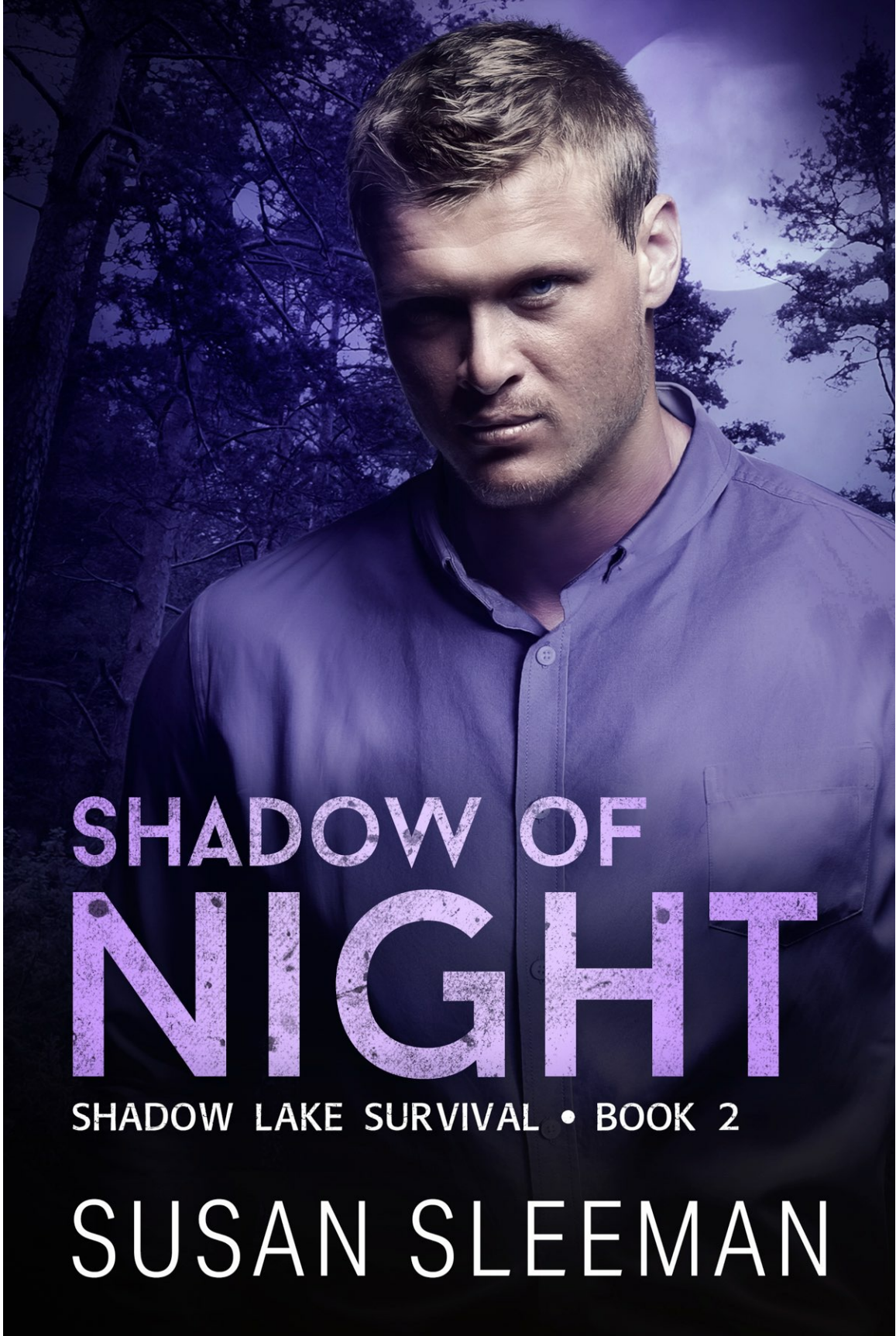




SHADOW OF
NIGHT

SHADOW LAKE SURVIVAL • BOOK 2

SUSAN SLEEMAN



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**SHADOW OF NIGHT: A CHRISTIAN
ROMANTIC SUSPENSE**

SHADOW LAKE SURVIVAL

SUSAN SLEEMAN

Published by Edge of Your Seat Books, Inc.

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Gunshots echoed through the inky darkness.

One. Two. Three. Sharp. Concussive.

Officer Sydney Tucker hit the cold ground. A jagged rock slashed into her forehead. Blood ran free and dizziness assaulted her. Ignoring it, she reached for her service weapon and came up empty-handed.

No. No. No.

She'd made her usual stop after her shift ended at seven to check on the construction of her townhouse and left her gun and phone in the car. The lot was way down a steep hill. Going for her gun would leave her too exposed.

Dumb, Sydney. Really dumb. Now what're you going to do? Besides panic.

Remember your training. Take a breath. Deep air. In. Out.

Inching her head above knee-high grass, she listened, her pulse thundering in her head.

The keening whistle of the wind died, leaving the air damp and heavy with tension. No sounds. Not a single one.

What was going on?

Had she overreacted to the gunshots? Hunters could be taking nighttime target practice in the woods. They sometimes did crazy things. She'd seen a lot of it on the job in her rookie year.

Footfalls pounded from down the hill toward her. Two people at least. Charging through the brush. Maybe a chase. A loud crash reverberated in the air and branches snapped.

“What’re you doing, man?” A panicked male voice traveled up the hill. “No! Don’t shoot! We can work this out.”

A gunshot rang out. A second one. Then a third. A moan drifted toward her.

Sydney’s gut clenched.

Oh no. She hadn’t overreacted. This wasn’t target practice. Not at all. Someone had been hunted down and shot. Possibly murdered.

She wasn’t going to be next.

She lurched to her feet, fighting the dizziness. Blood dripped into her eyes. She wiped it away, blinked hard, and steadied herself on a large rock while peering into the wall of darkness for the best escape route.

Heavy footfalls crunched up the gravel path toward her location.

“I know you’re here, Officer Tucker,” a male voice, disguised with a high, nasal pitch, called out. “We need to talk about this. C’mon out.”

Yeah, right. Come out and die. Not hardly.

Please protect me. Please!

She scrambled deeper into the scrub. Over rocks. Through grass tangling her feet. Her heart pounded in her head, drowning the prayers with fear.

“I’m losing patience, Officer,” he called again in that strange voice. “You’re not like Dixon. He had it coming. You don’t.”

Carl Dixon? The man she’d arrested for selling drugs and providing alcohol to her sister, Nikki? Was that what this was about?

She paused to listen.

Rocks skittered down the incline. The shooter was still on the move. Coming for her.

Closer. Closer.

No time to think. She had to go. Now!

Blindly she felt her way past shrubs, over uneven ground. Dried leaves crunched underfoot. Branches slapped her face and clawed at her arms, but she stifled her cries of pain.

“I hear you, Officer.”

She wrenched around to determine the assailant’s location. A protruding rock caught her foot. Her body catapulted forward and somersaulted through the air. She came down fast and hard, her knee slamming into the packed earth before she crashed down the hill. Wrapping her arms around her head, she tumbled. Free fall. Rolling. Over and over. Smaller rocks biting into her body. Gravel scratching her arms.

She came to a stop, breath knocked out, lying flat on her back in a thick stand of weeds. Thankfully, she still wore her Kevlar vest from work and it helped protect her a bit.

“So you want to play it that way, do you, Officer? Fine. Just remember, you can run, but you can’t hide. I will find you. This will be resolved, one way or another.” His disembodied laugh swirled into the night.

The darkness pressed closer. Blinding. Overwhelming. Terrifying.

She rose to a crouch. Pain knifed into her knee, keeping her anchored to the ground.

Lord, please don’t let me die like this. Give me the strength to move. I need to live for Nikki. She’s only seventeen. She has no one else.

Sydney took a long breath. Uncurled and came to a standing position. Taking a few halting steps, she tested the pain. Nearly unbearable. But she *had* to do this for her sister.

Thinking of Nikki, Sydney gritted her teeth and set off, moving slowly, taking care not to make a sound.

Out of the darkness, a hand clamped over her mouth.

Screams tore from her throat, but died behind fingers pressed hard against her lips.

A muscled arm jerked her against a solid chest and dragged her deep into

the brush.

God, please, no.

She twisted, arched her back, pushing against arms that held her like iron bands.

She dug her heels into the ground. To no avail. Her assailant was too strong. He continued deeper into the brush. He abruptly stopped behind a large boulder and settled them both on the dewy ground.

“Relax, Sydney, it’s Russ Maddox,” her assailant whispered, his lips close to her ear.

Sheriff Maddox? What was he doing here?

“Sorry to grab you.” His tone said she was nothing more than a stranger instead of someone he’d known for years. “I didn’t want you to alert the shooter if I scared you and you screamed. I’m going to remove my hand now. Nod if you understand me.”

She let all of her relief escape in a sharp jerk of her head.

His fingers dropped away.

“Once the shooter rounded that curve, you would’ve been a goner,” he whispered while still holding her in a strong grip. “Good thing a neighbor reported gunshots, and I was in the area.”

Sydney started to shiver and inhaled deeply to steady her galloping pulse. Air rushed into her lungs. She was alive, but barely. No thanks to her own skills.

“You okay?” His breath stirred her hair.

“Yes.” She willed her body to stop shaking and eased out a hiss of disappointment at her job performance. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to hear the shooter claim he plugged Dixon, and he’s coming after you.” Though whispering, urgency lit his voice and rekindled her fear. “This have to do with your arrest of Dixon the other day?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered back. “At least not on my part. He works on the townhouse construction site, but I just stopped to check on the

progress of the one I'm buying on my way home from work."

