”

“He’s nice. Very sweet.”

“Hey, I wasn’t putting him down. I like the guy. But I can’t see Sunny being so ga-ga over him. He’s *so*



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not her type.”

“Which is exactly what Sunny said about me and Wilson.” *He’s hardly your type, Liz.*

“On that point, she and I disagree. I think you and the sheriff have more in common than Sunny and Ian.”

“He’s a big flirt, Kris. I shouldn’t take his attentions seriously, and you know it. Besides, I told you I’m not even sure if I’m attracted to him.” *Liar, liar.* “But when Sunny insisted that he wasn’t someone she’d pair me with, I reacted . . . immaturely.”

“Immaturely?” Kris grinned. “Hell’s bells, it’s the first sign I’ve seen that you have a pulse, woman! At least where men are concerned.”

“Thanks.” Her sarcasm lost on Kris, Elizabeth decided to switch gears. “Let’s set the dining room table.”

Kris followed her into the dining room, stopping to gaze out the double window facing the front yard. “You’ve never talked much about your engagement. The guy must’ve really done a number on you to have you so gun-shy.”

Elizabeth wouldn’t have wanted to talk about her ex even if she weren’t living under a new identity. “You’re right: I hate guns.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” Thankfully, Kris allowed the change in subject. “I’ve never owned a gun, but I’m giving it some thought. After Cathleen’s murder, a small pistol for self-defense is worth considering.”

No way Elizabeth would hold a gun in her hand. She shuddered at the idea. She said, “Wilson says unless you’re committed to firing a weapon without hesitation, you’re in more danger if you have a gun. The assailant can just take it away and use it against you.”

“*Wilson says?* My, my, you two have become chummy—”

“Just diner talk. Nothing personal.”

Kris gestured toward the street and the official county Jeep parked at the curb. “Look. Your sheriff has arrived, and he’s carrying pizza.”

Elizabeth stood beside her at the window and gazed at Wilson. “How does he do that?”

“Do what?” Kris asked.

“Look as sharp and crisp in his uniform as he did at breakfast, and after working all day, too.”

“Excuse me.” Kris poked her in the side with her elbow. “Was that a sigh of longing I heard?”

“You know I always swoon over pizza.”

“I don’t think it’s the pizza.”

“Well, it sure isn’t the sheriff.” Elizabeth’s denial rang false even in her own ears. Perhaps she’d overestimated her skill at lying.

Kris snorted. “Yeah, right. Whatever.”

Yes, her lying skills definitely needed honing.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Wil hesitated at the curb, repositioning the stack of pizzas he carried. He'd gotten three specials, plus an extra supreme, from Vinnie's Pizzeria. He figured his dad would enjoy the leftovers. Staring at the low ranch on Park Street, Wil realized Elizabeth Stevens lived in a suitable home. Sturdy and cozy, it was nice in its simplicity. The few adornments were serviceable: the colonial-style storm shutters decorated large windows and the wrought iron lantern that doubled as a security light. Settled beneath a sprawling oak, the house held its own in a neighborhood of higher-priced, roomier ranches.

Just as Elizabeth held her own among skinny women in designer duds and glamorous makeup. No doubt about it, he had a thing for her. Her naturalness drew him, and he wasn't about to fight the attraction. Was *she*

ready to stop fighting it?

When he reached the front door, ever-practical Elizabeth greeted him before he had to juggle the pizzas to ring the doorbell. "Thanks." She and Kris Knight relieved him of the pizzas and ushered him inside the entry area, which was little more than a few squares of parquet separating the two front rooms.

"We can eat in the dining room." Elizabeth tugged him toward a ladder-back chair. "We have Bud, Bud Light, and Coke. Name your poison."

"Coke is great." He may have imagined it, but Elizabeth seemed nervous.

She rushed off to the kitchen for his Coke, then hurried back to ask if he preferred it in a glass.

"No, the can is fine."

Kris busied herself opening the pizza boxes. "You must think we're very hungry."

"I plan to take home any leftovers."

"Good plan." Elizabeth handed him the can of Coca Cola. She'd already opened it. "Did you need a straw?"

"No, thanks." Yes, definitely nervous. He placed the can on the table. "I need to wash my hands. Where's the bathroom?"

"There's one in the hall." She pointed to the arched opening from the living room. "Straight ahead."

"Thanks." He took his time walking through the living room, studying details of her furnishings, gathering

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impressions about the woman herself. The furniture was a hodgepodge of styles, as if she regularly shopped estate auctions and yard sales. New slipcovers matched curtains and pillows. Everything was tidy and spotless, almost sterile. What was wrong with this picture?

Picture . . .

It hit him. No photos or portraits hung from the walls or sat in frames. Even when he peeked into the bedrooms, he saw no pictures. Not that the walls were bare. Elizabeth's decorating showed an eye for design, with fabric wall hangings, and plants. As many as a dozen plants—some real, some artificial—filled each room, arranged at varying heights. But not one single photograph.

After visiting the bathroom, he rejoined the women in the dining room. Like the rest of the house, or what he'd seen of it, the dining room was furnished in old but sturdy wooden furniture that had been painted white. Paneling halfway up the wall to form a chair rail appeared to have been painted from the same can. Six ladder-back chairs with cane seats surrounded a plain rectangle table. Assorted sizes of candles on a mirror formed a centerpiece. No heirloom silver or china was displayed in the painted corner hutch, just everyday dishes.

Instead of impressing him again, the practicality worried him. Her informal and clean house was cold and impersonal, even more lonely than his own. But also a lot neater. Elizabeth would probably cringe at the

chaos in which he lived. Not that he didn't value order, but he had several home improvement projects in varying stages keeping his bungalow in upheaval.

"Let's eat." Elizabeth sat at the end of the table, where she and Kris had two pizzas opened and waiting.

He joined them in the chair opposite Kris and next to Elizabeth. "This Mexican pizza is Vinnie's specialty."

"That's what Elizabeth said. Is it spicy hot?"

Elizabeth held up packets. "That's what the dried jalapeño is for."

Following her example, Wil generously seasoned his pizza slices with the jalapeño. "I thought I was the only one who liked smokin' hot Mexican food."

Elizabeth leaned back in her chair, spreading her arms to indicate her girth. "As you can see, I like all food."

Wil focused on her breasts—her very impressive breasts—poking through the material of her T-shirt. "Surely you aren't implying that you're fat," he said.

She gave him an eye roll. "Surely you aren't implying I'm skinny."

"Actually, darlin', I'm implying that you're just right."

Kris gulped the rest of her beer. "I love this pizza, but I'm going to need more to drink."

Elizabeth pushed away from the table. "Beer or Coke?"

"Relax. I can wait on myself." Kris fled the room.

Elizabeth abandoned her slice of pizza and glared at him. "Do you enjoy embarrassing me?"

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“It was a compliment.” He’d be damned if he apologized, even if she had turned all frosty again. “Why would that embarrass you?”

Kris returned with a second Bud Light, preventing Elizabeth from answering. The three finished off two of the Mexican pizzas with minimal conversation. Since Kris was the one driving tonight, her two beers to every one of Elizabeth’s worried Wil.

Elizabeth opened the third pizza and took out a slice. Kris reached for another slice, announcing it as her absolute last, and sprinkled it with the remaining dried jalapeño. By the time she’d finished her fourth Bud Light, Wil decided to risk asking her his question.

“I hear you used to date our chief of police.”

“We went out twice. Why?”

“Just curious. My dad thought he saw the two of you canoeing the Suwannee one Sunday.”

“Not canoeing. A couple weeks ago, we took a rowboat trip. We docked at White Springs, had dinner at the Telford, then struggled to get the thing back.”

“Why’s that?”

Kris smirked. “Have you seen the Suwannee lately? Hello. No rain, no water. We kept running aground, and Adam had to jump out in some spots to push us.”

“So did you go out with him after that?”

“Once. Why?”

“Ordinarily your personal life would be none of my

business, but I'm investigating a homicide."

"Yeah, so which one of us is the suspect—me or Adam?"

"Neither, darlin'."

Elizabeth, bless her lovely heart, saved him. "I'm just curious, Kris, but why did you stop seeing Adam Gillespie?"

Kris shrugged, apparently not offended by the question, at least when posed by her friend and not the sheriff. "He's just too serious for my tastes. My mom would call him uptight if she met him."

"You mean he was possessive or controlling?"

Shaking her head before he'd finished, she said, "Not at all. Just no fun. I've had serious once, and I'm not making that mistake again."

Elizabeth had told him about Kris being divorced, so he didn't press her for more. "You've given up on finding Mr. Right, eh?"

"A long time ago. Now, does this conclude my interrogation, Sheriff?" She sounded so good-humored he couldn't help but smile.

"No more questions, and I apologize for prying."

She stood beside her chair, fluttering her hand. "No big deal. It's just that I have to pee so bad I'm about to wet my britches."

Elizabeth laughed at her friend rushing from the room—a deep, hearty laugh. Genuine, like everything



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else about her. “She is *so* Southern.”

“And you aren’t?”

“You mean I drawl as much as she does?”

“Almost, darlin’, but a sweet Southern drawl is not a bad thing.”

Elizabeth’s smile collapsed. “She’s had a lot of beer. Do you think I should drive her home?”

Wil appreciated her astuteness. Drinking drivers worried him, and for good reason. “Yes, I think it’d be wise. I’ll follow you and bring you back.”

“Thank you. I’ve never seen her guzzle beer like tonight. I think we’ve both been on edge and down in the dumps about Cathleen’s murder. As I told you, we aren’t exactly party animals. I usually stop at one beer, and this is my second.”

Elizabeth had sipped while Kris gulped, though. He wasn’t worried about Elizabeth’s driving. He helped her box up the remaining Mexican pizza. “You two seem like good friends.”

“We get along. Plus, we both teach English.” She interrupted herself to grab the trashcan from the kitchen. “We have a lot of the same interests.”

“Books, you mean?” He crushed the empty boxes until they fit inside the trash bin.

“Oh, lots of things. She’s amazing with crafts. She helped me *papier-mâché* an old lamp to look like a new plaster one. And did you notice the marble pillars in the living room window, the ones displaying my silk flowers?”

He glanced into the living room. "What about them?"

"Kris helped me make those. They're actually cardboard boxes covered with Con-Tact Paper. From a distance, they look convincing."

Stuffing the rest of the garbage into the bin, he stepped into the living room for a closer look. "Impressive."

"Just don't look too closely." She cellophane wrapped the box of leftover Mexican pizza. "Sunday she's taking me to a craft demo at Stephen Foster Folk Cultural Center over in White Springs."

"Did you know the state originally looked at Drake Springs for that park? But the Foster County commissioners were opposed."

"Why? I would've thought the center belonged in the county named for Foster."

He wasn't going to mention his father's part in Foster County's anti-growth campaign. "The state wouldn't commit enough funding for improving roads and signage, and the county wasn't equipped to handle heavy tourist traffic."

"In that case, I don't blame them." She moved the trash bin back into the kitchen. "By the way, you were right about the Mexican pizza. Outstanding."

Wil liked helping her clean up from dinner. The domestic scene played out in his imagination until he

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pictured them married, tidying his remodeled kitchen after a meal. He reined in his thoughts before he made a fool of himself. He still had to pinch himself to believe he'd been invited to her home to share pizza. His patience rewarded at last, he wouldn't rush things now.

He picked up the remaining box of pizza. "The supreme hasn't been touched. You want me to leave it?"

"Didn't you say you deliberately bought extra? Take the leftovers and reheat them later."

"I'll take them to my dad's. He'll enjoy pizza for a change."

Kris reentered the room. "Don't you live at your dad's place?"

"Sort of. Same property, different house."

"The day I went boating with Adam, he pointed out your house. It's almost exactly across the river from his family's land."

"You and Chief Gillespie are neighbors?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not really. I don't think he lives there."

"He told me he has a place in town," Kris added, checking her watch. "Oops. It's after seven. I need to get home. You aren't going to follow me and cite me for DUI, are you, Sheriff?"

Again, Elizabeth rescued him. "No, because I'm driving you home. The keys?"

Kris stared at Elizabeth's outstretched hand. "Hell's bells, I live around the corner—"

“The keys?”

Grumbling, Kris dug out her car keys from her purse and dropped them in Elizabeth’s hand. The three filed out the front door, which Elizabeth then locked. Wil noted that she had solid double deadbolts installed. Sensible lady.

He followed the Mazda half a mile—a tad more than *around the corner* to his way of thinking—to the other side of Main Street near the Methodist Church. Idling at the curb, he waited for Elizabeth to park. Kris lived on Third Street in one of a row of frame duplexes that had been built fifty years ago, right after his grandparents had opened the college and triggered a growth in Foster County’s housing market.

Elizabeth jumped into the passenger seat of his Jeep, crowding his on-dash laptop. “What’s this? A computer?”

He pulled onto Main Street. “Don’t sound so surprised. Foster County may be Florida’s smallest county, but we’re hip.”

She laughed at that, again with hearty, genuine laughter he loved to hear.

“Did you learn anything from tonight’s conversation with Kris?” she asked.

“She’s good-natured, creative, and open.”

“I mean to help you solve Cathleen’s murder case.”

He shook his head. “I won’t know that for awhile. Right now I’m just gathering all the pieces of information

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I can.”

“Like a puzzle, I guess.” They turned onto Park Street. “If you’re not in a hurry, I can offer you another Coke.”

“No, thanks. I need to check on Dad.”

“Oh, that’s right. He’s had a stroke,” she said, sympathy in her voice. “Does he stay alone?”

“Just at night. I make sure he has what he needs at bedtime, and a visiting nurse gets him up in the morning. He wears a monitor so he can push the button for help in an emergency.” He pulled into the driveway and parked behind her truck.

“Those emergency monitors are great. Grandma has—I mean, *had* one.” The sorrow in her voice revealed the deep grief for the family she’d lost, and he longed to take her in his arms to offer comfort. Before he acted on his impulse, she opened the Jeep’s door and got out. “I’ll get your pizza.”

Wil watched her disappear into the carport and mentally beat his head against the steering wheel. “Idiot! Fool! She invited you inside.” On the one hand, he didn’t want to scare her by rushing things. On the other hand, she *had* made a move, inviting him for pizza tonight. What if he’d missed a hidden cue and blown it? He scooted out of the Jeep to follow her, then hesitated. What if he’d misread her, and she’d offered the soft drink out of politeness? No, Elizabeth didn’t strike him as a woman who played games.

From the carport, she called to him. "Did you change your mind about that Coke?"

"If that's allowed." He sauntered up to the side door with a fake casualness. "I thought it was later than it is."

"Changing your mind is allowed." She held the screen door wide until he reached the threshold. "Kris left on the early side, but she wanted to be home before dark."

He followed her through a small utility room into her kitchen. "I hope I didn't intrude on your girl's night—"

"I invited you. Besides, I figured you really accepted so you could ask Kris about dating the police chief."

"Partly true, and I thank you for helping me out with that."

Pulling two cans of Coke from the fridge, she handed him one. "Look, I want Cathleen's murder solved as much as you do. I'll help however I can."

He popped the tab on his Coke. "I also came over because I like you, Elizabeth. I had fun tonight."

"Me, too." She gestured toward the door to the dining room. "Let's sit in there."

He followed her, assuming she meant the dining room, but she continued through to the living room. She plopped down in a side chair, leaving him the sofa. He expected to sink into a giant fluffy cushion, but the seat was firm. He nodded toward the corner, where her television dominated the top of a steamer trunk. A stack of DVDs beside it reached almost to the top. "You meant

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it when you said you like movies.”

“Yes. I watch them all the time, some over and over. Next to curling up with a good book, watching DVDs is my favorite thing.”

“I have satellite TV with lots of movie channels I rarely have time to enjoy.” He paused for another swig of his cola. “Sometimes at night I’ll sit with Dad and catch a movie. He watches a lot of TV. I guess it keeps him company.”

“I can relate. When I first moved here and didn’t know a soul, I held movie marathons each weekend. It’s dangerously addictive, all that buttered popcorn and wadded-up tissues from tearjerkers. But I have it under control now. I’m down to maybe one movie per evening.”

“Ah, but what about the buttered popcorn?”

“Hey, one addiction at a time.” She smiled again. “So what kind of movies do you and your father enjoy?”

“Mostly older films. Westerns, mysteries, baseball movies—you name it.”

“Chick flicks?”

“Sure. Like *The Hallelujah Trail* and *The Natural*?”

She shook her head. “I was thinking *Kate and Leopold* or *Return to Me*.”

“Nope, neither one.” For the life of him, he couldn’t remember ever seeing either movie title, but he wouldn’t admit it. He made a mental note to check them out, though. He strolled over to her movie stack. “Let’s see

what you have here.”

“I have a bit of everything. I buy older titles when the prices are reduced.”

Squatting beside the television, he read through the DVD jackets. “*Seabiscuit, The Horse Whisperer, Hidalgo* . . . I’m seeing a theme here.”

“What’s that?”

“Horses.”

She batted her eyes at him. “Are there horses in those movies? All I remember are Toby McGuire, Viggo Mortensen, and Sam Neill. Oh, and Robert Redford.”

Scanning the remaining titles—everything from *Moonstruck* and *Pearl Harbor* to the animated film *Chicken Run*—he catalogued them in his mind’s folder on Elizabeth. “*Chicken Run*?”

She peered at him through her glasses as if he were an obtuse student. “Mel Gibson.”

He nearly choked on a drink of Coke. She could say outrageous things without cracking a smile. He liked that. Returning to the sofa, he finished his soft drink. “May I ask you a question?”

“As sheriff or as my breakfast buddy, Wilson?”

*Breakfast buddy?* He didn’t care for the sound of that. He thought of her as more than a *buddy*. “How ’bout as your friend Wil?”

“Sure—my friend Wil.” She smiled at him over the top of her Coke.



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"Where are your pictures? Did the fire that cost you your family also destroy all your photos?"

"Yes. I lost everything." She stared at him then with an emotion other than sorrow. Anger? "I have nothing left of my family or childhood."

He nodded. "Is it too painful to talk about? I'm a good listener."

"Yes, it's too painful. Sorry."

"Just tell me one thing. How long ago did this happen?"

She sighed. Took a drink of her soda. Swallowed. Sighed again. He'd given up on her answering, but then she did. "Seventeen months, three weeks, and one day."

He could think of nothing to say except, "I'm sorry."

"Me, too. But thanks."

Great. He'd ruined the evening with his curiosity. "Well, thanks for the soft drink. I'd better get back to Drake Oaks."

"Drake Oaks?"

"Habit. That's what the ol' homestead is called. My great-great-grandfather, I think, named it that."

"*Drake Springs, Drake Oaks, Charlotte Drake College . . .* The Drakes mean a lot to this community."

"No, darlin', the community means a lot to the Drakes." Corny even to Wil's own ears, it had never been more true. "Especially this Drake."

He stood to leave, and she followed him to the dining room. "Is that why you're sheriff? Your way of giving back?"

“Something like that.” He gathered the two pizza boxes from the dining room table. “That’s why I have to catch the bastard who brought murder to our town.”

“Come hell or high water?”

“With this draught, I’d welcome high water.” She smiled at that, and he released a pent-up breath. Maybe he hadn’t ruined the evening. “When I worked in the city, I felt as if I was spinning my wheels all the time. We’d have a murder a day, and many are still unsolved. I felt . . . ineffective. I’d hoped by taking this job in Drake Springs, I could make a difference.”

“You already have, Sheriff.” Her smile did funny things to his ego, not to mention certain parts of his body. “You’ll solve this murder, too.”

“Listen. Do you reckon we could do this dinner thing again?”

She hit him with yet another surprise when she crossed her arms, cocked her head, and imitating him said, “I reckon so, darlin’.”



Elizabeth slept late Saturday morning. It was almost eight when she headed toward the diner for breakfast. She left her truck parked in the carport and indulged in a long walk. She missed regular exercise, and a brisk morning walk energized her. She figured she’d consumed more

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than enough calories in beer and pizza to allow for the calories she'd burn.

Boyd's Diner on Main Street was just five blocks of sidewalk from her house. Inside, the aromas of cooked bacon and fresh brewed coffee welcomed her. The diner had three booths along one wall and six tables of varying sizes in the center, every one occupied. The cash register took up the front wall next to the entrance. A long counter with seven round stools ran the length of the wall opposite the booths, and swinging doors in the rear hid the kitchen.

Standing by the door to wait for a table, she scanned the restaurant for Wilson, but he'd probably eaten earlier. After lecturing herself half the night for encouraging his attentions, she had no more resolve this morning to resist him. She knew better than to fall for the guy, but she felt so damned lonely. It'd been ages since she'd shared pizza and conversation with a nice man. And she was damned tired of downplaying herself to avoid attention.

If after gaining thirty-three pounds, chopping off her hair and dying it a drab color, and losing the makeup, she *still* attracted Wilson, then he was a worthy candidate. Not that she was in the market, but if she were he'd be a great catch. He cared about his community, his family, and his employees. Maybe he cared about *her*. She definitely cared about him. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford to let things progress beyond friendship as long as she was in the WitSec program, which would be the case as long

as her life was in danger.

Lorraine breezed past. "Hey, sugar! There's a place open at the counter if you don't want to wait."

"Thanks." She slid onto a stool at the far end of the countertop. When a teen whose name she didn't know offered her coffee, she shook her head. "Hot tea, please."

The high schooler gave her name, Tiffany, and said, "Comin' right up." She seemed to be tending the counter and booths while Lorraine waited tables during the breakfast rush.

Behind the counter, a small TV tuned to The Weather Channel showed a map of the Atlantic with a tropical storm's projected path. One forecast model predicted a hit at northeast Florida, reminding Elizabeth of Wilson's disaster preparedness meeting.

Of course, most of her thoughts led to Wilson.

Last night she'd invited him in for another Coke because she hadn't wanted their time together to end. She'd had the most ridiculous urge to kiss him good night when he'd left. What would he have thought about that? Probably that she'd lost her mind, which was true. Months of keeping her emotional distance from him had worn down her self-control. Sullivan's contract on her life still endangered her, but she'd underestimated the overpowering loneliness of her new life.

"Don't get careless," her handler had told her more than once. She tried not to whine to him. After all, WitSec kept her safe and at considerable government ex-

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pense. She appreciated the marshals and their dedication to protecting her. Could she maintain a relationship with Wilson without jeopardizing her cover? Casual, not intimate, of course. She couldn't be close to a man she couldn't confide in.

"Here's your tea." Tiffany slid a cup of hot water holding a submerged tea bag toward Elizabeth. A slice of lemon and packet of honey crowded the saucer. "Know what you want to order, or do you need to see a menu?"

She'd eaten so many breakfasts at Boyd's Diner she didn't need to look at the choices. "Western omelet with home fries."

"That sounds good. Can you bring me one, too?" Wilson grabbed the seat next to her before Tiffany had a chance to clean up from the previous customer. "And some black coffee, darlin'."

Tiffany flashed him an adoring grin, even though the handsome sheriff was at least twice her age. Was any female immune to that dimpled smile? "Sure thing, Sheriff."

"Good morning." Elizabeth took a sip of her tea to hide her sudden case of awkwardness. What was that about? It wasn't as if he knew she'd wanted to kiss him last night, but what if he read minds?

"This is late for you, isn't it?"

"Hey, it's Saturday. I slept in. And you?"

"Darlin', I've been on the job since seven." He leaned away from the counter while Tiffany wiped it clean. She

then poured him a steaming cup of coffee. "Thanks."

Elizabeth nodded toward the television set. "Because of that new tropical storm?"

He blinked, squinted, then stared at the screen just as it switched to a commercial. "No. The homicide. I've been combing through personal effects looking for clues."

Realizing the need for discretion in the crowded diner, she nodded but didn't pursue the subject other than to say, "Good luck."

"Yeah." He downed half his coffee before speaking again. "I know this is short notice, but are you busy tonight?"

"I'm alphabetizing my canned goods. Why?"

He guffawed. "Alphabetizing—"

She tried to fight a smile, but it escaped. "Hey, I'm serious. I took Lorraine's advice and went over that emergency supply list. I want to have a minimum of three days' worth of canned and nonperishable foods, so I need to take inventory."

"I see. Do you think you could squeeze in a movie date?" His mischievous grin reminded her of Dennis Quaid in *Undercover Blues*. "It's a cheap date with a chaperone."

The noise level in the busy diner provided a bit of privacy, but she lowered her voice and leaned closer, close enough to breathe in the woodsy scent of his aftershave. "A cheap date with a chaperone? How could I resist as charming an offer as that?"

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Tiffany placed identical plates in front of them. “Anything else?”

“Maybe a refill on coffee,” Wilson said. Tiffany filled his cup, then moved along the counter topping off coffees for her other customers. “Like I told you, I often watch a movie with Dad, and it’s Saturday night. I thought you’d like to join us. I promise to pop up a bunch of hot, buttered popcorn, and you could pick the movie.”

Should she believe the town’s most eligible bachelor spent his Saturday nights with his father? “Popcorn and movies. Two of my weaknesses.” Or maybe three, counting Wilson. “What time?”

“I’ll come by as soon as I wrap up things at the station. Could be as late as five.”

“Sounds fine. That gives me time to organize the pantry, do my shopping, and still make us dinner by that time.”

“You’re cooking me dinner?”

“Don’t look so shocked. Oh, wait. What about your father?”

“Someone stays with him until the evenings, so he’ll get fed. Although that doesn’t keep him from wanting to eat again when I get there.” He smiled, shaking his head. “He likes to snack at night, and I don’t mean a few crackers and milk.”

She pictured a warm relationship between father and son. How sweet Wil was to spend time with his father on a Saturday night when he could be hanging with friends.

"All right. I'll have dinner ready for us around five, but don't expect much. I'm no gourmet chef."

He lowered his voice and leaned close enough that his breath warmed her ear. "If it's a bologna sandwich, darlin', it'll be great, just as long as *you* fix it."

"Bologna." She pouted. "How'd you guess? I wanted it to be a surprise."

Wilson chuckled. Between bites of omelet, they debated ordering a movie from Pay Per View or selecting one from her collection. "What movie do you have that you think the three of us could enjoy?"

"*Cars*?" She cringed, waiting for him to ridicule an animated film. "It's cute, light, and not too long."

"*Cars*. I wanted to see that when it came out years ago but never got the chance. Is it good?"

"Owen Wilson." She batted her eyes again, which earned her another laugh.

"Anything about it to interest Dad?"

"A Hudson Hornet."

Wilson frowned. "What's that?"

Her real father—not her fake-biography one—owned an automobile dealership and collected classic automobiles, including a 1953 Hudson Hornet. But Elizabeth Stevens would know little about old cars. "I gather it's a neat car from the fifties. You'll see."

"All right, we'll go with *Cars*. It beats one of those romantic movies—"



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“Oh, there’s romance in *Cars*.”

Was there romance in tonight’s movie date? Wilson’s invitation to spend the evening with his father seemed more personal and intimate than going as a couple to Tinseltown, not that there was a Tinseltown in Drake Springs. But still.

Maybe she’d make an exception to her dowdy-look routine and tweeze her eyebrows. Surely a little grooming wouldn’t alter her appearance to the point of putting her life at risk. She chose to ignore the other danger—the one Wilson Drake posed to her heart.

## *CHAPTER FIVE*

Elizabeth's words "seventeen months, three weeks, and one day ago" preyed on Wil's mind all morning. He spent too much time searching Google for "tragic fires" for that time period in the Atlanta area. After finding nothing in Atlanta, he widened his search criteria to Georgia, the Southeast, and finally the United States. If multiple deaths resulted from a tragic fire approximately a year and a half ago, it hadn't made the news. Without more to go on, he'd have to wait for Elizabeth to tell him more. He abandoned his internet searches and returned to his homicide case.

He read through Deputy Jamie Peterson's report, which included an impressive list of contacts pulled from the homicide victim's office computer files. Jamie had the day off, but he wouldn't need to consult with

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her. Her thoroughness made up for her lack of experience. She had identified all of the names, including Jamie's and his, as those of pet owners in the area who'd been customers of Hodges Animal Clinic. Every name checked out.

She'd also pulled e-mail messages, matching addresses with suppliers and other business contacts on file. Addresses for personal e-mails matched family and friends—including Sunny Davis, Kris Knight, and Elizabeth Stevens. No mysterious or unidentifiable contacts.

Wil had given Jamie the laptop to go through, which yielded more of the same. She found no references to the mysterious abusive ex-boyfriend, although she had a reasonable explanation. The laptop was the latest model, most likely purchased after moving to Drake Springs. Jamie viewed the browser history, finding no evidence of chat room use or community forums. Cathleen Hodges had used her laptop primarily for internet shopping, and none of her purchases raised a red flag.

Jamie's next move would be to pull deleted files from the hard drives, something beyond Wil's own expertise. With a bit of training, she would be ready to go into computer forensics.

What held talented people in a small community with low pay and inadequate amenities had baffled Wil at eighteen. Now he understood. Aside from a low cost of living, Foster County offered a peaceful, friendly home

to its residents. A beautiful, scenic haven from the pollution and crime of city life.

The Cathleen Hodges homicide shouldn't have happened here.

Brady Newcomb's tall shadow filled his doorway. "Wil, I talked to the mother again like you asked."

Wil motioned him to sit. "Did you get anywhere?"

"I got a name. Cathleen Hodges lived with a guy named Michael Moore for three years in Pine Bluff. Do you know how common a name that is?"

"Yeah. I guess it's too much to hope she knew his middle name or initial."

Brady shook his head. "But she does have a photograph of the two of them. She's taking it to one of those places like Kinko's or the UPS store and having it scanned and e-mailed to us. I figure that'd be better than faxing it. It'll probably be a lousy image, but it's all we've got on the dude."

"Michael Moore. Elizabeth Stevens said she thought Cathleen Hodges had a restraining order against him, so there may have been domestic violence charges. Do a check with the Arkansas police to see if he has any priors."

"Already did. I'm waiting for an e-mail."

Pride filled his chest. Jamie Peterson wasn't the only thorough cop on his force. Wil had developed a good team over the past two years, even for so small a department. "Good work, Brady. Keep me posted."

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“Will do. Have you heard from FDLE yet?”

“They recommend we call in Ronda Lou Buckner, which tells me they don’t have much in the way of evidence,” Wil said. No surprise there.

“The profiler?” Brady asked. “What’s to profile?”

“She might be able to offer insight from her experiences with other cases. We need to come up with characteristics of a likely offender so we have some idea what to look for. JSO uses profilers—”

“That’s *Jacksonville’s* Sheriff’s Office. We can solve this case without outside help, Wil.”

Although Wil appreciated Brady’s enthusiasm, he knew passion didn’t solve crimes. “Let’s not kid ourselves. We have no eyewitnesses, no apparent motive, and very little evidence.”

“My money’s on the Michael Moore dude,” Brady said. “He has motive.”

“I’d love to solve this case on our own, but I’d be a fool to turn down the opportunity to work with Buckner. She’s not just any profiler. Rumor has it truTV wants her for a series of programs, like Dayle Hinman’s *Body of Evidence*.”

“I remember that show.”

“Buckner lacks Hinman’s years of experience, but she has similar training and expertise. I think she can help us.”

“I saw her bio picture on the Web site. She’s cute.”

Brady shrugged. "I mean, for an older woman."

Funny, but when Wil thought of a cute woman, the only face he envisioned was Elizabeth's. Yep, he'd fallen for her, and he hadn't even kissed her yet. "I don't care what she looks like as long as she helps us solve this case."

"Amen to that. So when will she get here?"

"Unfortunately, she's not available until next week. I'm hoping Monday."

"Any theories of your own about the offender?"

"Just one," Wil said. "He doesn't belong here. I have a strong feeling he's an outsider."

No, a killer didn't belong in their community. Wil hated to think one of his own citizens was capable of murder. "Now that the college students have returned, you're talking about half the county."

Wil nodded. "I know. I need something else to go on—a weapon, an eye witness . . ."

"We interviewed everyone along the river. You'd think somebody would've seen something, with all the holiday river traffic."

"My gut says she wasn't shot on the river."

"Whoever dumped the body probably dumped the weapon, too," Brady said.

"Good thinking, Brady." Wil snapped his fingers. "With the drought, there's not much water to search. I'll get Geraldo on it." He picked up the telephone and buzzed Zelda. "Get Deputy Blanco for me."

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"I thought FDLE searched the river," Brady said.

"They searched right around Reesor's property, treating it as a crime scene. We're going to take out our boat and broaden the search. That weapon could lead us to the shooter."

"It's worth a try," Brady said. "Let me know if you need me to work the search with Geraldo."

"Thanks. We're all going to have to pull extra duty until we solve this case."

"Contrary to what the editor printed in this week's *Drake Springs Democrat*. She seems to think we're a bunch of losers."

Wil expected nothing better from Phyllis Gillespie. She'd do her best to discredit Wil and his family. "She shouldn't underestimate us," Wil said. "We're a small county, and we're short on homicide investigation experience, but I'm staffed with smart, dedicated deputies."

"Thanks. With an endorsement like that, how can we fail?"

"That's the idea."

Brady stood. "I'd better let you get back to the computer stuff and check my e-mail."

Wil leaned back and stretched. "Nah, I've been sitting here too long. Let's grab a Coke. I'll tell Zelda where to find me when Geraldo shows."

"Sure." Brady followed Wil past Zelda's desk, then into the locker room, which doubled as the station's

break room. Three vending machines had been squeezed in between two sets of lockers and a row of vinyl-covered benches. "When will we have the results from the autopsy?"

"Monday, I expect. A body in the water decomposes fast. I imagine it's a challenge for the medical examiner's office."

"Which was the idea, if the killer deliberately dumped the body." Brady poured himself a cup of coffee from the decanter. "Zelda just made this, so it's fresh."

"I'm ready for something cold to drink." Between his early morning in the office and his breakfast at Boyd's Diner, Wil had had his fill of coffee for the day.

"How's your daddy doing?"

"Holdin' his own." Wil's father wouldn't appreciate being discussed. He'd been fiercely private ever since Wil's mother's death—or maybe he'd always been guarded about his personal life. "He's able to do a lot for himself now."

"Still seeing the physical therapist?"

"Yes, but he calls her a physical terrorist." Wil fed a dollar to the Coke machine. "He's determined to live alone, so he's motivated to work hard."

"Sure. He has his pride." Brady's cell phone rang. He stared at the caller ID before answering the call. "It's Dorie."

Wil saluted him with his Coke and left him to talk to his wife in private. With the exception of Jamie Peterson, almost everyone on his team was married and settled. Fred Fischer claimed to have been happily married



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until his wife passed away. Wil felt a twinge of envy for the couples, although he'd hardly given settling down a thought until last year, after his dad's stroke.

After he'd met Elizabeth.

"I was just coming to get you, Wil." Zelda hovered at his door. "Deputy Blanco's here."

Geraldo Blanco sat in the same chair Brady had vacated minutes earlier, in front of Wil's desk. His Latino looks and name contradicted his Southern drawl, but Blanco's family had settled in Foster County long before Cuba had been Castro's. "What's up?"

Wil motioned with his canned Coke toward the locker room. "Grab your life jacket. We're going fishing."

To his credit, Geraldo obeyed without question. Waiting until Brady finished his call, he filled Geraldo in on his plans to drag the Suwannee River.

"Sure, boss. We'll work the river while she's low. We have to work fast, though."

"Why's that?"

"You didn't hear? That depression's been upgraded to a tropical storm, and it could hit here within a week. If it dumps a lot of rain and floods the valley, we'll never find anything."

Wil bit back an expletive. He'd tried to tame his gutter-mouth from his younger days as a detective. He was sheriff now and proud of his professionalism. "No, I hadn't heard, but you're right. Let's do it."

"Sheriff Drake," Zelda called from the doorway. "Before you leave, Police Chief Gillespie needs a word with you."

"Now what?" Wil muttered.

"Go ahead, Wil. I'll hook up the boat trailer."

"Thanks, Geraldo." He swept through the locker room, past Zelda's desk, and into his office, where Adam Gillespie stood glaring at him. "What can I do for you—"

"If you want to question me about dating Cathleen Hodges, question *me*, not her gossip girlfriends."

"Relax, Adam, and sit." Wil spoke in a soft voice, hoping to defuse the man's anger. Red-faced and blustery, Adam huffed, scowled, and finally sat. "What's this about?"

"You know. Hell, everybody in Boyd's Diner knows. You think I dated Cathleen Hodges, right?"

"Nope. Mistaken identity, and it's cleared up now."

"You should've cleared it up with *me*."

Wil tossed his life jacket onto the desk and sat down. "I apologize. I should've gone directly to you and asked. One of her friends said you dated Kris Knight, not—"

"I did go out with Cathleen Hodges, and I want to tell you about it so there's no suspicion or gossip." His shoulders dropped, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "God knows we've had enough gossip."

"If you're referring to the strain between our two families, I couldn't agree more. I'd like to get past that

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if I knew how.”

“I don’t know how, either, Wil, so let’s stick to your homicide. I want you to take my statement.”

“All right. But off the record, you’re no suspect, Adam.”

“Maybe not, but we need to do this by the book.”

Wil appreciated Adam’s cooperation. No matter their personal history, Adam was an honorable man, not a murderer. Wil slid his recorder from his desk drawer, recited the date, time, and Adam’s name into it, then pointed the recorder toward Adam.

“I invited Cathleen Hodges to go to the Suwannee River Jam in April, down at the Music Park.”

Wil knew the place. Located in Suwannee County, the Music Park hosted concerts almost every weekend. For clarification for Adam’s statement, he spoke toward the recorder, “That three-day event with the big-name country singers?”

“Yes. I buy tickets every year. This year, I invited Cathleen. We went the first day in my boat, got badly sunburned, and she didn’t want to return for the rest of the shows. So I took Amy the other two days.”

*Amy.* Wil didn’t miss the curl of Adam’s lip when he mentioned his twin sister. Nursing an old grudge, Adam still hated Wil for dating Amy in high school. Amy had dumped him—not the other way around. So why, after twenty years, did it matter—especially to Adam? Amy

had her own family now.

“That’s the only date you had with the deceased?”

“That’s it. I don’t know whether she wasn’t enthused about country music or boating, or she just wasn’t enthused about me, but she discouraged me from asking her out again. End of story.”

“Were you and Cathleen on friendly terms after the one date?”

“Absolutely. No hard feelings. We just didn’t click. To be frank, I don’t think she was ready to date again. She’d gone through a rough breakup recently, although she wouldn’t talk about it.”

“Did she seem worried about anything? Mention anything about having trouble?”

“We didn’t get that well acquainted. She mentioned the recent breakup in passing, but now I think it was her way of keeping me at a distance.”

Boy, did that sound familiar. Elizabeth had kept Wil at a distance from the day they’d met. She seemed to have that much in common with the victim. “As far as you know, did she go out with anyone else?”

Adam shrugged. “She said she hadn’t. I never saw her out with anyone except her lady friends. I’m sure you’ve questioned them as well.”

Wil nodded, but for the benefit of the recording said, “Thanks for your statement, Chief Gillespie.” He stopped recording. “We’re tracking down her ex, a guy

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named Michael Moore. She told friends he'd been abusive. He's definitely a person of interest."

"No more questions?"

"Not for you. Thanks for coming in."

"We both know it looks better for me to do so." Adam stood, pointing to the life jacket. "Are you heading out?"

"We're going to search the river while it's low. Brady seems to think we might find the weapon."

Adam spread his hands in a gesture of friendship. "Don't get all jurisdictional on me, but I do have officers who can help you search."

"Chief Gillespie, I'd be a fool to turn down your offer. Deputy Blanco is spearheading the operation."

"I'll have my guys work out a schedule with him. Maybe they can work in two-man teams." With a nod, Adam left his office.

Zelda filled the door, undoubtedly having eavesdropped on the entire exchange. "I must be trippin', Sheriff Drake. I thought I saw you two *cooperating*. You know . . . getting along?"

Wil chuckled. "Chief Gillespie and I always get along."

Her eye roll said, *Yeah, right*. Near retirement age, the sixty-something-year-old Zelda Brooks had attended Foster County High School with Wil's mother. She'd assumed the role of mother figure as soon as Wil had won the election. "Shall I tell Deputy Blanco about the

change in plans?”

Yep, she'd eavesdropped. Grabbing his life jacket, he herded Zelda back to her office. “No, I'll take care of it.”



Elizabeth restacked her canned goods in her cabinets after rotating stock, her cordless phone stuffed between her cheek and shoulder. “What’s up, Kris?”

“It’s too hot. Would you be willing to plait my hair for me again?”

After at least three lessons—Elizabeth had lost count—Kris still hadn’t mastered the art of weaving her long hair into a single braid. “If you’d be willing to return the favor.”

“But your hair’s too short to plait—”

“I want you to shape my eyebrows,” Elizabeth said. “Bring your tweezers.”

“Yippee! I’ve been dying to get hold of you and—”

“Whoa, just the brows, girl. This isn’t a makeover project.”

“All right,” Kris said, “just the brows. At least you can have two instead of one continuous black caterpillar.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You remind me of that scene in *Moonstruck* where Cher goes into a beauty salon and the stylist welcomes the chance to update her look.”

“I haven’t seen that movie in years, so I don’t remember

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enough to know whether to be flattered or insulted.”

“Neither. Come on over, and we’ll groom each other.”

Kris chuckled. “Sounds kinky. I’ll be right there.”

“Thanks, Kris.”

“Maybe we can watch *Moonstruck* together afterwards,” Kris said. “You have it, don’t you?”

“Uh . . . I sort of have a date tonight.”

Kris squealed into the phone. “All *right*! I’m on my way.” Without a goodbye, she disconnected.

“Good grief,” Elizabeth said to no one. “She’s been hanging with teenagers too much at that high school.”  
*And I’m talking to myself.*

Moments later, Kris rang the doorbell. She was armed with witch hazel, tweezers, and hair elastics. “I brought some makeup, too, just in case.”

“No makeup. Do you want him to think I’m trying to impress him?”

“Him who? Is this the sheriff we’re talking about? If so, you’ve overplayed the disinterested party routine. It’s time to pull out all the stops—”

“No.” Elizabeth gripped her shoulders firmly and guided her to the hall bathroom. “We’re keeping his dad company, is all. Don’t make a big deal of it. Just pluck my hairs, and I’ll braid yours.”

Kris sighed. “Oh, all right. But it’s just as Sunny says—you have a lot of beauty you hide.”

"Thanks. I think." She prodded Kris toward the toilet seat to sit on the lid. "Let's brush out your hair first."

"Couldn't you at least lose the glasses? It's as if you hide behind them."

Exactly—but she couldn't tell Kris. The lenses offered minor correction for myopia. She could do without them, but the thick black frames added to her disguise. "The glasses are part of my image. I'm a college professor. Now pay attention, and next time you can do this yourself."

She and Kris wasted most of an hour giggling and joking before Kris got her turn at shaping Elizabeth's eyebrows. Peering at her image in the mirror, she smiled at the results.

Kris smiled, too, and nodded. "See how feminine you look? Shaped brows really highlight your eyes."

"I'd forgotten what a difference it makes in my looks." Elizabeth spoke without thinking.

"You'd forgotten?" Kris stepped back and narrowed her eyes. "You used to take better care of your looks, didn't you? Hell's bells, you're a classic case."

Elizabeth huffed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I've got you figured out. You used to be gorgeous. Then Mr. Wrong broke your heart. Now you insulate yourself with extra weight, dull clothes, and no makeup to avoid attracting another man. You're protecting yourself from getting hurt again."

*Close enough.* The part about protecting herself from



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getting hurt rang true, but not the way Kris meant. “Sounds as if you have me all figured out, Sigmund Freud.”

“Well, you haven’t scared off Wilson Drake, which means he’s not a shallow jerk. Promise me you’ll give him a chance.”

“I am giving him a chance. But I’m also taking it slow.”

“Slowly,” Kris corrected, then chuckled. “Sorry! It’s a habit.”

Elizabeth pushed her out of the bathroom into the hall. “It’s what I deserve for hanging with English teachers.”

“You’re an English teacher.”

“Exactly.” At least for the past year. “Let’s take a break. I have Diet Coke in the fridge, just for you.”

“I’d love one, thanks.” Kris followed her into the kitchen, where she sat at the tiny bistro-style table, the set Elizabeth bought at one of many garage sales she frequented. “I thought you bought this set for your patio.”

“It’s the perfect size for the kitchen.” Elizabeth opened the refrigerator. “You and Cathleen helped me load it into my truck—remember?”