"Off duty, huh? Explains why you don't have your weapon drawn."

"I left my duty belt in my backpack in the car." She waited for his negative reaction to her confession, but he simply remained still as footfalls grated against gravel.

"Shh, he's about to pass us." Russ leaned forward and drew his sidearm with his free hand, but didn't release his hold on her.

Crunching steps came within a few feet of their location. Halted.

A hot lump lodged in Sydney's throat. Thick. Suffocating. She could barely swallow.

"Can you feel me breathing down your neck, Officer Tucker? I'm inches from finding you." He couldn't know the accuracy of his words.

Russ pulled in a deep breath, upping her concern and washing away the brief blanket of security his arms provided.

Adrenaline urged her to move. Run. Fast. No holds barred.

She concentrated on Russ's unwavering weapon to stem her panic.

The shooter took a few steps closer. Her heart thumped. Hammering. Threatening to leave her chest.

Russ tightened his hold. Could he tell she wanted to bolt?

The shooter spun, feet digging into the gravel and sending it flying at them, then headed back the way he'd come.

His footsteps receded up the hill, and she tried to relax her taut muscles. The warmth from Russ's body helped chase out her fear and the chill of the night. Thank God Russ was here. Who knew what would've happened if he hadn't come.

No. Don't go there. God had watched over her. Provided rescue. Just not in the form she would have chosen.

Not only was Russ the head of the Emerson County Sheriff's Department—a team often in competition with Shadow Lake Police Department where she worked—but he was a man she'd had a crazy crush on in high school. A

man whose rugged good looks still turned women's heads. Hers included.

She let out a long sigh.

"I know this is awkward," he whispered. "But hang tight for a few more minutes. We need to wait for the shooter to head back down the hill when we'll have the advantage."

She wanted to protest and suggest they flee, but Russ thought clearly. The shooter had to come back down to reach the parking lot. Taking off now gave the killer the benefit of higher ground, making them moving targets. They'd have to sit like this until he passed them again.

If they made it out of here, which the approaching footfalls told her wasn't at all certain.

The shooter's steps pounded closer. He moved at a quick clip this time, as if he thought she'd gotten away, and he was in hot pursuit. Or maybe he was heading to her car to lie in wait for her.

As the footsteps receded again, Russ's arm slackened.

"Time to roll," he whispered. "Stay here."

"But I—"

"You have a backup?"

With their small-town police force and limited crime, she hadn't felt a need to carry a second weapon, but that would change starting today.

She shook her head.

"Then wait here." He crept toward the path.

She leaned against the boulder. Without his warmth, chills took over her, and she couldn't stop them. The reality of the night froze her inner core. She wrapped her arms around the warm circle on her waist where Russ had held her. She should listen to him. Lie low. Wait until he apprehended the killer.

That was the safe thing to do.

The easy thing to do.

The wrong thing to do.

As an officer of the law, letting a shooter escape without trying to stop

him wasn't an option. Even if that shooter had her in his sights, she would make her way to her car for her weapon and then reassess to see if she could be of help.

She would do anything she needed to do to stop this maniac before he hurt someone else.



“Stop! Police!” Russ called out after the shooter, who'd hopped onto a dirt bike in the parking lot. Of course the shooter didn't stop. Didn't even slow. Taillights of the mud-splattered dirt bike vanished up the trail, spitting gravel and dust.

Russ halted near the ditch and fought to catch his breath. He'd warned the suspect to stop, but short of shooting him in the back, Russ couldn't stop him from fleeing into the dark.

At least he'd accomplished his primary objective—to protect Sydney and keep her alive.

Now he needed to alert his team and the local police department to the suspect's whereabouts.

He lifted his shoulder mic and ordered a unit from his office to stake out the end of the trail for the dirt bike and requested an ambulance in case Dixon survived. Plus Sydney had a nasty gash on her forehead that needed looking after. He also asked dispatch to patch him through to the city police department to make sure they knew he'd taken charge of the scene. No way he wanted the chief or any of his hotshot officers arriving with the hope of usurping control.

Russ turned on his flashlight and headed up the hill toward Sydney. Its beam skipped over gravel and lush plants lining the winding path. Midway up, rustling brush stopped him cold. He'd left Sydney higher up. Nearer the lake.

Was a second shooter hoping to ambush him?

He flipped off his light and sought protection behind a tree. His breath came in little pulses in the cold air—unusual for October in Oregon. Adrenaline, with little time to ebb away, came roaring back, but even as the noise grew louder, he resisted the urge to take action.

Maybe it was Sydney. The girl he used to know wouldn't have listened to his directive to stay put. She'd trounce down the hill, her chin tilted at the same insolent angle like her freshman year of high school when he told her he didn't return her crazy crush. Not that he'd wanted to send a beautiful, lively girl like her away. He could easily have dated her, but he was four years older—just starting college. With their age difference and long distance between them, it wouldn't have been right. She had four years to date and figure out who she really was.

Bushes at the path edge shook, then parted. Slow as a sleek panther, Sydney slipped out. He watched until she stood tall on those incredibly long legs he'd admired since she was sixteen before lowering his weapon and aiming his flashlight at her.

She jumped and peered up at him, an impudent look on her face. This was the Sydney he'd known as a teen and, heaven help him, in just minutes, she'd sparked his interest again.

“Mind shining that somewhere other than my face?” She shaded her eyes, warding off the glare.

He moved the light, but not before he caught a better look at the gaping wound running from her hairline to her eyebrow, covered in congealed blood. He lifted his hand to check out her injury, but stopped. He wouldn't probe a wound on any of his deputy's faces. As a fellow law enforcement officer, he shouldn't treat Sydney any differently.

“I told you to stay put.” He infused his words with authority.

“I wanted to help.” She held out blood-covered hands. “Wish I'd listened. I tripped over the body.” Her eyes watered as if she might cry.

Man...don't do that. Don't fall apart. He couldn't remain detached if she started crying. He'd have to empathize, maybe give her a reassuring pat on the arm. Maybe feel her pain and dredge up all the reasons he'd left his homicide job in Portland. Something he preferred to keep buried.

Changing his focus, he nodded at the brush. "Show me the victim."

As the faint whine of sirens spiraled in the distance, a grimace of pain marred her beautiful face, and she limped into the tall grass. He followed, illuminating the area ahead of her, the light falling on lush ferns and other thick greenery he couldn't name.

About ten feet in, she stopped.

Diffused rays slid over a young male lying on his back. Russ shifted the beam to the man's face, landing on open eyes staring into the blackness above.

Sydney gasped and swung around him. She rushed toward the main path.

Even though Russ knew it was a lost cause, he bent to check for a pulse on the body. Dead. Carl Dixon. A man every officer in the area knew from his frequent blips on law enforcement radar, including his most recent arrest by Sydney for selling drugs and providing alcohol to underage girls.

The flashlight illuminated three close-range gunshot wounds to the chest. Once they thoroughly processed the scene, he'd know more. But first, they needed to vacate the area before further contaminating the scene.

He located Sydney near the path, leaning forward, hands clasped on her hips, exhaling long breaths as if trying to expel what she'd just seen.

Haunted eyes peered at him. "He's dead, right?"

"Yeah."

"And what about the killer?"

"Couldn't catch him. He took off on a dirt bike."

She came to her full height and disappointment crowded out the fear on her face. "Did you at least see him?"

"From the back. He was my height or a little taller, thin build. Wore a

black stocking cap. The bike has a plate, so it must be street-legal. It was covered with mud, but I got the first two digits. I think it was red, but it's dark so can't swear to that."

"That's something then."

Something, but what? It would do little for them in terms of searching DMV records without additional details, but he didn't think she could handle more bad news, so he kept quiet. "Let's head down to the parking lot."

He put the flashlight in her hand and urged her to take the lead down the steep hill covered with knee-high scrub grass. They reached solid concrete, and she handed the light back to him. Holding it overhead, he watched her closely for dizziness or other impairments from her injury. He saw nothing out of the ordinary, but a head injury could mean a concussion. The EMTs would check her out when they arrived.

He pointed at a rough-hewn bench. "Maybe you should sit down."

"I'm fine." Her voice cracked, and she ran a hand over her face. Was she embarrassed about her reaction to the murder? Could be or she could just be tired.

Her distress cut him to the core, and it took everything he was made of not to gather her in his arms and hug away her pain. "It's okay to be upset, Syd. A horrible thing happened tonight."

"I'm fine, really." She lifted her shoulders maybe trying to convince herself of that fact. "I'll be back to a hundred percent by morning."

"Don't expect too much too fast."

"Really, I'm fine." She tightened her jaw as if trying to live up to her statement. "It may be my first year on the job, but I can handle this."

"You just witnessed a homicide. If you're like other officers, you're probably feeling guilty for not preventing it."

"I deserve the blame." She averted her gaze and shifted her feet. "His death is all on me. I should've been carrying. Now a person is dead and a killer is running free. What if he hurts someone else?"

Russ knew that look. Had worn it himself. Guilt. Plain and simple. He took a step closer and softened his voice. “You can’t think that way. You have a life outside the job. You couldn’t have known something like this would happen when you left your weapon in the car.”

She backed away and studied his face for long moments, her pained expression turning suspicious. “Why are you being so kind and not blasting me for leaving my sidearm in the car? Is it because I’m a woman?”

“What?”

“If I were a male officer, you’d probably be jumping down my throat and railing on me for being dumb enough not to be carrying.” She jutted out her chin.