“Yeah, I do. That was one of those weekends Sunny was out of town. The three of us ate lunch at that cute little tea room.”

Elizabeth handed her the canned soda. “You mean the one that went out of business?”

“Well, a tea room in Foster County is a hard sell, you must admit.” Kris paused to take a sip of her Diet

Coke. "So has your sheriff figured out who killed Cathleen yet?"

"He's not *my* sheriff. Besides, what makes you think he's going to discuss his investigation with me? I could be a suspect."

Kris snorted. "Then I am, too. And Sunny."

Twisting off the cap of her Gatorade, Elizabeth slid into the chair opposite Kris. "We were the last to see her alive. I can't think about Friday night without wondering what we missed. Was there someone lurking in her minivan? Someone in the parking lot who followed her home?"

"Yeah—and did they ever find her minivan?"

"If so, it hasn't made the news." Elizabeth nodded toward her copy of the *Drake Springs Democrat* on the table, which she'd refolded after reading that morning.

"You mean there's news in that weekly?" Kris snorted. "I thought it was eighteen pages of advertisements."

"We have to keep up with what's on sale at Family Dollar."

"This whole murder thing creeps me out, man. I took a teaching job in this tiny community because of the quality of life here." She took another drink of her soda. "Hunh. It certainly wasn't for the salary."

"Me, too." It wasn't a total lie. The quality of life for a relocated witness definitely improved in an out-of-the-way town like Drake Springs, provided she stayed hidden. "I love the slower pace, the friendliness, the

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lower prices—”

“The inconvenience, the nosy people who know everyone’s business, the limited shopping—”

“Not that you’re complaining.” Elizabeth chuckled.

“Actually,” Kris said, “I wasn’t until something happened to one of our friends. Now I’m wondering if I’d been just as well off with my job in Charlotte.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “This is way better weather than North Carolina.”

“Unless that tropical storm turns into a hurricane. But hurricanes hit the Carolinas, too, so that’s no argument.” Kris finished her Diet Coke. “I better go so you can get ready for your date. Remember: you promised you’d give the guy a chance.”

Elizabeth raised one eyebrow. “I did?”

Kris frowned. “I mean it. Cathleen’s murder has me thinking. Life’s so short and fragile. Maybe I wrote off Adam too quickly. He’s decent, knows how to treat a woman. And frankly, I miss sex.”

Elizabeth would’ve laughed ordinarily, but not with Kris’s change in mood. “Why not give Adam a call? Invite him over for popcorn and a movie. Take my copy of *Moonstruck*.”

“And have him think I’m desperate?”

“Yeah.”

Kris giggled. “Oh, maybe you’re right. I could do that. So let’s both practice what I preach: Don’t be afraid

to grab a little happiness. Deal?”

“Deal. But even if Adam’s not available tonight, don’t give up on him.”

“If Adam turns me down, I’ll curl up with a glass of merlot and watch *Moonstruck* by myself.” With her braid bouncing against her back, Kris sauntered to the door. “Have fun tonight. I want all the details tomorrow on the ride to White Springs.”

At the door, Elizabeth handed her the *Moonstruck* DVD. “I don’t mind driving if you don’t mind the pickup.”

Kris turned, taking a few steps backward toward the driveway. “Fine with me. I’ll leave my *Lexus* at home.”

They both laughed at her imitation of Sunny. Kris got in her older model Mazda, backed out of the driveway, and drove off with a wave. Elizabeth checked the time and rushed inside. If Wilson was going to arrive at five, she barely had time to make dinner.



Wil pulled the Jeep into Elizabeth’s driveway at six. After he’d received the preliminary report from the Medical Examiner’s Office in Jacksonville, he’d had to call Elizabeth to change the time he’d be there for dinner. He couldn’t rush out of the station when he needed to hold a meeting with the deputies. His most senior officer, Chief Deputy Fred Fischer, stayed in contact with the

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CSI. Devon Winston took over the search for the victim's vehicle while Geraldo coordinated the search of the river. Wil kept his cell phone at the ready in case anything turned up in either search.

With time of death established to be no later than midnight Friday, he had a handle on reconstructing the timeline for Cathleen Hodges's last hours. He assigned Brady the task of charting the timeline and verifying alibis. Brady also waited to hear from the police in Arkansas about Michael Moore, the abusive ex.

For a few short hours he needed a break from the case, hardly the attitude of a dedicated county official. But Dad needed him, too. Mostly, he yearned to have Elizabeth with him in the old home place—to see how well she'd fit into his mental picture of their future. Not that he'd admit it to her.

Besides, technically, he needed to question her about her whereabouts after last seeing Cathleen Hodges. Okay, that was a stretch. He wanted every procedure on the case handled by the book—that much was true. He also wanted to be with Elizabeth.

He rang the doorbell but didn't have to wait. Smiling, she pulled it open immediately. She'd never looked more beautiful, although he didn't know what was different. She seemed flushed with excitement or pleasure. Or maybe she'd been outside in the ninety-degree heat.

“Come in.” She turned, leading him to the dining room, her bare feet noiseless on the gray carpet. “I hope you like salad.”

He liked anything to do with Elizabeth. He liked that she didn’t keep him waiting. He liked the way the denim shorts molded against her thighs and hips, the way the tan T-shirt hugged her curves. He especially liked the red toenails so at odds with the rest of her. *Nail polish? Elizabeth? Hmm.*

“Salad’s great.”

“I figured you were busy and might not have much time, and this was easy.” She motioned him to sit. “It’s just tuna.”

Just tuna? More accurately, the plate held a chef salad with a scoop of tuna salad on top, the kind he’d paid ten bucks for in a chain restaurant in Jacksonville. “Darlin’, it’s perfect.”

They ate, cleaned up, then grabbed the DVD to take to his dad’s. Elizabeth slid her feet into moccasins, and disappointment filled him. He’d found her fiery red toes incredibly sexy.

At the door, she hesitated, staring at his Jeep. “Should I follow you in my truck? You know, in case you get called out?”

The simple question reached deep inside him and tugged at his heart. His official Foster County Sheriff’s vehicle with its logo on the side attracted attention.

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Consideration for his work ethic earned her another checkmark on his perfect wife questionnaire. “Personal use of the Jeep is part of my salary package. Even if it wasn’t, I’d rather see you home safely, especially with a killer on the loose.”

“I appreciate that. Sunny, Kris, and I talked about safety in numbers. None of us wants to be out alone after dark.”

She locked up, then followed him to the Jeep. During the short drive out Main Street, she asked about his home.

“I’m not far outside the city limits. Our driveway pulls off this road. Drake Oaks stretches from County Road 471 to the Suwannee River, a total of eighty acres.”

“That’s a lot of lawn to mow.”

Chuckling, Wil shook his head. “Truth is, most of it is a pine tree farm now. There’s a cottage on the river that I’m remodeling. That’s where I live. Dad lives in the first floor of the main house, a Victorian my grandmother had built.”

“Is this the same grandmother who opened the college?”

He couldn’t remember telling Elizabeth that fact. Had she been researching him, too? Or just listening to local gossip? “Yes, darlin’. Charlotte Drake. She was quite the matriarch. I’m named after her, did you know that?”

She chuckled. “No, *Charlotte*, I had no idea.”

He pulled a face, then smiled. “Well, not the

Charlotte part. Gram was a Wilson before marrying Grandpa, and she was the sole heir of the Wilson Drug Store chain. They closed about thirty years ago. She devoted her life to raising my father and opening a liberal arts college. Then she wound up raising her grandkids.”

“What about your parents?”

“Mom died in a car wreck when I was twelve. Gram had moved us into the big house after Grandpa died, so she just naturally returned to her role as mistress of Drake Oaks.” He didn’t explain how he’d lost his mother long before the auto accident. Some dirty laundry shouldn’t be aired.

“You make it sound like a plantation.”

Wil nodded. “I think that’s exactly how Gram saw it. She was quite a lady.”

“Yes, grandmothers have a special role in our lives.” She gazed out the window sorrowfully, probably with her own grandmother on her mind.

“But Drake Oaks was never a plantation. Truth is, the Drakes bought the land from carpetbaggers after the War of Northern Aggression, as folks around here refer to the War Between the States.”

“At the Battle of Olustee reenactment, I learned that Florida’s capital was the only one that didn’t fall to the Yankees.”

Wil noticed the sadness tinging her voice. “Did you go with Cathleen?”



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She nodded. "And Sunny and Kris, too."

He slowed the Jeep to make the sharp turn into the driveway, then stopped in front of the porch steps. "Here we are."

She stared at the house. "Oh, my. I adore those porches. You must have loved growing up here."

"You know how it is when you're a kid. You don't know how good you've got it."

"How true." Without waiting for him to open her door, she stepped out of the Jeep and gazed at the second-story porch. "Nobody lives upstairs?"

"Not anymore. My sister, Taylor, travels a lot. She has an apartment in California. And Sam lives in the dean's residence on campus."

Wil ushered Elizabeth up the porch and to the front door. Testing the knob, he found it unlocked. He opened the door and hollered, "Dad?" Then he braced himself for Sophie to rush into the entry hall.

The television blared in the background. Wil strained to hear. Where was the dog? Typically, she'd whack him with her wagging tail and butt his hand with her head, demanding to be petted.

She wouldn't leave his father, though, if he was in trouble.

Wil's pulse quickened with concern, and he raised his voice. "Dad? Sophie?"

"What?" Elizabeth's quiet voice answered behind

*Cheryl Norman*

him. "What did you call me?"

"Sophie's the dog." Then he heard it—his father's weak cry for help. "Dad!"

He rushed into the den, Elizabeth right behind him, and his heart stopped. Dad and Sophie lay on the floor tangled up in the overturned wheelchair.

## CHAPTER SIX

Wil's father struggled to move, but the overturned wheelchair pinned him to the floor, trapping Sophie's leg.

"What happened, Dad? Did Sophie trip you?"

His dad must have heard the alarm in his voice. "It's Sophie. She ate some of the rat poison. I fell over hanging onto her collar to keep her away from it." But the tears in Dad's eyes only frightened Wil more. Dad never cried—he hadn't even when Wil's mom had died. "Help her, son. Don't let her die."

Elizabeth kneeled beside Sophie and reached for Dad's hand, which tightly gripped the dog's collar. "You can let go, Mr. Drake. I have her."

"That fool Hazel. She saw a little old mouse in the kitchen and went crazy with the poison." Tears trickled from Dad's eyes. Wil considered drying his face but

decided against it. Even distraught, his proud father wouldn't appreciate Wil's interference.

"You did the right thing holding onto her." Elizabeth spoke in a soothing voice that carried an air of authority. He had to hand it to her: her confident tone nearly convinced him, too, especially when she raised the dog's eyelids to examine her eyes. "Help your father up, and find me some peroxide—pronto."

Pulling his dad upright, Wil steadied the wheelchair and helped the old man sit.

"Peroxide's under the sink, son."

"Wilson," Elizabeth said, "this dog needs medical attention. Bring me peroxide and a large spoon."

"Who are you?"

"Sorry, Dad, I forgot my manners. This is Elizabeth Stevens. She brought us over a movie to watch about cars."

She narrowed her eyes at Wil, and he took the hint. "Be right back."

Elizabeth murmured something to his dad as Wil hurried from the room. In the bathroom, he located peroxide and then carried the bottle to the den. With a quick detour to the kitchen, he grabbed a soup spoon from the flatware drawer.

Wil stooped beside Elizabeth, handing her the bottle and spoon. "How can I help?"

"Hold her."

Elizabeth poured peroxide into the spoon. Then to

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his horror, she forced Sophie's jaws apart and spooned peroxide into her mouth. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Inducing vomiting." Elizabeth gazed up at Wil, her troubled eyes searching his. "How much does she weigh, about eighty pounds?"

"About that. Why?"

"All right." Again she poured peroxide into the spoon and poured it into Sophie's mouth. Then she repeated the process, this time with a smaller amount. "If the rodenticide gets into her system, it can—" She stopped and cut her gaze toward his dad. "I don't suppose you could get us inside Cathleen's animal hospital—"

"I have the keys."

"What we need is there. Do you know how to reach her assistant?"

"No, but my deputy, Jamie Peterson, does."

She ran her fingers over Sophie's leg, apparently examining it for injury from the wheelchair. "See if she can get her to meet us there."

Wil pulled out his cell phone and checked the signal. "My battery's low. Let me use your phone, Dad."

He opted for the wall phone in the kitchen and reached Jamie at home. "I know it's your day off, but I have an emergency."

Wil told her about Sophie swallowing rat poison, and Jamie offered to locate the name and telephone number for Cathleen Hodges's assistant.

“Could you call and ask her to meet us at the vet’s office?” Wil asked.

“I’m on it,” Jamie said.

“My cell phone’s about dead. If you need to call me back, call Dad’s.” He gave her the number, then ended the call.

Back in the den, Elizabeth hovered over Sophie, unaffected by the gross puddle of dog puke at her feet. “We need a mop and some paper towels, please.”

“I’m on it,” he said, echoing Jamie’s words. He grabbed a mop and bucket from the utility room, stopped at the kitchen sink for water, then ripped off a handful of paper towels. He returned to the den, where Elizabeth patted Sophie’s back. The dog hiccupped.

His dad rolled closer. “Will she be all right?”

“She’s a healthy dog, and she emptied her stomach—but it can take days for the effects to show up,” Elizabeth said.

Wil mopped up the worst of the vomit, then tossed the water out the back door. He refilled the bucket and mopped a second time. Elizabeth used the paper towels to finish the job. Wil returned after rinsing out the mop and bucket, and found his father sitting, staring at Sophie. He wasn’t crying now and, in fact, seemed less anxious—though far from relaxed. Wil placed his hand on his dad’s right shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze.

Finally, Dad spoke. “When you get back, take every one of those damned rat baits and throw them in the trash.”

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"You bet. Want me to have a word with Hazel?"

Dad nodded, his tired eyes suddenly stormy. "You better. If I do it, she'll quit without notice."

Elizabeth disappeared into the kitchen with her wad of paper towels, probably in search of the garbage can. When she returned, she gestured toward the dog. "We need to know more about the rat poison. Could you look for the packages in the garbage?"

"You bet." First dog puke, now garbage. This was not how Wil had envisioned his Saturday evening with Elizabeth. Under the sink, the thirteen-gallon trash pail held nothing but the wad of paper towels. Great. He leaned in the doorway of the den. "I'll have to look through the trash can outside. Are you sure this is necessary? I mean, rat poison is rat poison, right?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I need to know whether it's first-generation or second-generation rodenticide. I can tell from reading the label."

"Do it, Wilson." His dad's voice, though weak, discouraged argument.

*Rodenticide.* Why hadn't she just said *rat poison*? If she was trying to impress him, it was working. He sure as hell didn't know the chemistry of rat poison. Curious that a Shakespeare professor did. Resigned to the task, he went out to the back of the house. Lifting the lid on the trash can, he was rewarded with empty cardboard packages. Their position at the top of the bin spared

him from the odorous refuse tied up in bags. "Thank you, God."

He returned to the house and handed one of the blue and gold packages to Elizabeth. "Here. Now what does this tell you?"

She read the ingredients and directions on the package. "Bait blocks. Sophie probably thought they were treats. This is a first-generation type containing warfarin, so we don't have to worry about other ingredients—"

"Warfarin? That's a blood thinner, like Coumadin—" His dad took Coumadin. His dad took . . . rat poison?

She checked Sophie's eyes again, then looked at her gums, as if she knew the mysteries of animal health. "Well, yes, in controlled doses it's medicinal for humans. And it kills rats, although some rodents have developed a resistance, which is why chemists developed the second-generation rodenticides."

"But you said this is first generation, so that's a good thing, right?"

She didn't respond, but maybe she didn't have an answer. Why would a Shakespeare professor know so much about rodenticides? The fact that she did had most likely saved his dog's life, but he couldn't overlook the strangeness of it.

As if speaking to herself, she said, "Cathleen should have a supply of vitamin K1 I can inject—"

"*You* can inject?" He'd exercised restraint when she'd



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poured peroxide down Sophie's throat, he'd dug through trash and mopped up vomit, but he'd be damned if he'd let an amateur poke his dog with a needle. "Whoa!"

"No, um, I mean that's why we need her assistant to help us."

"My deputy's working on finding her as we speak."

Elizabeth turned to his dad. "Sir, did you see how many of the blocks Sophie ate?"

He shook his head. "Hazel put a bait in every corner probably, the damn woman. But I think three at most."

Wil nodded. "Dad would know. Sophie stays right with him."

"Wilson, help me carry Sophie to your truck. We need to get her treatment."

His dad waved him on. "Go. I'll stay out of trouble until you get back."

Wil stared at his disheveled and weepy father sitting in his wheelchair. He debated leaving him. "I don't know how long I'll be."

"We'll not be long if Cathleen has what we need." Elizabeth's calm voice belied the underlying tension.

Elizabeth was more than an animal lover. She was way more than a Shakespeare professor, too, if she knew her way around rat poisons and antidotes. Who was Elizabeth Stevens? Could he count on her to treat their beloved Golden Retriever? "Maybe we should run her on to Gainesville or Jacksonville, to one of those emergency

clinics—”

“I know what to do. Trust me.”

Wil wanted to trust Elizabeth, but what did she know about doctoring dogs? If anything happened to Sophie, Dad would be devastated. Wil credited the dog with having pulled Dad out of the depression he’d suffered following the stroke. Sophie seemed to sense what the old man needed and stayed at his feet, often to the aggravation of the hired help who came to care for him.

Wil gathered up Sophie and carried her to the Jeep, Elizabeth holding the doors for him. She crawled into the backseat beside the dog.

He slid in the front and started the engine. Taking advantage of his flashing lights, he sped toward town. “I hope you know what you’re doing, darlin’.”

“I used to work in a veterinarian’s office.”

“That’s it?” Working in a vet’s office could explain her familiarity with animals and medical treatments. Wil prayed it would be enough experience to save his dog.

“Yes. I promise you, I can do everything for Sophie that a vet can do, only faster, because there isn’t a vet within thirty miles of here—right?”

“Level with me, okay?” He spoke to her via the rearview mirror, his gaze never leaving the narrow county road. “I can’t let anything happen to Sophie. She means everything to my dad. She’s become his helper dog.”

“I understand.” She said nothing else for at least

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a minute. “Wilson, this much I can tell you. I’ve had enough training to help her. She needs subcutaneous injections of vitamin K1—”

“How the hell do you know that?” He slowed when he reached the edge of town, where County Road 471 broadened into Main Street. “You learned that much from working in a vet’s office?”

“Yes. Sophie’s a strong, healthy dog. She’d probably recover without treatment, now that she’s emptied her stomach, but don’t take that chance. If we treat her aggressively with the vitamin K1, she’ll have a stronger chance at recovery. You’ll need to have her blood checked later for anemia.”

He parked in front of Hodges Animal Clinic and cut the lights. He remembered enough of high school health class to know that vitamin K1 was found in lettuce and other greens, and that it was important because it helped blood to clot. It made sense if Sophie ate a bunch of anticoagulant, she’d need vitamin K1. His gut told him he could rely on Elizabeth’s judgment. “I’ll unlock the door to the clinic and come back to get Sophie.”

Inside the silent building, he turned on lights and adjusted the thermostat so the air conditioning kicked on. On his way back to the Jeep, he stopped beside a Volkswagen Beetle, which he assumed belonged to the assistant. A young woman got out of the car and approached him. He’d met her once when he’d brought

Sophie in for her rabies shot, but Brady had been the one to take her statement after the murder. He thought she looked familiar, but he couldn't place her other than from his one vet appointment.

"Sheriff Drake, I'm Iris Porter. I used to work here as Doctor Hodges's assistant."

"Yes." He paused to shake hands. "Thank you for coming. If you want to go inside, I'll get the dog."

With Elizabeth's help, he got Sophie out of the Jeep and into Hodges Animal Clinic. Once inside, he carried Sophie to the examination room, Elizabeth following. Sophie could walk on her own, but he wanted to keep her as calm as possible. He placed her on the examining table while he introduced Iris to Elizabeth.

"We've met." Iris shook her hand. "You were one of Doctor Hodges's friends."

Elizabeth nodded and got down to business. "Iris, Sophie ate some rodent bait blocks. We induced vomiting shortly after, but she needs the injectable vitamin K1. It should be in an amber-colored bottle. Do you know where Cathleen kept her supplies?"

"Sure. I'll get a syringe ready." Iris frowned. "Would you know about the dosage?"

Elizabeth chewed on her lower lip. "Eighteen CCs should do it, but I'll weigh her to be sure."

Iris went into the kitchen-slash-surgery room, leaving them alone in the examination room. Sophie tried to

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jump from the table, but Elizabeth's soothing and petting calmed her.

"I don't think this is legal." Wil met Elizabeth's gaze.

She didn't flinch. "Breaking and entering?"

"Dispensing drugs without a license."

She smiled then. "It's a vitamin shot, Sheriff. And animal owners can give their own injections. Ranchers and farmers do it all the time."

"I see." But ranchers and farmers dealt in livestock, not beloved family pets. "Sorry to be a skeptic. This is a special dog, particularly to my dad."

"Let's try to weigh her. I guessed at eighty pounds for the dosage."

"How did you know about that? Seems to me you know more about animal doctoring than Iris does."

"I doubt that." Together they placed her on a scale that resembled a treadmill until Elizabeth got a reading. "How long have you had Sophie?"

So she wasn't going to give him a straight answer. He returned the dog to the examination table. "Three years or so. She belonged to a homicide victim when I worked in Jacksonville. We found her whining at his side. The deceased had no family, no friends, no one willing to take the dog. She was just a puppy, probably close to a year old."

"Softie Wilson Drake rescued her." She smiled again, and his earlier doubts evaporated. As long as she

smiled at him that way, he'd believe anything she said. Not good for a detective. Or an objective county sheriff. But he'd lost his objectivity where Elizabeth Stevens was concerned, probably the first morning she'd shared a table with him at Boyd's Diner. "Hey, don't let it get around that I'm a soft touch, okay?"

Her smile collapsed, and she lowered her voice. "If you don't let it get around that I treated your dog."

"Deal." Not that she need worry. Using the deceased's property for personal reasons surely violated some code of ethics. But the image of his father's tears overrode propriety. "But I can't stop Iris from talking."

Elizabeth nodded. "I know."

"Darlin', I'm sure you have your reasons for not wanting me to think you've more than a passing acquaintance with veterinary medicine. But I wish you'd talk to me. You can trust me."

Were those tears in her eyes before she looked away? "I can't."

Iris returned with a hypodermic needle. "The dog ate rat poison blocks?"

"Yes." Wil stared at the needle. "Are you going to give her the shot?"

Iris gave her head a rapid shake. "I don't do injections."

Elizabeth reached for the syringe and pinched a bit of Sophie's furry yellow coat.

"You know how to give the injections?" Iris asked.

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“Yes, I do.” This time Elizabeth met Wilson’s gaze and held it. She seemed to be silently pleading with him, but he wasn’t a mind reader.

Wil held Sophie’s head in both hands. “Steady, girl. This is going to hurt.”

“If I inject it all in one spot, it can cause a reaction.” She injected Sophie repeatedly in various parts of her body, just beneath the skin. Sophie neither flinched nor whimpered. “All done.” Elizabeth turned to Iris. “See if you can find fifty-six capsules of K1.”

“Right.” Iris followed the order as if she’d expected it.

“That many capsules?” Wil asked.

“Yes, it comes in twenty-five milligrams only, and Sophie’s a large dog. You’ll need to give her four of the capsules every day for the next two weeks.”

No longer questioning her about her knowledge, Wil nodded toward Sophie, who was pawing at the table’s metal surface. “She wants down.”

“Good girl.” Elizabeth ran her fingers through Sophie’s coat. “All right, set her on the floor.”

“She’s going to be all right?” Wil asked, forgetting for the moment Elizabeth wasn’t really a vet. He stooped to pet Sophie, who stood on her own and appeared none the worse for wear.

“She should be. She emptied her stomach fairly quickly.”

Yeah, all over the floor of the den. He almost gagged

at the memory. Not that he was squeamish or anything.

“Watch for things like bruising, pale gums, or labored breathing. Anything that indicates a bleeding disorder. Will you be able to watch her tonight?”

“You bet.” He ruffled the fur around Sophie’s ears with both hands. “Sophie, darlin’, tonight you’re sleeping with me.”

His golden retriever ended up in his bed most nights, anyway. A fantasy of Elizabeth sharing his bed instead of his dog fluttered through his one-track mind. Would she understand dog hair in the sheets?

“As I said, you’ll need to take her to a vet as soon as you get a chance for blood work, to be sure she’s not anemic or anything.”

Iris handed him the bottle of vitamins, and he stood. “Thanks for helping out, Iris.”

“It’s the least I could do.” She gave him a look filled with chagrin. “It’s my mom’s fault, you know.”

“Your mom’s?” Elizabeth frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

Then the resemblance zoomed into focus, and his brain connected the dots. “You’re Hazel Porter’s daughter, aren’t you?”

“Afraid so. She’s a maniac with wasp spray and rat poison, I’m sorry to say.”

Wil reached for his wallet and handed her two twenties. He had no idea if the amount was appropriate. When



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Iris tried to refuse, he said, "Take it, darlin'. It's the least I can do for interrupting your Saturday night."

"Well, I *am* currently unemployed . . ." She took the bills and stuffed them into the pocket of her shorts.

"It'd probably be better if we kept this between us, all right?" Damn. He hoped that hadn't sounded as if he was bribing her.

"I understand." She dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand. "Do you know what's going to happen to all this? Dr. Hodges said she'd taken out a huge loan to open her practice, so will her equipment be repossessed?"

"Her mother will have to make those decisions," Wil said. "She told my deputy she plans to be here next week." And Wil owed Cathleen Hodges's estate for the vitamin K1. He'd need to find out the cost. Jamie probably knew from the computer files she'd examined.

"It'd be nice if she could sell it to another veterinarian who'd take over and reopen, but I guess that's wishful thinking."

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes strangely liquid as her gaze swept the room. She was probably remembering her dead friend. But question marks littered Wil's mind. If she wouldn't explain why a trained veterinarian would become an English professor at a small college and want it kept secret, he'd have to redouble his investigation of her.



Elizabeth hadn't lied. Not exactly.

She lay in bed staring at the illuminated dial on her clock radio. Four o'clock in the morning and she should've been sound asleep. Instead, her mind replayed the night's events. She had told Wilson she used to work in a veterinarian's office, which was true. Of course, she'd neglected to mention that she'd worked as a veterinarian. Or that she held a degree in veterinarian medicine. She wasn't a vet, though—not anymore. She wasn't certified to practice in the state of Florida, nor could she be until she caught up on her continuing education hours.

So she hadn't lied. But she'd broken role, something her handler said could get her killed. Unfortunately, Elizabeth had reacted to the emergency without thinking. It had always been her nature to rescue and treat animals, even before her veterinary science training. After earning her English degree and then deciding to go to Auburn to get her DVM, she didn't surprise anyone who knew her well. Last night, her immediate concern was saving the golden retriever from poisoning, and her training kicked in automatically. Too late, she realized her *faux pas*.

The keen-minded sheriff wasn't fooled, either. He recognized her training in saving Sophie. He dropped her off at home after they closed up Hodges Animal Clinic and saw her safely inside her house. Then he gave her the opportunity to explain, but she ignored it. There

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was no good night kiss or even a close encounter. She saw question marks in his eyes, not romance.

“Just how long did you work in that vet’s office, darlin’?” he asked. He may not have figured out the truth yet, but he was curious. He’d probably google her name the first chance he got, not that he’d find anything for Elizabeth Stevens. The question haunting her now—who would he tell?

Abandoning her bed, she got up and padded to the kitchen. By the glow of her nightlight, she brewed a cup of tea and carried it into her darkened living room. Curling her legs beneath her, she settled into the sofa to enjoy her hot drink. The woodsy scent of Wilson’s cologne lingered in the fabric of the slipcovers where he’d sat Friday evening, reminding Elizabeth of her foolishness.

She’d let him get close—closer than any man since Brendan, though that lying creep could hardly be called a man. How many times had she reminded herself that she could be relocated with little notice at any time? If Sullivan’s hit men figured out where she’d moved, she couldn’t afford a moment’s delay. Once her handler called her, she had to be ready to move. How could a relationship work under such circumstances?

Now she’d compromised herself. It may mean nothing. Or it could lead to her exposure. She feared there’d come a time when she’d be cornered and have to decide whether or not to confide in Wilson. Her instincts, known to be

defective, told her he would safeguard her secret. She liked him—too much. Kris nailed it when she said he'd proven not to be a shallow jerk. Kris would tell her to trust him. But should she trust *Kris*?

Kris had moved to Foster County about the same time as Elizabeth had, but so had Cathleen and Sunny. Did that make them suspicious? She'd read somewhere that a hundred thousand people moved to Florida each week, so newcomers to Drake Springs—particularly a college town—weren't unusual. Her handler said to confide in no one, though, so she didn't. All three women considered her a close friend but knew little beyond her phony biography. Maintaining the charade exhausted her.

Unlike Cathleen, who rarely spoke of her family or home, or Kris, whose parents had used her as a pawn in the battlefield of their divorce, Elizabeth had grown up in a loving, happy family. She'd been close to all of them—so close that her heart ached still to talk to any one of them. To do so would endanger not only her but them, too. She'd been warned that she couldn't risk e-mail, either.

She finished her tea and sat up straight, an idea taking root. She often surfed the internet. Would anyone notice if she logged on to her hometown newspaper? If keystrokes were recorded, couldn't she access a number of cities' newspapers to leave a trail of confusion? Seventeen months ago she'd traveled to Georgia by taking flights to

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various cities under different names. Her handler later set her up in Drake Springs and gave her the Chevy S-10, which she drove to her current identity's new life. She could follow the same convoluted path with the internet.

Elizabeth powered up her computer, squinting against the sudden brightness of her monitor in the darkened room. Thanks to Ian Davis, she had a high-speed internet connection. He'd installed the software and switched her over from dial-up the first time she'd cooked dinner for him and Sunny.

An hour later she'd soaked up dozens of articles at courier-journal.com, news from Louisville, Kentucky, and southern Indiana. She browsed the headlines, then read through local news. Her favorite restaurant had closed after forty-nine years. *Damn!* She scanned the obits and saw no familiar names, thank God. Fall racing was about to start at Churchill Downs. She skipped that article. Any racetrack brought back painful reminders of the events that had landed her in this mess.

A tiny ad in the sidebar caught her attention: "Mustang Sally's Garage—for the best in auto restoration." Her heartbeat quickened. That had to be her sister-in-law's business. Mustang Sally's Garage had outfitted her secondhand motor home for her mobile veterinary business. Sally hadn't owned a computer at the time, but now she appeared to have entered the information age. Or Sally had sold the business, for all she knew.

She'd missed so much of her family's and friends' lives since she'd gone into hiding. Against her better judgment, she clicked on the link. MustangSallysGarage.com filled her screen, and a smile filled her face. Right away she recognized the handiwork of her brother Joey. She touched a finger to the screen as if to bring her in contact with him. Had he and Sally started a family yet? What exactly was the name of his employer? Could she find anything about Joe on their Web site?

In her moment of weakness, Elizabeth started to save Sally's Web site to her favorites but reconsidered. She could remember the URL easily enough, and it wouldn't do to send trouble to Sally's door. It wouldn't do for her to do a search on her brother, either. Up until now, the Feds had succeeded in protecting her family, going to great lengths to paint a picture of her as estranged from the Desalvo family. Fortunately—if anything about this mess could be seen as fortunate—she'd lived and worked in Lexington, not Louisville, seventy miles from the closest family member.

Seventy miles or seven hundred miles: would it matter to a man on trial for murder and racketeering?

Exhaustion finally claimed her. Yawning, she shuffled back to bed without turning off her computer. She'd be up again in two hours and could check for new posts on the Shakespeare forum before going to the early service at St. Helen's, the tiny Catholic church in downtown

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Drake Springs. Attending mass was her one concession to her previous identity. This was no time to give up praying.

At 10:30, she'd pick up Kris. Or should she call first? If Kris had followed through on her idea to invite Adam over for the evening, she may have gotten lucky. Barely finishing that thought, Elizabeth fell asleep.



Sunday morning, Wil swung by the Nite Owl Convenience Store on First Street, grabbing a breakfast burrito and hot coffee on his way to the station. He missed his usual breakfast at the diner but couldn't blame Boyd and Lorraine for closing one day a week. He missed seeing Elizabeth, too, although he'd been with her last night. The entire episode with Sophie had unsettled him, not that he wasn't grateful for Elizabeth's help. In fact, he'd been so focused on saving his dog he'd overlooked a few things that later resurrected in his thoughts.

Elizabeth seemed at home in a strange veterinary clinic, using language and expertise beyond that of a former aide. Or had she actually said she'd worked as an aide? Something else niggled at the back of his brain—something she'd said that he'd meant to follow up on but now couldn't recall. He definitely intended to spend more time investigating her, if for no other reason than to satisfy

his curiosity.

Still, her behavior last evening had triggered his detective radar. He'd learned to trust his instincts, and he couldn't ignore his misgivings about her even if he did lo—like her. *Lo—like* covered it perfectly because he was halfway in love with Elizabeth. And he had yet to kiss her.

With so many troubling thoughts, he'd slept poorly and then overslept, which pushed him to get to the office by ten. He'd intended to go in at eight. To his amazement, he hadn't forgotten his weapon and holster. Ordinarily, the county sheriff could take a Sunday off. But Wil had an unsolved homicide and a police force working extra shifts to find evidence.

He unlocked the back door that led directly to his office, and slipped inside. After finishing off his breakfast, he toured the station, speaking to Rebecca Gibbons, the dispatcher on duty. "Any trouble this morning?"

"Not since I came on, Wil." She handed him the clipboard containing the printout of the day's calls. "Here's the log."

Wil scanned the list of traffic and disorderly conduct calls. "Amazingly light for a Saturday night."

"Especially the first weekend after classes start. The biggest trouble came late last night, when Fred Fischer caught Ralph Sapp breaking into the Dairy Queen again."

"Fred didn't arrest him, did he?" Ralph Sapp had



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the mental capacity of a seven-year-old and had a weakness for Dilly Bars. Most folks in town helped his elderly mother keep him out of trouble.

“Of course not. Had to wake Mrs. Sapp, though. That’s about all the excitement Nancy had to report when I relieved her.”

He handed back the log. “Thanks, Bec—I mean, Rebecca.”

“Aw, Wil, I don’t mind if *you* call me Becky. Just not in front of the deputies, okay?”

Rebecca and Wil had known each other since middle school. Her husband, Otis, owned the county’s biggest real estate firm and managed the property leased to Cathleen Hodges. Which reminded Wil he needed to return the keys to the property before the family of the deceased arrived to collect her belongings.

“Sure, Becky.” He held up his empty Nite Owl cup. “Do you know if there’s fresh coffee?”

“Made it myself less than an hour ago.”

Wil saluted her with his cup. “Thank you, darlin’.”

He entered the locker room, where he found Geraldo fastening his holster. “Mornin’, Wil.”

“Heading back to the river?”

“Yes. The water’s low and clearer than normal. I think we could find something.”

Wil appreciated Geraldo’s positive attitude for what could be worse than a needle-in-a-haystack scenario.

"That'd be great. Call if you do."

"You bet." Geraldo picked up his life vest and left.

Wil refilled his paper cup from the carafe, picked up a discarded copy of the *Drake Springs Democrat* he'd yet to read, then headed toward his office.

Rebecca stopped him at the locker room door. "Deputy Winston's calling for you on the radio."

"What's up? Did he say?"

"They found the victim's minivan. He's securing the scene and sent me to find you."

Wil started to ask why Devon hadn't called and then realized his cell phone was recharging at home. Where was his mind this morning? Tomorrow, he'd have Zelda order him a backup cell phone to keep in the station.

"I'll grab it in my office." Wil dropped the newspaper where he'd found it and returned to his desk. He spoke into his radio. "Where is it, Devon?"

"In a pine tree farm between 471 and Sticky Swamp Road, just past your place."

"Close to the river?"

"Very close, and not far off the road, either."

Wil knew the area. The pine tree farm belonged to Drake Oaks, but he doubted Devon realized it. "Let me call FDLE. They'll need to process it."

He called the crime scene investigators. Just as he replaced the receiver, the telephone rang.

"Sheriff Drake."

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“Wilson, it’s me, Elizabeth.” Elizabeth’s voice, higher pitched than usual, quivered with emotion. “Maybe I’m overreacting, but I think something’s happened to Kris.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tension bunched the muscles at Wil's neck. "Where are you now?"

"In her driveway." Elizabeth's voice shook. "I'm supposed to pick her up this morning to go to that craft show, but her car's gone."

"Stay put. I'll meet you there." He ended the call, then buzzed Rebecca in dispatch. "I don't have my phone with me, but you can reach me on the radio."

Slipping out his private entrance to his Jeep, he sped toward the duplex on Third Street where Kris Knight lived. He wanted to believe Kris had forgotten about her plans with Elizabeth and was running an errand, but a chilling sense of déjà vu settled over him. He'd thought the same about Cathleen Hodges's disappearance. Two women, a week apart? *Don't jump to conclusions, pal.*

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He parked behind Elizabeth's Chevy pickup and climbed out of the Jeep. She slid out of the truck, wearing her usual drab colored T-shirt and shorts, as if to make herself as unnoticeable as she could. Except for that one glimpse of polished red toenails, he'd never seen her wearing anything colorful.

She joined him in the driveway and seemed to hunch into herself, cringing. "I may have overreacted after all, Sheriff."

"Why's that?"

"I'd forgotten that Kris may have had a date last night. She mentioned inviting Adam Gillespie over to watch a movie. Maybe she did, or maybe he changed her plans." She shrugged. "Do you know where he lives? We could just cruise past and see if maybe her car is parked nearby."

"You're giving me a lot of *maybes*." Wil didn't relish the thought of spying on Adam—or, more accurately, getting caught spying on Adam. "Did you try her cell phone?"

"First thing. It goes straight to her voice mail, which makes me think she turned the thing off—you know, to avoid interrupting something." Elizabeth shrugged again, but it didn't hide her nervousness. "I'll just feel better if I know she's all right."

"Come on." He escorted her to the passenger side of the Jeep. "She knew you were picking her up, right? Or

could she be at your house?”

“No, we were very clear about our plans.”

He closed the door, then walked around to the driver's side. Elizabeth hadn't seemed this shaken when he'd told her about Cathleen's murder. Maybe that murder had her thinking the worst. He backed into Third Street with a silent prayer that Adam didn't see him checking up on him.

“I understood Kris to say Adam wasn't her type.”

“That was before Cathleen's death. She said she may have been too quick to write him off and wanted to see if he was still interested. I loaned her one of my DVDs and suggested she invite him over to watch a movie.”

As he'd invited Elizabeth. He followed Main Street west, then turned south onto Fifth, within half a block of Elizabeth's house. “Speaking of which, can we try our movie date again Friday? You left your DVD.”

“Oh, I meant to. I thought you and your dad could go ahead and watch it.”

He pulled a face. “You're turning me down?”

She frowned. “No, but can we talk about it later?”

“Whatever you say.” He turned east at the next street.

“This is my neighborhood. Where does Adam live?”

“Right here, darlin', Third and Desoto.” He slowed at the curb in front of Adam's small ranch-style house. “Driveway's empty.”

“So Adam's car is gone, too.” She exhaled a long

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breath as if she'd been holding it. Perhaps she had.

"Let's check at city police headquarters."

"What if he's there? Should we ask him about Kris? I mean, we don't know if she called him. I'm guessing she did, but . . . I'd hate to embarrass him or her, if it turns out—"

"Hey, if you're really worried for her safety, you can't sweat the small stuff."

She nodded once. "You're right. Let's go."

Wil traveled east down Desoto to First Street, then north toward City Hall and the police station. Everything in Drake Springs was within a minute's drive at most. He could travel every street in town to look for Kris's Mazda in less than half an hour. He hoped it wouldn't come to that.

The parking lot at First and Main was empty. He pulled in and parked. "Let's see if he's here."

The late morning sun turned the dead sod that landscaped the Drake Springs City Hall complex a bright gold. Water restrictions because of the summer's drought had ruined much of the county's horticultural efforts. Wil escorted Elizabeth past the fountain, which had been turned off to conserve the city's spring-fed wells, and beyond the hardy shrubbery to the rear of City Hall, where the city police department had its offices.

At the front desk, Wil asked the officer on duty for Chief Gillespie.

"He's at church, Sheriff Drake. The Presbyterian Church on Coronado."

"Thanks." Wil escorted Elizabeth back outside. "Would Kris have gone to church with Adam?"

"Kris never mentions going to church, although we don't always see each other on Sundays. But this is the first time she's made plans with me and not kept them. If anything, she's punctual to a fault."

"Let's drive past the church and look."

"It'd be just as fast to walk. It's only a couple blocks."

"Okay," he said, although frankly her suggestion surprised him. All but the most dedicated of athletes avoided exercise of any type in the hot, sticky weather, and Elizabeth hadn't struck him as athletic. She must be very worried about her friend.

Wil led her to Coronado, which ran behind the police station. Drake Springs had neglected the upkeep of the sidewalks, and the cement buckled over tree roots. Other spots had disintegrated into gravel. Elizabeth followed him as he stepped into the street and walked on the asphalt. They traveled south on Coronado toward the church. Thanks to the ancient oaks that lined the street on the east, the same spreading trees that had damaged the sidewalks, Elizabeth and Wil enjoyed shade most of the distance.

When they reached First Presbyterian Church of Drake Springs, they found a number of vehicles—including the Police Chief's Chevy Blazer—but no sign of



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Kris Knight's Mazda.

Elizabeth stood, staring at the old frame church building. "I guess it was a long shot."

"Let's go back to her place. She's probably there now wondering why you aren't."

"Yes." Elizabeth sounded unconvinced. In fact, she looked damned worried.

He tugged her elbow. "Come on."

She walked back to his Jeep without a word, tension radiating from her like the morning heat from the sidewalks. Two minutes later, they were back in Kris's driveway, where they found Elizabeth's pickup as they'd left it. And no sign of Kris's vehicle.

After banging on the door and peeking in windows, Elizabeth turned to him and crossed her arms. "This isn't right. She's missing, Wilson, just like Cathleen."

Wil hated leaving her, but he had a homicide case five days old and a meeting to prepare for in case the FDLE profiler arrived tomorrow. "We have no evidence of foul play or injury—"

"Don't hand me that line of bull about waiting twenty-four hours. That's for television."

Wil's television viewing rarely included cop shows. "We can take a missing person report anytime."

"Then please take my report and consider Kris missing. Call it a woman's intuition. I don't care. Just look for her." Elizabeth's face reddened, and her voice quivered

at a high pitch.

Sensible Elizabeth rarely lost her composure. He couldn't ignore her request now, even if he considered it premature to file a report. But he couldn't afford to spend too much energy on a possible missing person when he had work to do with his homicide case.

"All right." He motioned her to her pickup. "You want to follow me to the station?"



Hours later, Elizabeth deadbolted herself inside her house and tried to sip a Coke. Her teeth chattered, but her chill wasn't from the air conditioning. For the first time in more than a year, she couldn't eat. No matter what Wil thought, she knew something had happened to Kris. Something awful.

Preoccupied with Kris's disappearance, she'd forgotten to power off her computer. She perched on the edge of her chair and moved the mouse to wake up the monitor. The Shakespeare forum still showed her logged in, so she logged out and checked e-mail on the off chance Kris had sent her a message. Except for a couple of forwarded jokes, her inbox was empty. Her home page brought up headlines for the area but nothing that interested her.

Then she cleared her cache of temporary files. If she needed to vacate in a hurry, there'd be no easy trail of the

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Web sites she'd visited should someone make off with her computer. Since this morning when she'd realized Kris was missing, she'd been thinking more and more of the possibility of relocating.

Wilson thought she was overreacting. She saw it in his eyes, although he patiently took her missing person report. "Darlin', you seem more than a little alarmed. Do you know more than you're telling me?" he'd asked. *Oh, yeah. Way more.* If only she could explain to him, he'd be alarmed, too. First the new veterinarian in town, then the English teacher. It wouldn't take Sherlock Holmes to learn that Sofia Desalvo graduated with an English degree before attending veterinary school. If re-located, she'd want to work in one field or the other.