He held up his hands and took a moment to regroup.

Maybe she was right. Not in the way she meant, discriminating against her because he thought a woman couldn’t do this job. This had more to do with their past. He’d never interacted with Sydney the officer, just Sydney the teenager. Sydney, the woman with captivating blue eyes could leave a man thinking about her into the wee hours of the night. That he could handle.

But Sydney as an officer?

He needed to adjust his mindset and see the fiercely determined officer standing before him. She was trying so hard to overcome her guilt and hold herself together at a time when many rookies fell apart.

He respected that and would get on with it. “Nothing to do with your gender. All I’m trying to say is I’ve been where you are, and I’m here if you want to talk about it. But we can move on.” He paused, waited until her chin lowered and shoulders relaxed a bit. “Tell me what happened from the moment you arrived.”

She shielded her eyes from the light. “There’s really nothing much to add. I was on the hill checking on the construction of my townhouse like I do every day after my shift. I heard gunshots and dove for cover. The killer called out my name, asking me to come out.” She shivered, then clamped a

hand on the back of her neck as if she could stop it. “He said he wanted to talk to me, but I think he was trying to lure me out so he could kill me too. Maybe pin Dixon’s murder on me as well.”

“Not sure I agree,” Russ said. “You made so much noise falling down that hill, he had to know your location. If he wanted to take you out, even with your vest on, a few rounds in your direction could’ve done it.”

Her eyebrow arched. “So you think he really *did* want to talk to me about something? But what?”

“We figure that out, we ID our killer.” Russ planted his feet. “The first step is analyzing your connection to Dixon.”

“There’s no real connection. I arrested him a few times, but that’s all. I...” Her voice drifted off, her attention shifting to flashing lights rounding the bend in the road.

His deputies were almost there. He wanted to keep questioning her, but she was distracted. It would be best for both of them if he moved her out of the action and finished interviewing her later.

“I need to get my sergeant to secure the area. You can wait in my car, and I’ll get your formal statement when I’m done.”

She opened her mouth, but then clamped it closed. Through a light, hazy fog, he escorted her to his patrol car and watched as she gingerly settled into the passenger seat, a soft moan escaping when she bent her knee. Her patrol car was parked in the lot too, even though she was off duty. Not surprising. City provided vehicles for every officer and allowed them to bring them home as a crime deterrent.

“I really need to get to my car for my phone and call this in to my chief.”

Great. Police Chief Krueger.

Karl—with a K—Krueger, as he liked to call himself, had also run for the sheriff’s job, and when the county elected Russ over him, a fierce rivalry developed. If Krueger showed up and offered to help in the investigation, and Russ turned him away, Krueger would let it slip to the public that the

sheriff's office—and Russ—weren't doing all they could to catch this killer.

Maybe he could convince Sydney to hold off on making that call. “Do you really want Krueger coming out here right now?”

“He's out of town until tomorrow, but I still need to call in.”

Yes, finally, something in Russ's favor tonight.

“I'll grab your phone for you,” he said, not wanting her to go to her car and dwell over having left her weapon in there. He held out his hand. “Just give me your keys.”

She didn't argue but gave them to him, and he moved to her vehicle to grab the phone from the holder on the dash.

Making sure the vehicle locked behind him, he returned the keys to her and gave her the phone. “Make your call, and I'll be right back.” Russ crossed the lot to meet his arriving deputy, Sergeant Bill Garber, Russ's go-to incident response guy.

The tall and lanky guy, as he climbed from his car, was lit from behind revealing his blond hair so pale it almost looked white. He surveyed the area. The excitement of a murder investigation burned in his eyes. Not that Garber would be happy someone died, but the thrill of utilizing skills he didn't normally get to employ in this small county would be intoxicating to most law enforcement officers.

Russ met him at the road. “I want this entrance sealed off. No traffic, foot or vehicle, beyond that bench.” He pointed at the bench near the path. “And call the ME. Tell him to get here double time. With the fog moving in, we need him to move the body before we can't see anything.”

Garber planted his hands on his waist. “Our portable lights won't light up this whole area. Should I call City to borrow theirs too?”

That's what Russ liked about Garber. Always one step ahead. Even if it did mean that Krueger would insert himself when he returned. “Do that.”

Garber gave a sharp nod. “I've got our forensic team en route, but what about the state crime lab? Want me to get them here too?”

Did he? “Their availability can often be sketchy, but give them a call. If they can’t arrive tomorrow, I might call in the Veritas team.”

“Veritas?” Garber blinked. “We have the funds for that?”

Russ shook his head. There was no way his department could afford to hire the world-renowned forensic team based in Portland. “I should be able to call in a favor. Let me know what City says about the lights and what they say at the state lab. I’ll be at my vehicle taking Officer Tucker’s statement.”

Garber’s eyes filled with questions, but Russ walked away. He wouldn’t waste time now bringing Garber up to speed. Russ had to plot out the murder investigation, starting with taking Sydney’s statement. Then get the scene processed before impending rain set in and potentially destroyed evidence that could help find the shooter.

Back at Russ’s car, he stood next to the open door. His position allowed him to block her view of the scene and keep an eye on what was going on at the same time.

He focused on Sydney for the moment. “Tell me about Dixon’s arrests.”

She swiveled to face him. “The first time was last month when I busted a party at his house and hauled him in for supplying alcohol to minors.”

“Your sister, Nikki, was involved, right?”

She nodded. “Dixon got her and three of her friends stinking drunk and the judge let him off with a fine. A *fine*. Can you imagine that?” Her voice rose with each word. “He corrupts young girls, pays a few bucks, and is free to do it again.”

“Sometimes our system doesn’t work.”

“Yeah, well, try to act so complacent when it happens to someone you love.”

She had a good point. How would he react if this happened to his five-year-old son, Zach? Not that Russ would find himself in this position. He’d let alcohol control his life for a few years and now only had weekend visits with his son. They spent every waking moment together on their visits, and

Zach was way too young to touch alcohol, so this couldn't happen. But as a father, Russ understood why Sydney reacted this way.

"I'm sure I wouldn't let it roll off my back real easy."

"And I couldn't either. She's my little sister, Russ. I fed her. Changed her diapers. Loved her when our parents failed us." She paused. Inhaled the night air. "I couldn't let Dixon get away with hurting her and walk free. He had to pay."

"You wanted him dead," he added to see her reaction.

"What? No! Of course not. I just wanted him in jail. I knew he would screw up again, so I made it a point to follow him in my free time." She met his eyes, a challenge in her expression. "Last Wednesday afternoon I caught him on his porch selling coke and busted him."

Russ couldn't believe it. She'd gone rogue and followed the guy, putting herself in danger. "They call it *off duty* for a reason. Without backup, you could get into serious trouble. Besides, you don't have the experience to run a narcotics investigation."

"Believe me, I'm well aware of my limitations. When I started following him, I didn't know it would lead to drugs. Or to this." She held out her bloody hands. "If I'd known my actions might result in someone's death, I would never have pursued him." She shivered and wrapped her arms around her waist, sheer misery clouding her face.

He hated to see any officer forced to deal with death, and he hadn't wanted to make things worse. Still, he had a job to do. That meant they would have discussions like this. But he could try to make it easier.

He went to his trunk, grabbed a blanket, and settled the blue fabric over her shoulders. Raw anguish filled her eyes.

Russ felt her pain.

To the bone.

He had lived it for the past four years, since he'd watched a homicide suspect gun down a six-year-old boy. Watched, helplessly, as if in slow

motion.

Russ wanted to go back. Save Willie Babcock's life. But that wasn't possible. The price had been paid. Willie with his life. Russ with the loss of his family.

He shook off the pain, dug deep for the calm center he'd worked hard to develop the past few years. He couldn't change the past, but he could and would stop it from happening again.

No way another person would die on his watch.

Damp and irritated from the mist, Russ stood in the parking lot next to Sergeant Garber, waiting for him to conclude his phone call. Heavy banks of fog drifted off the lake and rolled across the cement as if a living and breathing monster tried to swallow the whole area.

On a good day, waiting around got on Russ's nerves, but tonight it left him with too much time to think about Sydney's wounded expression and how he couldn't do a thing to fix it. Thoughts that were definitely not in his best interest.

Garber shoved his phone into his pocket and turned to Russ. "Not good news. I had to leave a message at State, and this fog has the police department swamped. They're investigating a hit-and-run in town and using their only set of lights. We won't get them until they finish."

"Any idea of time?"

"Could be a few hours or not at all if another issue arises," Garber said.

Not a good thing, but par for the course. The city police department was only five officers strong and had limited resources for equipment. Something Russ was familiar with in the small county too.

"No sense in all of us standing around waiting," he said. "Dixon lives in a rental house owned by Axel Quigley. Call Quigley. Tell him I'm on my way to the house to conduct a search and to meet me there with a key. Get this

scene buttoned down as best you can in the fog, and call me when the lights arrive or if you hear back from the lab.”

Garber nodded, and Russ headed in Sydney’s direction. She sat on the bumper of a silent ambulance, the red lights still swirling through the fog in an eerie dance. She held an ice pack on her knee and had cleaned the blood from her hands and pulled her hair into a ponytail. The angry gash on her head was now swollen to a massive purple lump. At least the bleeding had subsided, thanks to EMT Lisa Watson who’d applied a neat row of butterfly bandages.

“That’ll do for now.” Lisa pressed her finger on the bottom strip.

Sydney winced, then forced a laugh. “Will I live?”