Yet the U.S. Marshals assured her that her location would be kept secret as long as she did nothing to arouse suspicion. She'd followed their instructions to the max, with the exception of last night's lapse, and that had come a week after Cathleen's death. She'd not brought murder to Drake Springs, at least not on her own. Could Sullivan's hit man have found her location and now be killing anyone remotely close to her description? She wasn't sure she could live with the knowledge that her relocation had cost her friends their lives.

Of course, if Sullivan's killer found her, she wouldn't have to.



Wil had the unpleasant task of questioning Adam Gillespie in the disappearance of Kris Knight. He had little choice since Elizabeth had filed an official report. Driving home later, he replayed the scene in his mind.

He'd called Adam after Elizabeth had left and asked him to drop by his office. An hour later, Adam stood in the doorway and tapped lightly at the door.

Wil invited him to sit, then told him about the missing person report. "Elizabeth said Kris planned to call you yesterday. Did you hear from her?"

"I did." Adam glared at him, stiffening in his seat, literally getting his back up.

Wil mentally dug into his negotiation training, as well as his reserve of patience. "Would you be willing to tell me about it? You may be the last person to have talked to her before she disappeared."

"Am I a suspect in her disappearance, Sheriff?"

"Oh, good God, Adam, you know I have to question you. Cut me some slack."

"If our roles were reversed, would you cut *me* any slack?"

"I'd like to think I would. Regardless of our differences, we owe each other professional courtesy."

Adam exhaled a loud breath. "Not much to tell.

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Kris called just as I was heading out the door. I'd planned to have dinner with Amy and Ben out at their place. I invited Kris to come along, but she declined. You can check it out. I was out at my sister's house until eleven. Then I headed home and went to bed."

"Were you surprised to hear from Kris?"

"Hell, yes. She'd made it clear after the second date that we had no future, so I didn't expect a call."

Wil nodded. "How do you feel about her?"

"She seems kind of unhappy to me." He shrugged. "But what do I know about women?"

Wil smiled. At least now the conversation had relaxed. "Yeah. Who can figure 'em?"

"Do you really believe something's happened to her?"

"I don't know, but I can't ignore a pattern. First Cathleen Hodges disappears and turns up dead, then one of her friends is missing."

"You *are* thinking the worst."

"I don't want to, but I'm trying to be proactive."  
*Thanks to Elizabeth.*

"God, I hope you're wrong. Let me know if I can help. Kris is a nice person and a good teacher, from what I hear. We don't need anything more happening in our town."

They'd ended their meeting on that note, both concerned about one of their citizens. Wil congratulated himself for not antagonizing the police chief further.

Reaching Drake Oaks, Wil parked the Jeep in front of

the big house. He dragged himself up the stairs to the porch. When he stepped into the entry hall, he heard the happy sound of the tap-tap-tap-tap of Sophie's nails on the hardwood floor. Stooping, he petted his dog, and his mood improved at once. "How's my girl feeling?"

His dad called out from the next room. "Wilson, is that you?"

"Yeah, Dad." He rose and turned toward the den. Sophie led him to his father's wheelchair. "How's it going?"

"Good, but you need to give Sophie her vitamin. Didn't that vet tell you to give her four a day?"

"She's not a vet." Or at least she wasn't owning up to it.

"Could've fooled me. She's a cool one under pressure, and she certainly knew what to do with Sophie. Might've saved her life."

"Might have. I'll give Sophie the capsules at the cabin. So did she seem all right today?"

"Right as rain. You sure that girl's no vet?"

"She says she used to work for one."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

That was the question, of course, and Wil answered honestly. "I'm working on it. But she's not like other women, and the old Drake charm has failed to knock her off her feet."

This brought a chuckle rumbling from his dad. "Then she must be a bright lady."

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“Does this mean you approve of her?”

His dad harrumphed. “Since when do you need my approval?”

*I’ve always needed your approval, Dad.* “Well, I’d like your opinion. She’s someone I’ve had my eye on a while.”

“I liked what I saw. The girl has some meat on her bones and some brains in her head. And she’s nice. There’s kindness in her you don’t find often in young people today.”

Wil started to tell him that she wasn’t that young, but in his dad’s mind Wil was young at forty. “Yes, she’s kind. I’ve invited her back for a movie night, so maybe you’ll have a chance to get better acquainted.”

He expected some word of protest about his wasting an evening keeping an old man company. The fact that his father didn’t object implied a lot about the man’s loneliness.

“So tell me what’s new on the case.” The light in his eyes gleamed, affirming Wil’s suspicion that his dad needed to feel a part of something.

“We found the victim’s minivan. FDLE towed it in, but it appears to have been wiped clean.”

“So we’re dealing with a killer who kept his head.”

“Yeah. The victim had an old boyfriend back in Arkansas who used to beat her up. He’s looking good as a suspect. Arkansas police are going to pick him up.”

“What did Adam Gillespie have to say about his involvement with the victim?”

“Adam’s not a suspect, Dad.” Wil didn’t elaborate. “But there’s something else that’s happened. Another woman’s gone missing.” Wil explained about the disappearance of Kris Knight.

“This the woman you said resembled your murder victim?”

“Yes, why?”

“Those two look enough alike from a distance to fool me. Sounds like you have a killer interested in women with a certain look—”

“Whoa! Kris Knight is missing, not murdered.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. You didn’t find Doc Hodges right away, did you?”

“True, but let’s not borrow trouble.”

“Hear me out. I’m just theorizing. Phyllis Gillespie’s not sitting here with a tape recorder.” His dad made a face at the mention of the editor’s name.

“Okay, just for argument’s sake, what are you ‘theorizing’?”

“Some guy’s wife divorced him, and he’s nutty. Or his girlfriend dumped him. Whatever. He hates her. She had long brown hair, was tall, slender, and pretty. So every woman who fits that description enrages him and he kills her. Or maybe his mother abused him and she fit that description—”

“Dad, you’ve been watching too much truTV.”

His dad tried to shrug, but with half his body paralyzed,



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he couldn't pull it off. "You'll admit these two women look alike."

"Yes, at least from a distance."

"Then consider that their resemblance is related to their disappearance."

"I'll keep it in mind. I'll let you know what the profiler has to say about it. She may agree with you."

"When you meeting with her?"

"I hope tomorrow."

"I just hope you can find the killer before anyone else gets hurt."

"You and me, both."



Monday morning Wil arrived at the sheriff's office earlier than usual. He wasn't sure what time to expect Special Agent Buckner, but he didn't want to keep her waiting. Preparing for his meeting with the profiler, he'd worked late yesterday putting together a folder with copies of all reports pertinent to his homicide case. Wanting to review the case one more time before her arrival, he slipped into his office via his private back door at a quarter to seven.

A woman in her forties sat in his office across from his desk, her shoulder-length hair a mass of blond curls that nearly reached the shoulder pads of her suit jacket. Clear blue eyes rimmed by lashes thickly coated with mascara

steadied their gaze on him. Lips heavy with blood-red lipstick curved into a friendly smile. The glamour treatment reminded him of Sunny Davis. Attractive, but a bit heavy handed.

Standing, she extended her hand. "Sheriff Drake, I'm Special Agent Buckner, but please call me Ronda Lou."

Good grief, a morning person. So much for giving his case folder a final read before her arrival. She must have driven from Tallahassee before daybreak. He shook hands. "Call me Wil."

As if appraising him, she held onto his hand a beat longer than he thought protocol dictated, but he could've imagined the interest in her eyes. "Very well, Wil."

He started toward the interior door. "Let me see if we have fresh coffee brewed."

"I'd rather get right to business, if you don't mind."

He did mind, but he'd manage a bit longer without his morning caffeine fix. "Sure."

She sat down again and nodded toward the reports fanned atop his desk. "I've studied the crime scene photos and the write-ups you have so far on the homicide. There's not a lot of physical evidence, but that in itself is a clue."

She must have arrived in the middle of the night to cover all the material he'd prepared. "How so?"

"From the post mortem we know the victim died from a gunshot wound to the temple, a twenty-two caliber short, solid lead bullet at close range."

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“Right.”

“There were no bruises or scratches indicating a struggle, which tells us the offender was someone the victim perceived as nonthreatening. It appears he had no trouble getting close enough to fire the shot point-blank.”

“So she knew the killer?”

“Possibly—”

“Wait a minute. It’d be easy for the killer to shoot point-blank if Cathleen was asleep or unconscious.”

“The toxicology report isn’t back yet. Of course, they’ll look for sedatives or narcotics. But there’s no head wound to indicate she was knocked unconscious. You found no evidence that her bed had been slept in, and she was still wearing her clothing. Furthermore, look at time of death. Her stomach contained undigested food from her dinner.”

“Right. Also, according to her companions, she had nothing alcoholic to drink at dinner.”

“What convinces me she knew her killer was that the offender moved the body, thus distancing himself from the scene of the crime or from where the victim was last seen.”

“What about her ex-boyfriend, Michael Moore? She would’ve recognized him.”

Ronda Lou shook her head before he’d finished his sentence. “Cathleen Hodges feared Michael Moore. I don’t see her willingly allowing him to get close enough

to fire a weapon against her head.”

Wil rubbed his chin, considering. “So you’d expect wounds indicating she’d put up a fight if Moore had approached her. But what about the fact that he ran before authorities could bring him in for questioning? The Arkansas State Police have an APB out.”

“He’s not off the suspect list, of course. I’d be interested in hearing his alibi for the time of death, too.”

“Running away is suspicious behavior if he’s innocent.”

“Moore may or may not have killed the victim, but he isn’t innocent. If he’s heard of her death, he knows he’s a suspect because he has a known history of violence against her.”

“But you don’t think it’s him?”

She tapped the case file pages with one long fingernail. “He’s not fitting the profile I see emerging from the case file. An organized killer—or an incredibly lucky first-time offender—did this crime.”

Wil shook his head in confusion. “In the little evidence we have, what makes you say that?”

“We know from the ME that the victim didn’t die in the water, but we also know nothing found on the body will lead us to the offender. Bodies submerged in water decompose at a faster rate in this climate, which tells me the offender has forensic knowledge and hopes to conceal his crime as much as possible.”

Wil nodded, remembering his father’s words: *So*

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*we're dealing with a killer who kept his head.* "And when we found the victim's minivan, it had been wiped clean of prints. Bottom line, we can dismiss the scenario of a stranger passing through."

"Absolutely. I don't think this was a random killing. This woman was targeted."

"Which brings us back to her ex. Could he have hired a hit man?"

"A hit man that the victim trusted enough to allow next to her with a twenty-two? I don't think so."

Wil nodded. No wonder truTV wanted Ronda Lou Buckner for a program. "So we need to look at someone she knew and was comfortable with—"

"Or an acquaintance she'd have no reason to fear."

"Then her murderer is still here and among us."

"Yes," she said with a single nod. "I'm afraid someone living in your community is a cold-blooded killer."

"Damn." He cringed at his response, but this was *his* county. One of *his* citizens had murdered another.

Ronda Lou flashed him a sympathetic smile. "Is this your first homicide?"

"First as sheriff. I worked many years as a detective in Jacksonville."

"Ah. So you're no stranger to violent crimes." She shifted the papers on his desk and picked up a report. "I've read your interviews. It concerns me that the victim's three best friends didn't seem to know her that well."

Her tone said she thought they knew far more than they'd said. "I think each is busy with her own career, so their dinner nights out were the extent of their friendship. All had moved here about the same time."

"And now a second of this foursome is missing?"

He'd included the missing person report on Kris Knight in case the profiler considered it connected to the homicide. "Looks that way."

"I'd be interested in speaking with the other two women."

"I can arrange that." He'd welcome any excuse to contact Elizabeth, especially since it didn't seem likely he'd get to the diner in time to see her at breakfast. "Both work at the college. Want me to drive you over to the campus?"

"That'd be great. I've already had a two-hour drive this morning."

"How long will you be staying in Drake Springs?"

"A couple days at least. I've booked a room over in Jasper, near the interstate."

"That's good. I'm afraid our only motel closed in 1981." He chuckled. "It's now a strip of businesses including a florist, barber shop, and dry cleaners."

She nodded. "It's all right. Jasper's not that far."

"We'd probably have a better shot at catching both women around lunchtime."

"In that case, could you direct me to a good place to

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eat? I skipped breakfast this morning. I'm famished."

"I'll do even better. I'll take you myself. I could use a cup of coffee, and our downtown diner serves the best."

Her smile broadened. "It's a date, Wil."



Sitting at a table in Boyd's Diner, Elizabeth dunked her teabag, watching the brew darken. The Weather Channel droned on in the background with its tropical update. Apparently the meteorologists had their eye on a hurricane, but it had to be headed elsewhere. The brilliant sunshine and azure sky looked as perfect and nonthreatening as usual in Drake Springs. Just another day in paradise.

Lorraine hovered at her elbow. "Ready to order, sugar?"

"Not yet." She had no appetite but needed to keep up her weight, now more than ever. In truth, she stalled, hoping Wilson would show. Not that they had a standing date for breakfast, but he'd yet to miss a morning meeting her. "I think I'll wait till the caffeine kicks in."

"Gotcha." Lorraine moved to one of the booths where new arrivals waited to order.

The door opened, bringing with it a gust of wind that rustled the napkin on Elizabeth's lap. Rescuing the napkin, she glanced at the door and then did a double take. Averting her gaze, she swallowed her disappointment.

No, the emotions roiling inside her went beyond mere disappointment. Hurt?

Wilson Drake, dressed in suit and tie instead of his usual uniform, escorted a knockout blonde into the diner and to the booth farthest from the door. He slid in the booth across from her, his gaze sweeping the room as it always did. One thing she'd learned about the easygoing sheriff was that he was ever alert to his surroundings. His gaze paused on hers, and he smiled. What choice did she have but acknowledge? She gave him a finger wave then looked down as if reading tea leaves instead of brewing them.

Seeing Wilson with another breakfast companion upset her far more than it should have. If Elizabeth needed a reminder of her foolishness, she had one now. Wilson was a flirt; she accepted that. Her pain rose from facing the brutal truth that she'd ignored her own warnings. She'd allowed herself to fall for a man she couldn't confide in or trust, at least as long as she was in WitSec. She hadn't so much as kissed the guy but already felt a connection. She'd thought he felt it, too.

Lorraine returned with her order pad, but Elizabeth shook her head. "I'll just have tea this morning, Lorraine." No way in hell she could swallow a bite of food now.

After cooling her tea with an ice cube from her water, she drained her mug in a few gulps. She avoided



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looking at the couple in the booth, although a surreptitious peek at the woman gave her the impression she was a law enforcement colleague. Elizabeth didn't recognize her as one of Wilson's deputies, though. If Wilson preferred breakfasting with the blonde, Elizabeth couldn't fault his taste. Still, no amount of self-talk suppressed the barbs of jealousy eating away at her gut.

Gathering her composure, she forced rubbery legs to walk to the cash register so she could settle her bill. As she waited for her change, she caught a whiff of a familiar woodsy cologne. Wilson stepped in front of her, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"Good morning, darlin'." Up close, she saw the gold star pinned to his lapel, a miniature sheriff's badge. He looked too damn good in a suit.

"Good morning." Amazed at how calm her voice sounded when her insides trembled, she forced a smile.

"Before you rush off, I'd like to introduce you to someone."

"Sure." She took her change from Lorraine, who blatantly watched the exchange between the two. Elizabeth couldn't have the world and Boyd's Diner see her acting like a woman scorned. She forced both her shoulders and her smile to relax.

Wilson cradled her elbow, leading her to the booth. "Elizabeth Stevens, this is Special Agent Ronda Lou Buckner. She's with Florida Department of Law

Enforcement.”

The glamorous blonde extended her hand to shake Elizabeth’s. She had a beautiful French manicure, and probably a pedicure to match. “Nice to meet you, Miss Stevens.”

“Likewise.” Up close, Elizabeth detected a few crow’s feet at the corners of the woman’s eyes, along with a permanent frown wrinkle between her perfectly tweezed eyebrows. Definitely older than Wilson—but what she lacked in youth, she made up for in looks. She reminded Elizabeth of Sunny, though Sunny was younger and more petite. Both women were blondes who knew how to use makeup to their advantage.

Elizabeth knew how to use makeup to her advantage, too, but didn’t own so much as a tube of mascara. Her drab, unnoticeable appearance distressed her now more than ever. She had to remind herself how her dowdy appearance kept her safe and off the radar for anyone hunting a tall, slender thirty-six-year-old woman with brown eyes and a long, brunette braid.

Like Kris? No! She pushed aside her fears about her missing friend and focused on Wilson’s words.

“Ronda Lou would like to talk with you about the case. What time works best for your class schedule today?”

*Ronda Lou* sounded far too intimate when addressing a law enforcement colleague, but Wilson was

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a friendly guy. She reined in her jealousy and directed her smile at Special Agent Buckner. She refused to think of her as *Ronda Lou*. “I can meet with you between two thirty and four. At four, I need to be at the theater with the drama students.”

“Two thirty is fine. Where’s a good place to talk privately?”

“My office.” Just to be mischievous, Elizabeth laid a possessive hand on Wilson’s bicep—his impressive bicep—and smiled. “Wilson can show you where it is.”

He looked first at her hand on his arm then directly into her eyes. And winked. “I’m sure I can.” But he didn’t add *darlin’*.

With as much dignity as she could muster, she excused herself and fled Boyd’s Diner.

## *CHAPTER EIGHT*

At lunchtime, Sunny waited for Elizabeth at the quadrangle, the park-like plaza in the center of campus that had the requisite statues and stone benches. For the first time in months, the temperature hadn't climbed to the nineties. The light breeze carried no hint of rain, but at least it stirred the muggy air.

Sunny jumped from the wall surrounding the fountain, which had been turned off to conserve water, and waved. "Hey, Liz."

Her bubbly smile temporarily chased away Elizabeth's sadness. A black cloud of gloom had positioned itself over her shoulder, where it had hovered all morning, a constant reminder of her missing friend. She gave Sunny a tight hug. "How was the trip, girl?"

"All right. Let's just say a little bit of Mother goes a

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long way.” Sunny fluttered her hand as if to brush away the subject. “Where do you want to eat lunch?”

Elizabeth didn’t want to eat anywhere but couldn’t afford to lose weight. “Dairy Queen.”

Sunny laughed. “That’s what I love about you—you don’t fuss about *diet* this and *diet* that, like Kris—”

“Kris is missing.” Elizabeth stopped suddenly, and Sunny had to backtrack.

“What?”

“Same as Cathleen. We’d made plans, I went to pick her up—she and her car both gone. No one’s seen her since Saturday afternoon. She didn’t show up for school today, either. I checked.”

Sunny, whose disposition usually matched her name, frowned. “What in the hell is going on around here?”

“Wilson said we should be careful and travel in numbers, keep our doors locked . . . that sort of thing.”

“Wilson?” A slow smile curved her lips. “Would this be the sheriff you feared I’d fixed you up with?”

They walked again, reaching Osceola Street, where they headed toward the Dairy Queen on Second. “The same sheriff you said is *so* not my type.”

Sunny laughed. “Apparently, I was wrong. So, spill. What did I miss while I was gone?”

Elizabeth told her about inviting Wilson to join her and Kris for pizza. She chose not to mention Saturday night’s date that didn’t happen or the emergency with

Wilson's dog.

"Are you two still doing the breakfast at the diner thing?" They turned on Second and reached Dairy Queen. Sunny held the door for her.

"Sometimes." She didn't want to admit her disappointment that he'd had breakfast with Ronda Lou. "This morning, he was with a state profiler—who, by the way, wants to interview us today."

"Oh, her. She's already been into the bookstore to schedule me. I'm meeting her at four." Sunny dropped the subject to order her food.

Elizabeth didn't plan to bring up the subject of Ronda Lou Buckner again. Maybe the woman was good at her job, but she seemed too interested in Wilson. Not that Elizabeth was jealous. *Yeah, right.*

After picking up her shake and fries, which was all she figured her stomach could handle, Elizabeth joined Sunny at a hard plastic table for two. In between bites, she asked about Ian.

"Ian's Ian. You know." She shrugged. What had happened to the gooey-eyed sigh that usually followed his name when Sunny spoke it?

"Uh-oh. Is the honeymoon over?" she teased.

But Sunny didn't laugh. Or smile. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Well, that's cryptic. But okay. Let me know if you ever do."

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Tears welled in Sunny's eyes. "I think it's just PMS, okay? Ignore me."

"You can't have a name like Sunny and suffer PMS. It's . . . it's not allowed."

Sunny smiled then, but it was a weak and watery smile. Sunny stuffed the rest of her chicken sandwich into her mouth, preventing her from further talking. Elizabeth couldn't suppress her curiosity, though. What was going on with the odd-couple lovebirds?

A short, stout man she'd seen before around the Osceola Street area waved at Sunny. "Hi, bicycle lady!"

Sunny cringed. "Hi."

A middle-aged, red-haired woman pulled him toward the counter. "Don't bother the ladies, Ralph."

Elizabeth smiled at the woman. "He's not bothering us."

The woman nodded her thanks but continued to pull the man away toward the counter. "Let's get you a Dilly Bar, son."

Sunny's stare followed the two until they were out of hearing range. "Eewww. That guy creeps me out."

"I think he's mentally challenged. He seems harmless enough."

Sunny shuddered. "Maybe so, but when I'm out riding my bike, he tries to ride with me. He can be very persistent."

"You shouldn't ride alone. I've told you that. Especially after Cathleen's murder and Kris's disappearance."

Sunny paled. "You think Kris is dead, too, don't you?"

"Oh, God, Sunny, don't say that." She figured if she didn't verbalize the worst-case scenario, it wouldn't come true. Superstition or denial. Or both.

"I'm as worried about her as you are." Sunny sucked the rest of her drink noisily through the straw. "I need a refill on my soda, but I'm not going up there as long as Ralph's at the counter."

"He spooks you that much?"

"I don't think you were with us the time that Cat and I stopped here for a dipped cone. Ralph was in here without his mother, pestering all the customers to buy him an ice cream. I don't know why the manager didn't toss his ass out. Anyway, Cat bought him a Dilly Bar. From then on, he seemed fixated on her. Every time he saw me, he'd ask about the pretty pet lady. I guess he called her that because she treated his dog or something. Who knows? You heard him call me 'Bicycle Lady.' I sure don't want him fixating on me."

"That is worrisome. Do you think he's dangerous?"

"After what's happening lately, why take a chance?"

"Good point." She made a mental note to ask Wilson about the mentally challenged man, Ralph.



Wil managed to review the homicide case in depth with



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Ronda Lou, squeeze in a meeting to discuss preparedness in case the newly named hurricane struck the area, and coordinate with the multi-jurisdictional fire and rescue in battling the forest fire in Sticky Swamp. As if Wil's plate wasn't full enough, he now had a possible arson on his hands. Smoke was spotted in the morning. It was thought to be from an illegal campfire. By the time Foster County Fire and Rescue dispatched, flames had spread into Columbia County to the west and threatened Lowndes County, Georgia, to the north.

At 5:15, Wil checked his cell phone before leaving his office, satisfied that his deputies or dispatch clerk could contact him. After a long, busy day he looked forward to grabbing a bite to eat with his brother. On his way to the Hurricane Lantern, he detoured past the campus auditorium to see Elizabeth. He didn't have a reason, not even an excuse. He just wanted to see her.

The placard by the door announced, "Auditions for *The Tempest*." He slipped into the back of the auditorium, dimly lit except for the stage area where students read lines to three faculty members seated on the front row. Elizabeth sat on the aisle seat. Waiting until the students finished, Wil then strolled up the aisle and tapped Elizabeth's shoulder.

She spun toward him, clutching her throat. "Oh, Sheriff Drake, you startled me."

"Could I have a word with you, Professor Stevens?"

She blanched and dropped her clip board. He realized then she must have thought he'd found Kris and thought the worst. "This isn't about Kris."

Turning to her colleague, she whispered something about Prospero, probably a role in the play. Then she rose to follow Wil toward the back. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry I upset you. I didn't think."

She pushed her glasses up and peered at him. "Why are you here? I already spoke to that—to Ronda Lou."

"I—aw, hell, darlin', I just wanted to check on you. Promise me you'll not go out alone and you'll keep your doors locked, okay?"

"Of course—"

"I'm just being cautious."

She dropped her voice. "Why? What's happened? What aren't you telling me, Wilson?"

"The profiler thinks the person who killed Cathleen Hodges is someone in the community, not some stranger passing through. That means you can't afford to let down your guard around anyone you don't know well."

She gnawed at her lower lip. "Kris, Sunny, and I talked about this already. I know Kris was careful, which is why I'm so sure something's happened to her."

"I hope you're wrong about Kris, but I won't lie to you. I'm worried about her, too."

"Wilson, what do you know about a mentally challenged man who rides a bike? I think his name is Ralph."

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“Ralph Sapp. He’s harmless as long as he gets his daily Dilly Bar. Why do you ask?”

“You’re certain he’s harmless? Sunny’s disturbed by her encounters with him while riding her bicycle, and she believes he obsessed about Cathleen after she treated him to a Dilly Bar one time.”

“He’s never seemed violent.” Wil rubbed his chin, recalling Ronda Lou’s profile of the offender. “I’d be a fool not to check it out, though. Thanks for telling me.”

“I need to get back.” She nodded toward the stage.

“I know. Would—would it be all right if I called you later? Just to put my mind at ease that you’re home safe and sound.”

She grinned at that. “You’re welcome to call and make sure I’m safe, but I’m not making any promises about being sound.”

“Cute.” He hesitated, then lowered his voice. “Look, this isn’t the time or place, but I need to tell you something. I care about you. A lot. And I meant what I said the other night about trusting me.”

“I, um—”

“We’ll talk later.” He left her to return to the auditioning students, and slipped out the back. He hoped he’d gotten his message across to her.

Heading for his Jeep, he chuckled for no apparent reason—just a general optimism that he’d missed during the day. Elizabeth had a sharp mind and a sense of humor.

He liked that. If he could just figure out what turned her frosty at times, he'd warm her up to him once and for all. Right now, he'd settle for her trust. He hoped she'd decide to confide in him, especially now that he'd laid his heart on the line.

Sam drove into the parking lot at the same time as Wil did. They parked then walked to the restaurant together. "How's Dad?" Sam asked.

"Good." Wil motioned him inside then followed. "Dad's speech improves every day. He can carry on a regular conversation now."

Joyce motioned them over to one of her tables and handed them menus. After she left to get their iced teas, Sam resumed the conversation about their dad. "I'll get by there and talk with him. Maybe I'll go tomorrow and take him dinner."

"He'd like that. Take him fried chicken. Hazel won't make it for him." Wil then brought Sam up to date about Sophie and the rat poison.

"So where'd you have to take her for treatment?"

Wil waited until Joyce delivered their drinks before answering. He leaned across the table, lowering his voice. "I'd rather it not get out, but we took her to Hodges Animal Clinic. I had the keys. Elizabeth knows a little about veterinary medicine and was able to treat Sophie."

Sam frowned. "There's no mention of that in her résumé."

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“She probably didn’t list it or any of a number of penny ante jobs she worked to get through college. Besides, how would you remember one résumé with all the people you hire?”

“I make it my job to know my faculty. Elizabeth Stevens didn’t go through the normal hiring process, anyway. She was sent to me—”

“Sent to you? I don’t understand.”

“Neither did I. Evidently, she has a lot of pull in the academic world, because her references were impeccable. I checked her out.”

“But don’t you have final say in the hiring and firing of the college personnel?”

Sam gave him a look that said, *Are you kidding?* “About as much as you do in the hiring and firing of yours. Government watchdogs make sure we observe fair hiring practices—”

“Hold on. What exactly are you saying about Elizabeth Stevens? You didn’t offer her the job?”

“She transferred from the University of Georgia in Athens. I could’ve said no, but why would I with her credentials?”

Wil narrowed his eyes. “What are you *not* telling me, Sam?”

Sam fidgeted and wouldn’t look him in the eye, a sure sign he had something to hide. Finally, he glanced in all directions then leaned forward, as if to reveal a

dark secret. “I was sort of bribed. Or not me, but the college. With a donation.”

Wil digested that revelation. Someone made a generous donation to the college contingent upon Sam’s hiring Elizabeth? That made no sense. “Who?”

“I’m not at liberty to say. That’s part of the terms of endowment.” Sam chuckled as if he’d made a clever joke. Wil failed to understand it, but that was nothing new. Sam seemed to talk and live on a higher plane.

“Does she know?” Wil asked.

Sobering, Sam shook his head. “I have no idea. We never discussed it. But why should I look the proverbial gift horse in the mouth? She’s a fantastic English lit instructor, plus she’s been instrumental in reviving the drama depart— Wait a minute. What’s this about, anyway?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.” Wil mocked him with his own words, except for the *terms of endowment* part.

Sam leaned against the back of the booth and smirked. “Well, it’s either about your case or your love life.”

Or both. But Wil said nothing more because Joyce returned to take their dinner order. The rest of the evening he made superficial chitchat with his brother while his mind replayed the circumstances of Elizabeth’s job. It unsettled him more than a little. Why would someone buy her a position? As many scenarios as his mind sorted through, not one was good.

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Sometime between the auditions for *The Tempest* and her solitary dinner of a nuked frozen entrée, Elizabeth reached a decision. Tomorrow she'd call Cory, her handler, and tell—not ask—him about confiding in the sheriff. Wilson had a right to know about the contract on her life, even if the marshals didn't think it related to Cathleen's murder. She trusted him not to say or do anything to compromise her. She'd played by the WitSec rules as long as it protected her, but she couldn't at the expense of other people's lives.

Having reached the decision to tell Wilson the truth, she relaxed for the first time since Kris's disappearance. She didn't fool herself into dreaming about romance with the sheriff, though, even if he knew her secret. As soon as she told him, the marshals would relocate her. They'd warned her that if she wanted to stay alive, she had to keep ahead of anyone who recognized her.

At eight o'clock, Elizabeth's telephone rang. She paused her DVD of *Snow Dogs* to answer. "Hello?"

"It's Wil. Everything all right there?"

"I'm all locked in and watching a comedy."

"Is it too late for me to stop by?"

"I'm not in my jammies yet, if that's what you mean, so come on."

"I'm pulling onto your street now." And he disconnected.

By the time she ejected the DVD and turned off her television, Wilson rang the doorbell. She invited him inside. "How about a Coke?"

"No, I can't stay." He stood right inside the doorway, as if afraid to step off the parquet and onto the carpet. "I wanted to ask if you'd go out with me tomorrow evening. You know, a date."

She fought a grin and lost. "A date. Hmm."

"Is that smile a yes?"

"Maybe. Is this dinner and a movie with your father?"

"Not this time. Sam's taking Dad dinner tomorrow, so I'm all yours, darlin'. We can drive into Lake City or up to Valdosta—"

"Or stay right here and have pizza. I have to get up early Wednesday, and so do you."

He shook his head. "I don't want you to think I'm a cheap date."

"You can buy the pizza. Besides, I have something I need to talk to you about, and I'd rather talk here than in a noisy restaurant."

"What's that?"

"No, it can wait. It's involved. I'll tell you after you're full of pizza and Coke." She'd postpone one more day. Because once he knew the truth, he'd be angry with her for withholding information, and she'd be miserable



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knowing she had to leave Drake Springs.

"I'll give you a call tomorrow as I'm leaving the office. I'm not sure what time that'll be."

"That's fine."

"Just one more thing." In a sudden, unexpected move, his arm snaked around her waist and pulled her close.

His gold star lapel pin glinted with reflected light into her eye. She blinked, and for one ridiculous instant, she imagined her eye sparkling stars like a love-struck cartoon character, and a burst of hearts ballooning over her head. She looked up and met his green-eyed gaze, filled with heat and something else—desire? As if she were a chocolate sundae and he wanted to devour her. Time stopped. He didn't move. He didn't speak.

She lifted her face a fraction of an inch and whispered, "What?"

He pressed his mouth against hers in a firm, possessive kiss. The touch of his lips, though brief, softened and molded against hers. She leaned into him for more, and red-hot need spiked through her. Passion dormant for too long ignited in a matter of seconds.

His breath warmed her face when he pulled back. Staring at her with eyes as smoldering as his kiss, he said, "Good night, darlin'."

Like heat lightning, he was gone, leaving her to wonder if the kiss had been only in her imagination. But her lips tingled, and his taste lingered. Her body hummed with

unfulfilled arousal, beyond anything she could fantasize.

Worse was the realization that Wilson could've taken everything from her, whatever he wanted. He'd been the one to bring their single, bone-dissolving kiss to an end. At least one of them behaved sensibly. What a pity, since one taste of Wilson had her yearning for much, much more.



Tuesday morning dawned cloudless and windless without a promise of rain, the odor of wood smoke wafting from the north. The temperature had dropped to the sixties, hardly cool enough to warrant using a fireplace. Usually a light morning fog hovered over the river by Wil's cabin when he walked Sophie, but not today.

He dropped the dog off at the big house with his dad, then walked the short distance to where he'd parked. Grabbing his garden hose, he washed the black insect remains off his windshield before leaving for work. If there was anything good to be said about the summer drought, it was the decrease in the love bug population.

Although he'd dressed in suit and tie for his meeting with the FDLE profiler yesterday, he'd reverted to his usual uniform this morning. Ronda Lou had said she wanted to visit the scene where they'd found the body, and he intended to be comfortable. He imagined she'd

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brought her uniform, too.

He hoped she'd eat in Jasper and not show up at Boyd's, because he'd prefer sitting with Elizabeth. Tonight she'd said she needed to talk to him, and he needed to discuss a few things with her, too, starting with why she left a large university to teach in a tiny liberal arts college, possibly taking a cut in pay. And why could he find no record of a tragic fire claiming her family approximately *seventeen months, three weeks, and one day* ago? Finally, why would she hide her previous training as a veterinarian?

No longer could he chalk it up to personal curiosity. One woman was dead, one was missing, and the two remaining friends could be in danger. If Elizabeth's past had followed her to Drake Springs, he needed to know.

He drove straight down County Road 471 to the diner and parked in the Women's Club parking lot across the street. Elizabeth's Chevy S-10 was parked parallel in front of Boyd's Diner. As he walked across the street, the tiny detail that had nagged at his subconscious for three nights surfaced. *Sophie*.

He'd entered the house Saturday with Elizabeth and hollered for his dog. Elizabeth's response hadn't registered with him at the time, but she'd seemed confused, as if he'd been addressing her, not the dog. *What did you call me?* No matter how he replayed the scene, it made no sense. *Sophie* sounded nothing like *Elizabeth*. Maybe it

meant nothing, but it aroused his suspicion enough that he intended to test her.

Inside the diner, he spotted her in the back corner booth talking with Lorraine, who stood by the table. Since the table was bare, he decided Elizabeth must have just arrived.

He slid into the seat across from her. "Good mornin', darlin'."

"Why, good mornin', Wil," Lorraine answered for Elizabeth, then chuckled and winked. "I'll bring your coffee along with her tea." She sashayed to the counter.

Dressed in her usual colors of tan and brown, Elizabeth gave him a cockeyed smile. "Hi."

"How did the auditions go yesterday?"

"Great. We filled the cast, although a few actors will play multiple, minor roles. We found the perfect Ariel, a freshman who hasn't even taken her first Shakespeare class. But she nailed the airy spirit." She stopped and flinched. "I'm sorry. I can be a bore."

"Hey, do I look bored?"

She peered at him for a few seconds, then nodded once. "Definitely."

"You could never bore me, not even talking Shakespeare."

Lorraine set their hot beverages on the table. "Wil, honey, the only Shakespeare you understand is the rod-and-reel variety." She cackled at her joke as she whipped

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out her order pad.

Elizabeth grinned. "She has your number, Sheriff."

"You bet I do, sugar. Why, shoot, I've known Wil since his mama carted him around on her hip."

"I'll have two eggs over medium with a biscuit and sausage patty." He didn't want to listen to stories about his mother, especially in front of Elizabeth.

"Me, too." Elizabeth lifted her cup of tea. "And I'll need a refill of tea in just a minute."

"Sure thing."

Elizabeth stared at her tea bag, giving it an occasional dunking. "So what's on tap for you today?"

"I'm still working the homicide with Ronda Lou. Unfortunately, other crimes and emergencies haven't stopped, and I have other irons in the fire. Literally. The smoke is really bad at Drake Oaks."

"Is your property threatened?"

"Not at the moment, but we're watching it. I may have to move Dad to Sam's if they don't get the fires under control. Without rain, I doubt they can extinguish the flames."

"I always thought Florida was rainy."

He snorted. "Sometimes it is. If that hurricane hits, we could have a flood."

"But it would put out the Sticky Swamp fire. I guess it's a double-edged sword."

"I watched the tropical update with Dad last night.

Even if the forecast models are correct and it hits inland at St. Mary's, it won't be here for five or six more days. I don't want to think about what six days without rain will do to that fire."

Elizabeth frowned, then took a cautious drink of her tea. "Other than stocking up on drinking water and stuff, what else should I be doing?"

"If ordered to evacuate, you leave. Do not pass go; do not collect two hundred dollars."

She took another sip of her tea. "Evacuate where?"

"There'll be public shelters, or you can stay in a hotel outside of the danger zone."

"Well, as Grandma used to say, don't borrow trouble. I'll worry about it if it happens."

Wil nodded. He wasn't one to borrow trouble, either. Except concerning Elizabeth. She'd be worth any trouble if he could get close to her. Last night she'd let him get close. Very close. He'd had to flee before he lost his head and pushed his advantage. As skittish as she'd been the past few months, he surely didn't want to spook her now, when he'd made considerable progress. But he wanted more than physical closeness. He wanted her to share her secrets with him.

"Here you go," Lorraine said, handing Elizabeth a metal teapot.

"Thanks." Elizabeth shook her head when Lorraine offered her a teabag. "This one's still good."

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“Boyd won’t charge you for an extra tea bag, darlin’.”

She looked at him with the cockeyed smile again. “I don’t believe in wastefulness.”

“Good to know, Sophie.” He slipped the name in, watching her for any reaction.

She stopped dunking her tea bag for just a second, but long enough for his trained eye to register. “Your dog is thrifty, too?” she asked.

Quick-minded, he’d hand her that. “Sorry, I meant to say Elizabeth.”

She frowned. “So you’re confusing me with your dog? Thanks a lot.”

“Hey, she’s a gorgeous blonde, too.”

“Yeah, but hers is natural—” She clamped her mouth shut. Oops. Judging from her reddening face, Elizabeth hadn’t intended to reveal that fact.

“So what color do you hide beneath that shade?”

She smiled at him, too brightly and too cheerfully. “Mostly gray. Now you know. Please don’t hold it against me.”

*Liar, liar.* Lots of women tinted their hair. But Elizabeth was hiding more than her roots, he’d bet his next election on it.

Lorraine served their breakfasts, and their eating prevented further talk. He’d rattled Elizabeth by calling her Sophie. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have slipped up about the hair. With any other woman, he’d blame pride

for the dye job. Not Elizabeth. She rarely wore makeup and dressed like a monk. She colored her hair, but not out of vanity. He'd bet his next election on that, too.

Wil finished eating and declined a coffee refill. He really needed to get to his office. "I'll see you tonight. What kind of pizza?"

"Surprise me."

The short drive past the County Courthouse to the sheriff's office building took longer than usual because of school traffic. With cooler temperatures, Wil could go back to parking behind the courthouse and walking to the diner—assuming either fire or hurricane didn't force the town to evacuate. He finally parked and entered his office, expecting to find Ronda Lou waiting at his desk. She wasn't, thankfully, so he had a bit of breathing room to attend to other departmental business.

He headed toward the dispatch room, finding Rebecca Gibbons on duty. "Good morning, Becky. Find me Fred Fischer, please."

"Will do. You want to see him?"

"Yeah, have him come in to my office."

She handed him the call log, then radioed Chief Deputy Fischer. Scanning the list, Wil found nothing that required his attention. Property crimes, drunk and disorderly, and one Peeping Tom that turned out to be a fraternity prank. Lots of calls reporting smoke. He returned the log, then went to the locker room in search



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of more coffee.

His mind on Elizabeth, he yo-yoed between day-dreaming about her kiss and worrying about her trustworthiness. His mind and his heart were convinced that she was the woman for him, everything he could ask for. But his reliable detective instincts warned him that maybe she was too good to be true.

Holding a cup of hot coffee, he rounded the corner and nearly collided with Fred, his sixty-year-old chief deputy, a guy with the most seniority in the department. "That was quick."

"I was on my way in, anyhow. So what's up?"

Wil ushered him into his office and offered him a seat. "You picked up Ralph Sapp the other night for trying to break into the Dairy Queen, right?"

Fred snorted. "That's a regular occurrence. He's not a good burglar, you know."

Wil told him about Elizabeth's concerns. "Do you think he's capable of violence?"

"I have a hard time picturing anybody being afraid of Ralph. I've known him since he was born. He wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Not intentionally, maybe, but he doesn't know his own strength."

Fred held up his hands. "Now, wait a minute. You can't be suggesting that Ralph has the cunning to put a gun to a woman's head and fire, then dump her body

and hide her minivan. Not to mention, wiping it clean of prints. Besides, Ralph can't drive. He rides his beach cruiser all over the north end of town. You know that."

"You're right. Ralph could fit the profile except for one thing—his mental disability. But keep an eye on him, will you? His single-mindedness seems to frighten some people."

"I've always kept an eye on him. His mama depends on me to keep him from getting locked up."

Fred knew most of the people in Foster County. He'd been considered heir apparent for the job of county sheriff, but he'd declined efforts to put him on the ballot. After the death of his wife, he'd seemed to lose his ambition. Or maybe he preferred to stay second-in-command. Whatever his story, Fred was the best lawman around. He was also the closest thing to a mentor Wil had.

"Didn't you go to school with his mother?"

"Libby graduated a year ahead of me. Married some loser who ran out on her as soon as he realized Ralph wasn't right. The bastard."

Wil let the subject drop. "You said you were on the way in."

"Yep. We found something dragging the Suwannee. May not be important but . . ." He shrugged.

"What, for God's sake?"

"Pieces of a twenty-two caliber pistol. And it ain't been in the water very long."

## CHAPTER NINE

Wil's pulse quickened. This could be the break in the case they needed. "Could you make out the serial number?"

Fred's smile widened. "Oh yeah, loud and clear. That woman from FDLE said we should turn it over to the FBI to trace."

"By *that woman*, you mean Special Agent Buckner? Where is she?"

"She's out at Reesor's dock. Said she wanted to look at the scene where the body was found."

Damn, did the woman ever sleep? When she'd said she wanted to look at the scene where the body was recovered, she must have intended for Wil to meet her at Reesor's dock. "I better get out there."

An hour later, Wil followed Ronda Lou's Crown

Victoria back to the station. He'd promised her lunch at Boyd's, but all he wanted was for the workday to end so he could share a pizza with Elizabeth. She had something to tell him, she'd said. Was she finally ready to confide in him?

He couldn't help feeling encouraged about his prospects with her, as if they'd moved up another step on the relationship ladder. Sure, he'd kissed her, but more was at stake than getting to first base with her. He wanted to know all about her. Elizabeth remained an enigma to him, though. His detective skills and contacts had failed him in finding any trace of her before she'd moved to Drake Springs from Athens, Georgia. Until he solved the mystery of her past, he couldn't feel close to her.

As he'd expected, Ronda Lou wore comfortable shoes and her tan uniform, so he suggested they walk to the diner. On the way, they speculated on the possibility that the pieces of the pistol found in the Suwannee belonged to Cathleen's killer. By the time they reached Boyd's, Wil had moved onto the subject of Kris Knight's disappearance.

"Sheriff, I'm afraid you aren't looking for a missing person. You and your department need to consider the possibility of a second homicide victim."

He ushered her inside Boyd's and to the only vacant table, situated in the center of the diner. He didn't think it wise to continue that line of talk in public. "Let's talk more about that after lunch."

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Ronda Lou lowered her voice. "Are you looking for a body?"

"If it's in the river, we would've seen it. We've had a team out every day, at least until they fished out the twenty-two."

She nodded. "All right. We'll talk more later."

They each ordered a sandwich, which they ate under the curious eye of Lorraine. He figured Lorraine wanted to see if theirs was a working lunch or something else. Lorraine had been playing matchmaker between him and Elizabeth for weeks. Subtlety wasn't her strong suit. But she didn't need to worry about the blonde competing for his attention. Ronda Lou wasn't his type.

They paid and walked back. Wil's eyes burned from the smoke that darkened the sky. "That fire's either getting worse or the winds have shifted."