“Looks worse than it is. I closed the wound. You might want to have a doctor take a look at it. Maybe a plastic surgeon. Looks like it might leave a nasty scar.”

“Thanks, Lisa.” Sydney smiled up at the EMT, a genuinely warm smile like the one she’d radiated up at Russ as a teen.

He shook off the thought. He was here to do a job. Catch a killer. Not let the cute dimples or generous patch of freckles on high cheekbones distract him.

He stepped into his professional mode and approached the pair. “Officer Tucker’s good to go, then?”

“No signs of a concussion,” Lisa said. “She should be fine with some rest and over-the-counter pain relievers.”

“Then, if you’ll excuse us, I need to have a word with her.”

“I’ll be taking off.” Lisa looked at Sydney. “I’m off duty in an hour or so, but you can call me any time tonight if you need something. And if that knee gets any worse, head to the ER.”

“Thanks again, Lisa.” Sydney shoved off the bumper, grimacing on the way up.

He pointed at the jagged slit in her pant leg, darkened with blood. “Looks

like your forehead isn't your worst problem."

"I'll keep icing my knee when I get home. It'll be fine." She turned her focus to the deputies at the base of the path. "Any leads?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. We're waiting on your department to deliver lights, so I'm heading over to Dixon's place and wanted you to accompany me."

"Me?" Her eyes widened.

"Why so surprised?"

"You have to admit it's not common practice to ask for a rookie's help."

"Normally I wouldn't. Especially when you're the closest thing we have to a witness to the murder. But I'm hoping a trip to Dixon's house will jog your memory and give us a lead." Before she could ask another question, he pointed at his car.

Though her expression still held questions, she started toward his vehicle. He heard her soft groan of pain, but kept his mouth shut. The less he said about her injuries, the less likely he would make a comment that she misunderstood. For the same reason, he didn't open the passenger door for her as he would in a social situation, just climbed behind the wheel. When she settled into the other seat, he eased onto the road.

She clicked her seatbelt into place. "After tonight, you must think I'm hopeless at this job."

She didn't hide the despondency and self-recrimination in her tone. She would have to find a way to deal with the guilt if she hoped to move on. Not the way he had, with a stiff drink, but by talking and working through it.

He gave her what he hoped was a comforting smile. "Good officers aren't born. They learn through experience."

"But you would never leave your weapon in the car."

"No, you're right. But you were off duty, and that isn't the same as leaving it there while on duty. Besides, I might've done the same thing as a rookie. All you can do is learn from tonight and adjust accordingly." Trying

not to feel so much like a hypocrite by telling her one thing and letting Willie's death continue to get to him, he eased the car through light traffic.

"Not that this is an excuse." She shifted to face him. "But I like to do something positive on my way home to help relieve my stress. That way I can come home refreshed for Nikki. She's going through some things right now. Rebelling and fighting me all the way. So part of my attitude adjustment is leaving my duty belt behind. It's like taking off the weight of the belt helps remove the weight of the job."

He didn't know what to say other than what he'd already said except for telling her about Willie. For the first time in years, he actually wanted to recount his story.

He opened his mouth, but the words didn't come. Other than his partner, he'd never talked with another officer about Willie. They'd have told him to let it go. That he wasn't at fault. A second search wasn't protocol. But Russ learned early in the job to take extra precautions. He just didn't follow his instincts that particular day. And it still haunted him.

More than he'd thought if it stopped him from getting a single word out. He switched his focus to his driving, taking the shortest route to Dixon's house.

"What do *you* do to let go of a bad day?" she asked.

He shrugged. "My biggest problems these days are often bureaucracy or budget issues. Not finding a killer."

"So what about tonight? When you get home, how will you let this go?"

Yeah, what *would* he do tonight? "Don't know. I haven't often had to deal with something like this since leaving Portland."

She adjusted the ice pack on her knee. "I heard you were like this hotshot detective. What made you leave, anyway?"

Searching for the right address for Dixon's place, he slowed. "You're full of questions."

"I'm just trying to learn how to handle the job. It's different from what I

thought it would be. Especially tonight.” She rubbed a hand over her eyes. “We’re told to expect to see people die in car crashes, but I honestly never thought I’d see someone who’d been gunned down.”

The experience could make her walk away from the job. A job she excelled at, from what he’d heard through the grapevine. She was known for being patient. Understanding. Intuitive. Sure, she’d panicked tonight, but if a rookie with her promise quit, law enforcement would lose out. Hopefully, he could help restore her confidence if he had contact with her during the investigation.

He tipped his head out the window. “That’s Dixon’s house with the big porch, right?”

She peered out the window. “Yeah, that’s it. I can’t see how this visit will help. Nothing much happened here. It was a simple drug bust.”

“Try to let go of that notion or you might block anything of value that you see.” He slid his car into a parking space and killed the engine.

He grabbed paper booties and disposable gloves from a bin, giving a set to Sydney, and climbed out into the quiet night. Unease assaulted him and raised that sixth sense that had kept him safe on the job more times than he could count.

The wind howled through trees and whipped a fine mist into his face. He looked at the house. Surveyed the ragged shrubs. The dark porch. Saw nothing out of the ordinary. He searched the street, peering into the deep shadows running the length of the house.

“What is it?” Sydney came up from behind and startled him.

“Nothing.” He downplayed his uneasiness to keep from worrying her.

She narrowed her eyes. “Then why are you so jumpy?”

He couldn’t lie. “I have the feeling our suspect is watching us.”

She inhaled sharply.

Man. He’d freaked her out. If only he could take back his words. Or not. Maybe scaring her a bit wasn’t a bad thing.

If it didn't paralyze her like earlier tonight but made her more vigilant. In that case, a little fear was just what she needed to stay one step ahead of their killer.



Russ's concern upping Sydney's, she looked across the street at Dixon's small rental bungalow illuminated under a streetlight. The fog swirling around the lake hadn't slithered into town yet, allowing her to see the white paint rising in papery peels on old clapboard siding. The stirring breeze moved overgrown grass and carried the paint flakes into the air, depositing them like snow on the unkempt yard.

A yard that remained as overgrown as three days before she'd arrested Dixon.

Only three days.

Seemed like a lifetime. Maybe in another world. A world before the roller coaster of emotions that raced through her tonight. Up. Down. Around. One minute she was fine. The next nearing panic and letting guilt threaten to swamp her with tears.

But she wouldn't cry in front of Russ. Even if he seemed to understand her inner turmoil.

He gestured at the house. "We can run through Dixon's arrest while we wait for Quigley to get here with the key. Where were you when you saw the deal go down?"

"Behind a big tree at the edge of those woods." She pointed across the street. "I had a shift in a few hours and didn't want Dixon to see my patrol car, so I left it a few blocks away and walked over here."

"What time of day was it?"

"Around three p.m."

"Good. Daylight. You had a clear view of the house, and it would be easy

to see something that at first glance didn't seem important. Take me through the arrest."

"When I arrived, the noise and music blaring clued me in to the party going on. People kept arriving for about an hour and finally, Nikki's old friend Julia came walking down the street from the east. I knew she had a drug problem and figured she was here to get her next fix from Dixon."

Sydney shook her head. "You should've seen her, Russ. She was such a mess. I hated to arrest her, but she wasn't the sweet kid I used to know. She's in rehab now. I sure hope it sticks."

"The arrest might be just what she needed to kick the addiction." He offered her a reassuring smile.

She hoped he was right, but her gut said Julia had a long road ahead of her.

"So what happened next?" he asked.

"Julia knocks on the door, and Dixon comes out. She exchanges cash for a baggie. I call it in to dispatch, then head across the street and confiscate her baggie. I confirm it's not pot but something illegal and slap the cuffs on Dixon while convincing Julia not to run. Then we wait for backup and round up the partygoers for possession."

"So no one fled the scene?"

"Not really. There was a girl standing by a dirt bike a few cars down who walked away when I came up, but I'm not sure she was involved."

His face lit up. "Dirt bike? Can you describe it?"

"I can do better than that. While I was watching the house, I snapped a few pictures of the area. I know I got a shot of the bike."

He locked gazes with her. "Maybe our killer knows about these pictures and there's something in them that could incriminate him."

She dug out her phone and thumbed through her photo library. Russ moved behind her, and his breath whispered over her neck below her ponytail.

She wanted to lean back into him. Rely on his strength. *No. Concentrate on the images.*

He reached out to raise her hand with the phone. The warmth of his touch almost made her turn to see if their contact affected him too. He stabbed a finger at the current picture. Right. He was a professional, and his focus remained on the case.

“That looks like the bike our suspect took off on tonight. Can’t make out the plate, but if we enlarge it, we might hit pay dirt.” He let go of her hand. “My sergeant’s a motorcycle enthusiast, and we need to share these pics with him. He might see something we don’t.”

An older-model car with a rumbling muffler chugged down the street, emitting waves of smoke and pulling up in front of the house.

“That’s Quigley,” Russ said. “Time to check out the house.”

Russ stepped to the curb and greeted the older man. He looked up from behind the wheel, his face holding enormous respect for Russ. Not unlike what many locals thought. They appreciated his experience, diplomacy, and the way he kept the department operating efficiently.

Shaking Mr. Quigley’s hand through the open window, Russ looked back and caught her watching him. She should look away, but couldn’t bring herself to do so. If she suddenly averted her eyes, she would probably earn a smirk. So she kept them firmly fixed to his. He responded by staring deeply into her eyes as if searching for something.

Wow. Just wow! This was how she’d hoped he would look at her when she was in high school. But she didn’t expect a surging jolt of awareness that moved through her.