"The wind did shift. I checked with the fire and rescue captain on my way into town. Actually, the fire is almost contained. The crews finished digging the fire trench, so it just has to burn itself out."

"I hadn't heard that update. Thanks."

"Do you have property in the evacuation zone?"

"No, but close to the eastern side of Sticky Swamp. My dad is in a wheelchair. I'll need to move him if the flames jump the fire line."

"Between the firestorm and the hurricane, I'm eager to head back to Tallahassee, out of harm's way."

"I don't blame you. But you've been a big help, and I appreciate your insights."

"Call if a second victim turns up, okay?"

"You bet. You think it's a repeat offender?"

"Honestly, I don't know. It's nothing scientific, just a gut feeling."

They'd reached the corner of Court and Main. "Here we are. Let me ask you one more question about the profile. Could the offender be mentally challenged?"

She glanced at him and frowned. "Why? Do you have a person in mind?"

"We have a man in town who seems harmless. He has the body of a forty-year-old and the mind of a six-year-old, tops. But he's very demanding at times. He makes people who don't know him uncomfortable."

"I don't think you can move him to the top of your suspect list. Remember that we're looking for an offender with forensic knowledge, someone savvy enough to submerge a body to accelerate decomposition. Mentally handicapped doesn't fit the profile."

"I didn't think so but thought I'd ask."

"You have to explore other possibilities. Remember, the profile is a tool. I'm not always right."

"You usually are. I've seen your page on the Web site."

"I'm flattered. You checked me out." Instead of heading inside the building, she walked toward her car.

"Are you leaving now?"

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"I've done all I can until we get ballistics tests and a trace from the FBI. But call me if anything new turns up." She held out her hand to shake his. Again, she held on longer than he expected, and her gaze held interest. Her smile broadened. "Or just call if you want to talk."

*Talk about what?* He wasn't mistaking her behavior as overly friendly. Charming, too, but not tempting. Nope. When he thought about temptation, he saw an image of a curvy English professor who hid behind glasses and drab clothing.

Releasing Ronda Lou's hand, he opened the car door for her. "Thanks again for your help."



Elizabeth's foolishness had hit an all time high. After calling her handler that morning and explaining about her missing friend, she'd told him she would tell the sheriff her true identity. Wilson had the right to know. Special Agent Cory admonished her for making his job more difficult and told her to be ready to relocate. He doubted that the two disappearances related to her case, but at the first indication that her location was compromised he would come get her.

She left the campus as soon as she dismissed her last class, and stopped by Fox's Apothecary on her way home. She needed to buy hair color to touch up her dark roots.

The small store offered a limited number of shades, so she had to settle for a dark ash blond instead of medium ash blond. Before checking out, she grabbed a box of condoms, the only brand Fox's carried, and added it to her purchase. Tonight she intended to bare her soul to Wilson, not her body. But still. After that one hot kiss last night, it wouldn't hurt to be prepared. Or did buying rubbers further prove her a fool?

She had time for a color job and shower before Wilson arrived with their pizza. Her severely short haircut dried in a couple minutes. She checked out the new shade in the mirror and gasped. Dark ash blond did not lighten as much as she'd hoped. She looked too much like her old self, especially with the shaped eyebrows. Quickly, she grabbed her glasses and put them on, which helped with her disguise. Thirty-plus pounds also filled out her face as well as her body, changing her appearance a lot. Enough, she hoped.

She dressed in a tan T-shirt and khaki shorts then slipped on a pair of white exercise sandals, showing off the bright red pedicure she'd forgotten. In sharp contrast with the neutral colors she wore, the crimson toes stood out like a Christmas tree at a bar mitzvah. Would Wilson notice?

As if her thoughts conjured up the man, he called on the phone. "It's going to be a tad later than I thought," he said. "Is that okay?"



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“Not a problem. I have some work I need to do on the computer, anyway.”

“I’ll call you when I leave Vinnie’s.”

She tidied up the dining room and set out plates and napkins for the pizza. Would she be leaving her furniture behind? Until that moment, she’d given little thought to what she’d abandon when she relocated. A year’s worth of shopping, painting, refinishing, and decorating would be left behind. Somewhere else she’d start again. At what point had she formed attachments and started to think of Drake Springs as her home?

No, this wouldn’t do. She needed to prioritize herself. Number one: stay safe. Furniture, clothes, and DVDs could be replaced. Friends? Well, she’d make new friends. She’d already lost Cathleen. Had she lost Kris, too? She’d really miss Sunny when she left. And Wilson. Leaving Wilson, not knowing if or when she’d see him again, left a hole in her heart as large as the one she’d suffered from leaving her family.

Damn. What did that mean? Had she begun to think of him as family? Did she love him? If so, she really was a glutton for punishment.

She booted up her computer on the desk in her spare bedroom, the one filled with books and plants but no furniture for visitors. What need did she have for a guest room? No one in her family knew where she was.

She browsed a few newspaper sites, then returned to

her hometown newspaper. The Mustang Sally's Garage ad in the sidebar proved irresistible, and she clicked on it. No updates since her last visit, but rereading the Web pages comforted her, as if she'd had a visit with Joe and Sally. The ringing of her telephone brought an abrupt end to her sentimental side trip.

"I'm turning onto your street, darlin'."

"I'll meet you at the front door." Ending the call, she hurried to the door, calling herself seven kinds of fool for her eagerness. She had to tell Wilson the truth tonight and face the consequences, but that didn't burst the bubble of excitement that buoyed her spirits.

Wilson arrived carrying an extra large pizza with a tantalizing aroma. "I got the works. Everything but anchovies."

"You don't eat anchovies?" She locked the door, then followed him to the dining table.

"Vinnie was out of anchovies." He opened the box, treating her to a view of a supreme pizza covered in extra cheese.

"That's just as well." Anchovies weren't a favorite topping. "Let me grab our drinks."

"Coke's fine with me. My mouth thinks I've swallowed a gallon of smoke from that Sticky Swamp fire out there."

"Is there any progress on it?" She grabbed two cans from the refrigerator and brought them into the dining room.

"It's finally contained, thank God. But the smoke is with us for a while."

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Her mind switched gears from the fire to her missing friend. “Before we eat, I need to ask about Kris.”

He pulled out a chair for her to sit. “I haven’t found her yet. I stopped by the high school and convinced the principal to give me her next-of-kin information. You said her parents were divorced, but she gave neither name on her application. Her next of kin was a brother, Jack Knight.”

She pulled the tab on her Coke. “She never mentioned a brother.”

“He’s on a cruise, compliments of the U.S. Navy. I doubt she’s gone to visit him. We’re trying to contact him, though, to track down her parents.” He opened his soft drink and took a sip.

“Wilson, this isn’t good. You and I both know she’s in trouble. She’s a responsible adult who wouldn’t disappear without telling someone—at least the principal or another teacher.”

“We’re doing all we can.”

She exhaled a loud breath. “I know you are. I’m just so worried.”

“By the way, didn’t you say you and your friends talked about personal safety strategies after Cathleen’s murder?”

“Yes, of course. Why?”

“Just wondering. I saw Sunny Davis bicycling north on County Road 12 past the high school.”

“By herself?” At his nod, she groaned. “I warned her about that. She’s very athletic and thinks she can

take care of herself. But she's flirting with disaster, especially now."

He shook his head. "Well, darlin', you can't worry about her. Just promise me you'll be careful."

She reached into the box for a slice of pizza and slid it onto his plate; then she took a slice for herself. "I'm as careful as I can be. But I thought Kris was, too."

He took a bite of his pizza. "Did you hear the latest tropical update? The hurricane's picked up speed and appears to be strengthening."

"I hadn't heard that. So is it headed this way?"

"I don't think they know yet."

"After we eat, we can check on the internet. I'm still logged on in my spare room."

He nodded. They finished off the pizza without further conversation. Wilson stood and crumpled the box for the trash. "I'll help you clean up."

"Why don't I do that while you check on that hurricane?"

"Deal." He left the room but returned immediately. "What's Mustang Sally's Garage?"

Oh, no. She'd forgotten to clear her browser. Maybe this was the opening she needed to tell Wilson the truth. The pizza lay heavily in her stomach, and her heart sank with dread. "Let's sit for a minute, all right? I have a lot I need to tell you, starting with Mustang Sally's."



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Wil resisted the urge to take her in his arms. Unhappiness filled her eyes, and her shoulders drooped. Instead of grabbing her in a bear hug, he followed her to the sofa, where she sat at the opposite end and turned to face him.

“What’s wrong, Elizabeth?”

She gave her head a slight shake. “I’m not who you think I am.”

“O—kay. Who are you?”

“First, I need you to promise to keep secret everything I’m about to say. Please, Wilson, it’s important.”

If it meant her confiding in him at last, he’d promise anything. “I swear, darlin’, I can keep a secret.”

She didn’t seem convinced. “I hope you can. It’s a matter of life and death.”

Whoa! Life and death? Several theories rushed through his mind, but he focused his attention on Elizabeth. “Tell me.”

“Mustang Sally’s Garage belongs to my brother’s wife in Louisville.”

“So you do have a living relative?”

“I lied about the house fire. I lost my family because I’ve been forced to go into hiding. As far as I know, everyone’s alive except my father.”

*I have nothing left of my family or childhood.*

He’d figured out the fire was a tale when he’d found no report online of a tragedy fitting her story, but

he wouldn't admit to investigating her. "So you aren't Elizabeth Stevens?"

An invisible rope of tension seemed to tighten her shoulders. "My real name is Sofia Desalvo, Fia to my friends."

"Fia." He tried out the name. It suited her, but so did Elizabeth.

"I witnessed a murder and have to testify against the ring leader of a syndicate of bookies."

"Bookies? Maybe you better start at the beginning."

She chewed at her lower lip. "After the murder of my father and the—"

"Your father was murdered?"

She nodded, her eyes filling. Bravely, she blinked away the tears. "That's an unrelated story. After his death, I broke up with my fiancé because he betrayed me in the worst way—" She raised her hand in a halting gesture. "Don't ask. I still can't talk about it. Anyway, I was at loose ends."

Saying nothing, he waited as she pulled herself together. He stifled his curiosity about her father's homicide but yearned to know if he'd died from a gunshot wound. If so, it would explain her aversion to guns.

"As you've probably guessed, I was a veterinarian. I earned my DVM at Auburn—"

"Auburn? Were you a student when Cathleen Hodges went there?"

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She shook her head. "Although she and I are about the same age, she entered veterinary school later. I told you the truth about meeting her when she treated Ian's cat."

"You were saying you were at loose ends?"

"Yes. My brother encouraged me to start my own practice. I love horses, but they're difficult for the owners to trailer in for treatment. I saw a market niche in the Lexington area I could fill and *voilà!* Horse Calls was born."

"*Horse Calls*. Like a doctor who makes house calls?"

"Exactly." For the first time since she'd begun her confession, she had enthusiasm in her voice. Her face glowed, as if she were reliving the excitement of starting her own practice. "I bought a van-type motor home, and Sally fixed it up for me. She made sure it was mechanically sound and modified it for storing my medicines and equipment. Plus, it had a bed over the cab, where I could sleep."

"You slept in it, too?"

She shrugged. "I lived in it. It kept down expenses. Plus, sometimes I needed to stay over to watch a sick horse or to deliver a foal. The owners of the horse farms gave me a place to plug in and get water. I dumped my holding tanks at a campground near Lexington where I sometimes stayed."

"Did you do well with the practice?"

She gave him a brief smile. "Better than I ever imagined. After only four months I had all the patients I could handle. I lived like a gypsy and got to be around horses. Life

was good.”

“Sounds lonely.”

She snorted. “You don’t know what lonely is until you enter the Witness Security Program.”

A lot of the pieces of the puzzle matched up. Elizabeth’s penchant for nondescript clothes, her lack of roots and attachments. Her reluctance to date. “Tell me what happened seventeen or eighteen months ago.”

She clenched her hands in her lap and stared at them. “That’s when the nightmare began. I was called to Versailles Downs after a race to treat an injured filly. She’d been the favorite, but something went wrong during the last stretch. I didn’t watch the race, so I’m not sure, but she damaged her tendons in one leg.”

“Was this at night?”

“Yes, after the last race. Anyway, I guess no one could see me in the stall where I worked with her. I overheard voices and peeked out—curiosity killed the cat, you know.” She gave a humorless laugh.

“Did you recognize the people you overheard?”

“Doctor Frank Sullivan, a well respected physician in Lexington, was with a rough-looking goon I’d never seen. They were on either side of Ollie Breckinridge—”

“The Kentucky Derby-winning jockey who was murdered.” Wil nodded, recalling the news story. “I remember.”

“I gathered from their argument that he was sup-



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posed to lose a race he'd won. Ollie claimed he couldn't hold back his horse without being obvious, probably something to do with the injury I was treating. Sullivan said he'd cost them more money than his life was worth. Then while the goon held Ollie, Sullivan injected him with something fatal."

"You were the witness? Oh, shit!"

"Yes, 'oh, shit' sums it up. I didn't realize you were familiar with the case."

"I don't remember the details, but wasn't Sullivan charged with racketeering in a huge, multi-state illegal gambling ring?"

"Yes. I'll have to testify against him in the murder trial, if I can stay alive. He's rumored to have hired a contract killer to make sure I don't. Or to make me pay later if I do."

"So why didn't you tell me this in the first place? I'm law enforcement—"

"I was instructed not to inform anyone, even you. Don't tell me you think all law enforcement is above Sullivan's reach."

"So why tell me now?"

"Because I'm afraid. Not for me, but for my friends. What if Cathleen and now Kris were mistaken for Sofia Desalvo?"

"Why would they—"

"Because." Angry red blotches mottled her face, and

tears glistened in her eyes. “Sofia Desalvo was a thin, brown-eyed brunette who usually wore her hair in a single long braid. She majored in English, then in veterinary science. First a vet, now an English teacher—”

“Jesus.” Her distress must have been contagious, because anxiety grabbed his gut. “But how did you become—”

“Fat and dowdy?”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

She plowed on as if he hadn’t spoken. “Deliberate gluttony, along with nerd glasses and clothes at odds with what I wore in my former life. I lost the long hair and lightened it. They even took away my engraved locket and anything else that might betray me. I’m afraid to do any of the things I would’ve done before entering WitSec.”

“Such as?”

“I love horseback riding and hiking. And dancing. Not only are those Sofia Desalvo’s pastimes, they’re physically active and could make me lose weight.”

She patted her abdomen, which by her standards might seem fat. All he saw was a womanly figure—an attractive, womanly figure. “How’d you land the job at the college?”

“I first relocated to Athens and studied for my masters in an accelerated program at the University of Georgia. Then my handler sent me here. He arranged the job. I didn’t ask how.”

Wil knew how—with a sizeable donation to the col-

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lege—but he kept quiet.

“As long as I keep my end of the bargain, the government provides me with an identity, a job, and a little bit of cash to start over. Nothing extravagant, and nothing I can’t leave in a moment’s notice.”

His respect for her escalated. Many witnesses under protection couldn’t live by the rules. Sooner or later, they made a phone call or revisited an old haunt—something that betrayed their identity. Yet she’d shown amazing self-discipline. “Hell of a way to live,” he said.

“Well, ‘live’ is the operative word. I don’t want to die, Wilson, but I don’t want others to die because of me.”

Wil didn’t, either, but a professional hit man didn’t fit Ronda Lou’s profile. Now Elizabeth believed she’d brought murder to her friends. “Ah, darlin’, don’t do this to yourself.”

Her shoulders relaxed a fraction, and her fisted hands opened. “I thought you’d be angry with me.”

“Angry? Why?”

“Why? I lied to you—”

“You followed instructions necessary to keep you alive.”

She gave her head a slow shake. “I withheld information that may help your investigation into Cathleen’s murder.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“You don’t know me—not the real me. Everything I’ve done since entering the program has been like play-

ing a role in one of those student theater plays. I'm acting a part but with little training."

"Lots of people play roles. The difference is you know you're pretending."

She stared at him for a moment. "Gee, that's deep."

Too philosophical for a sheriff in a small rural county?  
"I'm not a total hick, Elizabeth."

"See, that isn't my name and yet we have to use it."

"I can live with that. And you can, too."

"And I don't think you're a hick. In fact, you're probably the first man I've trusted in a very long time."

Her admission reached deep within him and squeezed his heart. How he'd hoped she would open up to him, and now she had. "That means a lot to me to have your trust. Because I intend to keep you safe."

He meant every word. He couldn't bear the thought of losing Elizabeth, not that he'd tell her. Not yet. She might be spooked into running for sure if she knew he'd fallen in love with her.

Elizabeth looked into his green eyes and shivered, although the heat from his gaze should've melted her like a Florida snow. She'd expected his wrath, not his support. No, more than support, he regarded her with affection . . . strong affection. How could he?

She broke eye contact. "I'm not asking you to keep *me* safe—just keep my secret. That's a lot to ask of a county sheriff, but I'm asking."

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"I keep my promises."

Like she hadn't heard that before. Her cynicism after Brendan's treachery had lost some of its muscle, however, and she chose to believe Wilson. "Thank you."

"Now that I know what's going on, I can help you. I know you don't like guns, but do you—"

"No! Don't ask me to keep a gun." She shivered again, this time from the image of her father slumped over his desk with a bullet in the brain. Not that she'd seen it. The police had spared her and her family that scene, thank God. But she'd pictured it over and over in her mind until it had become a memory as real as if she had witnessed it. "I can't."

"I can teach you how to use one safely—"

"No."

He recoiled at her outburst. "All right. Then let's talk about a security system for your house."

"Yes, I can do that. Whatever you think. Just . . . no guns, please."

"Someday you're gonna have to tell me what happened to make you so terrified of firearms." He stood abruptly and stalked to the front window. "We need sensors on all the windows. And doors. I know a good security guy, a former Columbia County SWAT team member."

Thankfully, he'd dropped the subject of guns. "That'd be great. I wouldn't know who to call."

He nodded. "I'll handle it. Meanwhile, there are

other self-defense measures we can discuss.”

“You mean like carrying my car keys like a weapon when I walk to my car, and staying aware of my surroundings?” Her handler had drilled her on personal safety and sensible behavior.

“For starters. There are several moves I can show you—”

“Like Sandra Bullock demonstrated on Benjamin Bratt in *Miss Congeniality*?”

Wilson shrugged. “Haven’t seen that one. Do you have it?”

“Yes, I do.” She refrained from mentioning Benjamin Bratt a second time or offering the accompanying eye-batting. “We could watch it tonight.”

She braced herself for a stern look and a rebuke. After all, they were discussing how to safeguard her life. But Wilson grinned and wiggled his eyebrows, saying, “Does the movie come with popcorn?”

She returned his smile. “Buttered.”

“Then I think in the interest of learning self-defense moves, we should pop in that DVD.” He turned toward her stack of DVDs. “May I?”

He asked permission. She liked that he didn’t take over like other men—especially Brendan, her evil ex. “Be my guest. It’s near the bottom of the stack. I haven’t watched it for a while.”

While Wilson searched for *Miss Congeniality*,

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Elizabeth headed for the kitchen. After three large pieces of a supreme pizza, she wasn't sure she had room in her stomach for anything else. But sharing a bowl of buttered popcorn with Wilson appealed far more than she expected. The closer she grew to him, the more she'd suffer when WitSec yanked her from Drake Springs to relocate, but that thought did little to deter her growing affection for him.

Although danger remained a constant in her life, the burden on her shoulders seemed lighter tonight. Unloading hadn't lifted her spirits as much as Wilson's reaction had. Instead of anger, he'd given her support. Under normal circumstances, she'd have him in her bed before the movie ended. *Normal*. Now, there was a concept.

She stopped her pity party in its tracks and focused on making popcorn. Since she owned very little cookware, she decided to use the microwave variety of popcorn. Pulling apart the plastic wrapper on the bag, she didn't hear Wilson's approach behind her. But his woodsy cologne announced his presence.

"Need help?" He crowded her without a touch. His body heat pressed into her back and enveloped her, filling her with a deep, needy longing.

She swallowed. "Not with the popcorn."

His hands settled on her shoulders, and his lips brushed her ear. "Darlin'."

The warmth of his breath heated the delicate skin

behind her ear. She leaned back, sinking into the seductive caress. He slid his hands down her arms, then drew her against him. She'd missed physical contact with a man, but more than that she'd missed having a confidant. Now that she'd crossed the line and revealed her secret to Wilson, she allowed herself to take pleasure in his embrace. Closing her eyes, she sighed.

Wilson must have sensed her acquiescence, because he nuzzled her neck. Then he kissed a trail along her throat and jaw until his lips found her mouth. Turning her body to face his, he pushed her against the counter's edge, his mouth hungrily kissing her. His tongue sought entrance and she opened to him, angling her face to allow him total access. She gave; he took. Then she assumed the role of aggressor, her hands holding either side of his face while her tongue and lips touched and tasted.

His hands massaged their way up either side of her body until they found her breasts. With his thumb, he rubbed a tantalizing circle around her nipple. Sweet, hot desire shot through her, and she moaned.

He tore his mouth free. "God, I want you."

"Yes." She opened her eyes and gazed into his, the green irises darkened with desire. "I want you, too."

He covered her face with rapid kisses. "Are you sure—"

"I'm sure." Later, she'd deal with the consequences of her weakening resolve. For now, she'd enjoy the pleasure



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of making love with Wilson and pretend there was no threat against her life. Pretend no Witness Security Program would whisk her away to a new location at the first hint of trouble. Pretend she and Wilson would have tomorrow. “But if you’re going to get me naked, cowboy, first you’ll have to lose the gun.”

A deep chuckle erupted from his throat. “Fair enough. But let’s move this to your bedroom.”

Years had elapsed since she’d been intimate with a man. Suddenly self-conscious, she hesitated. Would Wilson think her attractive? She had let her body go to hell. Darkness was at least another hour away, so he’d see every inch of flab. She trusted him with her life, but could she risk her heart?

“Second thoughts?” Wilson asked.

“Just nerves. It’s been a while—”

“Hey, it’s been a long time for me, too. We’ll take—” Whatever he’d meant to say was cut off by the ringing of his cell phone. He answered it immediately, then frowned. “Where?”

Instead of walking away for privacy, he pulled her to him and placed a light kiss on her forehead. Squeezed close to him, she could hear much of what was being said on the other end of the connection. Something about “origin of the fire,” then “cover up.” The last word chilled her: “Corpse.”

He ended the call and looked at her with regret-filled eyes. "Bad timing, but I've got to go."

"It's Kris, isn't it?"

He touched his mouth briefly to her lips—still tender from his earlier kisses—then released her. "I'm not keeping anything from you, darlin'. They found a body in the Sticky Swamp fire, but it's burned beyond recognition. It could be anybody—"

"How many missing person cases are you working?"

"Just one, but this could be some other department's missing person." Stepping back from her, he hurried to the front door. "Lock up behind me, and promise you'll stay inside."

"I promise." No way she'd open her door to anyone she didn't know, especially after dark. "Looks like our movie dates are doomed."

"Just postponed. Maybe we can watch one tomorrow night."

"I have rehearsals tomorrow."

He froze, his hand on the doorknob. "Till what time?"

"Probably seven or seven thirty."

Wilson frowned. "Can you miss it?"

"No, I can't. The Shakespeare plays are my responsibility."

"I'll be there to follow you home. No argument." He gave her one last swift but commanding kiss, then left.

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She bolted the door. “No argument at all, Sheriff,” she whispered into the darkness.

Elizabeth would take all the protection Wilson offered. She shivered, picturing a burned corpse, unable to shake the premonition that it was Kris.

## CHAPTER TEN

Morning dawned gray and overcast, probably a combination of lingering smoke and clouds. Operating on four hours' sleep, Wil hurried into the station to meet with Ronda Lou Buckner. When he'd called her with the news about the burned body, she'd insisted she return to Drake Springs immediately. He didn't argue the point, but why make the trip before he had any findings to report? He said as much when he greeted her in his office.

"You called; I came." Seated in front of his desk, she pulled a file folder from her briefcase. "I spoke briefly with the arson investigator who found the body."

"Do you think it's the same offender?"

"We'll know more after the autopsy. But the arson investigators suspect the fire was set to conceal the crime. As with the first victim, the offender has forensic knowledge."

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“He succeeded in destroying any evidence—”

“Not necessarily. We’ll know more when the victim is identified.”

“It’s probably my missing person, who bears a striking resemblance to the first homicide victim. If so, couldn’t that link the two crimes?”

She shook her head. “It’s premature to speculate. The department has put a rush on the autopsy given the urgency of the weather.”

“Urgency?” He rubbed his eyes with his thumbs and groaned. “Oh no. Don’t tell me the hurricane’s projected to hit here.”

“I guess you’ve been too busy to watch the news.” She gave him a sympathetic smile. “The good news is rain is on the way and will extinguish the fires.”

“And the bad news is it’ll hamper the crime scene technicians.”

“They’re working the scene now.”

“You’ve already been out there?” After working in a large city, Wil had yet to accustom himself to depending on FDLE. But he wasn’t fool enough to think he could work homicides in a vacuum.

“I swung by there on my way. I wanted to catch the arson folks.”

“Good God, when do you sleep?”

“Look who’s talking.” She gathered her files and stuffed them back into her briefcase. “Right now we’re

in a waiting mode. Let's grab some breakfast, Sheriff."

Wil didn't relish showing up at Boyd's with Ronda Lou, although he'd probably see Elizabeth there. He refused to think of her by her real name for fear he'd slip and use it. The last time he'd taken Ronda Lou to breakfast, he'd seen something that might have passed for hurt cross Elizabeth's face. At the time, he hadn't been sure of her feelings for him. Last night had changed everything. If not for that untimely call, they would've made love. And he probably would've blurted, *I love you*. No matter how close they'd become, she wasn't ready to hear declarations of love, given the limbo in which she found herself as long as Frank Sullivan posed a threat.

"Is Hardee's okay?"

"Hardee's is fine."

Instead of using his private entrance, Wil led Ronda Lou into the station, detouring past the dispatcher's desk. Nancy Fox looked up from the console, her index finger raised to signal him to wait. Nancy, lowest in seniority on the dispatch team, was the youngest child of Woodrow and Gilda Fox, who owned the only drug store in town, Fox's Apothecary. Of all his staff, Wil knew the least about Nancy other than her penchant for body piercings and black nail polish.

Speaking into her headset, she ended the call. "Dean Drake needs you to call him right away."

"All right." What did Sam want? Wil hadn't

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stopped by his dad's last night after his late night at the crime scene. Was something wrong with his dad? "Then we're running over to Hardee's for a quick bite. I'll have my cell."

Excusing himself from Nancy and Ronda Lou, he returned to his office to call Sam. "What's up?"

"I guess you caught the weather report about the hurricane."

"I heard. What about it?"

"Hazel Porter refuses to go out to Drake Oaks tomorrow because of the warning, but she's willing to look after Father here in town. Can you get him moved to my place today?"

"I'll handle it. It may be after dinner, though. Will you be there?"

"That works best for me, too. See you then."

Wil joined Ronda Lou and escorted her to his Jeep while he mentally added *move Dad to Sam's* on his growing to-do list. He figured he'd meet Elizabeth and enlist her help. She could take care of Sophie while he packed for his father's stay in town. He could manage by himself, but why miss an opportunity to spend more time with her?



At lunchtime, Elizabeth found Sunny locking her bicycle at the stand next to the Student Union Building. For the

first time, the sky held the threat of rain, but it hadn't deterred her from riding her bike to campus.

"Hey, girl, ready for lunch?"

Sunny nodded. "You bet. Ian fed me Chinese last night. Thirty minutes later I was hungry again."

"Ian cooked Chinese?" Elizabeth fell in step beside Sunny, and they headed toward the cafeteria.

"Sort of. You know, those frozen dinners? They're not too bad, just not filling."

"Too many vegetables." Which was why Elizabeth loved most Chinese food. Unfortunately, the closest oriental restaurant was thirty miles in any direction from Drake Springs.

"Let's just say the vegetable-to-chicken ratio was skewed. What's the special today?"

By the door, a dry marker board listed the day's entrée. "Shepherd pie. Suits me."

Sunny pushed open the door. "Anything suits me as long as we can eat here. The weather's too gloomy to wander far from campus."

After they'd gone through the line and paid for their meals, they found a vacant table near a window. They settled and started to eat, and then Elizabeth brought up the discovery of the charred corpse.

"What?" Sunny stared, her fork in midair. "What body?"

"All I know is the firefighters found a charred body



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out in the middle of Sticky Swamp. I'm worried that it's Kris."

"What makes you think that? Is it a woman's body?"

"I don't think they know. Wilson said it was badly burnt—"

"*Wilson* said?" She grinned. "You two are getting mighty chummy, Liz. So how's that going?"

Elizabeth debated kissing and telling. Sunny was her closest friend in Drake Springs, but Wilson was the county sheriff. He might not appreciate her sharing information about their budding romance.

Evidently, Sunny read between the lines. "I see. Have you slept with him yet?"

"No!"

"But you want to, right?"

A grin escaped. "I'll admit the thought crossed my lustful mind."

"All right!" Sunny high-fived her, and some of the students turned to stare.

"I do like him, Sunny. I don't know where it'll lead, but I'm willing to see."

"I can't wait to tell Ian. He'll be so happy for you." Sunny paused to sip her iced tea. "You're coming over for dinner tomorrow night, aren't you? We're grilling hamburgers."

She hesitated. "I don't want to be out by myself at night until they catch the murderer."

Sunny grinned. "Invite the sheriff."

Would Wilson agree? She wouldn't know if she didn't ask. "Maybe I will. Can I let you know for sure tomorrow?"

"Of course. Just remember if that hurricane hits, all bets are off."

"Even if it stays on its present course, it's not predicted to make landfall before Friday." After Wilson had left her last night, she'd checked the tropical update on the Weather Underground Web site.

"Have you ever been through a hurricane?"

"Not really." Hurricanes didn't threaten Kentucky, but she couldn't say so since her fictional biography put her childhood in Georgia. "Have you?"

"No, but I'm evacuating if there's a warning, with or without Ian."

Elizabeth hadn't intended to pry, but the words tumbled out before she considered them. "Are things okay with you and Ian?"

Sunny glanced up from her shepherd's pie. "Why do you ask?"

"Yesterday, you seemed upset. I'm sorry." Elizabeth waved a hand dismissively. "Forget I asked. I shouldn't pry."

"Yesterday, I was damned upset." Sunny glanced around the cafeteria. "I'm probably just paranoid, but I discovered something that . . . that has me on edge. While I was gone, Ian went on my computer, pulling up

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my browser history, that kind of thing.”

“Did he have an explanation?”

“A lame one, something about connection speed and our wireless router. He knows I didn’t buy it.” Sunny frowned. “I thought we respected each other’s privacy, you know?”

“Why do you think he wanted to look at your browser history?”

“I haven’t told Ian anything about my financial situation. He struggles to make a good living, and I have a generous trust fund. I didn’t want him to feel inferior, you know? Now he knows about it. He found my financial downloads on my spreadsheet. It . . . changes things.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The generous trust fund explained a few things, like the Lexus and the frequent trips to Boston. But surely Ian wondered, too. Elizabeth wasn’t condoning his invasion of Sunny’s privacy, but she couldn’t blame him for his curiosity. A married couple who kept secrets from one another flirted with disaster. “So what are you planning to do about it?”

Sunny shrugged. “I think I need to see a lawyer.”

“A divorce? Isn’t that a little extreme?”

Sunny shook her head. “No, not for a divorce. I need to draw up a will. Do you realize that if you die intestate in the state of Florida, the spouse gets everything?”

“Well, I saw that in *Body Heat*, but that’s an old movie—”

"I'm saying that I don't want Ian to think he'd benefit by my untimely demise."

Elizabeth wasn't used to Sunny using terms like *demise* and *intestate*. She'd obviously researched her subject. "You don't think Ian would . . ."

"Kill me? No, but lots of wives have thought their husbands wouldn't kill them. Lots of dead wives. Don't you watch truTV?"

She shook her head. Her television viewing was limited to comedies or DVDs, usually mindless fare that offered a mental escape. "I think the murders have us spooked. But if you have reason to suspect Ian of violence, you need to go to the police."

"Ian loves me. I seriously don't think he'd hurt me. But suddenly I don't trust him anymore."

"It's none of my business, but if Ian struggles to make ends meet, he might worry about your spending, that's all. You've kept your trust fund a secret but drive a Lexus. Duh."

"Dad bought me the Lexus. I told Ian that. No, no matter what spin I put on it, Ian had no right to violate my privacy."

"I agree. But in all fairness, Ian has a complaint. It's one thing to hide your net worth from everyone else, but you shouldn't keep secrets from your husband." She raised both hands and winced. "I'm sorry. That's judgmental, and I shouldn't have said that."

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Sunny's frown deepened. "But you're right. I may have overreacted."

"I'm not the best person to advise you, Sunny. I've never been married, so what do I know? Maybe you two could talk to an impartial third party before things between you get too strained."

"A marriage counselor? That's a good suggestion. Thanks." She finished off her lunch and pushed aside her tray. "I think Ian will agree to counseling."

"He seems committed to the marriage, but you'd know more about that than I."

"He's more committed to the marriage than I am, if you want to know the truth."

What an odd admission. "I thought you were nuts about Ian."

"I'm nuts about Ian, just not nuts about marriage. This thing about him snooping in my computer has creeped me out. But I'm not throwing in the towel. As my mother said, I've made my bed, etcetera."

Elizabeth wondered if her weekend trip to visit her mother had been for a heart-to-heart about her marriage. But Sunny said she didn't discover Ian's computer probing until she got home. Was there other trouble in paradise? She recalled Kris's remarks about Ian and Sunny making an odd pair—which reminded her of Sunny's bicycling.

"By the way, promise me you'll stop these long, solitary bike rides until they solve Cathleen's murder, please."

"I can't promise that. Riding keeps me strong and fit. It's important to me to stay in shape, and not just for appearance's sake."

"I'm afraid for you—"

"I'll stick to the streets here in Drake Springs then."

"And in daylight hours only."

"Yes, Mom, and I'll wear my helmet." Sunny's smile softened her sarcastic tone. "Now, what about you? Sometimes those rehearsals run late."

"I know. I'll be careful." She wasn't ready to tell her friend about Wilson's plan to meet her and follow her home. Too many unknowns lay between her and Wilson, and their relationship was new. Other than knowing he cared about her safety and wanted her in bed, she didn't know anything about his feelings for her.

She'd trusted Wilson with the truth about her identity. But she had a history of believing in the wrong people. She prayed this time her faith wasn't misplaced.



Frustration gnawed at Wil. He didn't mind working long hours to solve a crime, but long hours waiting for results from tests and investigations exhausted him. Ronda Lou managed to stay out of his way most of the day, chasing down reports and pulling whatever strings she could to expedite testing. Other criminal activity in the county

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demanding his department's attention, and complaints about the smoke from the Sticky Swamp fire clogged the incoming telephone lines. Nancy had looked as haggard as he felt when ending her shift at the dispatch desk.

At 4:30, Zelda came to his door with a stack of callbacks. "Messages." She stuck out the fistful of yellow slips. "None that are urgent, but I thought you'd like to know about the one on top. It's from a Veronica Stone."

"I don't recognize the name—"

"I know, which is why I'm telling you about her. She's the mother of the dead woman, Cathleen Hodges. She's trying to make arrangements to claim her daughter's body so she can bury her in Arkansas. But she's been delayed because of the airport closing—"

"What airport closing?" For the first time since taking office, Wil felt pulled in too many directions at one time. What now?

"Jacksonville International is closed to incoming flights. Right now it's still allowing departures because of the evacuees—"

"Nobody's been ordered to evacuate yet."

Zelda shrugged. "These are voluntary refugees. Hurricanes spook folks, especially the tourists. You know how it goes. Anyway, Mrs. Stone won't be here until after the hurricane threat is lifted."

"Okay." He rubbed his chin, considering the news. He'd hoped the mother would hold some sort of memo-

rial service in town so he could scope out the mourners. Often killers would show up at the gravesides of their victims. But funeral arrangements were up to the victim's family. "Anything else urgent?"

"Jack Knight. He's the brother of the missing—"

"Yeah, Kris Knight. I thought he was at sea."

"Well, he managed to call while you were out with demands that you find his sister. He says she'd never leave without telling someone. He left an e-mail address."

Apparently, the Navy had internet access even when out of port. "I'll handle it. Anything else?"

"Dennis at Cameron Security in Lake City wanted to let you know he'll meet you Monday for an estimate on an alarm system." She waited for him to explain.

Wil ignored her raised eyebrow. He wasn't going to divulge that the security measures were for Elizabeth's house. "Is that it?"

"One more." She read from the slip. "Special Agent Cory. He wouldn't leave a number or a message, and he refused to talk to Fred, even though I explained he was the chief deputy. Seemed anxious to speak to you but said he'd call back."

"If he does, give him my cell—"

"I tried that. He said he wouldn't talk on a wireless connection." She rolled her eyes. "The guy needs to join the twenty-first century."

Wil didn't have the patience for cloak-and-dagger



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games. "All right. If anything else comes up, I'll either be in the Jeep or I'll have my cell phone."

"What about Special Agent Buckner?"

*Who? Oh, right, Ronda Lou.* "What about her?"

"She seems to be hanging around, waiting for you." Zelda winked. "I think she's hoping you'll take her to dinner."

He probably should, but he wanted to be at the campus auditorium in time to meet Elizabeth. "Where'd she go?"

"She's in the conference room."

Wil backtracked to the hall and on to the conference room, where he found Ronda Lou with paper reports organized into neat stacks. "Anything new?" he asked.

She leaned back and sighed. "No. But Kris Knight's dental records have been located. Luckily, she'd recently seen a Doctor Jarrell in Lake City. He's working with the ME now."

"Great. Maybe we'll hear something tonight."

"I'm calling in every favor I'm owed. With a hurricane headed this way, I'm eager to get back to Tallahassee."

"I don't blame you."

"The toxicology reports take the longest. We're still waiting for the one from the first homicide."

"While we're waiting, would this be a good time to grab a bite to eat?"

She beamed and rose from her chair. "Absolutely!"

May I leave my reports here?"

He nodded. "I'll lock the door, but we'll be coming right back. I have a feeling it's going to be a hard day's night."

On their way to the Hurricane Lantern, Wil explained about moving his dad. He omitted his promise to see Elizabeth safely home. Over steaks he reviewed both homicide cases with Ronda Lou. He told her about Ralph Sapp and Sunny's concern about his obsession with Cathleen Hodges.

Ronda Lou shook her head. "This crime wasn't committed by a mentally challenged offender, or you'd know about it. He lacks the sophistication to hide his guilt. The killer has forensic knowledge, and he's clever enough to have us scrambling for evidence."

"I figured as much but wanted to run it by you."

She lowered her voice. "Cathleen Hodges was killed by a single gunshot wound to the temple, a short, solid lead twenty-two caliber bullet. I'm betting your Ralph Sapp doesn't have access to any weapon."

Probably, but he'd verify with Fred since his chief deputy seemed to know the family. "I'm anxious to see if that twenty-two we fished from the Suwannee matches the ballistics."

"I'm more anxious to find out the history of that weapon. Whoever owned it last may lead us to our killer."

Joyce appeared with a pitcher of iced tea to refill

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their drinks. Wil introduced her to Ronda Lou. "Joyce, you waited on Cathleen Hodges the night she disappeared. Would you be willing to tell Ronda what you remember?"

"Like I told both you and Devon, nothing out of the ordinary happened."

Wil turned to Ronda Lou to explain. "Deputy Devon Winston is Joyce's husband."

Ronda Lou's blank expression told him she hadn't a clue which deputy was Devon, but she nodded for the waitress to continue.

"The four ladies met here for dinner as usual, leaving around seven thirty. It was still daylight outside. Just from tidbits of their conversation, I gathered they planned to go their separate ways after dinner. They aren't bar hoppers. But it was a busy Friday night, and I didn't actually watch them drive away."

Ronda Lou nodded. "Thanks."

Joyce turned to Wil. "Anything else?"

"That's all for now." Joyce moved to the next booth to top off iced teas. "I was hoping she'd remember an unusual customer lurking about, but no such luck."

"Being married to a deputy, she'd probably notice things out of the ordinary."

"She would." Wil took a gulp of iced tea. "As far as witnesses go, I'm nowhere on this case."

"Don't be discouraged. I'm making a nuisance of

myself with the ME and FBI. We should have something to work with by morning.”

Wil dropped her off at the station, then headed for the campus. Fortunately, dinner with the profiler hadn’t taken long, and he arrived at the auditorium by seven. He watched the rehearsal from the back row until Elizabeth dismissed the cast. She gathered her briefcase and script, then headed toward him. Dressed in black, she blended into the darkness. Now he understood her bland wardrobe. The witness in hiding didn’t want to stand out.

Despite her drab clothing, she smiled and eclipsed every other woman in the building. “Hi, Sheriff Drake.”

“Hello, Professor. Could I impose on you to help me move my dad into town tonight?” He explained the situation with Hazel. “I can’t leave him out there alone.”

“Of course. Let me follow you in my truck. I can haul the wheelchair and such in the back, and I can bring the dog.”

Leave it to Elizabeth to remember Sophie. “That’d be great. Let’s go.”

She walked with him to the auditorium entrance. “Thanks for showing up. I figured you wouldn’t have time with all that’s happened. You know, the hurricane and . . . everything.”

“I’m just taking a breather, darlin’. The day is far from over for me.” He walked her to her pickup and held

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open the door. “Did you have a chance to eat dinner?”

“Yes, I grabbed a sandwich. Which reminds me, if the hurricane holds off, I’m invited to a cookout tomorrow night at Sunny and Ian’s. You’re invited, too. It’s just hamburgers—nothing fancy.”

“I’d like that.”

She cocked her head to the side. “You would? I was afraid . . . that is, I didn’t know if you wanted anyone to know—”

“I’m proud to be seen with you, if that’s what you’re getting at. It’s okay for folks to know you’re my woman.”

She smiled again, as if his answer relieved her of some burden, and she climbed into the cab of her truck. “*Am* I your woman?”

“Gee, that did sound caveman, didn’t it? ‘Me Tarzan, you Jane.’”

“Am I your woman?” This time she asked in a low, sultry voice filled with promises of tangled sheets and naked limbs.

Leaning into the pickup, he gave her a quick, open-mouthed kiss. “I hope so. Because I’m all yours.”

She seemed flustered by that and concentrated on inserting the key into the ignition. “Um, where are you parked?”

“We just passed it.” He nodded to his county Jeep parked at the entrance to the auditorium. “Lock your door, and follow me.”



*I'm all yours.* Wilson's words replayed in her mind. She shouldn't have felt giddy as a teeny bopper. She should've worried about Frank Sullivan's goons or Kris's disappearance. Or the missing murderer who probably had struck again. Instead, she fought a silly smile all evening. She tried to blame her good mood on her long, dry spell—pun intended—between men, but who was she kidding?

Wilson wasn't just a man. He tugged at her heart in ways no guy in her past could. If she allowed herself a sensible thought, she'd quash her euphoria in a heartbeat. Tomorrow she'd come back to earth, after a pleasant respite from reality.

At Drake Oaks, she collected Sophie's food, supply of vitamin K1, and dog pillow while Wilson packed for his father. She hooked up the leash to Sophie's collar and led her to the truck. The dog dug in her heels and balked.

Wilson hurried down the steps behind them. "It's okay, girl. Dad's coming, too."

But Sophie wouldn't budge. "Maybe your dad could ride with me, too. Would that work?"

"We can try." Wilson finished loading his dad's belongings—enough clothing and medication for a week—into the Jeep, then he rolled his dad to the Chevy S-10. "Can you get up into the cab?"

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“Just give me a push. I’ll make it.” When Sophie saw the older man seated in the truck, she leapt into his lap. “Ugh. You’re heavy, girl.” Fondness in his voice softened the reprimand.

Wilson reached inside the tangle of dog and man to secure his dad’s seatbelt. Then he folded the wheelchair and hoisted it into the bed of the pickup. Elizabeth followed him around the truck to the driver’s side, and he opened her door.

With one foot on the running board, she hesitated. “I don’t know where we’re going, so I’ll have to follow you.”

“Sam lives on campus, just off Osceola. Dad knows where in case we get separated.”

“Let’s not get separated.” She leaned inside the truck to turn off the passenger air bag. “Just in case. We wouldn’t want to squish Sophie.”