“You want the key or not?” Quigley asked.

Russ broke eye contact and took the key. “I’ll lock up when we’re done, but we may have to cordon off the property and won’t be able to return the key to you right away.”

“Appreciate getting it soon. Gotta get the place rented again.”

“I’ll do my best.” Russ stood back, watching Quigley drive off before heading her way.

She waited for him to pass by and climbed the stairs behind him. On the porch, memories from the arrest flashed in her brain. The smell of the alcohol that freely flowed. The marijuana that was freely smoked. The unwashed bodies of some of the guests. All replaced her thoughts of Russ.

They put on their shoe coverings and gloves.

Good. Clinical. All business. Maybe if she kept that kind of outlook when she touched Dixon’s things, she could forget her guilt over his death.

She accompanied Russ into the house, stepping directly into a small living space painted dark blue and boasting a monstrous brick fireplace. The furniture was all secondhand shop variety, worn and torn. A large Slipknot band poster hung above the sofa.

“This poster here when you arrested Dixon?” Russ asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I looked them up. Heavy metal band. We located decals with the band logo on an electric guitar case and some songbooks. Looks like Dixon was into them big time.”

Russ looked back at her. “Everything else the same too?”

“Minus the beer cans and rowdy friends, yes.”

“You said you arrested the friends.”

“We found lines of coke on the table, so we hauled them all in.”

He crossed to the small scarred desk and pulled open a drawer. “We’ll need to question them. I’ll want a copy of your arrest report first thing in the morning.”

Sydney nodded, though it would have to be second thing in the morning. The chief would first want to dress her down for leaving her duty weapon in the car.

She stepped further into the space where a cord trailed from an outlet under a table. She dropped to her knees without thinking. The injured one hit the stained carpet. Pain radiated up. She bit her lip. No way she would cry out

and let Russ think she was incapacitated.

She closed her eyes and waited for the black spots in her vision to recede. Took a few breaths. Opened her eyes, traced the cord to a cell phone, and held it up. “Odd place to charge a phone.”

“Dixon’s phone. Good work in locating it. I figured he would be carrying it, and we’d have to wait for the ME to search for it. Finding it here makes life easier.” Russ’s tone carried more optimism than she’d heard all night.

“*If it’s Dixon’s,*” she said. “Someone could’ve plugged it in the night of the party and forgot it.”

“It’ll be easy enough to find out after our techs image it.” He tossed her a plastic evidence bag. “Bag it.”

She settled the phone inside, and it chimed.

“There’s no way I’m ignoring this text no matter what protocol says.” Before he could warn her to stop, she tilted it to wake up the device. The screen came alive. “The text is from someone labeled *Big Cheese.*”

She silently read it.

Good evening, Officer Tucker. This isn’t over. I want what you took from this house. I will get it back even if someone else gets hurt in the process.

Her mouth fell open, and she stared at the screen.

What in the world was he talking about? What thing? She’d only taken the drugs that she logged into evidence, and the small quantity she recovered wasn’t worth killing someone over. And how did he even know she was here right now and would answer this phone?

Had he followed them? Was he outside now...watching like Russ had thought?

“Read me the text,” Russ said from where he searched a desk drawer, his back to her.

She heard him speak but couldn’t quit staring at the screen or form any words. Their theory had been right. The killer *did* want her alive and wanted something from her.

But what, she had no clue. A helpless feeling swam through her.

Russ crossed the space and knelt next to her.

“Let me see.” His voice was soft, reassuring, but didn’t melt the ice forming around her heart.

He tried to take the phone. Her fingers tightened around it like a claw, and she couldn’t seem to let go. He turned her hand so the screen faced him. She heard him draw in air before jumping to his feet.

“Stay here,” he commanded and rushed to the door. Weapon in hand, he eased onto the porch, pulling the door closed behind him.

He didn’t have to tell her to stay put. Without her weapon, she wasn’t moving a muscle. Especially not to step outside. The killer was likely hanging in the shadows. A mere shadow himself. Watching through the misty fog that was likely rolling in by now. Biding his time. Hoping to strike again.

Wait. The text said if *someone* got hurt in the process. He didn’t say if *she* got hurt. Did that mean he planned to hurt people she cared about instead? Her sister, Nikki? Maybe even Russ?

She dropped the phone and flew to the window. Searched up and down the street. Not seeing Russ, she opened the door. Poked her head out and footfalls sounded at the side of the house.

Was it Russ or the killer? Should she stay out here or go inside?

She scanned the area, her mind churning with indecision. The footfalls grew closer. She slipped back inside the doorway but kept the door open a crack. A hand holding a weapon cleared the side of the house. She glimpsed a deep navy sleeve covering the arm. Russ?

She held her breath. Waited.

Russ emerged from the shadows, his profile strong and solid. She whooshed out the breath. Dragged a fresh one into her lungs.

He spun and fixed his weapon on her. “Go inside and close the door, Syd.”

Sirens split the air. Red lights twirled in the distance, coming closer. He’d

called for backup. They were moments away, and their killer likely wouldn't try anything with several officers on the scene. Russ would be safe. All would be fine.

For now.

She took cover in the house.

Please protect Russ.

She settled on the floor with the phone and looked at the message again for any lead in the wording.

There it was. Right in front of her.

His warning.

This wasn't over. Not by a long shot, and might not end before someone else died at the hands of this killer.

Russ and his deputies searched for the killer for thirty minutes. The guy had to have been there to know he and Sydney had come to Dixon's rental. Too bad they'd come up empty-handed in their search. He likely took off, but Russ wouldn't take any chances. He left a deputy on the porch and went back inside the house.

He still had a county to oversee, and he was running out of deputies to post as needed. If this investigation didn't end quickly, he might have to ask Krueger for help to keep from paying overtime and wrecking his budget for the year. Something he never wanted to do.

Sydney sat on the floor by the table, the bagged phone in hand.

He squatted next to her and took the bag. Wouldn't be good for her to start rummaging through the device before they could get an image taken. They needed to have a copy of the phone in the state they found it in or any evidence it contained could be called into question. Reading that text might turn out to bite them after they located *Big Cheese* and brought him to trial.

"We'll get him before he hurts anyone else, Syd. I promise." He didn't know how he could say that. He could no more promise this guy wouldn't hurt anyone than he could promise she would be fine.

She peered at him. "Promise me something else."

"What?"

“That you’ll let me work the investigation with you.”

“I—”

She held up her hands. “Don’t say no right away. Just think about it. I might be a rookie, but I also seem to hold the key to this case. Despite what our killer thinks, I didn’t take anything from this house, but he seems more than willing to come after me to get it.”

Russ let himself stare into her eyes. She’d changed and yet she hadn’t. Her eyes seemed bluer, her face softer. If he didn’t move away from the pull of her gaze, he would promise her the moon.

“With your life in danger, I’ll personally work the investigation, and I’ll think about it.”

“Fair enough.”

The door opened, and Detective Baker entered. Russ went to meet the short guy who worked out as his main hobby. His muscular build and his curly orange hair made him unforgettable.

“Here’s the phone.” Russ handed the bag to his detective, who was busy checking out Sydney.

Russ got in Baker’s face to distract him. “I want tech to image this phone tonight, then you print out a log of every call and number on here before you go home. And put some pressure on the phone company to get the past phone logs for this number ASAP. Call me as soon as the log is finished and once you’ve confirmed the owner of this device.”

“You got it,” Baker said.

“Get out of here and get to work on the phone.” Russ hoped the phone would show them their suspect’s next move. A move Russ would do his best to prevent from happening. Or if he couldn’t stop it, he could at least be with Sydney when the killer struck again. Maybe Russ should call Lieutenant James, who took over the department in Krueger’s absence, and ask him to arrange protection for her since she was one of their own.

No. Not a good idea.

If he went that route, Russ would have to deal with Krueger's officers each time Russ wanted to talk to Sydney. His best shot was to fulfill her request. Have her assigned to the investigation. Not only would she be available when needed, but he could also keep her close to him and make sure she didn't come to any harm. After all, with his skills, he offered far better protection than a routine patrol officer.

Yeah, that's what he'd do, and he had to do it before Krueger got back.

Russ stepped into the other room and made a quick call to James, who was most obliging. Krueger would be mad when he heard Russ hadn't waited for his return, but Russ could handle the guy.

He ended his call and returned to the family room.

"Let's finish searching this place and get out of here." He headed for the desk he'd been digging through. "I just called your LT. He agreed to put you on the team. You'll report to me until this investigation is closed."

"That's great." She flashed him the smile that had always driven him crazy. "Thank you."

This time he ignored it. "You can thank me by being extra vigilant until this killer is caught. Keep your head on a swivel. Wear your vest at all times." He wanted to add *sleep in it too*, but he knew that would only earn him an eye roll. "And don't leave your gun in the car."

"Don't worry. I hear you." She turned back to searching the sofa cushions and lifted out a small baggie. "Found some weed. It's been years, but it's still hard for me to get used to the fact that it's legal in Oregon."

"Tell me about it." Russ sat on a chair and dug deeper into a bottom drawer. He pulled out a computer power cord. "Did you take a laptop into evidence during the drug bust?"

She shook her head. "We saw that power cord then too, but no computer."

"Maybe that's what our suspect thinks you took."

"Could be, I guess. Though I don't know what kind of evidence a drug

dealer would have on a computer.”

Nearly an hour later, they hadn't located anything else of interest. Russ's phone chimed. "Text is from Garber. Lights arrived. We're done here, and I can finally do a cursory review of the scene. I'll drive you back to your car."