Holding the driver’s door, Wilson nodded. “Wise move.”

Closing the door, he waited until she’d buckled her seatbelt. A few minutes later, he led their two-vehicle caravan up County Road 471 toward Drake Springs. At the city limits sign, they approached Hodges Animal Clinic. Wilson slowed and turned right on Ortega, taking them past Cathleen’s darkened house. A wave of grief washed over Elizabeth.

Not a day passed that she didn’t wonder about Cathleen’s murderer. Her death left such a deep sense of

loss. Although she hadn't known Cathleen long, she'd gravitated toward her from the beginning of their friendship. They had much in common in their passion for caring for animals, but Cathleen's road had been much more difficult. After her mother remarried, Cathleen had been estranged from her stepfather for reasons she never divulged. She'd struggled to work her way through vet school, whereas she—Sofia Desalvo—had a supportive and financially able family to help her. A loving family.

Wilson's father broke the silence, putting an end to her sad reverie. "Sophie seems to be all right now, doesn't she?"

"Yes, sir. The vitamins are just a precaution." She turned left on Osceola, following Wilson west toward the college campus area.

"You can call me Harold. It's my name, you know."

No, she hadn't known. The chaos of Sophie consuming rat poison had precluded any formal introductions the night they'd met. "All right, Harold. Call me Elizabeth."

"Thanks for giving us a ride. It's not necessary, moving me into town. I'm all right on my own."

He needed to believe as much, and she wasn't about to contradict him. "You know that and I know that. But let's humor your sons, make them think you need them."

He chuckled at that. "I guess I can do that. Wilson's got enough on his mind as it is."



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“He certainly does. With the fire, the hurricane, and now a second murder—”

“Second murder? He didn’t tell me.”

Oops. “I doubt he’s had a chance. The firefighters found a body in Sticky Swamp late last night, burned beyond recognition.”

“Phyllis is going to have a picnic with this.”

“Who?”

“Phyllis Gillespie, editor of our local tabloid.”

So much venom filled his voice that Elizabeth refrained from asking more. Fortunately, Wilson led them into a circular driveway in front of the small brick colonial that was Dean Samuel Drake’s residence.

When Wilson started helping his dad from her truck, Harold scolded him: “Why didn’t you tell me there’s been another murder, son?”

“We found a body. It’s not been determined yet whether it’s a homicide.” He cast Elizabeth a questioning look.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed.

Wilson shrugged. “I’ll tell you everything we know, but first let’s get inside.”

Samuel stood in the doorway. Until she’d seen both brothers together, she’d not thought of them as resembling each other. The dean had reddish hair, similar to the color of Harold’s thinning strands, and a rugged complexion that reminded her of the actor David Caruso. Wilson’s features, she now recognized, were nearly identical but

with blond hair and a fairer complexion, suggesting that his hair color had come from his mother. She'd not seen any portraits of the woman in either of her brief visits to Drake Oaks.

It took nearly an hour to haul everything inside the dean's residence and get Harold settled, not that she'd been much help. Wilson insisted she stay inside and away from doors and windows. The townhouse was not wheelchair-friendly, so Wilson and Samuel turned the living room into a temporary bedroom for their dad. As soon as Harold returned to his wheelchair, Sophie turned in a circle and plopped at his feet. Before they left, Wilson sat on a wingback chair near his father.

"Dad, I have to go back to work. Hazel will be here in the morning, but if you need anything—"

"I'll manage. You and Samuel needn't worry about me." He gave each son a pointed stare. "Half of me still functions."

At that moment, Harold looked almost as young as either son. He straightened his posture and ordered them to stop fussing over him. Then he thanked Elizabeth for her help and invited her to drop by to visit him.

"Only a hurricane could keep me away." Well, a hurricane, a contract killer, or the feds, but she didn't say that.

Wilson escorted her to her truck. "I'm following you home and checking out the house."

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“Yes, sir.” Though tempted to salute him, she smiled. He grimaced. “Sorry. I don’t mean to order people around.”

“Don’t apologize.” She cupped his jaw in her hand. “I’m touched that you worry about my safety.”

He covered her hand with his and held her gaze. “Darlin’.”

A rush of pure lust heated her body. Seconds passed in silence, the passion in his eyes matching the fire inside her. If he’d wanted to kiss her, he must have reconsidered. After all, they were parked under a streetlight in full view of the dean’s living room window. Not cool to put on a display in front of his family.

Pulling her hand free, she buckled her seatbelt. “You said you need to get back.”

“Yeah.” Regret tinged his voice. “But I’ll do my best to finish up in time to eat dinner at your friends’ place tomorrow.”

She took that to mean he’d be getting little sleep tonight. “I have a suggestion. Rather than drive all the way back to Drake Oaks tonight—or whenever you finally get to break for a few hours—you can sack out at my house. I’ll give you a key.”

## *CHAPTER ELEVEN*

Wilson's neutral expression morphed into one of surprise. Oh, dear, she'd just offered her key. Did he think she wanted him to move in with her? He probably wanted to run for his life from her offer. Heat suffused her body, this time from embarrassment.

When he didn't say anything, she panicked. "That didn't come out right. I meant I'd loan you a key for tonight—"

He silenced her with a long kiss, in front of his family, God, and the world. The touch of his lips and the gentle caress of his tongue blocked out everything else. She focused only on his talented mouth, fueling fantasies of having him kiss every inch of her body. Her nipples tightened against the inside of her bra, the whisk against soft cotton further arousing her.

When he finally paused to take a breath, he touched

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his forehead to hers. “I accept your offer, darlin’, but don’t think you’re going to stick me in the guest room.”



It was almost midnight when Wil and Ronda Lou called a halt. Jamie Peterson met Wil at the dispatch desk with news that the Magnolia PD in Arkansas had picked up Michael Moore, the former abusive boyfriend of Cathleen Hodges. Unfortunately, he had an iron-clad alibi. He’d been working on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. News of Hodges’s death appeared to hit him hard, so Wil moved him to the bottom of the short list of suspects.

Preliminary reports placed the time of death of the second victim between Saturday and Monday, the same time period of the Sticky Swamp fire. Using Dr. Jarrell’s dental X-rays, FDLE confirmed the identity of the corpse as Kris Knight. Wil notified next of kin, which was no easy task. Now he had to face Elizabeth with the terrible news.

His earlier thrill at her invitation to stay the night vanished. She’d hardly be in the mood for making love when he told her. Guiding his Jeep down the now-deserted Main Street, he turned onto Fifth and drove to her house, parking in her driveway behind her Chevy S-10.

Using the key she’d given him, he unlocked the front

door and then closed and bolted it. A single night-light burned in the dining room, casting the living room in a dim light. Elizabeth appeared in the shadowed archway that led from the hall. Her short hair tousled and her eyelids at half-mast, she padded into the living room.

“What’s happened?”

He hadn’t wanted to disturb her—not this way. He couldn’t let the scent from her shower gel or shampoo or whatever the hell smelled so nice distract him. Now wasn’t the time to notice how her University of Georgia sleep shirt barely covered her long legs. He shouldn’t be staring at her nipples poking the gray knit fabric. Did she have on panties? His own underwear grew tight at the thought of her naked. *Get a grip, idiot!*

“I have bad news, honey.”

She drew her quivering lower lip between her teeth and stared. Her eyes, moist with unshed tears, seemed to speak to him. She knew. He didn’t have to say the words.

He barely heard her softly spoken question. “The burned body is Kris, isn’t it?”

“The dental records match, so we believe so. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, God.” Tears spilled onto her cheeks. “Cathleen, and now Kris.”

He held out his arms, and she moved into them. Patting her back, he said nothing. If only he could take away her pain. He offered what comfort he could, holding

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her and letting her sob. His body refused to ignore the warmth of her or how perfectly she fit against him, but he did his best to position himself to avoid inappropriate contact. Now wasn't the time for her to feel his erection.

She composed herself and pulled back, staring at the wet circle she'd left on his shirt. "Oh, dear. I messed up your uniform."

He shrugged. "I'll have to run home before morning and change anyway."

"No." The volume and tone of her voice did not cover the tremor. "Take off your clothes, and I'll run them through the wash."

He grinned, hoping to coax a smile from her. "Darlin', I've dreamed of you asking me to get naked, but—"

"Then get naked." When he didn't move, she heaved a weary sigh. "Look, we're adults. I invited you to spend the night."

"You're upset right now. Two of your friends have been murdered—"

"So Kris *was* murdered. What happened?"

"We don't know yet, but—" He didn't want to give her graphic details about a bullet hole found in the skull. "She was shot."

Elizabeth nodded. "Just like Cathleen—"

"We don't know that yet, either." He reached for her, pulling her back into his arms. "Didn't you say Kris had an ex-husband?"

She hiccupped and blinked rapidly, fighting more tears. "Yes, but she said he was a nice guy, just that they grew apart."

"Did she mention where he is now?"

She shook her head. "But he's remarried and has a daughter. He and Kris broke up a long time ago."

"He's an unlikely suspect then. Still, I'll need to check him out." He smoothed her hair and hugged her against his shoulder, loving the scent of baby powder and fresh spring flowers from whatever she'd used in her shower.

"I know Kris used her maiden name. I haven't a clue what his name is. She just referred to him as her ex."

"You smell nice." He gripped her by the shoulders and pushed her away. "I'd like a rain check on that invitation to stay the night."

"You're right about my emotional state, but you aren't taking unfair advantage if you sleep with me, Wilson. If anything, it's what I need. You're the only true friend I have, the only person who knows who I am. I need to be me, Fia, just for tonight."

Damn. He wanted to take her to bed, no doubt about it. Her candor and directness made her difficult to resist. "When we make love, I don't want you to regret it."

"I don't want *you* to regret it, either." She closed the distance between them and reached for the buttons on his shirt. "Let's get your clothes in the washer."

"If you help me undress, the clothes won't make it to



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the washer.” Removing her hand, he lifted it to his lips and kissed her palm.

She closed her eyes and swallowed. “They will . . . eventually.”

He moved his lips to her wrist and kissed the spot where her pulse raced. Her moan was all the encouragement he needed. Tugging her against him, he covered her mouth in a kiss filled with need and yearning. She returned his kiss with equal fervor, and he lost himself in the sweetness of her taste.

No woman he’d held before her came close to the rightness of Elizabeth in his arms. He’d known for months they’d be good together. Did she feel it, too? Had that been the reason for her keeping him at a distance for so long?

He thanked God she’d relented at last, whatever her reasons. Caught up in the thrill of touching her, he’d lost track of everything else until the chill against his skin roused him. How had she unbuttoned his shirt without his awareness? She reached for his holster and froze.

Covering both her hands, he ended the kiss and stepped back. “I’ll remove the holster, darlin’.”

Lots of people feared firearms, but he wanted Elizabeth to overcome hers. She’d have to get used to the presence of guns, living with a cop.

*Living with a cop?*

Holy hell, he needed to back up, take things a step

at a time. Just because he envisioned a happily ever after with her didn't mean she shared that dream. He'd do his best to make the night unforgettable. He wanted to force from her mind the memory of whatever her fiancé had done to betray her. Even more, Wil wanted his own face to be the one she dreamed of when she closed her eyes, his name to be the one she attached to thoughts of love.

At the moment, only one worry nagged him. When he cried out in the heat of passion, what name should be on his lips—Elizabeth . . . or *Fia*?



Once Wilson removed the dreadful gun and holster, she resumed undressing him. Eager to jump his bones, she nonetheless wanted to linger over every inch of his body, memorizing details and savoring her exploration. She pulled his shirt from his arms, then tugged his undershirt over his head. Wiry blond hair covered his chest—his impressive pectorals that spoke of regular workouts—and arrowed south, disappearing into his slacks. Oh, my! She needed to see all of him.

When she reached for his belt buckle, he grabbed both her hands. “You’re trembling.”

A strong shiver seized her body. “Nerves.”

He held her hands captive and stared into her eyes. “Are you all right?”

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He seemed worried about her mental state, but why shouldn't he? She'd proven to him she could pretend to be a completely different person. Would he think she was pretending now? He must wonder if she was using sex to take her mind off Kris's murder.

Was she?

No matter what, she couldn't stop shaking. "I'm not all right. Two friends have been murdered, and it could be because of me. I can't deny that I want you, Wilson, but I also want to forget. Just for a few hours. And that makes me sound—"

"—normal."

"—selfish."

"Darlin'." He tugged her toward him and wrapped his arms around her. God help her, she wanted his embrace. "Feeling guilty won't bring them back. Believe it or not, I know what you're feeling."

"Do you?"

"Come on." He led her to the sofa, where he sat then pulled her onto his lap. "My mom was killed in a car accident when I was still a kid. It wasn't until much later I found out she was drunk."

She resisted interrupting him. Had his mother's drunk driving accident been behind his attitude toward alcohol? Elizabeth had never seen Wilson drink, and he'd seemed super vigilant about Kris driving after too much beer.

He exhaled a deep breath. "The accident wasn't my fault. Hell, I didn't have anything to do with it. But for months I'd lapse into a moment of fun and immediately berate myself. I felt guilty for enjoying anything when my mother was dead. It's irrational, but it's normal."

"How sad to lose your mom. At least I had both of my parents well into my thirties." Until some sociopath murdered her father. She pushed that particular memory to the back of her mind. "I took my happy life for granted."

"You're close to your mom?"

"I'm close to all of my family. That's why I'm such a whiner about being unable to contact them."

"You're no whiner." He kissed her forehead, nudging her head to rest on his shoulder. His bare shoulder. "If anything, I'm amazed at your discipline. It must be hard to isolate yourself from them. Most folks in the program can't hack it."

"The ones who can't, die. That's what Cory said."

"Who's Cory?"

"Cory's his last name, but that's what he told me to call him. He's Special Agent Cory, my handler in the program."

Wilson's body tensed. She sat up and turned to look at him. He seemed distressed, but at her questioning gaze, he smiled. Barely. "You do what Special Agent Cory tells you, then, because I want you to stay alive for a long, long time."

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Even if Cory told her to move again? The unspoken question hovered between them, unanswered. She didn't want to think about relocating. Not tonight. "Do you remember your mother?"

"I remember." His mouth tightened into a thin line.

"Still hurts too much to talk about it, right?" She couldn't talk about her father without a sob in her throat, and he'd died more than two years ago.

"I . . . just never talked about her. Not to Sam, not to Taylor. Certainly not to Dad."

"Too much shared grief?" Although sharing their grief got her own family through her father's funeral, not all families were that close.

He snorted. "I've never talked about this to anyone, never felt the need."

"That's all right. I didn't mean to pry—"

He silenced her with a gentle touch of his lips to her mouth. "I want to talk about it with you."

The magnitude of his admission wasn't lost on her. He wanted intimacy, and not just the physical variety. "I'd be honored to listen."

"First, I'm going to have to move you off my lap, or I won't make it another sentence."

She crawled off his lap to sit beside him. "I didn't realize I was that much of a distraction."

"How could you not?" He nodded toward the erection straining the seams of his trousers.

She smiled but said nothing. After all, she wasn't going to apologize for arousing him. On the contrary, it buoyed her confidence. Even though she was overweight and dowdy, this hunk found her sexy! She drew up her legs and tucked her feet beneath her, snuggling against him on the sofa. She'd envisioned such a scene for one of their movie nights that had yet to materialize. But the quiet darkness provided a cozier setting.

"Mom wasn't living with us when she died. Dad had kicked her out months earlier."

"Oh, my God."

"Yeah. Mom was . . . weak. Emotionally dependent. And Dad either didn't realize or underestimated her neediness. He was a county commissioner in addition to running a business, which kept him away from home a lot of evenings. He and Mom had their problems, I guess, but kids don't understand. They think in terms of *how does this affect me?*"

She nodded, not wanting to interrupt him, her heart aching for the children who lost their mother and had so little time with their father.

"Dad's an environmentalist, and he ran for commissioner on the platform of controlling the growth of Foster County. Jed Gillespie owned a lot of land on the river and planned to open a hotel and water park. He applied for the necessary permits, but the council turned him down. Dad said the septic system in Jed's plans

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wouldn't handle the demand and would threaten the Suwannee River ecosystem."

"It would."

"Furthermore, Dad believed the extra traffic would cost the county in road repairs. The two-lane county blacktops weren't designed for big rigs or heavy use. The bridge across the Suwannee that leads to the Gillespie spread is barely adequate for local traffic. Jed argued that in the interest of growth and progress, Foster County should build a sewage treatment plant for his development, handle any road repairs, and replace the bridge. Dad led the opposition, contending that the county shouldn't foot the bill for Jed's business."

"That's a universal battle, I'm afraid. Progress versus the environment."

"Unfortunately, Jed had sunk every penny he had into the property. When his plans had collapsed, he had to move his family out of Drake Springs and into a mobile home on the riverfront property."

"Is this Jed Gillespie related to Adam Gillespie, the police chief?"

He nodded. "His father. Anyway, Jed blamed Dad. Hated Dad. And found an easy avenue for revenge with Mom."

"Oh, no. He caused the accident?"

"No, at least not directly. Mom was vulnerable, and Jed could be charming from what I heard. They had an

affair. Jed made sure Dad found out. Unfortunately, Mom thought Jed cared about her. She believed he intended to leave Phyllis—”

“The newspaper editor, right?” What had Harold said earlier? *Phyllis is going to have a picnic with this. Phyllis Gillespie, editor of our local tabloid.* His hostility now made sense.

“Yes. Phyllis and Jed had three kids, also: Adam, Amy, and Megan. Adam you’ve met. Amy is his twin sister who now lives out on the property with her own family.”

“And Megan?”

Wilson’s muscles in his neck tensed. If she hadn’t been snuggled right next to him, she might not have noticed the tightening of his jaw. “Megan is dead. But that’s another story.”

Since she’d said almost the same to him about her father’s murder, she let it pass. “So what happened to Jed? Did Phyllis kick him out, too?”

“No. She blamed Dad for the affair, Jed’s drinking, and all of Jed’s self-destructive behavior. Jed eventually drank himself to death. She still blames Dad for her troubles.”

“After all these years. Grandma says holding a grudge hurts the container the most.” Elizabeth sensed the topic of Megan was off-limits but asked anyway. “Did she blame your Dad for Megan’s death, too?”

Again, his body stiffened with tension. “No. I got



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the blame for that one, even though I wasn't within a hundred miles of her when she died. But that happened much later."

She dropped the subject of Megan for now. "So your dad couldn't forgive your mother for the affair and—"

"He would've if she'd asked. But Mom was in love with Jed. He'd given her the attention she craved. Dad wasn't willing to stay married to a woman who openly loved another man."

"Marriage is hard enough between two people who love each other, so I see his point."

"Yeah, but I didn't see it that way at the time. Dad made mistakes, but he really loved my mother. I thought he should've gone after her. I blamed him for years, thinking he could've saved their marriage and her life if he'd put aside his stubborn pride."

"Pride works both ways. Maybe she was too proud to admit she made a mistake."

"You're right. Mom didn't fight for custody of us or try to return." Wilson's voice was flat, but bitterness bled through his too-casual tone. "She moved out and waited for Jed to join her. Of course, that was never his plan. He used Mom to hurt Dad, and it broke her. She died in a single car accident out on County Road 12. But I guess I always felt it was suicide."

"Oh, Wilson. How sad for all of you."

"It was a long time ago." His offhandedness didn't

hide the regret in his voice. "My grandmother raised us, so I can't complain of a neglected childhood."

"I'm glad you told me."

"I don't know why I needed to, especially when you were ready to tear off my clothes and drag me to bed. Sorry I spoiled the mood." He draped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

"You haven't." Another time she might have protested his version of her intentions, but he seemed too thoughtful. Too lost in the past. He'd exposed a part of himself she'd never seen—his serious side. He'd given her a closeness that she'd missed. She couldn't blame the Witness Security Program, either. Since breaking up with Brendan, she hadn't had the heart to trust another man. "There's more to intimacy than sex. Thank you for sharing something of yourself with me."

He gave her a gentle hug, his thumb drawing lazy circles against the bare skin on her arm. "Deep down I think I've blamed myself, even though that's the immature reasoning of a kid. Guilt is a waste of energy. I don't want you feeling anything but normal grief for your friends."

"I've had a dose of irrational guilt, so I know what you mean," Elizabeth said. "My sister Nina and I were riding horses together when she had an accident that left her in a wheelchair."

"What kind of an accident?"

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“Etta, the horse she was riding, stepped into a hole and went down, taking Nina with her. Part of Nina’s spine was crushed, and she’ll never walk again. I still feel responsible, although logically, there was nothing I could’ve done. It was a freak accident.” She shook her head at the memory. She’d thought at first the fall had killed Nina because she’d lost consciousness. “We had to put Etta down.”

“How was the horse destroyed?” He seemed to tense as if knowing the answer.

“Dad shot her in the head with his pistol.” She shivered at the memory. “I think he worried that I’d try to save her. But I was a trained vet and knew nothing could be done, at least nothing humane.”

“But he didn’t give you the chance.”

“No. I would’ve put her down, but not that way. I would’ve given her an injection.” Like the one she’d seen Frank Sullivan give jockey Ollie Breckinridge? With that memory, her full-body trembling returned with a vengeance.

Wilson must have assumed her shaking resulted from talk of Etta’s shooting. “Is your dad’s pistol part of your aversion to firearms?”

She nodded. “More guilt. Almost losing my sister left me emotionally raw, and I lashed out at Dad. I told him I never wanted to see that gun again. He promised me he’d keep it locked in his desk at work.”

“Why would he need a weapon at his office?”

“He didn’t. Oh, maybe he thought he’d be robbed, but the car dealership he co-owned wasn’t in a high crime area.” She snorted. “Or so we thought. He wound up dying from his own gun, a staged suicide, right there at his desk.”

“And you think he’d be alive if he hadn’t taken the gun to work?”

She nodded. “Not logically, of course. His murder prevented him from going to the police about a crime he’d uncovered. The killer would’ve found another way. The gun just made it convenient.”

“Did they catch the offender?”

“Yeah.” She squeezed her eyes shut, as if that were enough to block the grief of losing her father. That pain would be with her for a long time. “I really don’t want to talk anymore about it.”

“I understand. It explains an odd remark you made, though, when I came to question you about Cathleen’s murder. You asked if the gunshot wound was self-inflicted. Were you thinking about a staged suicide?”

He certainly had the memory for police work. “It crossed my mind. The police were too quick in ruling Dad’s death a suicide. My mother protested, and my brother investigated on his own—well, with Sally’s help. Finally, the police reopened the case and ruled it a homicide. I didn’t mean that as a slur against your department.”

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"I know, honey, and I'm sorry about your dad." He touched foreheads with her. "So tell me how your sister is getting along after her riding accident."

"Nina's an award-winning wheelchair athlete. She always could take lemons and make lemonade. She's happily married and has a little girl, Samantha, Mom's only grandchild—unless Joe and Sally have started a family since I left."

"Joe, your brother, and Sally of Mustang Sally's Garage?"

"Right. I'll bet you were a good detective. You listen and remember."

"I *am* a good detective."

She chuckled. "And modest, too."

He touched her chin with his finger and thumb, holding her mouth inches from his. "I want to know everything about you."

She swallowed. Heat flooded her face. "You, um, already know pretty much everything."

"Not nearly enough, sweetheart." His lips hovered over her mouth. She waited, poised for their touch, but only his warm breath kissed her.

Her mouth suddenly dry, she tried to swallow again and couldn't. "What else do you want to know?"

"For starters, I want to know what your naked body feels like next to mine. I want to know if you lose yourself and make noises when you—"

"I do not make noises!" She closed her eyes to avoid his heated gaze. It had been so long since she'd made love with her fiancé, and he'd been too intense to relax and savor sex. After Brendan, she'd sworn off men . . . until Wilson. Now he'd succeeded in breaking through her protective barriers.

"If you don't make some noise, darlin', you've been in bed with the wrong guys."

"Guy." The admission slipped out without forethought. She opened her eyes and met his quizzical gaze. "That's right. Just my fiancé. I'm not much for browsing."

He chuckled, fanning her face with his breath. "Definitely an inadequate sample for study."

"You're suggesting I test a number of guys until I find one who—"

"I'm just arrogant enough to think I'm up for the job." He took one of her hands and placed it at his crotch.

She stroked his hardness through the khaki fabric, and he groaned. "Yes, definitely up for the job."

He lowered his head until their lips touched. She closed her eyes and sank into his embrace. His soft, leisurely kiss heated her blood until she simmered with need. How had she resisted his touch for so long? She moaned when his tongue teased the seam of her lips and slipped inside to tantalize her mouth.

What had sizzled beneath the surface between them exploded. Suddenly she couldn't get enough of the feel

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of him. Unbuckling his belt, she eased her hand inside his trousers until she zeroed in on his flesh. He seemed just as eager to touch her bare skin. Breaking their kiss, he yanked at the hem of her nightshirt and drew it over her head, tossing it somewhere on the living room floor.

They never made it to the bedroom. Tension building for months proved too much for her patience. She helped him shed his clothes and pulled him to her before he had a chance to remove his socks. His body covered hers, naked flesh searing naked flesh. Their hands raced over each other's skin, touching and fondling until she couldn't separate her appreciative moans from his.

When she opened for him, he froze, suspended over her. Her body tingled and throbbed, needing him to bring her to completion. She nearly screamed in frustration. "What?"

"Honey, we need protection—"

Thank God one of them had the sense to think of a condom. "Where?"

He winced. "I think the glove compartment."

When he started to get up, she wiggled from beneath him. "Don't you dare move. I'll be right back."

No way she'd let him dress and go out to his Jeep. Through her fog of arousal she made it to the bedroom, where she'd stashed the condoms she'd bought at Fox's Apothecary. She tore open the box and grabbed two foil packets. One wouldn't be enough for the night she had

in mind. Maybe they'd make it to bed for round two, maybe not. She wasn't taking chances.

Wil sat up on the sofa and waited, calling himself seven kinds of fool. Had he been celibate so long he'd forgotten how to make love to a woman? He'd hurried like a rutting animal instead of creating special memories for Elizabeth. Inhaling a deep, calming breath, he reined in his lust. For all of twenty seconds.

She returned to the sofa, all creamy skin and curves, waving a couple of foil packets in her hand. She climbed on top of him, pushing him down. She reached beyond him to lay one of the condoms on the end table, and her breasts brushed his face. He couldn't resist a taste. His tongue grazed one of her nipples on the return trip, earning him one of her breathy moans.

"I'm not going to last long at this rate, darlin'." And he wanted to last. How could he face her in the morning if he took her like an inexperienced teenager would?

Straddling him, she tore open a foil packet. "That's fine. We'll do slow next time."

"Talk about pressure. Two condoms and talk of an encore."

"Well . . . only if you're up for it."

Excitement jolted him at her assertiveness. How could he not want this sexy woman again and again? Taking the condom from her fingers, he rolled it on. If he let her sheathe him, it'd all be over but the shouting.



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She smiled. “Impressive weapon you got there, Sheriff.”

Before he could respond, she lowered herself onto him in one swift move, plunging him into her sweet heat. She stilled, allowing him to savor the feel of her. Ah, such pleasure. He’d fantasized sex with her many times, but nothing compared to the real deal. He caressed her hips and moved with her into a slow rhythm that quickly accelerated.

She matched him stroke for stroke, building a frenzy of sensation that carried him closer and closer to the edge. He moved his hands to fondle her breasts, his thumb abrading both tender tips, and mewling sounds erupted from her throat. Then she stiffened and cried out, her body shuddering and convulsing around him. The last shred of control gone, he followed her in climax.

After her breathing slowed to a more normal rate, she raised up and peered at him. “You were right. I do make a lot of noise.”

He chuckled. “I think we both did, darlin’.”

She moved to get up, and he wrapped his arms around her to hold her in place. “Wilson, I’m too heavy—”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He nudged her head against his chest. The fragrance of baby powder mixed with her musky feminine scent intoxicated him. He may have lain with her like that till morning, but the air

conditioning blew icy air from an overhead vent. “We need a blanket.”

She kissed his throat, then raised up with a grin. “There’s one on the bed.”

Ignoring his body’s protests, he got up and followed her toward her bedroom. With a detour by the bathroom to dispose of the condom, he searched the darkness for her. The light from the nightlight in the dining room didn’t reach to the back of her house. She held out her hand for his and then led him to the bed, where they both climbed in beneath the sheet and cottony blanket. Content to snuggle against her, he thought they’d fall asleep.

“I forgot to put your uniform in the wash.” She scooted from the bed, leaving him chilled again, this time from her absence. “I’ll be right back.”

Then another chill possessed him, a nagging thought from the recesses of his mind. One of Zelda’s phone messages. *A guy calling himself Special Agent Cory. He wouldn’t leave a number or a message, and he refused to talk to Fred, even though I explained he was the chief deputy. Seemed anxious to speak to you but said he’d call back.*

The name had meant nothing to him at the time. When Elizabeth mentioned her handler in the Witness Security Program, *Special Agent Cory*, a vague sense of dread filled him. Now the foreboding engulfed him. If Special Agent Cory wanted to speak with Wil—and only Wil—it couldn’t mean anything good.

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Elizabeth had been compromised. He'd bet his modest-but-growing 401(k). Cory planned to pull her from Drake Springs and relocate her with a new identity. Then Wil may never see her again. Even if Dr. Sullivan no longer posed a threat to her, wouldn't she return to Kentucky to reclaim her life with family and friends?

Jumping to conclusions led nowhere. If tonight was his only night to spend with the woman he loved—yes, *loved*—he'd make the best of it. Then when she left, he'd have a lasting memory to comfort him in the dark days to follow. He had no choice but to let her go. Her life depended on it. Even if it killed *him*.

## *CHAPTER TWELVE*

By the time Elizabeth returned to bed, Wil had calmed himself. Or so he thought. He gathered her chilled body against his to warm her, but the heat quickly spread through his own body. Heat of a different kind. In an instant he hardened again, astounded by the depth of his hunger for her.

She responded with an eagerness that both pleased and electrified him. This time he concentrated on taking a slow, leisurely path to ecstasy. He caressed every inch of her flesh until she begged him to take her, then retraced his path with his mouth. He tasted and licked, and she writhed beneath him, arching toward his fingers and lips. Taking his time, he pleased her again and again until she pushed him to his back and demanded equal opportunity.

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Her mouth and hands stroked him as no others ever had, driving him insane with wanting. He begged to be inside her. Only she could end his aching need. Their lengthy foreplay, so at odds with their earlier frenzied coupling, finally culminated in their bodies' joining and rocking together to an explosive finale.

The best sex of his life claimed him like a sedative. He wanted to tease her for the noises she made in the heat of passion. He yearned to tell her about the strength of his love for her. But exhaustion claimed him. He had no energy left to speak.



Thursday morning, Elizabeth awoke with a start. Someone was in her house! Then the musky odor of sex wafted from the twisted sheets, and she remembered. Wilson. He must be in the laundry room trying to iron his uniform. She'd intended to take his clothes from the dryer before wrinkling set in. After putting the wet clothes in the dryer, she'd returned to bed only to find Wilson awake and ready for round three.

Now stretching her deliciously sore muscles, she allowed a smile of satisfaction at the memory. It was as if they both knew they'd have only a short time together and needed to cram in as much sex as possible. She'd expected him to wake her this morning for round four,

although her body needed the rest. Her smile widened. She could rest later.

He slipped inside the bedroom carrying two mugs of coffee, and wearing only his briefs and a smile of his own. "Is that smile for me, darlin'?"

She stretched her arms over her head, the sheet dropping to expose her breasts. Not that it mattered. He'd seen all of her, up close and most personal. "It's a smile of contentment. I had to dig through a lot of stuff to find where I'd packed it away."

He grinned, handing her one of the mugs. "Glad you did. It becomes you."

"Thank you for helping me find it." She sipped her coffee, suddenly shy. Grabbing for the sheet with her free hand, she tucked it under her arms.

"Don't hide your beautiful body."

"You really think it's beautiful?" How could he? She was so out of shape and overweight. "I've really let myself go."

"I think everything about you is beautiful. And I'm talking more than looks."

She hid behind the coffee mug. "Thanks."

"Aw, hell, I've embarrassed you." He sat on the edge of the mattress. "I don't want any of that morning-after awkwardness, you hear me? What we had last night was nothing short of amazing. I have no regrets. Do you?"

"None." She meant it, too. Wilson had given her

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back her feminine power, her confidence. And he'd given her intimacy. "I'd do it all again."

"Me, too, if we had time." He winked. "But I need to get to the station, and you have classes."

"What about breakfast at the diner?" She took another drink of coffee and then set the mug on her nightstand.

He nodded toward her clock radio beside her coffee. "We overslept. I turned off the alarm when I got up. You were sleeping so soundly I hated to disturb you."

"Gosh, that isn't like me. Thank you."

"For letting you oversleep?"

"For making me feel safe and cherished. It's been too long since I've felt either." Her voice caught. Traitorous tears filled her eyes. What was wrong with her? She'd gone from a wide grin of satisfaction to tears in seconds.

He set his mug on the nightstand beside hers and reached for her, gathering her in his arms. "Ah, darlin'."

"Pathetic, aren't I?" She let him hold her, nonetheless. "It also sounds as if I used you . . . what we did—"

"Hush, now." He kissed her forehead. "I don't think that. I know you love me."

"I—" What had he said?

"That's all right. Maybe you don't know it yet, or maybe I'm a cocky, overconfident son of a gun, but you are in love with me."

"Why, of all the arrogant, presumptive . . ." She ran

out of steam. He had her. “Yes, dammit, I love you.”

He cocked one eyebrow and grinned. “You’re a professor of Shakespeare and can’t come up with anything more romantic than ‘yes, dammit, I love you’?”

Her tears gone now, she fought another smile. “How would *you* say it, *Wordsworth*?”

“I don’t know anything about Wordsworth.” He covered both her hands and tugged them against his bare chest. “But I’ve known for a long time that I love you, whether you are Elizabeth or Fia. I knew we’d be good together, but we’re more than good. We’re out-of-this-world fantastic.”

“You’re the first and only woman who has me thinking about sharing a home, having a family, taking vacations. I know with this witness protection thing hanging over our heads we can’t make plans for the future, so I have little to offer you.” He moved their clasped hands to his left breast. “Except my heart.”

A more beautiful declaration of love she couldn’t imagine. She blinked back more tears—damn her emotions!—and smiled. “Wordsworth doesn’t have a thing on you.”

He kissed her then, a tender touch of his lips that tasted faintly of coffee. Her arms wrapped around his neck, holding him in place while she deepened the kiss. The touch of the bare skin of his chest against her breasts reignited her body. Her pulse pounded in her head, and



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her skin flushed with heat.

“I’d love to follow through on this, darlin’, but as it is we won’t have time to take our showers—”

“We will if we take one together.”

She knew then she’d be late for her first class.



Wil’s uniform being freshly washed and ironed enabled him to go straight to the office without heading home first. Slipping in the private door, he planned to emerge from his office as if he’d been at his desk for hours. Not that anyone tracked his time. He just didn’t want to invite gossip or speculation about where he’d spent the night.

First he called Sam’s to check on his dad. “Samuel’s already at work. He called the cabin but got no answer. Where are you?”

“Dad, I had to work half the night.” And he’d spent the other half in bed with Elizabeth, not that he’d admit *that*. “Did you need something? I can stop by—”

“Blazes, no. Hazel’s here to cook for me and walk Sophie. No need to worry about me.”

“That’s good to hear.” Wil ended the call, rubbing at the stubble on his chin. Two-day beards may have been the fashion with celebrities, but not the county sheriff. He had an electric razor in his desk drawer for emergencies like these.

Zelda caught him in mid-shave. "There you are. Special Agent Buckner's looking for you. She seemed agog about something, so you better call her."

"All right. What's the latest weather report?"

Zelda shook her head. "Could be a category four by the time it hits Fernandina Beach. Schools have been canceled for tomorrow and probably Friday. I imagine your brother will shut down the college, too."

"Don't you have any good news?"

"Sure. If the storm hits tonight, it won't be as strong. They're saying that's a possibility."

Wil dismissed Zelda, who left and closed his office door. He called Ronda Lou's cell number, and she answered on the first ring. "What's up?" he asked.

"FBI has a history on your twenty-two pistol."

"Great news." This could be the break they needed in the Cathleen Hodges homicide. "Where are you now?" he asked.

"Boyd's Diner, where I thought you'd be. Hurry, and I'll have you a coffee waiting."

"Be right over." He stuck his head out the door long enough to tell Zelda where he'd be and then headed out his private entrance.

Ronda Lou and half the county probably wondered why neither he nor Elizabeth had showed for breakfast this morning. They could keep wondering. Sheriff or not, his personal life was nobody's business. He checked

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the ugly gray sky and doubled back to his Jeep. Today was no day for walking.

As it turned out, he'd have been better off to walk, because he had to park two blocks from Boyd's. Ronda Lou waited for him in a front table just inside the diner. As promised, a mug of coffee awaited him. He'd already had a cup from the pot he'd brewed at Elizabeth's house. He'd shunned the second cup in favor of lovemaking in the shower. He couldn't keep from smiling at that particular memory.

"Why the goofy grin, Wil?" Lorraine asked. She switched his cooling mug for a fresh, steaming one as he took his seat.

"I'm just happy to see you, darlin'," he drawled, earning him one of Lorraine's *yeah, right* eye-rolls. She walked away, and he lowered his voice to Ronda Lou. "So tell me about the firearm."

She smirked over her coffee cup. "Good morning to you, too, Sheriff Drake."

"Sorry. I'm wound up about this investigation." And Elizabeth Stevens—or Fia Desalvo. He'd be struggling all day to concentrate on anything but their wild night of sex, but he must. Two homicides had to be solved as soon as possible. "So, good morning, Ronda Lou."

"All right, I'll skip the small talk. Ballistics matches the bullet that killed the first victim. The twenty-two was purchased two years ago by someone in Texas, a

Morgan O'Hare."

He frowned at the news. "In Texas?"

"It gets better." Ronda Lou frowned. "Or worse, depending on your perspective. Morgan O'Hare checks out at first. But further investigation reveals Morgan O'Hare died at the age of six, about twenty years ago, and is buried in Idaho."

Wil bit back an expletive. "So we're nowhere."

"Not quite. Morgan O'Hare—or whoever he is—purchased a number of weapons, both handguns and rifles, in about eight different states. The FBI has a file on him. When we get back to your office, I'll tell you the rest. First, I'm having some French toast. It's really good here."

Boyd's French toast had impressed Elizabeth, too. Everything reminded Wil of Elizabeth and their night together. He had to get a grip. When Lorraine returned, he said, "I think I'll order eggs and toast."



Back in his office an hour later, he studied the reports Ronda Lou handed him about Morgan O'Hare. "How'd you get this stuff so fast?"

"I'd like to tell you I have a lot of clout. The truth is the FBI has been trying to nail this Morgan O'Hare imposter for some time. They're pretty excited about your finding

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the weapon.”

“It’s not like it has fingerprints.”

“In a way, it does with its serial number. Remember a few years back when thousands of guns used in crimes where traced back to a single gun shop in California?”

“Sure I do. They seldom did background checks, and they sold to gun traders. I also remember it took the FBI more than a decade to shut them down. But—”

“This Morgan O’Hare bought guns from them about five years ago. A lot of guns.”

“Could Morgan O’Hare be our suspect?”

“Our offender probably bought his weapon or weapons from this arms dealer.”

He glanced at the reports, planning to read them later in more detail. Thoughts of arms dealers brought up a different image to Wil, of international smuggling of UZIs and bombs, a common misconception. Ordinary guns got into the hands of criminals or minors on too regular a basis, thanks to people like Morgan O’Hare. He’d read recently that 57 percent of crime guns were sold by a mere 1 percent of the gun dealers.

He held up the manila folder. “If the guy isn’t our killer, why are we excited about this?”

“The FBI is tracking all weapons connected to him. They could find the person he sold this particular weapon to.”

“That would be good.” Wil needed more sleep and more coffee. As if reading his mind, Zelda appeared at

his door with two Styrofoam cups of fresh brew. As for sleep, he'd willingly give it up again for another night with Elizabeth.



Sunny stood in the doorway to Elizabeth's office at lunchtime. "Where shall we eat? Please don't say the cafeteria again."

"We don't have a lot of choice." Elizabeth slid her lesson plans into her middle drawer, then changed into her athletic shoes. "There's Hardee's, Dairy Queen, Boyd's, or we could drive over to Miller's IGA and grab a salad."

"Miller's. Can you drive? I rode my bike."

"In this weather?" Elizabeth grabbed her purse and then stood.

Sunny shrugged. "I live close, and the rain hasn't started. If that storm hits, I may not get to ride for days. I need to keep in shape."

Together they descended the stairs and headed for the main door. When Sunny pushed open one of the doors, the wind gushed inside, whipping their clothing and hair askew.

"Good grief! That's a stiff wind."

"Welcome to hurricane country, Liz. This is mild. Just wait."

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So much had preoccupied her that she'd given little thought to the hurricane warning. Now a shiver of fear seized her. She'd seen the destruction of Katrina and Wilma, and the news reports of countless other hurricanes. Just how prepared was she for the impending storm?

"The hurricane must be close. Dean Drake has closed the school for the rest of the week and canceled our drama rehearsals." Elizabeth raised her voice to be heard above the wind.

"So what about tonight?" Sunny asked. "Ian says he can broil the burgers in the oven, so don't let the weather keep you away."

They reached her pickup. She beeped it unlocked and waited until they were inside with the doors closed before answering Sunny. "Wilson says he'll come with me."

Sunny gave her a wide grin. "Oh, Liz, I'm happy for you. You two make a really nice couple."

"I thought you said he was *so* not my type." She couldn't resist teasing Sunny, even though the remark had originally peeved her.

"I was wrong." Sunny waited for her to start the engine before asking, "So have you slept with him?"

"A lady doesn't kiss and tell." But heat crawled up her neck and reddened her face. Good thing she never tried her hand at poker.

Sunny took it in stride and fastened her seatbelt. "That's a 'yes.'"

She couldn't deny it, not with her flaming skin, but she wouldn't confirm it, either. Shifting gears, she traversed the backstreets to avoid the traffic on Main and First Streets. Within minutes they arrived at Miller's IGA on Desoto. Parking took more time, as cars and SUVs filled every parking spot in front of the grocery.

Finally inside, they squeezed past the shoppers crowding the aisles until they reached the deli counter. She glanced around at the half-empty shelves. "Is there a sale we don't know about?"

Sunny laughed. "Like I said, welcome to hurricane country, Liz. People are stocking up and getting ready to dig in."

"How do you know so much about it? You're from Boston."

Sunny shrugged. "We do the same for blizzards. You never know when you'll lose power."

"I'm glad I already stocked up on drinking water and canned goods. I'd hate to fight this mob."

Fortunately, the customers weren't there for lunch, so the deli line was blessedly short. Sunny picked out an Asian salad and ordered a fountain Diet Pepsi, while Elizabeth grabbed the seafood salad and crackers, along with a can of Dr. Pepper. The checkout lines backed halfway up two aisles. Both cashiers rang up items and bagged them at a frantic pace. Finally, Elizabeth and Sunny paid and escaped the madhouse grocery.



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Returning to the cab of the truck, which Elizabeth had parallel parked a block down Desoto, they ate their lunch and sipped their sodas in peace and quiet. Through the windshield, they had a view of Miller's IGA. At regular intervals, the shoppers exited hauling armloads of plastic bags and jugs of water.

Sunny broke the silence. "I made an appointment for next week with an attorney in Jacksonville." When Elizabeth gave her a puzzled look, Sunny added, "You know. The estate lawyer. I want to protect my trust fund . . . in case."

"In case." In case she divorced Ian? In case she died? "I thought you and Ian were okay now."

The wind rocked the cab of the truck, and Sunny rescued her drink from the dashboard. "I don't think everything's okay. Let's just say if anything happens to me, tell that sheriff friend of yours to check out Ian."

"Why don't you tell him now yourself? If you're afraid—"

"Look, I'm not. Not really. I wouldn't stay with a guy I feared. I'm just saying in the unlikely event, you know?"

"You must have a reason for this change of heart, but it's not my business—"

"I told you, he's spying on me. That's creeping me out."

"So did you mention marriage counseling?"

Sunny took a long time to answer. "Not yet. I probably overreacted. But just in case, I needed to say something to somebody. You're the best friend I have in

this town.”

Elizabeth squeezed her hand. “You’re the best friend I have in this town, too.” Well, except for Wilson, who knew her secret. There were some things she couldn’t tell even Sunny.