She planted her feet. "I'd like to examine the scene with you."

"Not a good idea. Could be dangerous."

"But I'm your main witness, and I can walk you through step-by-step what happened before you arrived instead of you having to guess."

She had a point. A good one.

"Fine," he said but didn't much like having to agree.

They stepped onto the porch. The whispery mist had floated into town and hovered low over the ground. The temperature had dropped, a definite fall chill in the air, and neither of them wore jackets.

Sydney shivered and tilted her head at his deputy's patrol car sitting at the curb. "What's he doing here?"

"Just a precaution."

She flashed a worried look at Russ. "You thought the killer might come back again."

"Could be." He scanned the area on the way to his vehicle but tried not to be obvious about it and raise her concern even more. He signaled for his deputy to take off.

At the car, Russ opened the trunk, retrieved his jacket, and draped it over Sydney's shoulders.

"You keep it." She started to remove it. "You're cold too."

"I'm fine." He moved to open her door before remembering to let her do it herself. Not saying anything, she tugged his jacket tightly around her shoulders and climbed in.

On the road, she didn't speak.

He didn't mind the silence. He used the quiet to keep his focus on making sure the killer wasn't tailing them. Certain no one followed, he pulled up to

the townhouses. Of course, that didn't mean their killer hadn't left Dixon's house and returned to the murder scene before them.

Russ parked and searched the area. Dense woods and heavy undergrowth provided plenty of hiding spots. The fog—seeming to grow thicker by the minute—would give him even more cover. Still, he would be foolish to try anything with law enforcement officers on scene.

“I don't like the idea of you out here with the fog to provide our killer better cover,” he said. “Keep that vest on and stick close to me.”

“Of course.”

She was being compliant. Way too compliant. Should probably be more concerning for him than when she argued. Before they could get out, Garber marched up to Russ's door and signaled for Russ to lower the window.

“Just heard back from State. They're working several homicides right now and can't send anyone out for a couple of days. Said to use our people best we can until then.”

Russ resisted slamming a fist onto the wheel. “Let me get on the phone with Veritas and then we'll walk the scene.”

“I've got to set up the city's lights, and we'll be good to go.” Garber spun and headed back to the large light storage boxes sitting at the base of the hill.

“Hang tight while I make the call.” Ignoring the fact that it was nearing nine p.m. and outside of office hours, Russ found Sierra Rice's number in his phone's contact list. He'd worked with her during a recent investigation and knew she often worked late at her lab.

“Sierra Rice,” she thankfully answered despite the time of day and that last time he saw her, she was very pregnant and could be out on leave for all he knew.

“Sheriff Russ Maddox, here.”

“Hey, Russ.” Her tone held the good-natured cheer that she was known for. “What can I do for you?”

He told her about the murder. “I tried to get the state lab to send someone

out, but they're swamped with homicides.”

“Yeah. It's rough. Way too many lately in the Portland Metro area.”

He could only imagine the work overflow that had gone to her center. “I have no business asking for your help. Especially since I'll have to ask for it pro bono, but the suspected killer is threatening a local police officer. You might know her. Sydney Tucker.”

“I don't know her, but know of her sister from the recent investigation down there.”

Nikki had inadvertently been drawn into a serious crime that Sierra had helped investigate. “Sydney doesn't work for me, but I don't much like the thought of any officer being threatened.”

“I'm with you on that.” There was a bite to her tone. “Let me get the team on a conference call and see what I can do. I'll get right back to you.”

He thanked her and ended the call. “She's checking with her team.”

Sydney nibbled on her lip. “I hate to play on their sympathies like you did, but it would be great to have their help.”

“You're not doing anything. It's the killer who's doing it.” He looked out the front window. “You up for a better look at this scene?”

She curled her fingers into fists on her knees. “Honestly? Not really, but sometimes you have to do what you have to do.”

“Isn't that the truth.” He didn't add that he could only pray bucking up like this didn't end with her getting seriously hurt.



Jitters left Sydney's hands trembling as she crossed toward the lights glowing like beams of warning in the fog. The eerie mist swam along the ground in undulating waves of thickness. The lights did little to illuminate the details but shined bright enough to show their way.

Was her terrible feeling from the eerie creep factor of the scene unfolding

before her or from the possibility that the killer watched them from the wooded area across the road?

She honestly didn't believe he was over there. Not with multiple police cars and deputies on scene. But killers could be unpredictable. Foolish. Especially if they were motivated by revenge or other brain-clouding issues. Like drugs.

Question was, what motivated this killer? Would he harm her, or did he want to collect this thing that he thought she had first, and then would he kill her too?

Let it go. Concentrate. Lead Russ to the scene.

She took quick steps past her car in the lot and toward a rough path heading up the hillside to her townhouse. Guilt tried to grab her focus. She swallowed it away. "This is where I came on scene. I got as far as the top of the hill when I heard the gunshots. Three at first, then two men talking, and another three shots."

Russ stared up the hill. "What did you do then?"

"Ducked and covered. You should be able to find my blood on the rock that gave me this beaut." She gently touched the throbbing wound on her head. "Then I waited and the killer called me by name. I'll admit it freaked me out big time, and I bolted deeper into the scrub."

"Show me where."

She led him to the edge of the path where her footsteps had mowed down the grass. "I caught my foot on something and fell. A rock, I think. Hit my knee and head, but got up to run then tripped and rolled down the hill. That's when you snagged me."

"And we moved back this way." He shone his light on the ground to retrace their earlier movements.

The warmth of his arms holding her came back to mind. She could stand to be held right about now. Not romantically, but from a friend. Helping her let go of the shakes. Russ seemed totally oblivious to her emotions. And why

shouldn't he be? He was never into her back in the day. It'd been all one-sided on her part. Why would he pay her any attention now other than as a witness to a murder?

He stopped to kneel. "Cigarette butt. Could be from our killer."

She wanted to be hopeful, but... "Could be from a construction worker too."

"Back in here?" He looked up. "Not likely. They wouldn't have to hide to smoke."

"Yeah." She wished she was thinking more clearly.

He stood, tucked his flashlight under his arm, and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hey, Garber! Bring an evidence marker up here."

"On it," came Garber's reply.

"You're leaving the butt in place?" she asked.

"We can protect it for the night, and it's better to have the forensic team photograph it and then take it into evidence with whatever else they find."

His phone rang, and he dug it out of a cargo pocket in his tactical pants. "It's Sierra. I'll put her on speaker."

He tapped the screen and greeted her.

"You're approved," she said. "My assistant Chad and I'll be there by noon tomorrow."

"I take it this means you're not on leave yet," Russ said.

"Still have six weeks to go. Gonna take some pretty sweet talking to keep my husband from insisting on joining me on this trip." She laughed.

Russ nodded as if she could see him. "In case you're here overnight, you're welcome to stay in one of our cabins."

"I was going to ask about that. It's a long drive to make twice in a day so that would be great."

"We'll get the place ready for you. And I can't thank you enough for coming. Let me know if I can ever repay you other than putting a roof over your head for a night."

“Just pay the kindness forward if you can,” she said. “Do you want to meet at the crime scene?”

Russ’s eyes narrowed. “That works for me.”

“Then text me the address, and we’ll say noon. See you then.” She didn’t wait for his agreement but ended the call.

He stowed his phone. “This is good news. Very good news.”

“I can’t wait to see them in action,” Sydney said, catching his enthusiasm.

“Sierra’s something. Always has some cutting-edge procedure that forensics around here hasn’t likely even read about, much less employed. It helps move the investigation forward.”

Sydney could only imagine. “I might hate being in this position, but one thing’s for sure. I’m learning a lot about investigations and will be a much better police officer when this is all over.”

He opened his mouth as if he planned to speak then clamped it closed.

What had he almost said? Should she ask? Or was he thinking, Yeah sure, she would be a better police officer—if she lived to put what she learned into practice.



There was nothing more Russ could do at the murder scene. He turned to tell Sydney that he would drive her home, but a small teal-colored Honda fishtailed to a stop across the road. His hand drifted to his sidearm, and he stepped in front of Sydney.

The vehicle’s passenger door opened. Throbbing music pulsed into the night. A young teen climbed out.

“Nikki,” Sydney whispered.

Russ relaxed his grip on his duty weapon. “What’s your sister doing here?”

“I don’t know, but don’t worry. I’ll make sure she leaves right away.”

Sydney started forward.

He grabbed her arm. “You think that’s such a good idea?”

“Her leaving a murder scene? Of course.”

“What if our killer got here before us and is watching? Even in this weather, it’s easy to see her resemblance to you and figure out she’s your sister. He could see Nikki leave. Follow her to—”

“Get to me.” Sydney finished his sentence.

“Exactly.”

A boatload of emotions shifted over Sydney’s face. Worry morphed into rage, the exact thing that would be raging in his gut if Zach were targeted by a murderer. Russ would do anything to keep his son out of the hands of a killer. Most likely, Sydney was thinking like a parent, not an officer.

She planted her hands on her waist. “I’ll take her home with me.”

“I’ll drive you.”

She arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “I appreciate your concern, but I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I know, but humor me. I won’t be needed here until Sierra arrives tomorrow.”

“That doesn’t mean you need to escort me home.”

“I think I do.” He held up his hand before she continued to argue. “This event tonight has made you more of a victim than an officer, and you aren’t at the top of your game at the moment. Worrying about your sister is an added distraction. If the suspect follows you, it would be good to have another set of eyes on the situation.”

She glanced across the lot in the direction of the other deputies. “I can’t see you telling one of your deputies to duck and cover like this.”