They returned to campus. After she’d parked her truck and gathered her trash, she turned to study her friend. Normally vivacious, Sunny frowned and seemed more pensive than usual. Were her concerns about her husband unfounded, or could Ian be a Jekyll and Hyde?



Ronda Lou left for Tallahassee at lunchtime, escaping both the approaching hurricane and the smoke. After breakfast, winds had kicked up, fanning the embers in the Sticky Swamp. No longer contained, the fire spread at numerous patches throughout the national forest. The firefighters regrouped, trying to protect property as much as they could until the hurricane brought in drenching rains. Unfortunately, the approaching storm also brought the fierce winds.

Foster County couldn’t seem to catch a break. After checking on his officers and dispatch, Wil retreated to his office. He opted for a vending machine lunch of peanuts and a root beer at his desk. He had a stack of phone calls to return, although returning calls during the lunch

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hour often consisted of leaving messages and playing telephone tag.

One message was from his brother, probably to talk about hurricane preparations. The phone rang just as he hung up from leaving a voice mail. “Sheriff Drake.”

“Sheriff Wilson Drake?”

“That’s right. How may I help you?”

“This is Special Agent Cory with the U.S. Marshals. I understand you spoke with Elizabeth Stevens about her situation.”

He’d been dreading this call since the moment he’d matched the name of yesterday’s caller with Elizabeth’s handler. “Yes, she brought me up to speed, but I’ve kept it confidential—”

“I need a favor.”

Wil assumed the WitSec guy had checked him out by now and decided to trust him. “Whatever I can do to help.”

“Unfortunately, she’s been compromised.”

Wil’s body tensed, and his heart hammered against his chest. The words he’d dreaded, yet expected, clenched his gut. “She’s in danger?”

“Yes. I need to get down there ASAP, but the Jacksonville Airport is closed because of that hurricane. I’ll probably drive, or fly partway. But the interstates will be clogged with evacuees from the coast. I won’t be in Drake Springs for at least two days.”

"I'll do whatever it takes to protect her—"

"Can you keep her in protective custody until I arrive?"

"I can't put her in jail—"

"Protective custody. Stash her in a safe house or something. But you need to stick with her. Don't tell anyone where she is. Don't trust anyone else with her safety."

"Sure thing." The safest house that came to mind was his own. "But can you give me some idea about the people after her, so I'll know what to expect?"

"I wish I could. That's the problem. We learned the identity of Sullivan's contract killer, an assassin who calls himself Conger. He's a cagey character. We've yet to learn his real identity or find a description of him. We just learned he's been working out of your area for some time and may be one of your citizens. He's good at blending. I know that isn't much help."

"We fished a twenty-two caliber pistol from the Suwannee River that was used here in a homicide. The FBI traced ownership back to a Morgan O'Hare. That's a fictitious identity, and may not mean anything to your case. On the other hand, I have two homicide victims who closely resemble your witness."

"I'll check out Morgan O'Hare with the FBI. Do your best to keep our witness safe until I can get her relocated."

. . . *until I can get her relocated.* A fisted punch in the gut would've hurt less than Cory's words. Wil

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cleared the painful lump in his throat. “You can count on me.”

Special Agent Cory thanked him and ended the call, but Wil barely heard anything above the buzzing in his head. A clammy sweat dampened his skin. His breathing quickened. He had to get to Elizabeth without delay.

He couldn’t dwell on the fact that she’d be disappearing from his life. His number one priority was keeping her safe at all costs. If he failed, she’d die. If he succeeded, she’d be moved to another location, lost to him in a different way. Either way, the price would be enormous.

## *CHAPTER THIRTEEN*

After their picnic lunch in the pickup, Elizabeth returned to campus and parked. The wind whipped litter across the asphalt parking lot. Although the sky was charcoal gray, not one drop of rain fell.

“Woo-hoo! Look who’s waiting for you, Liz.” Sunny elbowed her none too subtly.

Walking toward the classroom building, Elizabeth followed Sunny’s gaze. Wilson Drake stood straight and tall, like a sentinel guarding the building’s door, his feet apart and his arms folded across his chest. He wasn’t smiling.

“Hello, Sheriff Drake.” Elizabeth studied his face for a clue to his mood. He’d certainly been smiling when he left her house that morning.

“Professor Stevens.” He nodded. “I need a word in private.”

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"This is where I leave. See you at six." Sunny gave a little finger wave and walked away.

"Your afternoon class is canceled. You need to come with me." The grim set of his jaw warned her not to contradict him.

"What's the matter?"

He took her by the elbow and turned her toward the parking lot. "I got a call from Cory. You've been made."

She gasped. "Who did you tell? Was it that profiler—"

He recoiled as if she'd slapped him, and dropped his hand from her arm. "Didn't I promise not to tell a soul? I probably compromised the homicide investigations by keeping your secret."

"I'm sorry, Wilson. I'm just upset."

"I know you are." He tugged at her elbow again to pick up the pace. "Let's get out of here."

"Did Cory say how—"

"He doesn't know. I'll tell you all about it at your place. You need to pack a few clothes and toiletries—"

"I know the drill." She blinked back tears that threatened to spill. Now wasn't the time for weakness. "He's relocating me again."

They'd reached her truck. He placed his hands on her upper arms, forcing her to look into his eyes. "Not yet. As of now, you're in protective custody. My protective custody."

He followed her to her house and parked behind her in the driveway. He went inside ahead of her, his gun

drawn. Her insides quaked. The seafood salad she'd had for lunch formed a hard ball in her stomach. She forced her rubbery legs to walk. She'd tried to prepare herself for this eventuality a thousand times. But nothing could have readied her for the onslaught of emotions that now besieged her.

How could she have allowed herself to fall in love? She snorted at the thought. *Allowed* herself? That was a joke. No matter how she'd resisted, she'd never stood a chance of escaping with her heart. Sometimes love happened no matter what life threw in the way.

"All clear." He holstered his gun and drew her into the house.

"I guess I won't be having that alarm system installed after all." She stepped inside, scanning for any signs of an intruder. Everything looked the same as she'd left it that morning. "I'll pack my things, but let me check my voice mail first."

"Avoid the windows." With that, Wilson went from room to room closing blinds and pulling drapes.

As expected, she had a call from Cory. He'd left a vague message saying that he'd talked with Sheriff Drake. "Don't call me from your house." That ominous message sent a frisson of fear through her body. Her line might be tapped or her house bugged. If so, how long had someone been listening in on her? Would last night's lovemaking be on someone's digital recorder?



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Had they heard all that she'd told Wilson about WitSec?

She'd lost her home, her haven. Her privacy. She nearly screamed in frustration. "Ugh! I want my friggin' life back!"

Wilson gave her a sympathetic nod. "While you pack, I'm going outside to close your hurricane shutters."

"Please hurry. I don't want to stay here any longer than necessary."

"I'm in as much of a rush as you are, sweetheart." He disappeared, leaving her to pack.

Now wasn't the time to lose focus. She steeled herself for what had to be done. Moving like an automaton into her bedroom, she pulled out a nylon duffel bag. Except for a few T-shirts and jeans, she stuffed it mostly with underwear and socks. Her monochrome wardrobe, which had kept her nondescript for a year, no longer served her. She left her pants suits hanging in the closet. Now she'd have to reinvent her appearance. Maybe she'd dye her hair auburn. Or white.

She bit back a sob. *Be strong, Elizabeth.* Or what name would she be given in her next life? *Judith? Deborah?* She'd know soon enough when she talked to Cory. Changing out of her beige slacks and shirt, she tossed them into the clothes hamper for someone else to wash. Someone else would be living in her house. WitSec would do whatever they did best to arrange the sale of the property and help her find another place to

live. Next time she wouldn't bother with a house. Just a studio apartment.

With each shutter Wilson closed, darkness closed in on her, forcing her to turn on a lamp. The shutters offered protection from hurricane winds, but they also shut out any peeping hit man. She dressed in khaki shorts and a dull plaid camp shirt, then laced her athletic shoes. Ready to leave, she stood and surveyed the room one last time.

Wilson came to the bedroom door. "Anything I can help you pack?"

She grabbed her duffel. "Everything I can take is in here. I can't even take my movie collection."

"I could hang onto it for you."

"Wilson." She shook her head. "Take my DVD collection. It's yours. We both know I can't come back."

His face twisted into an anguished frown. "Don't say that—"

"You can't live in limbo, waiting for something that may not happen." She loved him too much for him to put his life on hold.

"I will wait for you. Don't doubt it."

What if Sullivan succeeded? What if she didn't survive his contract killer? "But—"

"Let's get out of here. We can discuss this later."

"Where are we going? And what about dinner at Sunny's?"

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"We're going to park your truck behind the station out of sight. Then I'm keeping you with me wherever I go. Understand?"

"Are you kidding?" She laughed, but it sounded forced even to her own ears. "I'm scared spitless. I'm sticking so close to you you'd better not make any sudden stops or I'll run smack into your back."

"I don't want anyone to know where you're staying, not even Sunny. Got it?"

"Got it." She'd stayed alive so far by trusting no one—except Wilson. She wasn't going to take chances now. "Where *are* we staying?"

"A safe house." He opened the door to the carport.

"Wait. If you're saying we're riding out this hurricane together in a secret location, let's take all the canned goods and jugs of water I stocked in my pantry."

"Okay. We'll load everything into the Jeep, but we need to hurry."



Wil had Elizabeth drive ahead of him. He didn't want her out of his sight. He'd told her to drive straight up Park Street to Coronado then pull into the sheriff's office parking lot behind the building. Even though it was early afternoon, they both drove with headlights because of the growing darkness. She parked and waited for Wil

before exiting her vehicle. Smart lady.

He showed her into his office via the private entrance. "Sit here. I'll be right back."

She nodded. Her drooping posture and sad eyes said more than words to describe her state of mind. He headed for Zelda's desk, where she stood with a steaming Styrofoam cup. "Is that coffee fresh?"

"Just finished brewing."

"Find Fred for me while I grab a cup." He went into the break room and filled two cups with coffee. He stuffed Mini Moo's and sugar packets into his shirt pocket, then headed toward his office.

Fred met him at the door. "You looking for me?"

"Yes. Grab a cup, and step inside my office."

But Fred shook his head. "I've had enough coffee today. Between the caffeine and the smoke, I'm flirting with a headache."

"I couldn't tell if the darkness was from the clouds or the smoke."

"Probably both."

Entering his office, Wil handed Elizabeth one of the coffees and then scooted behind his desk to sit. He didn't have another chair to offer Fred, but what he had to say wouldn't take long. "Elizabeth Stevens, this is Chief Deputy Fischer. Professor Stevens teaches English at the college, Fred."

Fred shook hands with her, then turned to Wil.

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“What’s up?”

He fished the creamers and sugar packets from his pocket, then tossed them onto the desk within Elizabeth’s reach. “I’m taking some personal time away from the office. It has to do with Dad and the hurricane—”

“No need to explain, Wil. You haven’t taken so much as an hour off since you took office. If you need to leave, I’ll see to things here.”

“I appreciate that. You’re in charge. I’ll have my cell phone. When the hurricane hits, we’ll probably lose the towers, though.”

“More ’n likely. Don’t worry. We’ve been over this disaster plan. Each of us knows what to do.” Fred didn’t ask him to explain Elizabeth’s presence, and Wil didn’t offer. “Do you need me to work with FDLE on the homicide investigations?”

Elizabeth peeled open a Mini Moo to pour into her coffee. She didn’t look up, but Wil caught the tension in her shoulders at the mention of the homicides.

“Everything’s on hold until the storm passes. Special Agent Buckner’s gone back to Tallahassee.”

“I hope she made it to the interstate before the traffic jam. Amelia Island and up the coast to Tybee Island are being evacuated.”

“Tybee Island? Then it sounds as if they expect the eye to go north of us.”

“That’s the projected path. As you know, we’ve received

no evacuation order.” Fred shrugged. “Stay tuned to The Weather Channel.”

“Me and everyone else. If the phone service is out, check with Sam. I may be at his place.” Not likely, but he couldn’t trust anyone with the truth.

Fred’s cell phone rang. He pulled it from the clip and frowned. “I need to get this.”

“We’re through.” Wil waved him away, and Fred stepped into the hall, closing the door behind him.

Elizabeth took a drink of her coffee. “So you’re using your vacation time to hide me?”

“Officially. Cory says not to involve anyone else. He doesn’t know where there’s a leak.”

She gave him a grim nod. “Sullivan is part of what they call a good-old-boy mafia. He seems to have a lot of reach.”

“Maybe. But sometimes those crime syndicates collapse like stacked dominoes when one of them is taken out. Don’t lose hope.”

She gave him a look that seemed anything but hopeful, and stood. “Where’s the women’s restroom?”

“I’ll show you.” He opened the door and almost collided with Fred. After he’d pointed Elizabeth toward the restrooms, he asked, “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah, but I’m on it. Ralph Sapp is being taken by ambulance to Gainesville. They can’t risk a helicopter in this wind.”

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“What’s wrong with him?”

Fred clenched his hands at his side. “Victim of an apparent hit and run. Bastard didn’t even slow down.”

“Was Ralph on his bicycle?”

“Yeah. That was Libby calling from the ambulance. She tried asking him who hit him, but he lost consciousness, poor guy. And Libby’s holding on by a thread.”

Wil saw more than normal concern in the older man’s eyes. Fred had a soft spot for the mentally challenged man. He seemed to feel even more for the man’s mother. Fred had carried his share of loneliness since losing his wife to cancer four years earlier. If he’d taken an interest in Libby Sapp, good for him.

“Put out the word to watch for vehicle damage. If it’s a local, the driver will struggle to hide the evidence.”

“Chief Gillespie called it in to FHP—”

“So Ralph was struck within city limits?”

“Right. We’ll all be on the lookout, though. The highway patrol have their hands full with evacuee traffic.”

“Yeah, but that could work in our favor. It’s hard to hide a damaged vehicle in slow-moving traffic, especially with the highway patrol out in full force.” Wil squeezed the older man’s shoulder. “Let me know Ralph’s condition as soon as you hear from his mama.”

“If I can get through. But you tend to your personal business. We’ll be all right here.”

Wil debated telling his friend and mentor the truth,

but couldn't. Cory's warning echoed in his head. It wasn't a matter of not trusting Fred. But he had to keep his word, both to Cory and to Elizabeth. He'd do nothing to jeopardize her safety. "Fred, I feel like I'm running out on everyone when they need me most. We have a forest fire, a hurricane, two homicides, a—"

"I trust you, Wil. I know you aren't goofing off. Now trust me to do the job till you get back."

"I know you will. Thanks."

Fred nodded, his gaze darting past Wil's. "Get out of here, and stop worrying."

Fred pivoted toward his own office, which was adjacent to the dispatch room, and Elizabeth returned to Wil's side. "What now?"

"Wait for me inside my office. I need to find Zelda."

"Here I am." Zelda rushed in from the reception area. "Phyllis Gillespie's here and wants to interview you about the two homicide investigations."

"I'm not available. In fact, I'm going to be out of the office for a couple days, and Fred's in charge. Tell her she can make an appointment with Chief Deputy Fischer, or she can wait until next week. I'm out of here."

Zelda grinned. "I'll give you a two-minute head start, and then I'll tell her."

"Thanks." He stepped into his office and closed the door. "Let's go. I need to see about Dad before we go underground."



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She stood. "What about dinner at Sunny's?"

He ushered her out the private door and nudged her toward the Jeep before answering. "I think you can cancel without arousing suspicion, considering the smoke and the weather."

"Good. I'm too nervous to be good company tonight."

He paused beside the Jeep. "Darlin', you're always good company."



Elizabeth stepped out of the Jeep at Dean Drake's residence and peered at the sky. "This is eerie. Did you ever see the movie *Dante's Peak*?"

"I don't remember. Tell me about it." Wilson took her elbow and walked her to the front door.

"*Dante's Peak* is a town built near a dormant volcano. Pierce Brosnan tries to warn the town that it's about to erupt. No one believes him until it's too late."

"Yeah, I think Dad and I watched that one night. What about it?"

"Remember how the sky turned dark with ash, and the heat from the lava stirred up the winds?"

Wilson followed her gaze. "You're right—this is similar. It's spooky."

Greeting them at the door was a forty-something-year-old woman whom Elizabeth guessed to be Iris

Porter's mother, Hazel, the overzealous wielder of rat poison.

"Come in. Your father's in the bathroom but he'll be right out."

Sophie crowded them at the door, eager for attention. After Wilson pushed Elizabeth inside ahead of him, he scratched the dog behind both ears, managing to close the door behind him in the process. "Miss Hazel, this is Professor Stevens."

She offered her hand to Hazel. "Call me Elizabeth, please."

"Nice meeting you." Hazel shook hands. "I've got a pot of stew in the slow cooker for supper, but I've got to leave."

"I don't blame you. You be careful."

"I don't know if I can get here tomorrow—"

"Sam will be here. He's shut down classes for tomorrow."

Hazel left a few minutes later. Wilson waited for his father by the bathroom door, where Sophie lay. "Dad may need help. Sam doesn't have safety bars installed."

"Shall I go check the stew and give you two privacy?"

"Good idea. Just don't go near any windows."

"I won't. I'll give Sunny a call about canceling tonight, too."

"There's a telephone near the kitchen table." He rapped on the bathroom door. "Dad, it's Wil."

"Good. I need an extra hand."

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Wil appreciated the embarrassment his dad must feel asking for help getting dressed. He'd always been a strong, domineering man. The stroke had changed him, but it hadn't defeated him. Wilson opened the door and found his dad leaning against the lavatory with his pants caught at his hips. After righting his clothes and fastening them, he washed his hands. Wil had to step out into the hall to position the wheelchair, but his dad used the doorjamb and managed to sit.

"What's new with your murder cases?" he asked.

Wil wheeled him into the living room, then took a seat in one of Sam's two wingback chairs. "The second victim has been tentatively ID'd as Kris Knight, a high school English teacher—"

"The one I saw Adam Gillespie out on the river with."

"Right." Wil leaned forward to better hear his soft-spoken dad. It always saddened him to see how the stroke had reduced his father's loud, authoritative voice to little more than a whisper. But at least he'd regained his speech. "We're still waiting on the postmortem exam. The pistol found in the river was originally purchased by a guy in Texas named Morgan O'Hare, a fictitious name. The FBI guys have a file on him. Our prime suspect in the Cathleen Hodges case, her ex-boyfriend, has been

cleared.”

“You said Adam dated both women—”

“Dad, I know where you’re going with this—”

“You’re too trusting. Don’t overlook the possibility. The Gillespies would like nothing better than to dump your career in the toilet. You have two homicides, one of which also triggered a bad forest fire, and you have nothing to link these women except Adam.”

“I have more to link them than Adam, Dad. Both women were new to Drake Springs, both were about the same age, and both were romantically unattached. They were part of a foursome, a group of women who regularly ate out together and shopped together. Now two of the four have been murdered.”

“Who are the other two ladies?”

“Sunny Davis, who runs the campus bookstore, and Elizabeth Stevens, who’s here with me now.” Wil listened to the low murmur of Elizabeth’s voice as she talked on the telephone.

“The one who took care of Sophie.” Dad nodded, digesting this information. Upon hearing her name, the dog raised its head. When his dad petted her, she lay down again. “So what’s the motive?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

His dad snorted. “I think you need to take another look at Gillespie. That man’s not to be trusted.”

Wil nodded. The last thing he needed was his dad

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upset over old grudges. “I can’t afford to rule out anyone at this point.” Which was true. Could Wil be fooled by Adam? He gave his nemesis more credit than to take human life to tarnish Wil’s term in office. But what if that wasn’t the motive? What if Adam had other reasons for killing two women?

“Now with this hurricane ready to make landfall, let’s hope the killer doesn’t strike again.”

“He may have already.” Elizabeth stood in the doorway of the living room, her face ashen. She leaned against the doorjamb. “Sunny’s missing.”

“What? We just saw her—”

“I called the bookstore. According to the student working there, she never returned from lunch. He was there by himself and closing the store so he could leave. I called her apartment. Ian says he hasn’t seen her since early this morning. Both her bicycle and her car are gone.”

“She probably ran some errands after she left us.”

“Wilson, she didn’t have her car. She rode her bike to campus this morning. Either Ian’s mistaken or . . .”

“Or what? What’s the matter?”

“Oh no.” She closed her eyes and sank to the floor, hugging her knees. “I begged her to talk to you herself, but she said she didn’t believe she was in danger.”

He hurried to her and took her hand. Her skin was clammy and alarmingly colorless. “Tell me what you’re talking about.”

"I—I think you need to look closer at Ian Davis. He may not be the tenderhearted geek we all assumed him to be."



When Wilson released her hand, she opened her eyes, missing the comfort of his touch. She'd grown too dependent on him, too ready to accept his comfort and reassurance. Just as she'd feared, she had set herself up for heartache. A part of her had been in denial, convinced she could stay in Drake Springs and build a new life with the man she loved.

Wilson whipped out his cell phone and punched a number he obviously had on speed dial. "Jamie, are you on duty? Good. Stop by Dean Drake's residence on campus. I need your expertise."

"Jamie's your deputy, right?"

Bending, he took Elizabeth's arms and helped her stand. "She's good with computers. I'm going to have her check out a few things while we still have internet access. If anyone can figure out if something's off with Ian Davis, Jamie can."

Elizabeth sank into one of the wingback chairs in the dean's living room. Wilson sat in the matching chair facing her. Rich burgundy upholstery and draperies, traditional styled furniture, solid wood bookcases

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and tables—all came together to fit her expectations of what a dean's residence should look like . . . thirty years ago. Samuel and Wilson Drake's grandmother probably furnished the house. If so, the dean had changed very little of it.

Harold's wheelchair and few belongings added the only disorder to an otherwise neatly arranged place. Order was one thing she and the dean had in common, which made her WitSec living arrangements so maddening. Flexibility wasn't her forte. Instead of feeling sorry for her situation, she focused on her missing friend.

Until now, she'd worried that Cathleen and Kris had been murdered as a case of mistaken identity for Sofia Desalvo. But Sunny was the wrong age and appearance. Her preoccupation with Ian's "spying" since she'd returned from Boston may not have been an over-reaction. Maybe she had good reason to worry.

Harold scooted his wheelchair toward Wilson. "Are you saying another woman's missing?"

Wilson looked up from his cell phone. "Maybe. It's only four-o'clock, so she may turn up."

"I hope so," she murmured. But each time she replayed Sunny's conversations in her head, she feared the worst. "Wilson, do you believe Sunny's disappearance is connected to the other two?"

"We don't know for certain that she has disappeared, but I can't ignore the possibility." Wilson called another

number. "Sam? It's important. Can you pull Sunny Davis's employment file and bring it home with you?" A pause. "Yeah, I know. Listen, she's missing. Break a rule for me, bro."

"I told Ian to call the police, but I don't think he will. He says she'd kill him if he reported her missing." Elizabeth shivered at his choice of words. "Besides, what if he's responsible?"

Wilson returned his cell phone to its clip. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"It's pretty far-fetched."

"Hey, it's just us three. Dad's my unpaid consultant on these homicide cases." He gave her a wink that his dad couldn't see. "You can tell us your theory."

She hadn't sorted all her suspicions in her own mind yet, but apparently Wilson wanted her to play detective with Harold. She couldn't help but appreciate Wilson's sensitivity toward his father. He treated him as an adult, not a stroke victim, preserving the older man's pride whenever possible.

"I'm thinking aloud here, so bear with me. Suppose Ian married Sunny for her big trust fund."

"Does she have a big trust fund?"

"She says she does, but she never told Ian about it. He found out by snooping through her computer." Ian had helped Elizabeth set up her computer connection, too. Could he have installed spyware? Would he have



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made the connection with MustangSallysGarage.com?

“Go on.”

She returned her attention to speculating about Ian and Sunny. “He knows that in the state of Florida if she dies without a will, he inherits everything. So to kill her, he has to divert suspicion by creating a serial killer scenario. He kills a couple of her friends before doing away with her—”

“You believe he’s capable of murdering three women?” Wilson asked.

“No, I don’t. But I have a history of being a poor judge of character.” Starting with her ex-fiancé, not that she’d go into that humiliation with Wilson and Harold.

“What prompted your suspicions of him?”

“Just a few hours ago, Sunny said to me, ‘If anything happens to me, tell that sheriff friend of yours to check out Ian.’”

Harold looked from her to Wilson. “Doesn’t sound so far-fetched to me, son. It would explain why you have no other suspects except for—”

“Da-ad.” Wilson’s warning tone stopped whatever Harold was about to say.

“All I’m saying is she has a good theory.” In an aside to her, he added, “I watch true crime shows on TV.”

Elizabeth didn’t. She seemed to be *living* a true crime episode.

“As soon as Jamie gets here, I’m going to have her

do some checking on both Ian and Sunny Davis. I need Sam's file on Sunny for a starting point."

"Is it too early to eat? I'm hungry." Harold reached for his wheelchair wheel with one hand.

"Let me, Dad. Sam's carpet isn't wheel-friendly." Wilson pushed Harold into the kitchen. "Elizabeth, is it too early for you?"

A vortex of acid besieged her stomach. She'd be lucky to push a spoonful of stew between her lips. Surely she could fake it for Harold's sake, though. Confined to a wheelchair, he had enough to deal with. At least Nina, her wheelchair-bound sister, had the use of both arms and could do most things for herself.

Elizabeth counted her blessings and put on a brave face. "You know me. It's never too early to eat."

She followed the men into the kitchen, a cozy galley decorated in 1970s gold and avocado. A wide opening in the rear of the room led to a small dining area, with a table and chairs nestled in a bay window. Before she had the opportunity to admire the view of the back courtyard, Wilson closed all the mini blinds. He then flipped a switch, flooding the room with light.

"Sam will be here in a few minutes, Dad. Don't you want to wait for him?"

"By the time we set the table, he'll be here. He likes to eat promptly at five."

"Don't I know it!" Wilson grimaced. "Whenever

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we meet for dinner, he thinks I should be waiting for him at five, no matter what's going on in the world of criminal justice."

Elizabeth saw little left to do in the dining nook. Hazel had the solid cherry table set up for two and quilted green placemats for four. She grabbed two bowls Wilson handed her.

"Where's the flatware?"

Wilson lifted the lid off the Crock-Pot, filling the breakfast room with a tantalizing aroma. "Try the drawer beneath the microwave oven."

The front door squeaked open and Wilson's hand moved to his holster, a grim reminder that she was in danger. They exchanged a look. Her presence put his family at risk. "I shouldn't be here, Wilson."

He ignored that, calling out, "Sam?"

His brother walked through the door leading from the living room. In his hand was a blue folder. "Something smells delicious."

"You're just in time for dinner."

Dean Drake handed Wilson the folder. "Has the beast been walked lately?"

Harold answered, "Not since lunch. You volunteering?"

"Yeah, Sam," Wilson said. "Walk Sophie while I dish up the stew."

"If I must." Wilson's brother hooked up the leash and led Sophie to the front door.

Elizabeth suppressed the urge to offer walking the dog. She couldn't be seen outside. "Has she had her vitamin K1 today?"

"Not yet. You can give it to her before we leave."

Harold spoke, his gruffness failing to hide his affection toward Sophie. "You leaving her here?"

"If Sam doesn't mind. It'd be better for her."

And for Harold. Elizabeth hid a smile. Harold was a tough guy with a marshmallow center—and like father, like son.

Harold rolled his chair to the end of the table. Wilson pointed to the only chair not in the direct view of the breakfast nook window and gave her a pointed look. "You sit here."

His brother returned with the dog and the young deputy she remembered seeing at the diner. "Wilson, you have company." It may have been Elizabeth's imagination, but Dean Drake's tone seemed tolerant at best, as if he'd rather not have the likes of law enforcement darken his doorstep.

If Wilson noticed, he didn't react. He introduced her to them as "Deputy Jamie Peterson," then asked her to join them for a bowl of beef stew.

"No, thanks. I need to get to work. Dean Drake, may we use your computer for a few minutes?"

"Certainly. It's in my office."

Wilson excused himself from the table, grabbing the

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blue folder containing Sunny Davis's employment file as he stood. He then took Deputy Peterson into another room of the house, presumably Dean Drake's office, leaving Elizabeth to make small talk with his father and brother.

As soon as she loaded the dishwasher, though, she intended to call Ian. Where was Sunny? If Ian wouldn't file a missing person's report with the police, she would. She wouldn't reveal that the county sheriff was already on the case. No matter what Ian's intentions toward Sunny were, Elizabeth vowed to do everything in her power to find her.

## *CHAPTER FOURTEEN*

At Drake Oaks, Wil stopped long enough to close the gate and then parked the Jeep out of sight, back behind his cabin on the Suwannee. He'd had Elizabeth duck low in the seat until they'd cleared the busy streets of town. He wanted no one to see her with him or to guess where she'd be hiding. The darkening sky and floating pieces of soot drew his gaze toward the western horizon.

He pointed toward the distant plume of smoke. "I don't know which will get us first—the fire or the hurricane."

Elizabeth climbed out of the Jeep, stretching her back and arms. "Is this where we're staying?"

"Afraid not. We're going to dig in at Dad's house." He opened the back of the Jeep where they'd stashed the food and water.

Reaching inside, she grabbed her duffel bag and her

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purse. "Is this your place?"

"Home sweet home."

"It's nice."

"Thanks. You can leave that here," he said, indicating her duffel bag. "I just need to grab my rifles and some supplies. Then we'll pull around to the main house."

"Will you show it to me?"

"What? The cabin? Sure. Come inside." He motioned her toward the screened door, which he held open for her. "It's not that big. Half of it is porch."

"I love screened porches. All you need is a swing and a couple of rocking chairs."

"I have those put inside. At the first sign of a hurricane, we bring in grills, chairs, and anything else that's loose." He frowned. "Which is why everything's a mess right now."

"Don't worry about it." She stepped into the cabin and paused inside his kitchen. Although she didn't say a word, her dismay showed in her expression.

He examined his cabin through her eyes, regretting the crowded living area filled with outdoor furniture, the unwashed cups and plates in the sink, and the coating of dust on counters and cabinets. His barbells from his last workout cluttered the middle of the living room floor. Elizabeth's house never had a magazine or book out of place or a speck of dust on any surface. She alphabetized her canned goods, for crying out loud. She'd see his home as a rat's nest, or worse.

"I would tell you it's normally clean and tidy here, but I'd be stretching the truth."

She grinned. "Is it safe to use your bathroom?"

He laughed at that. "Reasonably. I think I hung up the towel after my shower. If you see clothes scattered on the floor, just kick them aside and make a path."

"You can't scare me."

He flicked on the overhead track lights and pointed her toward his bathroom. "Darlin', I hope I'm exaggerating." *Had* he left dirty laundry on the floor? Too late to worry about it now.

"I'll be right back."

While Elizabeth used the facilities, Wil dug out his rifles and ammo from the spare bedroom closet. The cabin had two small bedrooms, one bath, and the combination living/dining/kitchen area the builder had called a great room. A seldom-used corner fireplace, beamed ceiling, and many windows created a spacious feel to a compact space. Though small, the cabin derived its true charm from its three-sided, wraparound screened porch.

He'd fantasized bringing her here for a romantic getaway, even living here as husband and wife. She'd have his cabin spotless and his cabinets organized in no time, probably handing him a project list as long as his arm. They'd enjoy sunsets side by side on the porch swing, sipping hot cocoa on a winter's night. Or sit quietly and sip morning coffee on a spring morning, watching deer



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grazing along the river. Now circumstances crushed those dreams. He'd be better off forgetting what might have been. He needed to concentrate on keeping her safe until Special Agent Cory arrived. After that . . . well, he couldn't stay focused if he thought of life beyond her departure.

He hoped the cabin could bear the brunt of a hurricane. Located on a small bluff overlooking the river, it was vulnerable to flooding in the aftermath. Considering this year's drought, it'd take a lot of rain to fill the Suwannee. Flooding was less a concern than wind damage, but he'd run out of time to plywood up the windows. Unlike Elizabeth's house and his dad's, the cabin had no shutters to close over the glass.

Elizabeth returned to the kitchen. "What can I carry? Anything but guns."

He handed her four boxes of ammo, then turned off the lights. Clicking on his flashlight, he grabbed both rifles. "Let's go."

Stowing their cargo in the rear of the Jeep, they fought the wind with every step. Inside the Jeep, Elizabeth gave him a frown. "I think the wind's worse."

"At least it's blowing from the east. Otherwise, we'd be running from the fire." He didn't want to think of the residents and creatures west of the fire. The best-case scenario called for hundreds of charred acres in Osceola National Forest. "If we have to have a hurricane, let's

hope this one hurries and dumps a lot of rain.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw Elizabeth shudder. “How bad is a hurricane?”

“It depends on many factors. Which side of the eye we’re on, the speed it hits at, how organized a system it is. Since we haven’t been given an evacuation order, we’re not in the direct path. But we have to be prepared for the worst.”

“Which is?”

He didn’t want her scared of the hurricane. She had enough to frighten her. “Let’s unload and get inside. Then we’ll see what we can pick up from The Weather Channel. The nice thing about hurricanes is they give you lots of warning.”

He hoped his dad’s satellite dish hadn’t lost its signal yet.



Wilson closed the colonial shutters over all the downstairs windows. In the den the television’s signal came and went, but Elizabeth stayed with The Weather Channel. She jotted down everything the hurricane expert said so she could report it to Wilson while he was upstairs staking out places to watch for intruders. If he was being overly cautious, she didn’t mind a bit. Between the weather and the contract killer, she welcomed vigilance.

By the time he clopped down the stairs, she had a

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complete weather update prepared. “It’s changed direction a bit.”

“What’s the path?”

“It shouldn’t hit Florida at all. They predict landfall around Brunswick—”

“I hate to burst your bubble, darlin’, but Brunswick’s two hours from here. If the eye of the storm goes over Brunswick, we’re still in trouble.”

“Let me finish. The storm is moving a lot faster than expected, which means it hasn’t strengthened as much as it might have. They’re calling it a category two.”

He let out a breath. “That’s a lot better than a category four. My cabin might survive.”

“What about this house?”

“We may have some roof damage, but this house is built to last. The original structure is cypress, although the additions are pine. A few of the outbuildings could suffer, like the carport.”

“Shouldn’t you move the Jeep?”

“Where? If the carport holds, it’s some protection from trees and debris.” He headed toward the front door with a heavy length of chains. “I’m going out to secure the gates.”

“I thought you did that when we drove in.”

“That chain’s no match for seventy-mile-an-hour wind. Also, double chains will slow any unwelcome visitors.”

“May I watch from the porch?” With the shutters

closed, she couldn't see outside. "I have this irrational need to keep an eye on you."

He smiled at that. "Sure. Just keep to the shadows."

Still gripping her notepad and pen, she followed him out to the screened porch. She stood in the recess of the door and watched him jog down the steps and down the dirt road, the chains jingling in his hands. The entrance to Drake Oaks was about a quarter mile from the house. He reached the large metal gates and tested the single chain lock. Wrapping the heavier metal links between the two, he lashed them together to rattle and buck in the wind.

He raced back to the screened porch, panting and sweating. When he stepped inside the screen door, the rain began. "Good timing. I just hope the chains hold."

Large drops at first, so intermittent she could count them, exploded into a loud torrent made noisier by the house's metal roof. She inhaled the odor of wet dust mixed with wet burnt wood. After three months without so much as a sprinkle, the earth seemed to give a huge sigh.

"Oh my. Isn't this wonderful!"

He stood beside her for a moment, gazing at the wall of water. "It sure is, darlin'."

"I wish we could sit out here and enjoy—"

"It's blowing in. We'll get drenched." He opened the door and nudged her inside. "Besides, I have to keep

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you out of sight.”

“I know. I promise to be a cooperative charge. It’s kept me alive so far.”

He locked the door and bolted it. “I’ve never known anyone who did so thorough a job of sticking to the rules of witness relocation. You’re a smart and brave lady.”

“Thank you.” She glanced at the notepad she gripped. “Staying alive is a huge motivator.”

“Yeah.” His expression betrayed nothing of his feelings, although she imagined a flicker of concern in his eyes.

She followed him down the hall past the staircase. “What do we do the rest of the night?”

He flashed a sexy grin filled with empty promises. They both knew there’d be no letting down their guard for acts of pleasure. “First, we organize our flashlights and supplies in case we lose power. Then we wait it out.”

“This is my first hurricane, so forgive me if I go hysterical.”

Stepping close, he gifted her with a warm smile and the touch of his finger along her cheek. “The hurricane is the lesser of two evils. As long as the weather poses a threat, it’ll keep our hit man away.”

“Yes, the hit man is definitely more evil than Mother Nature.” First, the killer had to find her. For the moment, she felt safe in Wilson’s care. No one knew where they were, and he’d gone to extremes to hide their presence. After the hurricane passed, she’d face the other storms in

her life. "Okay, let's sort the supplies."

She followed him to the kitchen, where they'd stacked the gallon jugs of drinking water, flashlights, batteries, and canned goods. She gave a wide berth to the guns with their boxes of ammunition. Organizing and planning occupied her time, although it did little to distract her from the pounding of rain or the scraping of tree limbs against the roof.

After they'd checked the flashlights and set out the water jugs, Wilson called a Coke break. They carried their soft drinks to the den, where he sat cross-legged on the floor and groaned. "I didn't realize I was so out of shape until I ran from the gate."

She collapsed on the small braided rug in front of the television. "I'm in terrible shape. I used to ride horses, jog, Jazzercise—"

"What's Jazzercise?"

"Just an exercise class that's like dancing."

"That's right. You love to dance."

"Yeah." He'd remembered. She took a sip of her Coke and let her mind wander to her former life. "Believe it or not, I wasn't a big eater. Gluttony is an acquired art for me."

He shook his head. "Darlin', you're no glutton. And you aren't fat. It's a pleasure to eat with a woman who doesn't look at what's on her fork and recite fat grams and carbs."

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"I agree. Health nuts are a bore."

He scowled and took another drink of his soda. "I dated this woman in Jacksonville a couple years back. All she talked about was the G.I. Diet. I figure if she's eating like a GI, that's not bad, right? I mean, Army guys eat healthy portions. Dumb hick me didn't realize that G.I. stood for something called the glycemic index—"

"Why do you do that? You're no hick. And while we're on the subject, why do you let your brother talk down to you?"

"It's nothing personal with Sam. He's more educated. That's just how he is."

"And he treats your father like an invalid. While you were working with your deputy in the office, your brother insisted on spoon-feeding Harold. What's that about? Then he constantly wiped at Harold's mouth where he dribbled. He wouldn't have drooled if your brother had let him eat at his own pace. It was all I could do to sit quietly and pretend not to notice."

Wilson sighed, took another drink, then shook his head. "Sam is having trouble handling Dad's stroke."

"Well, so is your dad. The last thing he needs is—" She stopped when she saw his grin. "What's so funny?"

"Now I know you love me. You're my champion."

She grinned back. "Yes, I love you. I guess I don't understand your family dynamics. You say I'm disciplined and cooperative, but I'm a product of a close,

supportive family. I took it for granted until one day I discovered that other people's families aren't necessarily like mine. In fact, more aren't than are."

He nodded. "I was sort of the black sheep of our family, or at least the runt of the litter."

His mother was the black sheep, but Elizabeth resisted saying so. "Why do you think that?"

"I had a learning disability. Dyslexia. All through school I struggled, while Taylor and Sam made the honor roll. Everything either Taylor or Sam participated in, they excelled. I seemed destined for mediocrity. I was good at one thing only—the Boy Scouts."

"I'll bet you're an Eagle."

"Yep. A career in law enforcement evolved from scouting and was all I wanted, but it disappointed my grandmother and my father. They groomed us all to be either in academics or politics."

"County sheriff is politics."

"Yeah, it is. I surprised my family when I pulled that off. Dad's taken an interest in my career for the first time since I left home."

"I've watched you with Harold. You're sensitive to his disability and treat him as normally as possible."

"I can't imagine treating him any other way—"

"Exactly. You wouldn't know how to be condescending or patronizing."

He finished off his Coke. "You're a bit rough on



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Sam, especially considering the guy's your boss." He shrugged. "As for me, I don't let him bother me anymore."

Anymore? The adverb spoke volumes about the two brothers' history, but she dropped it. "Just remember: we teach people how to treat us."

He rubbed at his chin with his thumb, as if digesting what she'd said. "Yeah, I guess we do."

"So tell me about your sister."

"Taylor took up photography, entered competitions, and almost always won. Upon graduating from college, she turned down jobs because she already was in demand from a few well-paying publishers as a freelancer. She travels the world, which was always her dream."

"Taylor Drake, of course! I've seen her photos. Sorry I didn't make the connection sooner. Wasn't she up for a Pulitzer?"

"She *won* a Pulitzer. Did I mention she's beautiful, too? And that's not just a big brother's bias talking." Pride filled his voice and warmed his smile. "As I was saying, I stayed in the shadows of my siblings."

"Did you resent being overshadowed by them?"

He laughed. "Hell, yeah. A lot. I became the rebel child and got into all kinds of mischief. I left Drake Springs as soon as I could and joined the Army, and you know the rest."

*Not by a long shot.* "Tell me more about this rebel child phase."

"I did the unthinkable where Dad was concerned, and dated Amy Gillespie my senior year. We were quite an item."

"Amy, Adam's twin sister?"

"Yep. We were all in the same graduating class at FCHS. Adam didn't approve of our dating anymore than his mother or my father did. Eventually, Amy caved under pressure from Phyllis and called it quits, right before the senior prom."

"Oh no. So what happened? Did you find another date?"

This time his smile seemed sad. "Yeah. Megan. She was nineteen or twenty, finishing up her sophomore year of college and home for the weekend. She told her mother she was ridiculous for imposing old grudges on the next generation. When both Amy and Phyllis stood their ground, she called me to say she'd be my prom date. Caused quite a disturbance in the Gillespie house."

"Uh oh. Something else for Phyllis to blame on your family. So did Amy go to the prom with someone else?"

"She went by herself but left with Ben Sawyer. Two years later, she and Ben married and lived happily ever after."

"So Megan did her a favor, or did she see it that way?"

"I never knew what anybody in that family thought after that night. But Megan did me a favor. We had a lot more fun prom night than I would've had with Amy, if you get my drift."

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"Are you saying you and Amy weren't sexually active?"

"No, ma'am, we weren't. We did some heavy petting, but she said she wasn't ready to go all the way with a guy. I'm thinking Ben changed her mind about that."

"I see. But Megan had no such reservations?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "I don't think Megan had reservations about anything. College had turned her into a wild woman! She and I got drunk and stayed out all night parked at the river. I confess I was smitten with the *older* woman."

"So then did you two start dating?"

"Nope. I never saw her again. I left the day after graduation. Megan returned to college to take her finals, came home for the summer, and died in a collision on the interstate. That's one tragedy the Gillespies can't blame on the Drakes."

"Did you attend her funeral?"

"Didn't even know about it for a couple of years. I was in the service at the time."

"How'd you wind up in Jacksonville?"

"I hired on with JSO, worked my way up to detective, then Dad had his stroke. The funny thing was that he asked for me, not Sam or Taylor."

"That doesn't surprise me."

He gave her a puzzled look. "Why do you say that?"

"Just a theory of mine," she said. "Sam and Taylor are high achievers, people who demand perfection from

themselves and sometimes others. Harold created two monsters incapable of having the patience for him in his impaired condition.”

“Ouch! You’re saying the stroke dragged him down to my level, so he was more comfortable with me?”

“You aren’t impaired, Wilson. You’re human and normal, which is exactly what he needs. You don’t talk down to him, and you aren’t impatient with him. You treat him as if you’ve forgotten he’s in a wheelchair. It’s . . . wonderful.” Love swelled inside her until tears threatened. “You have no idea how good you are with people, do you?”

A slow smile spread across his face. “No, but when you look at me that way, darlin’, I believe I can do anything.”

She resisted telling him how much she’d miss him, how much he meant to her. So many memories they’d never get the chance to make. Instead, she chose to lighten the moment. “Don’t let it go to your head, handsome.”

“Handsome, huh? Seriously, is this theory of yours borne out of what happened with your younger sister?”

She nodded. “Some of it, yes. Nina’s husband, Terry, is very good to ignore her disability or to treat her as if she doesn’t have one. It’s exactly what she needs, and she’s happier because of it. To me, it’s pure, unconditional love. Your father has yours, and he knows it.”