“You’re wrong. If one of them were in this situation…” he paused, locking eyes with her to communicate the truth in his words, “I’d make sure they were escorted home. I would never do anything to endanger their lives. I’ll do no less for you.”

He was afraid he'd scared her again with the over-the-top intensity in his tone.

But she simply shrugged. "We take my car. I'll need it in the morning."

He didn't like leaving his vehicle behind, but he wouldn't let this issue stand in the way of protecting her. He could give Garber his keys and have someone drop his car off for him.

He met her gaze. "Fine, but I'll drive."

Her eyes burned into him. "I don't like this. Not one bit. Your deputies will think I'm soft and need coddling, but your points are valid. Nikki's safety comes before my reputation. If you think driving my car will accomplish that, then I'll agree."

"You made the right decision."

"I'm trying to cooperate, Russ. Really I am."

He knew she meant it, but he'd seen her need to be independent ingrained in her when he'd known her before. He wasn't sure of the reason, but maybe it had to do with why she had custody of Nikki. She also had to show her independence in law enforcement. All women had to work harder in their field. Shouldn't still be that way, but it was. He only hoped he wasn't coming across as one of the men who thought she was less than because she was female.

"I'll escort you and Nikki to your car and then give Garber instructions." He came alongside her.

An uneasy feeling settled over him again. He searched the scrub lining the road and the tall foliage visible above the fog yielding to the slight breeze. Nothing but plants in motion. So why did he keep feeling as if the killer was watching them, waiting for Russ to turn away to strike?

He glanced back at Sydney, vulnerable and scared for her sister. Now he had two people to protect from a killer.

Could he keep them safe or was he fooling himself?

Visions of blood blooming in Willie's chest as he fell to the ground

flashed into Russ's mind. A fresh wave of apprehension hit him hard again.

Let it go, man.

He tried. Hard. He couldn't let the raw pain from Willie's death rise up and make him paranoid. Emotions like that only led to two things on the job. In life.

Mistakes and regret.

He had to keep his head and apprehend this killer before the creep got the information he wanted from Sydney and ended her life.



Sydney hurried down the hill, trying to form the right words for when she reached her sister. Her training as an officer hadn't prepared her for this situation, and her role as Nikki's surrogate mom hadn't either. Only God could give her the right words.

Please don't let me say the wrong thing and help me to keep Nikki safe.

She took Nikki's arm and gently moved her behind the protection of a van. "Why are you here?"

"We heard about the shooting on Mr. Clark's scanner." She extricated herself from Sydney's hand. "You always stop here on the way home. When you didn't answer your phone, I got worried. So Emily brought me." Nikki pointed at her best friend, Emily Clark, who waved at them from the driver's seat of her car.

Sydney smiled her thanks for Nikki's concern. It had been a while since her sister said anything nice to her. Not since the drinking episode at Dixon's house, after which Sydney had grounded Nikki for a month. Hoping she'd learned her lesson, and hoping to repair the relationship that had been deteriorating of late, Sydney had agreed to let Nikki spend the night at Emily's house. Now she had to tell Nikki that she needed to cut her fun night out short and come home.

“It was sweet of you to check on me.” Sydney led with the positive and smiled. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” Nikki stared at Sydney’s forehead, then whistled. “That’s some awful shade of purple already.”

Sydney had to change the subject. Get her sister to go home with her and do it quickly. But what did she say without giving her the gory details of the murder and scaring her?

“I know that face.” Nikki frowned. “What’d I do now?”

“Nothing, but you shouldn’t be here. This is a crime scene, and you can’t be here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nikki saluted, but her tone didn’t hold the usual sarcasm. “Is it all right if Emily and I stop for some ice cream on the way to her house?”

Sydney counted to ten before breaking the bad news. “I really wish I could let you go with Emily, but you need to come home with me instead.”

“What?” Nikki cried out, drawing stares from the deputies. “This is a joke, right?”

“No joke. Something’s come up.”

Nikki’s lips morphed into a giant pout. “No, it didn’t. You just figured if I left her house once tonight that I’ll do it again. Admit it. You don’t trust me.”

Her sullen tone hit Sydney like a punch to the gut. “That’s not it at all. Honest.”

Nikki crossed her arms. “You just want to ruin my life.”

Sydney hated to tell Nikki what was going on, but if she didn’t, her sister wouldn’t understand. Their relationship would only suffer. “This wasn’t just a case of gunshots being fired tonight. A man was murdered.”

“What?” Nikki blinked lashes liberally coated in mascara.

“Someone killed Carl Dixon.”

Nikki’s mouth dropped open, and she brought a hand up to cover it.

Sydney moved closer and rested a hand on her sister’s shoulder. “That’s

why I need you to come home.”

She lowered her hand. “It’s a bummer that he got killed, but what does it have to do with me? I didn’t, like, know him or anything. I only went to a rager at his house.”

“This isn’t about you or the party. Three days ago, I arrested him for selling drugs to Julia. Seems like whoever killed him thinks I took something from the house, and he wants it back.” She gulped in air. “He tried to kill me tonight too.”

“No way.” Her gaze flitted around the area as she wrapped her arms around her waist—her go-to move when she felt threatened.

Broke Sydney’s heart. “Unfortunately, yes. He could come after me again or even you.”

“Me?” Nikki’s tone squeaked higher. “Why me?”

“It’s a long shot, but he could target you to get to me. I want you with me so I can protect you. Until the killer is found, I’ll need you to stay close to home.”

“But what about Emily’s birthday party? It’s tomorrow night.” She pleaded with Sydney. “You said I could go. Promised, even.”

“I’m sorry, Nikki. I don’t like to break a promise, but this is out of my control.”

Nikki tightened her arms. “You’re not sorry at all. Ever since you became a cop all you want to do is keep me locked up in the house.”

Sydney curled her fingers into her palms to keep from snapping. “What I want is to help you become everything you can be in life. Sometimes that means I have to be the bad guy.”

“Whatever.” Nikki’s nostrils flared, and she looked away.

“I want you to call Emily. Tell her you’re coming home with me, but don’t say anything about the murder.”

“I’ll just go over and tell her,” she huffed.

“Call her. I want you to stay behind the van. This guy could be hiding

around here, and I won't risk exposing you.”

Fear sparked in Nikki's eyes.

Oh, man, Sydney hated being the cause of it, but sometimes she had to do the hard things to protect the person she loved. The text from the killer said he'd stop at nothing to retrieve the item he was looking for. She would hand it over if she could, but since she had no idea what he wanted she had to go on the defensive. She wasn't about to let this crazed man anywhere near her sister.

After cleaning up in Sydney's bathroom, Russ took a seat in the tiny dining area in her duplex and pulled burgers from their takeout bag. It was approaching ten p.m. and none of them had eaten, so they'd grabbed fast food on the way to the small rental home she shared with Nikki.

The moment they walked through the front door, Nikki snatched up her burger and fries and stormed off to her room. He didn't know what Sydney had said to her sister at the crime scene, but anger radiated off the teenager like stink from a skunk. It seemed like an odd reaction since Sydney had the girl's best interest at heart. But then again, Nikki was at an age when anything could set her off without much provocation.

As he waited for Sydney to finish her own cleanup, he studied the room. Mail, a laptop, and a Bible cluttered the far end of the dining table. A napkin holder and salt and pepper shakers sat next to each other, but it was the well-used Bible that held his interest. Back in high school, he would never have pegged her for a religious girl. More of a rebellious troublemaker. Shows how much he didn't know about this woman.

Still limping, she entered the room. Though she wore her soiled uniform, she'd washed the grime from her face, leaving the anguish from the night even more visible. "Hope you weren't waiting too long."

"No problem," he answered.

“I’ll get some sodas.” She’d taken out her ponytail, brushed her hair until it gleamed, and the full curls swung against her shoulders as she walked.

Even now, worn out and injured, she was a real beauty. He couldn’t help but want to tangle his fingers in her hair. Maybe kiss her like he’d been tempted to do back in the day.

Don’t go there, Russ.

She returned and placed two soda cans on the table. “I’m sorry Nikki ran off to her room.”

“Believe me, I understand. My son, Zach, is only five. He can get mad and storm off in a flash.”

“Wait until he’s a teenager.” She dropped onto a bright blue chair across from him.

He knew she spoke the truth and that a teen could be problematic, but Russ welcomed the challenge of raising his son at any age. “I’m not in any way trying to minimize how hard it is to raise your sister. But if I could have even partial custody of my son, I’d gladly put up with the challenges.”

“You don’t have custody?”

He shook his head and handed her a cheeseburger and fries.

She reached for a packet of ketchup. “How long has it been since he’s lived with you?”

“Three years.” Russ tried to think of a way to move the subject away from Zach. He should never have brought it up. Just tired, he guessed. Or something about this woman made him want to open up. Not that he would. He’d never told anyone outside of his family in Shadow Lake about his battle with alcohol or losing custody of Zach. He wasn’t about to start now.

He reached for his soda and popped it open. “How long has Nikki been living with you?”

“Let’s see.” She paused and looked up at the ceiling. “She was eight when we left Aunt Lana’s house. So almost nine years.”

Her wistful tone told him not to pry any deeper. He wouldn’t want

anyone digging into his past, but something inside—maybe the same desire to see Zach succeed, despite how Russ had screwed things up—made him want these two to do well, so he ignored the warning.

He unwrapped his thick burger topped with all the fixings and oozing special sauce. “If you don’t mind my asking, what happened to your parents?”