“We’ve never talked about love.”

“You don’t have to, but I hope you will. You never know how much time you have left with your dad.

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Don't take it for granted." Tears threatened again, and she swallowed.

"You're remembering your father, aren't you?" When she nodded, he went to her, pulling her into his arms and holding her. "You're right, honey. I won't take Dad for granted."

Before the embrace of comfort led to one of passion, he released her and returned to his seat on the floor. They couldn't afford to let down their guard for sex, no matter how tempted. They needed to be alert to any signs of unwanted company.

Elizabeth forced a smile. "You left off where you were in Jacksonville, and Harold had the stroke."

"I took a leave of absence to care for him, and that's when Fred convinced me to make a run for county sheriff. You met Fred, my chief deputy."

"Yes," she said. "The one you put in charge."

"He's a good person and a great law officer. Anyway, I ran, Adam opposed me, and I won, surprising myself as much as anybody. Phyllis ran an editorial about the race with the headline 'Drake Dynasty Grabs More Power.'"

"Since it's general knowledge around here that her son was your opponent, most readers probably read that as sour grapes."

He chuckled. "Most readers don't bother reading the *Democrat*. They just skim the ads."

She stood and stretched. "I really need a shower."

He took the empty Coke can from her. "You better take one now, because no telling when you'll get another one."

"You mean if we lose power because we won't have hot water?"

"If we lose power, we won't have *any* water. We're on a well, and it takes electricity to run the pump. We have a generator, but it won't work the pump."

"In that case, I'm going to take a long, luxurious shower and shampoo my hair." She hesitated at the hall door. "I would invite you to join me, but . . ."

Their gazes locked, and his eyes filled with sadness. "Yeah. Wish I could, darlin'. When you're through, I'll need you to pull guard duty while I take my own shower. We wouldn't want to be caught with our pants down, so to speak."

"No." An involuntary shudder wracked her body. "I don't want to be caught under any circumstances."



At five in the morning, tropical storm winds besieged Drake Oaks for the second time that evening. The eye passed farther north and offered little respite for Foster County residents. Wil peeked out the upstairs windows to watch huge limbs on the oak trees bending and bowing. In the distance, one snapped and hit the ground with a boom, rousing Elizabeth from sleep. Earlier, she'd

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stretched out fully clothed across the dusty bedspread on one of the twin beds in the room where he sat—what at one time had been his and Sam’s room. She sat up and inhaled sharply, staring at the rifle lying across his lap.

“Relax. It was a tree limb breaking.” He sat at the desk he’d shared with Sam, the wooden chair hard and unforgiving. Just what he needed to stay awake.

She scooted to the edge of the bed. “Is this the hurricane?”

His small weather radio crackled to life beside him, the volume low. “According to the weather radio, the hurricane was downgraded after striking land in Georgia late last night. Good news for the inland residents. If we’re lucky, Foster County will have to contend with little more than some downed power lines and trees. Most flooding should be temporary because of the low level of the streams and rivers.”

Her tousled hair reminded him of the previous night, when he’d awakened her at her house. She looked just as appealing and sexy now as she had wearing that college nightshirt.

“So the drought turned out to be a blessing. Sometimes Mother Nature knows best.”

“You sound like Dad. Some folks called him a tree hugger when he opposed commercial growth in Foster County. But he’s just a guy who believes in balance.”

“Then your dad and I are on the same page.” She

scrubbed her face with her hands and yawned. "Since I'm awake, I'm going to make myself a cup of tea."

"Yeah, make it before we lose electricity."

She shuffled to the door in socked feet. He'd rather see her red-painted toes and bare feet, but the socks made her no less appealing.

"Can I bring you something?" she asked.

"A Coke. I need caffeine."

She made a circle with her thumb and index finger, then disappeared into the hall. After numerous attempts to convince him to get some sleep, she seemed to have gotten the message. Too wired and too upset, he couldn't sleep if he tried. If he closed his eyes, he'd replay his night of love with Elizabeth. Instead of giving him a memory to comfort him, it would make him want her all the more.

He returned his attention to the entrance and gate, illuminated by a single mercury vapor lamp that his grandfather had strung up years ago. The gates jostled with the wind. No, wait. What the hell? A shadowy figure seemed to be unwrapping the chain. Wil rubbed his tired eyes and looked again.

Grabbing his rifle, he raced down the stairs. "Stay in the kitchen." Without pausing to explain to Elizabeth, he unbolted the door and ran outside.



## *CHAPTER FIFTEEN*

Sloshing through the deep puddles, Wil wished he'd taken time to find his rubber fishing boots and slicker. No, a slicker would be hot as blazes even in the rain. The mud sucked at his feet, but he forced them to carry him to the end of the drive toward the man at the gate.

The intruder made no attempt to hide his movements. When Wil reached the gate, he recognized the man the instant he heard Adam's voice hollering in the wind.

"Wil, thank God you're here. I need your boat."

"What's this about?" Wil lowered the rifle but didn't offer to help unchain the gate. He resisted a dig about Adam being outside his jurisdiction, but questions flooded his mind. For starters, why would any Gillespie step foot on Drake property, especially in the middle of a tropical storm? Had Dad been right to suspect him? Or

worse, could Frank Sullivan have corrupted the chief of police with an offer he couldn't refuse?

"I have to rescue Amy and the kids. The bridge washed out. The only way I can get to them is by boat, and yours is closest." Adam stepped through the gate then rewrapped the chain, hardly the actions of a desperado looking to make a fast escape. His tone suggested he'd rather have awakened the Coast Guard than to have to ask a Drake for help.

Or maybe Wil imagined it. He'd vowed he would do what he could to bury the hatchet with Adam and Amy. "Where's Ben?"

"He went for help and never came back. No one's seen him, and . . ." Adam's voice faltered. His distress seemed genuine. "We fear the worst. He may have been on the bridge when it collapsed."

"That damned bridge has needed replacing for years." Wil pointed toward the river with his rifle. "This way."

"I tried to get them to stay in town with me." Adam stared at the main house as they sloshed past the front porch. "You out here alone?"

"We thought it best to move Dad in town with Sam." He didn't volunteer more. As much as he wanted to trust Adam, he couldn't afford the risk. "I stuck the boat under my cabin porch. I hope it's still there."

He hurried with Adam toward the cabin, the driveway muck pulling at his feet like loose putty. The security light

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on the corner of his porch guided them like a blurred beacon. “What happened at Amy’s?”

“She called from her cell, and I missed some of what she said.”

“Yeah, the signal’s piss-poor out here on a good day.”

“I think that huge live oak in back of their mobile home must have crashed through the roof. Whatever happened, they’ve had to evacuate. Amy’s really upset, but I think she’s more worried about Ben than her house.”

They found the john boat right where Wil had stored it out of harm’s way. Setting down the rifle, Wil checked the electric trolling motor and found it in working order. Together they carried the boat to the Suwannee, fighting the torrential rains and gusts of wind.

Wil picked up his rifle. “I would offer to go with you and help, but the boat won’t hold more than three adults. You’ll be okay with Amy and the kids, though.”

“I’ll bring it back when I can.” Adam pushed the boat into the water. After eleven solid hours of heavy rain, the river had swollen with alarming speed. He reached to start the motor and hesitated. In the dim light from the security light, his face softened. “Thanks, Wil.”

“Be careful.”

Adam disappeared into the inky shadows. Wil stared across the Suwannee to Amy’s place. No lights. Either that side of the river had lost electricity or the large tree had taken out their power. His instincts told

him Adam told the truth, but a sense of urgency pushed him back to the main house. He couldn't dismiss the possibility that Adam's appearance was a clever distraction, as far-fetched as that seemed.

Back at the house, Elizabeth waited for him in the kitchen, her face ashen. "Was someone here?"

"I didn't mean to scare you when I ran out." Standing by the back door in the laundry room, Wil peeled off his wet clothes. So relieved to find her waiting for him unharmed, he wanted nothing more than to grab her and hold her. If only he could afford the distraction.

She handed him a towel from the dryer. "I think your dad is out of Cokes. Want me to make coffee?"

"No. I might grab a cup of hot tea in a minute." While he toweled himself dry, he told her about Adam needing to borrow the boat to rescue Amy and her two children.

"How old are her children?"

"I'd guess nine and seven. Both boys. She and Ben were married about ten years before starting a family. They've not had an easy time of it financially."

She returned to the table to finish her cup of tea. "Why is that?"

Rifling through his duffel, he pulled out dry jeans and a T-shirt. "From what I hear, Amy wants to live at the old home place, so she bought it from her mother. That's a lot of land to finance. They traded for a larger mobile home about two years ago. I doubt it's paid for,

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but I hope it's insured."

"I'll bet she's frantic with worry about her husband, poor thing."

He tugged the T-shirt over his head. "Yeah, but Adam will see after her."

"Has Adam ever been married?"

"Not that I know of." He pulled up his jeans, then zipped them. "Having Phyllis Gillespie for a mother-in-law is too frightening a prospect."

"Hmm." Elizabeth dunked a tea bag in her second cup of hot water, staring into space as if lost in thought.

Or was she trying to avoid watching him dress? He'd given it no thought when he'd stripped to his underwear in her presence, not that she hadn't seen him undressed. "What?" he asked.

"Just thinking about Phyllis. I'm guessing she's kept the family feud alive all these years. I have a feeling you and Adam could be friends if not for her. What about Amy? Does she still hate your family?"

"I have no idea. The few times I've run into her, she's been cordial, but she was with Ben and the kids. She seemed happy—although her mother wasn't around any of those times, so you might have a point." Chilled from his rain-drenched adventure, he grabbed a clean cup and lifted the teakettle from the burner to make his own hot tea. "Adam is hard to read. I feel as if we're players on a stage, but I haven't been given the full script."

"I know the feeling. I've been trying to figure out my next persona when I have to reinvent myself. Again. Fat and dowdy worked for a while, but they're hip to that now. Maybe I'll go Goth and wear garish makeup. Dye my hair black."

Wil didn't want to think about her relocation. He changed the subject. "We're lucky we still have power. It's dark across the river."

"You want cream in your tea?" She nodded toward his cup.

"No, thanks." He took a sip of the blistering hot brew. "I need to check in, see if we have anybody who can help search for Ben."

"I'm sure your chief deputy is handling it, but go ahead and call. I know you're anxious."

"Yeah. You're probably thinking I don't know how to delegate."

She cocked her head and studied him. "And here I was about to pay you a compliment about being dedicated and committed to your job."

"How do you do that?" She lifted her brows in a question, so he explained. "You put a positive spin on everything I do. To hear you tell it, I'm a real special person."

"You are." She gazed at him with admiration and genuine affection.

His stomach did that flutter thing as if he'd taken a dip in the road at high speed and gone airborne. God help

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him, he couldn't remember anyone believing so strongly in him. He hoped her faith wasn't misplaced. Right now her life was in his hands. If anything happened to her—

“Stop worrying, and call.”

“Yes, ma'am.” He used the landline to spare his cell phone battery, although the cell towers may not be working in the area after the storm anyway. Besides, even on a good day, the signal strength was unpredictable. Dispatch put him through to Fred.

“I planned to call you at daybreak, Wil. What are you doing up?”

“Up? Hell, Fred, I haven't been to bed yet. So tell me about Ralph Sapp.”

“He's in critical condition and will probably need surgery, but the doctors say he'll make it. We're still searching for the car, but we do know the color. We found black paint on Ralph's beach cruiser.”

“So we're looking for a black vehicle with frontal damage. Do you know if he's talked to his mama yet about who struck him?”

“Not as far as I know. To tell you the truth, we've been too busy responding to emergency calls. Lots of roads are flooded, some power outages—”

“Is there power in town?”

“Downtown is fine. But everyone east of the Suwannee is without electricity. FPL has had a crew working on it half the night.”

"I still show a signal on my cell, so call if you get an update on Ralph."

"Before you hang up, we have something going on that I think you should know about."

Wil tensed. "Tell me."

"Sunny Davis, the missing person the English professor reported—"

"Elizabeth Stevens." Wil glanced at her. She'd said she called it in from Sam's after dinner.

"Yes, the lady I met in your office. Anyway, I sent Brady and Devon to the Davis apartment to interview the husband. He's cleared out."

"What do you mean? He evacuated, or he moved out, or what?"

"Disappeared. His clothes and computer are gone, along with his vehicle. We don't think he got far in this rain. Someone will pick him up."

"If they do, let me know. I want to talk to him, too."

"You're on vacation."

"Not exactly. I'll explain later."

"Jamie has a report for you on the Davises." The sound of shuffled paper crackled in the background. "Ian's clean. She's having trouble with Sunny, though. Her full name according to her college employment file is Sonya Leigh Duncan Davis, but Jamie's hit a brick wall on that one."

"Great. So how do we notify next of kin if it becomes



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necessary?" Wil avoided eye contact with Elizabeth. Her friend's disappearance had upset her enough already.

"You thinking it's going to be a third homicide?" Fred asked.

"God, I hope not." Wil rubbed the back of his neck, where the beginnings of a headache threatened. "Tell Jamie to keep digging, but not at the expense of those emergency calls you're having."

"Meanwhile, we have an APB out on both Ian's and Sunny's vehicles."

"Good. Did you give Phyllis Gillespie her interview for her paper?"

"Sure did. I told her she needs to think about retirement. Let Amy take over the *Democrat*."

Wil chuckled. "You didn't."

"Well . . ." Fred's low laughter gave him away. "Not exactly. I think Phyllis plans to call the two homicides 'cold cases' because we didn't solve them within the first forty-eight."

"She watches too much TV."

"Of course, had Adam been elected sheriff, she'd be spinning a different tale."

Wil didn't want to encourage Gillespie-bashing within the sheriff's department, so he ignored Fred's remark. "Speaking of Amy, has there been any news about Ben Sawyer?"

"Geraldo took the boat out and is searching the

Suwannee with a couple of Adam's officers, but it's rough going out there. We've had a lot of rain dumped in a short time. That river's a mess."

"It'll be daylight soon. That should help with rescue efforts." Wil ended the call and stared at Elizabeth.

"What is it?"

"Your theory about Ian Davis . . . isn't sounding far-fetched anymore."



Daylight sneaked in between the gaps in the shutters, bringing with it an eerie calm. Rain slackened to a drizzle, but a heavy cloud cover blocked much of the morning sun. Elizabeth changed into shorts and a T-shirt, then cooked scrambled eggs and toast for their breakfast. The lights flickered a couple of times, but Drake Oaks didn't lose power.

"I can't believe the electricity still works." Wilson started a fresh pot of coffee to brew. "We're lucky. Last year we had a nor'easter that wasn't nearly this severe, and lost power for nearly two days."

"That's why I did laundry last night," Elizabeth said. "I figured I'd get as much washed as I could while we had power." That wasn't the only reason, of course. She needed to keep as busy as possible and funnel her nervous energy.

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“Good thing you did, because I sure made a load of wet clothes when I came in from helping Adam.”

Elizabeth couldn't concentrate on talk of weather or utilities. She was too worried about Sunny. Where was she now? Could she still be alive, or had Ian killed her? How could they all have been so taken in by Ian and his shy, geeky routine? How ironic that he hadn't chosen to kill Elizabeth instead of Kris or Cathleen when she was the only one of the foursome who actually had a contract out on her life.

Wilson moved next to where she stood by the stove and gave her a funny look. “I said, ‘how long are you planning to cook the eggs?’”

“I'm sorry!” She jerked the skillet off the burner. “I'll make more.”

“These are fine. Just a bit overdone.” Grabbing one of the plates and a metal spatula, he scraped half of the hardened egg scramble onto it. “Get the toast, and let's eat.”

“I should've paid attention to what I was doing.” She joined him at the kitchen table with her own plate of crispy eggs. Wilson had poured them each a mug of coffee. “Did I mention I'm a kitchen hazard?”

He smiled, but it seemed forced. Tension had them both on edge, and any attempt at humor would have fizzled. “You were preoccupied.”

She stared at her eggs. Even if the plate had been full of Boyd's famous French toast, she couldn't have

swallowed a bite. "I can't stop thinking about Ian. Man, I am so naïve."

Wilson blew across the top of his coffee mug, then took a sip. "Stop beating up on yourself. First, we don't know he's a killer. Second, if he is, he had everyone fooled, including his wife. You don't have the market cornered on misjudging people, darlin'."

She snorted at that. "Wanna bet?"

"Yeah, I'd take that bet." He stuffed more of the crusty eggs into his mouth and chewed.

Wilson had a point, though. She was beating up on herself, which was counterproductive. She needed to stay positive. "You know, life's funny."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm no fatalist, but look at how every fork in the road brings us new choices, things we might have missed if we'd taken a different path. Like me and teaching English. I thought Horse Calls was everything I wanted in a career. Then when circumstances forced me into a new profession, I discovered a love for that, too."

"Sam thinks you're the best thing to happen to the drama department."

"He does?" How nice that Dean Drake recognized her efforts, especially after he'd been persuaded by the feds to hire her. "That's another thing. I never took part in school plays or did anything more theatrical than dressage, and that's a horse show. But I love working

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with the students.”

He swallowed his coffee, then smiled at her from behind the cup. “You probably learned theater from watching all those DVDs.”

“I never thought of that. Working with the drama students does make me feel like a movie producer. Or director. I’ll miss that.”

His eyes darkened and he scowled, but he finished his eggs and toast without a word. Any talk of her impending relocation seemed to upset him, so she changed the subject. “Are you going to check on your dad this morning?”

“If the phones still work.” He picked up his empty plate and pointed his fork at hers.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“The toast maybe. The eggs aren’t very appetizing.”

He chuckled. “Well, I wasn’t going to marry you for your cooking, anyway.”

“Marry? Who said you were going to marry me?”

“I would have. But you have to go, honey. We both know I can’t protect you twenty-four seven. I couldn’t live with myself if you died on my watch.” He swallowed, and his eyes grew bright with moisture. “I couldn’t live with myself if you died, period.”

She sprang from her chair and wrapped her arms around him. He hugged her back, then dropped a kiss to the back of her hand. “You’re one of those forks in the road I wouldn’t have wanted to miss, Wilson. I will

always love you.”

“Promise me when Cory gets here, you’ll leave immediately. Any hesitation could bring you closer to death.”

She nodded. “I see the wisdom in that, and I’ll promise. I won’t like it, though.”

“Let’s say our goodbyes now, because we may not get the chance later.” He cradled her face in his hands and pulled her down for a tender kiss. “I’ll always love you, too, darlin’.”

The shrill ringing of the telephone intruded. She stepped back from their embrace. “You better answer that.”

Wil answered the phone, listened for a minute, then straightened. Every muscle in his hunky body seemed to jump to alert mode. “Wait for me. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

When he hung up, she asked, “Where are you going?”

“We are going into the station. Brady and Devon picked up Ian Davis. They’re bringing him in for questioning, and I want to be there.”

## *CHAPTER SIXTEEN*

A mantle of dread settled around her shoulders. They were leaving the relative safety of their isolated hide-out. She couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom. "Wouldn't I be safer hiding out here?"

"I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Resigned, she headed toward the stairs. "I'll get my stuff."

"Good idea. I don't know that we'll be able to return for it."

About five minutes later, she descended the stairs with her duffel. Wilson waited for her at the bottom of the steps. He'd changed into his hunter green uniform, complete with holster and gun. Keys jingled from one hand. The other clutched an aqua and black baseball cap.

"I'm ready if you are."

He handed her the cap, which she recognized as an NFL-licensed Jacksonville Jaguars cap. "Wear this. It's not much of a disguise, but it's better than nothing."

She adjusted the strap to tighten the fit, then put it on. "Good thinking."

"Let's go out the back." The rain had stopped, but water dripped from every tree limb. She followed Wilson around the back of the house toward the carport. On the way, Wilson stopped beside an outdoor storage lean-to, where he grabbed an axe and some kind of saw. "No telling what we'll have to remove from the road."

"You think we'll be able to get through?"

"Well, Adam made it here from downtown, so I'm hoping the tools won't be necessary."

He idled the Jeep up the drive, careful of the standing water and debris. Stopping at the gate, he got out long enough to unchain the gates and then proceeded onto the paved county road. A police vehicle had been abandoned beside the gate. She assumed it belonged to Adam but didn't ask. Wilson had mentally retreated to some unreachable place, deep in thought. Or perhaps he was concentrating on the drive.

Dodging the downed trees, he followed County Road 471 to the next dirt road and pulled to a stop. An old truck blocked the side road, its hood raised. A thin, bony African-American man jumped from the driver's



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seat and waved both arms. Another man sat in the passenger seat, but she couldn't see his face.

"What's up, Mr. Gabe?" Wilson parked beside the man's truck.

"H'lo, Sheriff Wil. I'm mighty glad you happened by. I got me an injured man needin' help."

Wilson climbed out of the seat, then leaned into the window of the truck. "Ben Sawyer! A bunch of folks will be mighty glad to see you."

Gabe leaned against the fender, facing Wilson. "I tried calling Adam, but I can't get through. All I get's that fast busy tone."

Wilson nodded. "Busy circuits. You want a ride to town?"

The man Wilson had called Mr. Gabe shook his head. "No need. Just get Ben to a doctor. He's prob'ly got a concussion."

"Open the door, and I'll help him to the Jeep."

Elizabeth released her seatbelt, then bolted to his side. "Let me help."

Wilson grunted, hoisting the injured man from the truck. About Wilson's age, Ben Sawyer outweighed him by thirty pounds at least. "Ben Sawyer, Gabe Reesor, meet Elizabeth Stevens."

How had the scrawny older man managed to get Ben into his pickup? They murmured their polite greetings to Elizabeth while struggling to walk Ben to the

Jeep. Mud caked one side of his jeans, and long scratches reddened his arms and one side of his face.

"We need to doctor those scratches," she said.

"I dragged him some getting him out of the river."

"Saved my life."

Gabe waved off Ben's words as if rescuing the man were no big deal.

"Wilson, I'll ride in the back with Ben and see if I can find some antibiotic cream in my bag."

They buckled up and said goodbye to Gabe. Wilson started the Jeep and crept into town, again evading logs and other debris blocking his path. Fortunately, he had no occasion to use the axe. While she rummaged through her toiletries in search of her first aid kit, she kept Ben talking. If he was concussed, they didn't want him going to sleep.

"Adam borrowed my boat and went to pick up Amy and the kids."

"So they're okay?" Ben's voice wasn't strong, but at least he could talk.

"Far as I know, buddy. Can you tell us what happened?"

She found a tiny tube of Neosporin. "Hold on. Let me doctor his face."

After she'd applied the cream to his scratches, he held out his arm for her to wipe as clean as she could with one of her T-shirts. "Tree crashed through the center of the house, cutting it in two. The way sparks were fly-

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ing, it's a wonder it didn't catch fire."

"So why did you go for help alone?" Wilson asked.

"I didn't at first. We all piled in the truck and started for town. But the bridge was underwater. I could barely make out the sides. I turned around and took them back to the old barn. It didn't seem damaged, so I thought they'd be safe until I could get help. I went back and tried it alone. I figured I could make it, but I wasn't taking chances with my family."

"You know better. Remember our safety slogan, *Don't Drown—Turn Around?*"

"Yeah, I shoulda. The bridge gave way, and I lost my truck. Somehow I got out. Next thing I knew, I was on Reesor's dock. Did you know that old guy knows CPR?"

Wilson nodded. "Yes, I did. You aren't the first person he's saved."

Elizabeth emptied the tube of Neosporin, applying what she could to his wounds. "This will have to do till we get you to a real doctor."

"Did you see what became of your truck?"

"It's probably stuck in the mud with the bridge wreckage. It's insured, at least."

Her heart ached for this man. Even though she didn't know him, she appreciated his love for his family. "Do you have insurance on your home?" she asked.

"Not hurricane insurance. We'll have to wait and see what the damage is. I guess we'll stay with Adam for

a few days.”

Without thinking it through, she said, “I have a house on Fifth Street. I’m not going to be needing it for a while, so why don’t you and your family house-sit for me?” She met Wilson’s gaze in the rearview mirror and asked, “Or do you think it’s safe for them?”

Ben winced and grabbed his head, which probably hurt like crazy. “Safe?”

Wilson grimaced, then recovered with a fairly smooth story. “Uh, yeah. She has a huge live oak in her front yard. If it’s still standing, the house is safe.”

“Ma’am, you don’t know me. That’s mighty generous of you, but—”

“Any friend of Wilson’s is a friend of mine.”

Ben looked at her with worry-filled eyes. “Ma’am, that’s the thing. Wil and I ain’t exactly friends.”

She gave Ben her stern, professor look. “In times of trouble, we don’t nurse old grudges. Right, Wilson?”

“Right.” God bless him, he didn’t hesitate. “In fact, I’m finished nursing old grudges.”

“See? I’ve driven past your brother-in-law’s house. It’s adorable but hardly roomy enough for a family of four.” She slid the house key off her key ring, handed it to him, reciting her address.

Ben swallowed. “I don’t know what to say—”

“Just say thanks.”

She couldn’t tell him she’d have no further use of the

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house, anyway. But even if she wasn't being relocated, she'd open her home to him and his displaced family. That's what communities did to help their own. It'd been a long time since she'd felt strong ties to a neighborhood. Just another thing she'd miss when she left Drake Springs.

Ben closed his eyes and murmured, "Thanks."

She shook him. "Hey, wake up."

"Huh? My head is killing me."

"I know." She caught Wilson's concerned frown in the mirror.

"I'm going to try the radio. Maybe it's working."

While Wilson radioed his dispatch with the happy news that Ben had been rescued, Elizabeth kept Ben talking. "If you're feeling drowsy, fight it. Talk to me. Ask me questions." Anything. Although they'd reached the city limits sign, she didn't know how long he'd have to wait for medical attention.

"Okay," he said. "Tell me how you know Wil."

"We met at Boyd's Diner, where we both eat breakfast most mornings. Have you had their French toast? It's amazing."

"Uh, no, ma'am. But Lorraine makes good coffee."

Wilson stopped on Main Street to turn right on Coronado. A huge blackjack oak blocked the street and filled half the parking lot of the city building. "I guess I'll need to drive around front."

By the time Wilson pulled up to the front of City Hall, a crowd of people had gathered to take charge of Ben. Happy people, judging from their response to seeing him, including Adam Gillespie, a woman who had to be his twin sister, and two small dark-haired boys.

“Get down.” With his hand on her ball cap, Wilson urged Elizabeth to duck behind the seat. No one seemed to notice since all eyes were on Ben. Wilson saluted Adam. “I’ll leave him in your care.”

She lay down on the backseat after Ben got out. The Jeep moved again. After a couple of turns, Wilson stopped and cut the motor. “Okay, we’re here. Let me slip you in my private door. Then I want you to sit at my desk and don’t move, not even to go to the bathroom, unless I’m with you. Got it?”

“Got it.” She jogged from the Jeep to his office, with Wilson beside her toting her duffel bag. He bolted her inside and turned to leave. “Wait. If you’re going to leave me here awhile, let me visit the ladies’ room first.”



Once Wil had Elizabeth settled in his office, he greeted Zelda and then headed for the interrogation room, where Devon and Brady sat with Ian Davis. Ian scowled from behind a can of Mountain Dew when Wil entered the room. Wil left Ian with Devon while Brady stepped out-

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side to brief him.

"This guy's a real piece of work. You wouldn't believe what tale he's spinning in there."

"Try me."

Devon hooked his thumbs in the belt loops of his uniform trousers. "He says he ran because he fears for his life. He claims his wife is trying to kill *him*, not the other way around. Or she's trying to set him up for her crimes. Either way, it makes no sense."

"What are her crimes, according to him?"

"Murder. He says she killed both the Hodges woman and Kris Knight to make it appear that he did it. Then she staged a disappearance so he'd be the suspect. Didn't I say he'd spun a wild one?"

The scenario was the same as the one Elizabeth had suggested except for the killer's identity and motive. "Did he explain what her motive might be?"

Devon shook his head. "Hadn't gotten that far. In fact, we waited for you to begin the questioning. This is all bullshit he volunteered."

"Volunteered? You're right—that's suspicious. Ronda Lou, the profiler, said we're looking at someone these women knew, someone who could get close enough to shoot each one in the head. Someone nonthreatening who had the intelligence to avoid or destroy forensic evidence. You can't get much less threatening than this guy."

"You have to wonder what a looker like his wife saw

in a geek like him to begin with.”

Wil stared through the door’s glass window at their suspect. Short, stocky build. He hadn’t shaved in days. His thinning hair spiked in several directions, and black rimmed glasses perched askew on his large nose. Quiet, polite, gentle, he’d have no trouble disarming a woman, especially one who considered him a friend. Or husband. “Let’s go talk to him.”



Wilson’s desk looked a lot like his cabin. Messy. Left with time to fill and nothing to occupy her time, Elizabeth removed everything from his desk, then dusted the top with the T-shirt she’d soiled cleaning the mud from Ben Sawyer’s arm and face. She also dusted the monitor and keyboard on the credenza behind his chair.

During her brief visit to Wilson’s cabin, she’d caught herself fantasizing. Wouldn’t that be a perfect home for the two of them? After he’d mentioned marriage, she’d indulged in a brief daydream in which she redecorated the cabin, turning it into a cozy retreat on the river for the two of them. It wouldn’t take much to tidy up the place. How she’d love a home with a wraparound screened porch, with a swing where she could sit with a hot cup of tea, watching the wildlife.

Surely there was a way she could get her life back.



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If there were, which life would she reclaim? Her Horse Calls business would be difficult to reestablish since she'd abandoned all her clients without notice. The English professor's position wouldn't be held open indefinitely. Even if by some miracle Sullivan's threat no longer existed, where would she return? Where did she fit in?

She stopped that line of thinking in its tracks. To stay alive, she belonged where Sullivan's hit man couldn't find her. End of story. With resignation, she finished dusting the furniture in Wilson's office. Satisfied with her cleaning, she tossed the soiled T-shirt in the trash. As she replaced his telephone, stapler, wire inbox, and blotter, a Shania Twain tune finally penetrated her brain. Her cell phone ringtone.

Scrambling to pull the phone from her bag, she flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Liz, thank God!"

"Sunny? Oh, Sunny, where are you?" Weak with relief, she plopped into Wilson's chair. "Where have you been?"

"Are you alone? Can you talk?"

"I'm alone. Where—"

"Oh, Liz, you've got to help me." Sunny's voice rose to a higher pitch as she talked. "He's taken my car, God knows where, so I couldn't leave and—"

"Who took your car, Ian?"

"Of course, Ian, the son of a bitch. I can't believe I trusted him. *Loved* him! He tried to kill me."

"I figured as much. What happened?"

"I got away, but—" Her voice broke, and she started to sob. "I'll tell you l-l-later."

She'd never heard so much anguish in her friend's voice. "So what can I do to help? Call the police?"

Sunny sniffled, then seemed to compose herself. "Not until I'm safely away. Can you drive me to Jacksonville? I'm flying out as soon as they reopen the airport."

She couldn't drive Sunny to Jacksonville or anywhere. She'd promised Wilson she'd stay in his office. Besides, as soon as her handler arrived, she had to leave with him. "Sunny, I want to help, but I can't leave."

"Why can't you leave?"

She could tell no one, not even Sunny, about her circumstances. "I'll get someone to pick you up—"

"Someone? God, if not you, who's left?"

Both Cathleen and Kris were dead, of course, but how could Elizabeth help Sunny and not compromise her own safety? Yet how did she explain to Sunny why she couldn't leave?

"Liz, please. You're the only friend I've got. Won't you help me?"

"I can't drive you to Jacksonville, Sunny. I'm sorry. But tell me where you are, and I'll get you to the sheriff's office." She wasn't about to admit that she was already there, not when Wilson had given her orders to tell no one her whereabouts. "You'll be safe there, I promise."

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Sunny heaved a loud sigh. "I guess I don't have a choice. Okay, I'm at a public phone at the Nite Owl Convenience Store. You remember where that is?"

"Just past Dairy Queen on First Street."

"Don't drive to the front. I need to keep out of sight. Look for me on the north side of the building."

"But Ian's—" Either Sunny had ended the call or lost the signal before Elizabeth could explain that Ian was being questioned.

Now what? She stared at Wilson's neat desktop, then had a thought. She'd take Wilson with her. But when she opened the door to ask his secretary if she could talk to him, the older woman hung up the phone and shook her head.

"He gave strict orders, ma'am. I can't interrupt him now."

"Is there a deputy available who can help me?"

"Everybody's out on calls. Chief Deputy Fischer may still be in his office." Answering the ringing phone, Zelda pointed toward the hallway behind her desk.

Elizabeth hurried into a room labeled *Dispatch*, where she spotted Chief Deputy Fischer in an adjacent office. His door ajar, he sat at his desk talking on the phone. She waited just outside the office until he ended his call and then knocked at the wall beside the door.

He motioned her inside. "What can I do for you, Professor Stevens?"

She filled him in on Sunny Davis's situation. "She

doesn't want Ian to know she's escaped. He plans to kill her."

"But he's being interrogated now. Why can't she come in on her own?"

"She's frightened out of her wits. Besides, she may need medical attention. Can't you drive over to the Nite Owl?"

He stood. "All right. Can you call her back and tell her to expect me? I don't want to waste time hunting her down."

Flipping open her cell phone, she checked the last number on her calls received and hit *send*. "I'm calling her now."

Chief Deputy Fischer followed her into the dispatch room. "Tell her I'll be in a marked county sedan."

She nodded. He left the room just as Sunny answered the phone with a cautious "Hello?"

"Sunny, watch for a marked Foster County sedan. Chief Deputy Fisher is coming for you—"

"Are you nuts?" Sunny screeched into the phone. "Ian will know—"

"Ian's in police custody." Not true, but she needed to calm Sunny. Ian was being questioned at the station, which meant he wasn't on the loose. "I tried to tell you earlier, but we were cut off. You'll be safe now."

"No, Liz, I won't." Sunny spoke in quiet defeat. "You have no idea how cunning Ian is. He bragged to me that he's planted stuff on my hard drive to incriminate me in Cat's murder. Kris's, too. He set everything up

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well, and he'll convince the cops that I'm not to be trusted."

*Oh no.* That could only mean Ian had killed their two friends. "But how?"

"Oh, Liz, you've been around Ian. Even you had trouble believing he was capable of spying on me. Admit it."

"He did fool me." But she was easily deceived, not that she cared to go into that particular character flaw with Sunny. "Listen, it's your word against his. You have to fight this."

"Sorry, Liz. I can't trust the police. If you can't help me, I guess I'm on my own—"

"Wait. Let me see what I can arrange and I'll call you back."

"Why can't you just pick me up yourself? I'd do it for you in a heartbeat."

"I would if I could." Before Sunny questioned her further, she rushed on. "I promise I'll help you. Stay there at the Nite Owl, and I'll call you right back."

She'd stalled for time, but what did it buy her? The chief deputy was en route to pick up Sunny. Could she catch him and insist on going with him? But she'd promised Wilson she'd stay out of sight. Walking past Zelda's desk, she caught her in between calls.

"Do you know how to reach Chief Deputy Fischer?"

"That was him on the line just now. He said to tell you he had to take a call on his way to the Nite Owl and wouldn't be able to pick up the woman. I assume you

know what he's talking about."

"Yes, ma'am. Thanks." She headed toward Wilson's office, then hesitated. "Could you give Sheriff Drake a message for me when he comes back?"

"That I can do." She grabbed a pad of message slips just as the telephone rang again.

"Tell him I'll be right back, that I'm picking up Sunny Davis at the Nite Owl and bringing her back here."

Zelda stopped writing. "Sunny Davis, the one reported missing?"

The telephone persisted, and Elizabeth spoke quickly. "That's right. She needs my help. I'll return probably before he knows I'm gone, but I need for him to know my whereabouts."

"I'll tell him." Zelda scooped up the phone to answer the call.

*Damn!* She shouldn't be doing this. Leaving now was wrong on so many levels, but Sunny needed her help. She redialed Sunny at the public phone. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Even as Elizabeth slipped out Wilson's private door to jog to her truck, warning bells sounded in her head. She hated breaking her promise to Wilson, but she couldn't let Sunny down. Sunny was the only girlfriend she had in Drake Springs who hadn't been murdered, and Elizabeth had no intention of turning her back on her.

Imagine finding out your husband wanted you dead!

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Elizabeth knew that kind of betrayal. She'd been the victim of a lying sociopath who claimed to love her while leading a double life. They were two months from their wedding day when she found out he was not the man she loved. She and her family would suffer from his treachery for the rest of their lives.

She'd shed enough tears over Brendan Price. Now she needed to pick up Sunny. Just because Ian had been brought in for questioning didn't mean they had enough evidence to arrest him. But if she brought Sunny to the station, she could press charges before he'd be released. Then surely Wilson would forgive Elizabeth for putting herself at risk.

The Nite Owl, less than half a mile from Wilson's office, took fifteen minutes to get to because of road hazards and a county work crew cleaning up storm debris. She pulled past the store and stopped. Sunny darted out from behind the ice machine rolling her yellow bicycle, which she hoisted into the bed of the truck. She yanked open the door, then hopped into the cab.

"Thank you for coming." Sunny slid down low in the seat. "It's been a helluva night."

"You're safe now."

"What's with the baseball cap? I almost didn't recognize you."

She pulled out onto First Street and shifted gears. "Wilson gave it to me."

“Wilson, eh? Well, I’m happy for you, Liz.” Sunny looked up with a sad smile. “I hope you have better luck with your love life than I have.”

“Tell me what happened. And how’d you get away?”

“Oh, boy. Where to start?” Sunny scrunched low in the seat, her arms wrapped around her knees. “I went home to get my car after lunch because of the weather. But Ian was home, so after locking up my bike on the rack, I went inside. He fixed us each a cup of coffee, but mine must have been doped. Next thing I knew, I woke up locked in my trunk.”

An orange-vested flagger stopped traffic long enough to allow a bucket truck to back into First Street. “How’d you get out?”

“Ian’s smart, but he doesn’t know everything. I just used the trunk release. The struggle came from lifting the trunk when my bike was attached to it, but I managed. He’d parked us out near that fire. I think . . . I think he was going to leave me and the car to burn.”

“Oh no.” Elizabeth’s brother had come close to dying in an arsonist’s fire. The memory still shook her. “I’m so glad you escaped.”

“Thanks to my bicycle. I couldn’t find the car keys. He took them, the bastard.”

“You’ll be safe now. I’m taking you in to the sheriff’s office.”

“Oh, God, no! I can’t go there. You don’t know



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how persuasive Ian can be. You do know what a genius he is with computers.”

Elizabeth inched the pickup truck forward in traffic. “They won’t believe him, not if you press charges—”

“You believe me, but they won’t. He’s set this whole thing up brilliantly. I think he planned it from the time he married me, so don’t be so sure the police will take my word against his.” Sunny raised up enough to see over the dashboard. “You’re going to have to take a detour around this mess.”

Elizabeth’s spirits sank. This quick trip shouldn’t have taken so much time. Instead of rescuing Sunny, she may have put them both in danger. Who knew where the hit man lurked, or what he looked like? She needed to be the one slinking down in the seat instead of Sunny. That thought gave her pause.

If Ian was in custody, from whom was Sunny hiding?



Wil straddled the wooden chair backwards and crossed his arms over the back. Ian Davis gave him a sullen look from behind a can of Mountain Dew. The guy stuck to his crazy story that he—not Sunny—was the victim in her disappearance. He also had strong alibis for both homicides. He’d been working at the college data center.

“But what does Sunny have to gain by killing you or

setting you up? She's the one with the trust fund."

Ian seemed to have a ready answer for all their questions, which only raised Wil's suspicions. "I told you, I don't know about any stinking trust fund. If she has one, it's news to me."

"You two have been married how long?"

"I married her a year ago. We just celebrated our anniversary." He slouched back in his chair and harrumphed. "That's a joke. Legally, we aren't even married."

Wil masked his surprise at this bit of news, but Ian was clever. He could be playing them. "You aren't legally married?"

"I'm not legally married to Sonya Leigh Duncan, because Sonya Leigh Duncan died thirty years ago."

"Sunny used an alias? Why would she do that?"

"That's what I been trying to tell you yo-yos. I found several fake identities. She thought by deleting her files, I couldn't access them. But I know my way around a hard drive."

"Excuse me a minute." Wil motioned for Brady to join him outside the interrogation room. After they closed the door, Wil flipped through the file until he came to Jamie's report. "Here it is. Jamie couldn't find anything on a Sonya Leigh Duncan, but she searched for living persons."

"I'll get Jamie to check out the deceased Sonya Leigh Duncan."

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"You can reach her in the field. She has her laptop."

"If Jamie checks it out, are you buying his story?"

"I'm keeping an open mind, Brady. There was always something a bit too slick about Sunny Davis. Could be one of those 'black widows.' Let's ask him about life insurance policies."

Brady left to call Jamie, and Wil returned to the interview room. Ian had emptied his soft drink and crushed the can with both hands. He looked up when they entered the room, and held up the can. "You guys recycle?"

Recycle? Most savvy suspects wouldn't accept a drink or smoke, knowing the police might use it to check DNA. Could Ian be clueless, or very, very confident?

"Yeah. I'll take it." Wil relieved him of the can. "Before we continue, would you like another soda or anything to eat?"

"No, thank you."

Brady slipped back into the room, giving Wil a single nod. So Ian told the truth about Sunny's alias. Excitement filled Wil's gut, the same sensation he had when working puzzles and was closing in on a solution. Was he?

Reclaiming his chair, he met Ian's gaze. "Did you and Sunny buy life insurance?"

"Not that I know of. She might have forged my name on some, but I couldn't afford anything but the bare minimum of car insurance."

"Tell us everything you learned about Sunny from her computer that convinced you she wants you dead."

"I'm not convinced she wants to kill me, just to set me up to take a fall. I think she had me in mind for a patsy all along."

Ian was a consummate actor. Or genuine heartache and anger burned within him. Wil needed to know more before he formed any theories. "So tell us what you uncovered about her."

"You're not going to believe it. I hardly believe it myself."

"Just tell us, Ian."

"She goes on lots of trips. She said she was going to Boston to visit her mother, and I believed her. Then last weekend after she left, I booted up her laptop to run defrag. She knew about it. In fact, she asked me to pull maintenance on it because her CPU had been sluggish. Anyway, before I had a chance to start defrag, she got one of those popup IMs."

"Instant messages?" Brady asked.

"Yeah. It verified a funds transfer. A large funds transfer."

"How large?" Wil asked.

"Twenty grand. That struck me odd, so I did some checking into her deleted e-mails. Found out my dear sweet wife has a secret life. She does freelance jobs for thousands of dollars, which is how she affords the travel

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and the fancy car. I didn't see anything about a trust fund. Furthermore, when I tried to locate her mother in Boston, there was no mother. No Duncans with a daughter named Sonya Leigh. That's when I took apart her hard drive."

"Freelance? Doing what?"

"At first, I thought she was a hooker, but no hooker I ever heard of makes that kind of cash. Then I thought maybe she deals drugs because there was mention of shipments and delivery. But it's not drugs she buys—it's weapons. Not large arms deals, just the occasional untraceable weapon for the occasional crime."

Like the twenty-two found dismantled and tossed into the Suwannee? "Do you have this hard drive that you could show us these files?"

"What would that prove? I could've planted it there. That's what she'll say—"

"She's missing, Ian. She's not saying anything."

"That's part of her plan. She wants me to be under suspicion for her disappearance. Then you'll make the logical leap to those two women who were murdered—"

"I don't follow you. Why would we suspect you of those homicides?" Brady asked.

"This is the part you're really not going to believe, but I think Sunny shot those two women. She's a killer, I tell you. She carries a case of guns in the trunk of that Lexus of hers."

Wil agreed. He wasn't going to believe the woman drove with an arsenal in her trunk. "How did you find this out?"

"She rides her bike to work, so I had plenty of opportunities to search her car." He seemed embarrassed at the admission. "Not that I did, at least not until this week. She has a false bottom in the trunk. After I figured out how to remove it, I found the guns, all neatly packed in foam casing."

Still, Ian could be describing his own arsenal. "Those two women were her friends. Why would she kill either one?"

"Sunny—or whoever in hell she is—has no friends. She butters you up and uses you, then discards you when she's through." Bitterness laced his speech. "Or maybe she just puts a bullet in you."

Wil kept a noncommittal tone to his voice he didn't feel. Something in Ian's story piqued his subconscious. Excitement buzzed through his nerve endings. "Tell us how she arranged these gun deals."

"It's mostly in code, which is why it took me time to crack. Sometimes the deals are in chats, which for some reason she recorded. Some are e-mails. Again, she saves them all in a phony file marked 'Deleted Files.' I guess she never thought I would peek. She has about a dozen false identities, depending on who she's interacting with."

"I'll repeat my question. Do you have this hard

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drive to show us?”

Ian shook his head before Wil finished asking. “She grabbed the laptop and took it with her when she”—he made quotation marks with his fingers—“disappeared.”

Wil sighed, unable to mask his disappointment. How convenient. “Well, there’s no way to check out your story unless we know the details.”

“What details do you need?”

“For starters, what are some of these false identities she uses?”

“I remember most of them because I tried to trace them. All I checked out were dead people, usually children. Sonya Leigh Duncan, you know about. That’s fake. Then there’s Rita Redoso, who’s buried in New Mexico. Starr Webster turned out to be buried in Hannibal, Missouri. Morgan O’Hare, buried in Pocatello, Idaho. Melissa Hewitt, buried in—”

Every nerve in Wil’s body jumped to attention. “Did you say Morgan O’Hare?”

*The twenty-two was purchased two years ago by someone in Texas, a Morgan O’Hare.*

*Morgan O’Hare died at the age of six about twenty years ago and is buried in Idaho.*

Wil contained his impulse to run and call Ronda Lou. Ian may have discovered that Sunny Davis was the real Morgan O’Hare. Or Ian could be the real gun dealer and playing them. He needed more before he’d

know how to proceed.

“Yeah, that’s the one she uses in her weapons trade.” Ian gave a sarcastic laugh. “I was married to her for a year and never suspected a thing.”

“What else can you tell us?”

“She has a code name that she uses for her deals that take her out of town—”

“Tell us about those transactions.” Wil needed to keep an open mind. Although he found the idea of the diminutive blonde as a killer preposterous, he had to admit she would fit Ronda Lou’s profile. Neither Cathleen Hodges nor Kris Knight would’ve given a second thought to going anywhere with Sunny. Elizabeth, either, for that matter. A chill chased down his spine just from thinking of such a possibility. Sunny was smart, and certainly would’ve known something about forensics.

“God knows what she does. I found references to targets, timetables, deliveries, packages—that sort of thing. Everything vague.”

Brady glanced at Wil, then leaned across the table close to Ian. Brady wasn’t buying it, judging from his body language. “And you can’t remember the code name she used?”

Ian propped his chin atop his steepled fingers and closed his eyes. “Conagher, Connor . . . Conger. That’s it. Conger.”

“Conger? Jesus Christ!” Wil toppled his chair rushing



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from the room.

Whether Ian told the truth or an elaborate and convoluted tale, one thing was certain. Either Sunny or Ian was the hired assassin Cory said was looking for Sofia Desalvo. Wil rushed past dispatch, barged past Zelda, and banged open his office door.

Elizabeth was gone.

## *CHAPTER SEVENTEEN*

Zelda covered the telephone receiver with her hand and stopped him. He prayed she'd tell him something good—such as Elizabeth had gone to the vending machine for a Coke. Instead, Zelda handed him a message slip. “She’s gone to pick up that woman who was reported missing.”

He scanned the message, and his blood froze. He struggled to catch his breath. Elizabeth had gone to meet Sunny more than thirty minutes ago.

Charging out the private entrance, he searched the parking lot in the frantic hope that he'd see the Chevy S-10 pickup. No such luck. His pulse thundered in his ears. He squeezed the doorjamb until his fingers screamed in pain.

“Holy hell, Elizabeth, what have you done? And where are you now?”

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Wil rushed inside and alerted dispatch, issuing an APB on the Chevy S-10. It's all he knew to do except pray. And pray he did, that by some miracle Elizabeth could outsmart the hit woman.



"I've changed my mind," Sunny said. "Take me to my place. I'll pick up my car and drive myself to Jacksonville."

Still stopped for the flagger, Elizabeth glanced down at Sunny. "But you said Ian took the keys."

"Oh, right." Sunny's tone was odd, not at all that of the terrified victim rescued at the Nite Owl. "I forgot. Well, there's an extra set at the apartment. You can turn right on Osceola and cut through campus."

If she returned to the station without Sunny but unharmed, Wilson would forgive her for disobeying his instructions. But he'd be happier if she brought in the witness against Ian. "You need to press charges against Ian before you leave town, Sunny. That's kidnapping and attempted murder."

"What do you know about kidnapping and attempted murder? It's my word against his."

Elizabeth inched up in traffic, the flagger finally turning his *Stop* sign to *Slow*. "My brother was kidnapped once and almost killed. I know the charges can

stick if the victim testifies.”

“Well, I guess the secret is in not letting the victim live to testify.”

“What?” She turned to Sunny, who now held a pistol pointed at Elizabeth’s side. She blinked, but the horrible scene remained. Did Sunny plan to shoot Ian? Why point the weapon at *her*? “What are you doing with that gun?”

“Turn right on Osceola.” Sunny’s eyes turned to blocks of ice, her lips thinned to a tight, bloodless line.

Outside the weather was balmy, but chills besieged Elizabeth’s body. She trembled and shook. When she spoke, her teeth chattered. “For God’s sakes, Sunny, put that thing away.”

“I said turn right.”

Elizabeth turned.

Sunny said, “You know, you are the toughest girl I’ve had to track down. You never slipped up, not one time—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, give me a break. We both know Elizabeth Stevens is an alias that the Feds gave you when they re-located you.”

*Dear God, now what?* Was Sunny working for Sullivan? Had she discovered her identity and turned her in? Fear choked Elizabeth, making breathing more and more difficult. But self-preservation kicked in, and she forced a laugh. “You clearly have me confused with

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someone else—”

“Nice try, but you can give up the act. I’m onto you.” She craned her neck to see over the dash. “Turn left on Second and cut over to Main. We’re going for a ride out west.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll shoot you. Don’t think I won’t.”

One look into Sunny’s chilling blue eyes removed all doubt. This crazy woman had no qualms about killing her or anyone else. “You killed Cathleen and Kris, didn’t you?”

“I don’t do confessions.”

Maybe not, but she hadn’t denied killing them. Bile rose in Elizabeth’s throat. They’d been mistaken for her and murdered for it. In Sunny’s search for her “target,” she’d simply used the process of elimination. “I—I have to pull over. I’m going to be sick.”

“Vomit inside your redneck truck. You aren’t pulling over till I say so. Now turn.”

Gagging, she turned right onto Main and headed out of town. Maybe she should throw up in the truck, hurl all over Sunny. It would serve her right, the murdering fiend. Elizabeth held no hope of getting away from her killer. Instead of making her throw up, the realization calmed her. She had an edge now. She had nothing to lose. All she had to do was use her brain. The worst that could happen? Sunny would kill her; she planned to do that, anyway.

Elizabeth feigned her way into whining mode. "Please, Sunny, tell me why you're doing this. I don't want to die." She exaggerated her pitiful wailing, but the sentiment was real. She *didn't* want to die!

"Oh, please. For the money, of course. Do you have any idea how much I make as a freelance . . . cleanup person?"

"Is *cleanup person* a euphemism for contract killer?"

"I told you, I don't do confessions."

"So the parents in Boston and the trust fund—"

"I haven't seen my ol' man since I was eight. And my mother? She died of an overdose while turning tricks. Sorry to destroy your illusions, but honestly, Liz, you're too gullible."

As if she needed reminding of her poor judgment of character. She turned up the whining, hoping Sunny would grow overconfident of her position. "So why me? What have I done?"

Sunny twisted her position, gripping the pistol with both hands. "I want to collect the second half of my fee. My client wants you taken care of. 'Why' isn't my business."

"How can you be sure you have the right person?"

Sunny's words confirmed her worst fears. "Process of elimination."

Slowing, Elizabeth swerved around a huge tree that blocked half the highway near the Hurricane Lantern parking lot. "You can sit up now. There're no other cars on the road, and we've left town."

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Sunny took a confirming peek, then pushed herself up in the seat, the pistol never wavering from its aim at Elizabeth's side. "Okay, just head for the first trailhead in the forest."

Road debris slowed their progress, which suited her fine. She wasn't in any hurry to meet her death. If only she had a way to signal Wilson, to let him know her whereabouts. Even if she did, would he have time to rescue her? She had to try. *Think!*

"What's at the first trailhead?"

"That's where I'll be leaving you. I'll bike to my car, which is hidden farther up the road. You couldn't drive a car with an automatic transmission like everyone else, could you? Otherwise, I could've driven away in this and dumped it."

"Like you did Cathleen's van and Kris's car?"

Sunny seemed to ignore that. "God, this road's a mess. I thought I'd be clear of this shit hole town long before now."

She'd never seen this side of Sunny, such cold callousness. She'd thought they were friends. What signs had she missed or ignored? What defective gene had robbed her of good judgment when it came to people's character? "Sorry to have inconvenienced you."

"Well, you have. Who'd believe that a fat chick like you ever looked like that hot-looking brunette I've been hunting? You're good—I'll hand you that."

"I still don't know what you're talking about—"

"Save it. I know who you are. As soon as my spyware picked up multiple visits to courier-journal.com."

Damn. She'd thought Ian might have installed spyware. "How did you—"

"In an e-mail, dumbass. You never suspected a thing."

"You're so right about that," she murmured.

Ahead in the road, a small pine tree blocked part of the pavement. On either side loomed large, solid live oaks. In a split second, Elizabeth remembered two important items. First, her Chevy S-10 came with a satellite-linked road service device. She'd paid the monthly subscription but never used the service. Would it work after the hurricane? If so, it could notify authorities of her location.

Second, she remembered turning off the passenger-side air bag when Harold had ridden in the cab holding Sophie in his lap. However, she had no recollection of turning it back on. Could she deliberately crash the truck and injure Sunny without killing herself? The gun might go off in the impact, but it was a chance she had to take.

She downshifted as if slowing for the road obstacle. At the last second, she stomped the accelerator and rammed the live oak with the passenger side, crashing through the downed pine tree and catapulting Sunny into the dash. Right before impact, Elizabeth let go of the steering



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wheel and covered her face with both hands.

The airbag inflated, blocking Elizabeth's view and dazing her. She punched it down and out of the way. The impact dislodged the ball cap Wilson had given her to wear, but she couldn't spare time to hunt for it. Sunny groaned, blood streaking her face and her eyes closed. The vile gun lay on the floorboard just out of reach. Wasting no time, Elizabeth scrambled out of her seatbelt and scooped up the pistol in one fast motion. Later she'd think about how much she loathed guns.

"We have an airbag deployment indication on your vehicle. Are you all right?" a voice called out from her *OnStar*.

"No! Send help, quickly!" she shouted, the gun trembling in her grasp. This would never do. If she couldn't hold the weapon with authority, Sunny would take it away from her as soon as she regained consciousness.

On cue, Sunny opened her eyes.



Wil sent every available patrol car in all directions from town. Everyone at the station was on alert for news of the Chevy S-10. Brady stayed with Ian but suspended their interrogation. Wil's gut told him Ian was as much a victim as Elizabeth.

Nancy Fox hollered from the dispatch desk, holding

up a report sheet. “Out 471 west at the edge of the forest we have an *OnStar* report of a collision. It’s a vehicle belonging to Elizabeth Stevens. Devon’s closest.”

“I’ll take it.” Wil snatched the paper from Nancy’s hand. “Call EMS.”

“They’re already on the way.”

Wil started toward his office to leave and nearly collided with Fred Fischer. “I thought you’d want to know, Wil. Ralph Sapp’s regained consciousness—”

“That’s great, Fred, but I have an emergency.”

Fred rushed alongside him. “I know, but I believe this is related.”

Wil paused at his office door. “How’s that?”

“Ralph identified his assailant as ‘the bicycle lady.’ Libby’s description of the woman matches Sunny Davis.”

Wil swore. “Come with me. Let’s nab this bicycle lady and rescue Elizabeth.”

“I screwed up, Wil. I was on my way to pick up Sunny Davis when I got the urgent call from Libby Sapp—”

“Let’s go.” Later he’d worry about who screwed up. Now he had to focus on finding Elizabeth.

He and Fred ran for Wil’s Jeep and then hopped inside. Wil peeled out of the parking lot onto Main. He had faith that she’d crashed her truck deliberately to activate the *OnStar* system. Or, worst-case scenario— No, Wil refused to consider a worst-case scenario. Elizabeth was smart and gutsy, stronger than most people. Now he just

had to reach her in time.



Squeezing the butt of the gun with her right hand, Elizabeth used her left hand to try the door. It was jammed, but she couldn't stay in the cab with a psychopath. She turned the key for accessories in order to lower her window. Sunny's moan spurred her into action, and she shimmied her body through the window, dropping to the ground amidst a tangle of pine branches, the pistol falling into the debris. Ignoring the abrasions to her skin, she yanked the weapon from the branches and gripped it with both hands. She stood, bracing her quivering body, and faced the truck.

"Wha—what happened?" Sunny ran one hand over her face, stared at the blood, then looked out at Elizabeth with a confused expression. Her gaze dropped to the gun in Elizabeth's hands. Her confusion morphed to awareness, then anger. "You bitch!"

Sunny tried to open the door on her side of the truck, to no avail. With a roar of anger, she lunged herself at Elizabeth through the driver's door window. But a concussion hampered the movements of anyone, even a soulless killer. She staggered, grabbed her head, then collapsed against the truck.

"Hold still. The authorities are on their way."

“Like hell.” She reached for the gun and swayed. “They don’t know where we are—” The *OnStar* operator spoke again, this time reassuring them that help had been dispatched. Sunny glared back at the offending device. “Shit.”

“Don’t move, Sunny.”

Sunny’s smile was more of a grimace. “You aren’t going to shoot me. You’re too big of a wimp.”

She’d always been a wimp where guns were concerned. But Sunny had cold-bloodedly taken the lives of two good women, two unsuspecting ladies who’d offered her friendship and been brutally shot because they’d trusted her. Their only crime had been having a close resemblance to Sofia Desalvo. Rage filled her, followed by a strong dose of sorrow. She waited for the guilt to kick in, but Wilson had been right. Elizabeth hadn’t brought death to anyone. Sullivan had. If Sunny didn’t succeed, he’d just send someone else.

Sunny had failed this time, and she wasn’t getting away. Elizabeth steadied the gun in both hands, aimed wide, and squeezed off a shot. Her ears rang. The hot odor from the discharge polluted the air. Her hands cramped from tension and recoil. But the shock in Sunny’s eyes made it worthwhile. “Now stay put until the cops arrive.”



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Main Street narrowed to two lanes at the Hurricane Lantern and became County Road 471. Ahead, Wil stared at a long stretch of deserted road littered with storm debris. He ran with his flashing lights and siren, speeding toward Osceola National Forest. He concentrated on finding Elizabeth, pushing aside the numbing fear that he'd be too late. Straining to catch sight of a wrecked pickup, he nearly ran into a downed tree limb.

Veering back onto the blacktop, he broke the uneasy silence. "Stop beating yourself up, Fred. If you'd driven to the Nite Owl to pick up Sunny, she wouldn't have gone with you. It was Elizabeth she wanted."

"But why?"

"She's a psycho." It pained him to keep the truth from Fred, but he wouldn't break his promise to Elizabeth or his commitment to Cory. "See anything yet?"

Fred pointed. "Up there. See?"

Wil squinted. In the horizon, a pickup blocked half the road, its right side smashed into a large live oak. The truck straddled a downed pine. Wil nearly veered off the road when he heard the report of a pistol. Perspiration soaked him. Terror claimed his breath. Good God, was he too late?

"Shots fired." Fred had drawn his sidearm and unlatched his seatbelt by the time Wil skidded to a stop behind the wrecked pickup.

Drawing his own weapon, Wil crouched behind the

Jeep's door and called out, "Step away from the vehicle with your hands up."

Two figures emerged from the screen of tree limbs. He nearly melted with relief when Elizabeth stepped forward, both hands clutching a pistol trained on Sunny Davis. "She's all yours, Sheriff Drake."

Wil didn't know how Elizabeth had turned the tables on her abductor. He'd ask later. Her body shook with an adrenaline rush he recognized all too well. It would fade, leaving her weak and exhausted.

He nodded toward Sunny. "Chief Deputy Fischer, arrest this woman and see that she gets medical attention."

Fred grabbed the injured woman's hands, yanking them around to her back with a bit more force than necessary, not that Wil blamed him. Ralph Sapp had identified her as the driver who'd hit him and his bicycle. When they located her black Lexus, they'd test the body damage for forensics, but Wil figured the paint would match that found on Ralph's beach cruiser. Handcuffed, she stumbled to the Jeep, where Fred recited her rights and locked her inside.

Wil holstered his weapon and moved toward Elizabeth. With her hands still gripping the pistol, she dropped her arms and slumped forward. He rushed to catch her before she collapsed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I guess so."

He covered her trembling hands, which still gripped

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the twenty-two. “You can let go of the gun now, darlin’.”

She dropped the weapon into his hand. “I didn’t see it coming.”

He wrapped one arm across her shoulders and tugged her close. “I know, darlin’—”

“I *never* see it coming.” Her eyes glazed over. Anguish filled her voice. “I’ll never learn.”

The ambulance pulled alongside Wil’s Jeep and cut its siren. “You’ve had a shock. Let the paramedics look you over—”

Her eyes widened, but she still seemed unable to focus. “No!”

Fred escorted Sunny from the Jeep to the rear of the EMS vehicle to get treatment for her head wound.

“I’m not hurt.” Elizabeth closed her eyes and sighed a ragged breath. “I just want to go home.”

What did she mean? She’d handed over her house keys to Ben Sawyer and his family. She couldn’t mean Kentucky, not when Frank Sullivan still had a price on her head. As much as he’d like to fantasize the cabin as their home, he doubted that’s what she had in mind.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

She squeezed her eyes shut and collapsed against him. “She would’ve killed me.”

“You outsmarted her.” He hugged her, unable to tell whose body trembled more. His heart had stopped beating when he’d heard the gunshot. “Darlin’, did you

shoot at Sunny?”

“She called me a wimp. I didn’t aim for her, just fired to let her know I meant business.”

Thank God she’d overcome her phobia of guns, at least temporarily. “I thought you wouldn’t touch a firearm.”

She looked up at him then, and her eyes seemed to clear. “I thought I wouldn’t, either. I did all right, huh?”

“You did great.” With her shoulders tucked under his arm, he walked her to the Jeep. Fred climbed into the ambulance to guard their suspect. The closest hospital was in Columbia County, which meant Fred would be tied up for awhile. “We need to go back by the sheriff’s office. Will you be okay?”

“Probably.” She crawled into the Jeep. “Is now a good time to apologize for breaking my promise about not leaving?”

He leaned inside and buckled her safety harness. “Just don’t let it happen again.” He softened the warning with a smile.

Elizabeth didn’t return the smile. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the headrest. Color drained from her skin. Wil grabbed her wrist to check her pulse and found it alarmingly slow. Lifting her arms above her head to increase her heart rate, he gave her a gentle shake.

“Stay with me, darlin’. Don’t pass out.”

Moaning, she dropped her chin. “I’m nauseated.”



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"I know, but that's shock." He released her safety harness. "Come on. Let's walk around a bit."

"No, just give me a sec." She dropped her head between her legs and took deep breaths.

"It's normal to feel this way. Just take your time. We'll leave when you're better."

Unfortunately, Wil's own traumatic experience had taken its toll. He had to hold himself together for Elizabeth's sake, though. He ignored his own clamminess and nausea. Forcing back memories of the awful fear that had driven him to rescue her, he focused on *her* needs when what he ached to do was hold her tightly in his arms, reassuring himself that she was safe. Propriety aside, he feared if he hugged her now, he'd never be able to let her go.

Her safety, unfortunately, was temporary. Sullivan had money and connections. He'd find another contract killer just as soon as he realized this one had failed. Special Agent Cory would arrive to collect his witness and hide her somewhere else. But at least she'd be alive. Wil clung to that small comfort.

## *CHAPTER EIGHTEEN*

She hadn't even had the chance to tell Wilson goodbye.

Riding west on I-10 with Cory, she stared at the Florida landscape. Billboards indicated they were close to a large truck stop. Cory wouldn't tell her their destination yet, but she suspected Mississippi or Alabama. Any farther and they would've flown. Or would they? She'd been in the program only long enough to know that nothing was a given. Still numb from yesterday's harrowing experience, she hardly remembered the rest of the evening. She'd showered and changed clothes at the police station, dozing on a bench in the locker room. Wilson never let her out of his sight, although he'd been too busy to spend much time with her. Propriety had demanded he keep his hands to himself when all she'd

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wanted was to curl up in his lap. Well, that wasn't *all* she wanted, but it would've been a start.

It saddened her to know that she couldn't trust her instincts, even about Wilson. She'd been so sure he was her soul mate, the love of her life. For him, she'd spend her life in the tiny town and live in a two-bedroom cabin. Man, that sounded heavenly! But she'd been sure that Sunny was her friend, too. And what about Brendan? She couldn't have been more wrong in her assessment of her ex-fiancé. She dare not risk her life over a gut feeling. Her gut feelings sucked.

Her life sucked. But at least she was alive. So why did she feel empty and lost when she should feel grateful for escaping the hired assassin? "What's going to happen to Sunny? Or whoever she is."

Special Agent Cory, who appeared to be no older than she, glanced at her. He hid behind ultra-tinted sunshades, which made his expression unreadable. "Not nearly enough, I'm afraid. FDLE is short on evidence to link her to their two homicides, and she's not talking."

*I don't do confessions.*

"Look, I don't want to cause trouble, but what would it take for me to come out of the program?"

"You could leave now, but you'd spend your life looking over your shoulder. You'd wonder every time you turn the key on your ignition or every time an anonymous caller hangs up on you. It's your choice. At

the very least, we need to keep you under wraps until Sullivan is convicted.”

“I’ll cooperate. But I’m not good with clandestine work.”

Cory snorted. “Sofia, you are the best witness I’ve ever handled. You did nothing to bring this on yourself—”

“I looked up my sister-in-law’s Web site and my hometown newspaper. More than once. Sunny had some kind of spyware on my computer—”

“When?”

“When did I go to the site? A few days ago.” It seemed weeks had passed rather than days.

“Your location was leaked last year.” At her gasp, he shook his head. “I swear I didn’t know. None of us did until this week. Turns out Sullivan got to one of ours, but that leak’s been plugged.”

“If even your department isn’t secure, what’s the point? I should be looking over my shoulder, regardless.”

“My point is that, despite our breach, you kept yourself safe by doing everything possible to throw off suspicion as to your true identity. If you hadn’t been a model witness, you wouldn’t be here today.”

“But Cathleen and Kris would be.” A sob lodged in her throat that wouldn’t go away no matter how hard she swallowed. “If Sullivan knew where I was, why did it take Sunny a year?”

“With the computer forensics, we’ve determined that you were one of many contracts she handled from

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Drake Springs. She'd been told about Ian Davis's job at the college. Inexperienced and vulnerable, he was an easy target for her. She seduced and married him, giving her an in with the college and the community. Then it was business as usual while she bided her time trying to locate Sofia Desalvo. Unfortunately, all we can prove right now is kidnapping, and you're our witness for that charge."

"What about vehicular hit and run? Wils—" She swallowed. "Sheriff Drake said Ralph Sapp identified Sunny as the woman who ran him down."

He frowned. "I don't know about that case. The kidnapping alone should keep her behind bars a long time."

"Maybe she'd be willing to cut a deal."

"The FBI has a separate investigation going on her. I doubt they'll be offering deals."

She sighed. "It was just an idea. Maybe she'd turn on Sullivan and expose the murder-for-hire. Wouldn't that add a nail in his coffin?"

"I can always run it by them, but don't expect miracles."

Elizabeth Stevens might not expect miracles, but Sofia Desalvo wouldn't give up. She sighed, resigned to wait for the moment. "All right. What's my new name, and where will I work?"

"Brenda Martin. You'll be teaching at a riding academy in Texas."

"Horses?" At his nod, she smiled. "Cory, I know you've gone the extra mile for me. I appreciate it."

He gave a short nod. "You may be there a while, though."

"Doesn't matter. I'll do whatever I have to do to stay safe." Beginning with friendships. She couldn't afford to trust anyone. Not with her track record. "Might as well get used to my new name, too."

"All right, *Brenda*. When we get to Pensacola, we'll stop at a mall and get you a few clothes."

"I've decided to stop with the pigging out. Maybe I'll drop a few pounds. What do you think about red hair? If I'm reinventing myself, why not go bold and sassy?"

Cory shrugged. "Sure. Just as long as you stick to the rules, you should be safe."

The rules meaning break all connections to her former life. "Sofia rides horses."

"True, but that's what's great about this little town. Everybody rides horses, so you'll fit in. I thought it might make this relocation less objectionable. Just don't do anything else Sofia Desalvo would do."

"Since I entered this program, I've done little that Sofia would do, including now. Running away is so not my style."

Cory nodded, but she knew he didn't understand. He would think she meant running away from danger. But she was running from happiness, from a future with Wilson Drake. Her heart told her he was the one. Her instincts had failed her with a couple of people—bad

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people—but what about all the times she'd trusted folks and been right?

The real Sofia wouldn't lie down and admit defeat. She would grab life by the horns and live it to the fullest, enjoying every moment she could with her loved ones: Mom, Grandma, Nina and Terry, their daughter Sam, Joey and Sally. And especially Wilson. But first she had to figure out a way to reclaim her life without bringing danger to their doors.



Thanksgiving Day turned out to be a pleasant family gathering, though not the one Wil had envisioned. Without Elizabeth—which was no longer her name, but he still called her that in his mind—his days were long and his nights longer. He'd heard nothing more from Special Agent Cory, which he took as a good sign. Cory would contact him only with bad news. But the woman Wil loved couldn't be with him at Thanksgiving. Or anytime.

He and Sam had dusted off the dining room furniture in the main house, hauled out the china, and asked their sister to come home for the holiday weekend. Wil cooked the turkey the night before, then sliced it Thanksgiving morning. Taylor helped cook, but Sam offered to do cleanup only. Dad seemed pleased by their efforts.

At dinner, Taylor held up a water goblet for a toast. "To the first Thanksgiving we've spent as a family in . . . too long a time."

"Hear, hear." Wil raised his goblet.

They clinked glasses. Then Sam held up his glass a second time. "To Wil, for bringing us together and making it happen."

*What?* The unexpected gesture rendered Wil speechless.

"Yes, thank you, Wil. You do the Drakes proud." This from Taylor.

"Yes, son." His dad's shaky hand added his glass to Sam's toast.

"Well, say something, Wil." Taylor nudged him with her elbow.

"Thank you." He clinked their water goblets, then hid his self-consciousness behind a drink from his glass.

They ate without conversation for several minutes. Sophie curled up at Dad's feet beneath the dining table, waiting for a sneaked morsel or two. Wil's turkey turned out juicy and tasty, thanks to the careful instructions he'd gotten from Lorraine and Boyd. His family complimented his cooking, adding to the strangeness of the day's gathering. Growing up, he had never been the family's object of praise and compliments. Or even approval. His mind grappled with the pleasant experience.

It was the sort of thing he would've loved discussing with Elizabeth. Had his own lack of confidence fed his



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family's earlier attitudes? *Just remember: we teach people how to treat us.* She'd been right, of course. And she'd done more to boost his self-esteem than any other person ever had. No wonder he loved her.

"So tell me about this big murder case you cracked," Taylor said.

"Technically, I have two unsolved homicides. We know the identity of the killer but haven't evidence to charge her. Two cold cases are hardly worth bragging about."

Sam picked up the bowl of fluffy mashed potatoes Taylor had whipped. "The real mystery is what became of my English professor and drama director."

Wil glared at his brother. "Sam."

Sam plowed on, oblivious to Wil's discomfort. "I thought she and our brother had something going on, Taylor. They'd grown quite inseparable. Suddenly, she disappears and Amy and Ben are living in her house until theirs can be repaired."

Since the night Adam borrowed Wil's john boat to rescue Amy and her kids, and then the later generosity of Elizabeth giving them a place to stay, tensions between the Gillespie and Drake families had eased. Phyllis even ran an objective account of the homicide investigations in the *Drake Springs Democrat*.

"Let me see if I understand all this." Taylor pointed with her fork. "Wil's old girlfriend is living in Wil's new girlfriend's house, and the new girlfriend has vanished?"

“Amy and Ben insist on paying rent, but Elizabeth charges them only her house payment.” She’d turned over her property to Otis Gibbons, the realtor who handled almost all the rentals in town. Wil took it as a positive sign that she hadn’t listed it for sale.

“They pay utilities, right?” his dad asked.

“Right. But I ran into Ben last Monday, and he says they’ll have their new mobile home by the first of the year. Then I guess they’ll be moving out of the house.”

“Then what? Will Elizabeth be returning?” Taylor asked.

Wil reined in his emotions. He’d not let his own heartache spoil the family holiday dinner. He gave a brief explanation of how Elizabeth had been moved to Drake Springs as a protected witness, leaving out the details of the trial. “She’s been relocated. Her cover was blown here.”

Sam and Taylor stared at him, their faces nearly identical. Except for a few years’ difference in ages, they could’ve passed for twins. Their dad cleared his throat, and all three turned to him. “She saved Sophie’s life.”

Wil explained about the rat poisoning and how Elizabeth had once been a veterinarian. Sam added his two cents about how suited she’d been for the college drama department. Taylor gazed at Wil with sympathetic eyes. “I wish I could’ve known her before she had to leave. Do you think she’ll be safe now that she’s been

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hidden somewhere else?”

“I hope to God she is.”

Most of the food on his father’s plate lay untouched, but Dad was a slow eater. At least Sam hadn’t grabbed knife and fork and started feeding him. “But, son, when she testifies and the bad guy is in jail, she can come back, right?”

“This isn’t her home, Dad. Her family’s in Kentucky.”

Sam scowled at him. “Wilson, surely you aren’t that obtuse.”

Wil wasn’t getting into it any further with his family. He suffered enough in private, replaying parts of conversations. Reliving their night of lovemaking. He could never get enough of her. Yet, even if the state of Kentucky executed Frank Sullivan, would she return to him? He couldn’t shake the memory of her behavior after Sunny’s arrest. She seemed to take all the blame for herself. She’d seemed defeated, filled with self-doubt, when she should’ve celebrated her victory over one of the most cunning assassins on the FBI’s most wanted list.

*I have a history of being a poor judge of character.*

*I didn’t see it coming . . . I never see it coming . . . I’ll never learn.*

Yet he clung to her earlier words . . .

*I will always love you.*

He knew she meant them. Somehow, she’d be back. She had to. The alternative was too terrible to consider.

“Yo, bro.” Taylor waved her hand in front of his face. “What’s Sam mean about being obtuse?”

Sam answered for him. “Her home is with her husband. And unless I miss my guess, Taylor, that’s going to wind up being our brother.”

If Sam believed it, then Wil wouldn’t lose faith. He and Elizabeth—no, *Fia*—would make a home together. He’d be patient. But he wouldn’t give up. He raised his goblet for another toast. “All right. Here’s to making it happen.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Four months later*

Shedding her Brenda Martin identity for the trial, Fia once again could be herself. She and Special Agent Cory walked down the steps side by side, avoiding the crush of media in front of the courthouse. The blustery wind did little to dampen her spirits. “The sun shines bright on the old Kentucky home,” as Stephen Foster wrote. Naturally, the composer brought to her mind the county in Florida named for him, the song he wrote about the Suwannee River, and the cultural center devoted to his music. Most of all, it reminded her of Foster County’s sheriff.

Fia tugged on the belt of her all-weather coat to tighten it. “Is it really and truly over?”

“Sullivan can appeal the death penalty, but he won’t be able to appeal the trial. Your idea about turning

Conger on him turned out to be good strategy.”

“She’d kept records of everything. I have a feeling she either planned it for her own protection or perhaps blackmail.”

“Insurance, most likely. She’s one shrewd, ruthless woman.”

Fia shivered more from the memory of her close call with the contract killer than from the chilly wind. “So I won’t have to testify again?”

“Not against Sullivan.”

She let out a long breath and paused at the bottom of the steps. Sullivan’s attorneys had been granted a change in venue, bringing the trial to Jefferson County, to the same city where most of Fia’s loved ones still lived. Now that the verdict had been announced, her first order of business was to drive out to her mom’s and visit the family. She’d had to disconnect from them for two painfully long years. Next, she’d think about what she’d left behind in Florida . . . or, rather, *who* she’d left behind.

“Do you think I still need to look over my shoulder?”

“Sullivan’s going to be closely watched from now on, especially after Conger’s testimony. Still, you can always stay in the program, just to be safe.”

“No, thanks.” She’d thought long and hard, weighing all the pros and cons too many hours to hesitate in answering him. “There’re no guarantees in life, Cory. I could be hit by a truck crossing this street. I want to enjoy life to

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the fullest. If this witness protection business has taught me anything, it's a deep appreciation for living on my own terms."

He nodded. "You're right. Nothing is perfect, and no one is 100 percent safe."

She turned to face him. "Well, thanks for everything. You gave me the tools to stay hidden. That kept me alive. I won't forget you."

"I wish all my witnesses were as conscientious as you. It'd make my job easier." He stuck out his hand to shake. "Good luck to you, Sofia."

She ignored the hand and threw her arms around him for a hug. "Sue me for sexual harassment."

"Take care, lady." He hugged her in return. Then his gaze drifted over her shoulder. "What's this?"

She turned and followed his stare. Huddled together at the corner, hunched against the brisk early March wind, stood all the people she loved most. Her grandma's tight white curls hugged her head despite the breeze, her mom's tears smeared her mascara in dark rivulets over her cheeks, and Nina in her wheelchair held Samantha's hand while the youngster bounced with excessive energy. Fia choked on a sob at the sight of her niece, who was so much older than when she'd last hugged her. Joey, the consummate professional dressed in a tailored suit, with his arm around Sally, his pretty brunette wife. And . . .

They opened up their huddle to reveal another of her

loved ones. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight, and she cried out, "Wilson Drake!"

She rushed them at once, hugging each one multiple times. "Oh, God, I can't get enough of you all."

"We cheated," Grandma said. "We weren't supposed to know about the trial, but we have insider information."

Tears streamed down Fia's face when she stepped into Wilson's arms. "But how—"

"I'm the insider," he said. "Let's get out of this wind, and we'll fill you in, darlin'."

She turned to wave goodbye to Cory, who smiled and held up his hand. "Let's go someplace warm so we can talk."

"I'm starved." Grandma blinked back tears, struggling to maintain her tough gal image. She seldom let anyone see her cry. "Take me to the nearest restaurant."

Joe pointed toward the river. "There's a café one block over. They have blue plate specials and great coffee."

Nina spun her wheelchair around. "Hot coffee? Let's go."

"Aren't ya gonna kiss your young man first?" Grandma asked.

Wilson chuckled. "I'm supposed to tell you I passed Grandma's litmus test. I hope that's a good thing."

"It's a very good thing." Fia pulled his face to hers and gave him a quick kiss, murmuring against his mouth, "It's wonderful to see you."



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"You look beautiful," he whispered, hugging her again. "But you've lost weight."

"Not a lot." Since she'd returned to normal, more healthful eating habits, she'd dropped almost fifteen pounds.

"She needed some meat on her bones," Grandma said, but her grandmother hadn't seen Fia at her chubbiest.

She turned to face her grandmother. "So Wilson meets with your approval, Grandma?"

Grandma indicated they should follow Fia's mother, who walked behind Joe and Sally. "Lucinda thinks now that I'm eighty-five, I should give up driving and sell my PT Cruiser. Wil told her lots of folks in their eighties and even nineties drive in Florida. He invited me to live down there with you two."

When Fia cast a questioning look at Wilson, he shrugged. "She turned me down, but the offer still stands."

"This one's a keeper, Fia. You're going to be very happy living in Florida—"

"Wait a sec. I've been in hiding for more than two years. Don't be in such a hurry to get rid of me."

"Rid of you? Honey, we'll be spending every winter at Drake Oaks. Wil said so."

Again, Wilson shrugged at her raised eyebrows. "All of you?" Fia asked her grandmother.

"No, silly. Just me and Lucinda. Wil and I are going to fix up Lucinda with his dad. What do you think?"

Fia's mother turned around and glared at her grandma.

"I think you should mind your own business. Walk up here with me and give them a little privacy, Mother."

"What do you say, Fia?" Wilson asked. "Will you come home with me?"

"Sounds as if you and Grandma have my future all mapped out for me."

He stopped and gazed at her, a mixture of hope and uncertainty in his face. "Only if it's what you want."

Fia wanted to live life on her own terms. And Wilson was the man who'd let her. He'd not lost his temper when she'd lied to him or disobeyed his instructions, even though in so doing she'd jeopardized her safety. He'd kept her identity secret when it might have compromised his homicide investigation. He'd met her family on his own and traveled seven hundred miles to be with her at the end of the trial, but not out of any need to control her or make her decisions.

Grandma was right. He was definitely a keeper.

"What about Sullivan? There's no guarantee he won't hire another hit on me out of vengeance. That possibility will be hanging over my head."

Wilson smiled. "I've thought of that. I think we should change your identity again."

"Again? I've had to learn to be Elizabeth Stevens and then Brenda Martin—"

"Just one last name change, darlin'. Could you live with the name Fia Drake?"

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“Live with it?” She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him to her for a long, tender kiss. “For the rest of my life, *darlin’*.”



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# CHAPTER ONE

Her running shoes striking the pavement in sync with her breathing, Ashley Adams navigated the predawn mist with nothing but the overhead streetlamps to guide her. She and Marvin Jones, her self-appointed coach, hoped to get a jump on the Florida heat by starting out before sunrise. A hint of a breeze brought little relief from the warm October air, unseasonable even for Jacksonville. Serenaded by crickets and bullfrogs along the banks of the nearby St. Johns River, she was reluctant to interrupt the peacefulness by speaking.

Marv broke the silence. “So how do you feel now that it’s finally over?”

Although conversation passed the time during

their morning run and helped them to gauge their pace, his question was more than idle chatter. She knew he'd been worried about her and with good reason. How did she feel now that the divorce was final? She wanted to reassure him, but she'd need more than court papers to feel safe again.

"I just hope it's really over."

"You're free now, Ashley."

"Free." She pumped her arms to pick up the pace. "I don't know if I'll ever be free of Peter Adams."

"The restraining order—"

"—doesn't faze him."

"You'd be surprised. He's a bully. Most bullies are cowards."

"Except with women." The few times she'd stood up to Peter taught her that lesson only too well.

They crossed the road and headed into the upscale residential development on Pointe Landing Circle. "Is he stalking you again?"

Was he? No longer could she distinguish between genuine fear and paranoia. "I can't prove it. Sometimes, though, I feel as if I'm being watched. He still calls me."

"Don't let him spook you, kiddo. Call the cops."

Ashley snorted. "As if! We both know the cops washed their hands of me—"

"Call them, dammit."

Biting back a protest, she steadied her breathing. Easy, girl. It wouldn't do to fatigue herself this early in



## RUNNING SCARED

the run. True, they used conversation to pace themselves. Marv often reminded her that if she was too winded to talk, she should ease up on her pace. Nevertheless, she needed to stick with mundane chitchat, not emotional discussions.

"If Peter shows up, I'll call the police." Both Marv and his wife were her closest friends, but both could be overly protective. She decided to redirect the conversation. "So how are you adjusting to retirement?"

"Ask Gina. She says I'm making her nuts, just like when I retired last time. After the marathon, I'm thinking I'll start on career number three."

"I will ask Gina. I doubt she minds having you at home."

They rounded the curve toward the riverfront residences in Pointe Landing. She started to ask Marv what he had in mind for his next career, but just as they jogged even with the driveway of one of the houses, a bathrobed middle-aged man stooped to pick up his newspaper. From out of the darkness, an automobile roared to life. Headlights sliced through the fog. The vehicle shot toward them.

"Look out!" Marv yanked her arm, pulling her from the path of the speeding sedan.

She stumbled and landed in the wet pampas grass that edged the driveway. Blinking against the glare of the overhead streetlamp, she caught a glimpse of a figure leaning out the opened car window.

A loud crack shattered the morning tranquility when the car backfired. Marv gasped as the driver sped away with squealing tires.

"What's wrong?" Ashley's gaze followed Marv's to where the bathrobed man lay collapsed at the edge of the street. She squeezed her eyes shut. "What happened?"

"Don't look." Marv's voice shook. And not much unnerved him after his career in the U.S. Navy.

"Just tell me, okay? Did the car hit him?"

He hesitated. "Not the car. The driver shot him. It's bad."

"Shot? You mean, with a gun?" She realized that sounded stupid, but outside of the firing range where she practiced with her new pistol, she'd never heard a gunshot. Averting her gaze, she scrambled to her feet.

"Yes. Didn't you hear the report?"

Dear God, the car hadn't backfired. She grabbed Marvin's tattooed arm. "Oh, no, it's Peter!"

"Driving the car?"

"No, but—but he's behind this. You know he is. That guy was aiming for me." She struggled to breathe, gulping in air. Her body trembled, from fear or rage. Or both.

"You don't know that—"

"If Peter has followed me, he knows our running route." Her voice quivered along with the rest of her.

"Followed you? He doesn't even know where you live."

"He knows where you live. He could've followed you."

"Don't jump to conclusions."

## RUNNING SCARED

“He won’t ever let me go.” Her bravado collapsed.

How many times had Peter threatened her, warned her what would happen if she tried to leave him? Emotional blackmail, her therapist called it. But what if he wasn’t bluffing?

“Hey.” Marvin grabbed her shoulders. “Chill, kiddo. We have to get help.”

He led her past the driveway, past the poor man’s body. The odor of blood—so much blood—penetrated her senses and triggered a memory she’d tried to bury, another scene of blood. So much blood.



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## *Prologue*

Light from the computer screen spilled over the darkened office, glowing through a spreadsheet's grids. A mosquito buzzed the monitor. Where had it come from? The insects rarely swarmed in April, at least not in Kentucky. Batting away the mosquito, Leo Desalvo released his pent-up breath in a loud groan. He lowered his head and dug his thumbs into his temples to massage a growing headache.

Condensation slid down the can of his forgotten soda, forming a wet circle on his month-at-a-glance calendar. Earlier, to stretch his tired muscles, he'd made the short trip to the customer waiting area, where the vending machines offered the room's only light. The dealership's new commercial carpet silenced his footsteps. Thinking the cold caffeine of a Coke

would ease his fatigue, he'd taken one long drink before returning to his office. But there was no cure for what plagued him tonight.

His gaze returned to the monitor. Scowling, he reread the entries, entries that shouldn't be, in a hidden file that shouldn't exist. The data confirmed his worst fears.

Rage at the betrayal engulfed him. He studied the accounting record again, searching for a mistake. An explanation. But the same damning numbers glared back at him, and dread settled over his slumping shoulders. As much as he hated it, he knew what had to be done. All his life, he'd tried to do the right thing. He wouldn't stop now.

*Couldn't stop now, even if it cost him everything.*

"You're here late."

Recognizing the voice behind him, Leo stifled a gasp. The odor of the intruder's stale cigarette smoke should have alerted him, but everyone was supposed to be gone. Besides, the entire building reeked of stale cigarette smoke, in both the office and the shop. Still, he should've stayed more alert. He'd waited for everyone to leave, then relaxed his guard.

He tried to keep the anger and suspicion from his voice. "I had a few things to finish."

"Anything wrong?"

Clicking the mouse, Leo closed the screen, exited



## ReSTORE MY HeART

the program, then removed the USB drive without turning to face his unwelcome guest. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

The mosquito punctured the flesh beneath his collar. He swatted at it. What the hell? Not a mosquito, he realized, but a needle. He grabbed for the hypodermic, but his hand thudded uselessly onto the desk. Terror gripped him as numbness claimed his body.

A second hypodermic pierced his arm, then emptied into his vein. As a detached observer, he stared at his arm. He’d underestimated his enemy. His head grew heavy. His vision blurred. Air froze inside his lungs.

With considerable effort, he focused on the framed photos displayed on his desk. His precious children. His daughters. His son. If only he could see Joe one more time. It’d been so long. Now what would his family think? Wanting to protect them, Leo had spared them his recent troubles. Would they ever uncover the truth? Darkness narrowed his vision to the largest frame, the portrait of the woman he loved, the woman he would always love.

The woman he’d never see again.



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