“With the way gossip travels around here, I’m surprised you never heard.”

“Not much for listening to gossip unless it’s for the job.” He set down his burger and cupped his ears. “Then these are wide open.”

She chuckled but stiffened. “My father took off when I was fifteen. Said he couldn’t be tied down anymore. He promised to keep in touch, but we didn’t hear anything about him until he died a few years ago.”

“And your mother?”

“She took his leaving hard.” Sydney went silent, contemplative, then let out a long burst of air carrying what seemed like years of pain. “She started drinking to cover up the pain and spent her days too wasted to take care of us. Right before I turned eighteen, she told me she was going to kick me out and put Nikki up for adoption. If not for Nikki, I would’ve been long gone, but no way I would let my sister be adopted. I split that night, taking her with me. We lived in Portland at that time and came here to live with our Aunt Lana.”

All the pain he’d seen reflected in his ex-wife’s face when he’d hit rock bottom showed on Sydney’s face as she stared into the distance. He took a bite of his burger and chewed slowly to give her time to compose herself, but it tasted like sawdust, and he washed the bite down with his drink.

He could take her silence no longer. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“It could help,” he said softly.

“Or it could put undue focus on the problem.”

“Is there still a problem? I mean other than the pain from the past.”

She raised the eyebrow near her cut and winced. “You don’t give up, do you?”

“Not usually.” He smiled but she didn’t respond. “I’ll stop prying if you want me to.”

“No...it’s fine. Things with Mom are starting to heat up again. After no word from her for years, she contacted me recently. Said she’s been sober for two years and wants to see us. I don’t think it’s a good idea, but Nikki’s all for it. I want what’s best for her and that isn’t our mother.”

Oh, how he got that the mother would have a huge battle gaining Sydney’s trust again. Russ lived that life every day. “You sound certain about that.”

“I am, I mean, I—” She bit her lip and stared at a fry she’d dipped in ketchup. “I know I’m right, but honestly, I don’t know how to handle this with Nikki, so I keep putting it off. I’m hoping once we move into a real home of our own, she’ll forget all about getting together with Mom.”

He didn’t know how to respond to the problem with her mother, so he focused on the townhouse. “From everything I’ve heard, it’s supposed to be a sweet complex when it’s finished. Nikki should be happy there.”

“I hope so, but maybe not. I know she would rather live in a single-family home where she could play her music louder.”

Memories of Sydney hanging with her cousin, Adam, in the summers when she visited her aunt, brought a smile to his face. Russ was friends with Adam, and he could still picture her lounging on the ratty couch in their family room, flipping through a magazine, while music blared through the house.

Maybe he could lighten this conversation. “I remember when you liked to crank up your tunes in the summer, and Adam’s mom got on your case.”

She sighed, a faraway look in her eyes. “What I wouldn’t give for those carefree summers at Aunt Lana’s place, when all I thought about were music and boys.”

She'd said *boys*, but he knew there had been one particular boy she'd thought about back then. Him. What would've happened had he pursued those feelings? Would his life have taken a different road? Maybe he would never have left Shadow Lake to go to Portland. Willie might be alive, and Russ wouldn't have hurt the people he loved.

"Don't worry," she said as she peered into his eyes, which he knew exposed his inner turmoil. "I might've had a crush on you, but that was a long time ago. If you can believe it, I'm over you." She offered a smart-aleck grin, washing away his angst.

"Tell me it isn't so." He faked pulling a knife from his chest.

She laughed along with him, lifting his spirits. With their history, he'd thought he'd feel awkward around her. Instead, everything he'd seen so far intrigued him. He wanted to get to know her better. To find out the kind of person she'd become. Especially after the sad story of her parents. She really was fragile and vulnerable, despite the tough exterior she'd always portrayed.

Fragile and vulnerable.

Two things that didn't partner well while needing to be sharp and alert when a murderer had you in his sights. And two things he shouldn't even be thinking about when he was responsible for keeping this special woman alive.



Sydney peered at Russ's shuttered expression before he focused on eating his burger. Conversation over. Just like that. She'd said something wrong, but what? Something special had flashed between them during the light, flirtatious banter. The exact situation she'd hoped for back in high school. Now it seemed like all the light had gone out of him, and he'd put up an invisible barrier.

She grabbed her burger and chomped a big juicy bite. Just as well. They

were law-enforcement officers, not a couple of teenagers. She wasn't interested in a relationship with another man who might lead her on, then when they started to get serious, balk at the responsibility of helping her raise a teen.

She didn't think Russ would do it on purpose, but between whatever was going on with his own son and being the sheriff, his plate was likely too full for a rebellious teenager.

Relationships were off-limits until Nikki was on her own. Sydney best remember that.

He tipped up his soda can and polished it off. "Let's meet first thing in the morning at my office to get the pictures you took into evidence and get them enlarged. We can look for anything that might be pertinent now, and Garber will review the dirt bike pics."

"I have to check in with the chief before I can do that." Her phone chimed a text, and she called up the message screen.

You seem to be avoiding my request, Officer. Maybe I should have a conversation with that cute little sister of yours instead.

"Nikki." Sydney dropped the phone and bolted from the table. "He's after Nikki."

"What?" Russ called after her.

She fled down the hall and shoved open Nikki's door. Hoping to find her sister sitting behind the computer, Sydney stopped short. The room was empty, the window cracked open.

He had her. The killer had her.

Oh no. Please, anything but this. Don't let my baby sister be harmed. Help me find her, please. Please!

She charged back to the breakfast area and gazed desperately at Russ, who still sat at the table holding her phone. "Nikki's not in her room. The window's open. He must have her."

"Hold up. You're jumping to conclusions. Try calling her." He held out

her phone.

She snatched it from his hand and tapped Nikki's icon. "Straight to voice mail. What're we going to do?" Panic seared along her nerve endings.

Russ crossed over to her and placed his hands on her arms. She felt the warmth of his fingers through her sleeves and wished the heat would still the alarm threatening to overwhelm her. But nothing would warm the terrible chill invading her body.

"Take a deep breath and calm down," he said. "No matter what this creep texted you, I doubt he has Nikki. She's a tough kid. She wouldn't let him take her without making so much noise we would've heard them. Maybe she snuck out."

Was he right? "But I warned her about the killer."

"She's a teenager, Syd. They think they're invincible and do dumb things all the time. Can you trace her phone?"

"We have a family-sharing app that provides location tracking, notifications, and emergency services." Sydney grabbed her phone and opened the app. "Her phone isn't displaying. She must've turned it off. Or the killer did." She flashed her eyes up. "Oh, no! Do you think he did? The killer, I mean?"

"Don't overreact. She could've snuck out and turned it off so you couldn't find her. Let's look for something in her room that might tell us where she went."

Sydney jerked away from Russ and raced back down the hall. She heard him follow. In Nikki's room, her eyes lit on the computer sitting open on her desk cluttered with papers and folders.

"Her life revolves around her computer and phone. Maybe I can find something here." She dropped into the chair and lifted the laptop's lid. The screen came alive with a Facebook window followed by the little chat window with a transcript of a conversation with Emily.

Russ came up behind Sydney and leaned over her shoulder.

Nikki had typed, *Things changed. I can go.*

Emily responded, *Seriously? Thought the warden said you had to stay with her tonight.*

Sydney cringed at the “warden” comment. So what? She wasn’t Nikki’s friend or even just her sister. She was her legal guardian. For all practical purposes her mother. And mothers had to be wardens at times.

Don’t care what she says. I’m going, Nikki added.

It’ll be crazy fun. Logan scored two kegs.

K. Pick me up at the corner so S doesn’t see me leave.

Be there in 5, Emily had typed before signing off.

“See,” Russ said, his tone meant to soothe but did nothing to still Sydney’s anxiety. “She went to a party. Now all we have to do is figure out where they are and bring her home.”

It was good to know the killer hadn’t abducted Nikki, but his message said he knew she wasn’t home. Her life could still be in danger.

A wave of nausea rolled through Sydney’s stomach. “The killer has to be watching us to know she snuck out. What if he followed her?”

Russ didn’t say anything, but his tight expression said he believed the possibility existed. “Any idea where the party might be?”

“I’m guessing the pit.” She referred to a gravel pit just out of town. “At least that’s where most of the parties around here are held.”

“Then let’s go. We’ll issue a BOLO for her friend’s car on the way.” A Be On the Look Out would alert all officers in the area to watch for Nikki and Emily.

“You can call it in while I get my weapon. I’ll meet you at the car.” She didn’t wait for agreement but ran to her bedroom, where Nikki had dropped Sydney’s backpack after bringing it in from the car.

Sydney jerked out her duty belt and reached inside. Her sidearm wasn’t there. She clawed through the pack. Came up empty-handed.

What had happened to it?

It couldn't have fallen out of the bag. She would've seen it on the seat. Someone had to have taken it. The only person with unrestricted access since Sydney dropped her duty weapon into the backpack was Nikki. She might be mad enough about not being able to go to Emily's party to take the gun just to irritate Sydney. Yeah, her sister knew the right buttons to push to cause Sydney to freak out. This was the exact thing that would do it. But she had to forget about that. For now, her sister's best interests had to take priority.

If the text was true, the killer wanted something from Sydney, and he wouldn't kill her until she provided it. Not so with Nikki. He seemed very willing to put a bullet in Nikki to get Sydney to produce this mysterious item.

She was still wearing her uniform so she slipped out of her shirt and removed her bulletproof vest. When she found Nikki alive, and she *would* find her, Nikki would need the vest more than Sydney would.

She slipped the vest on over her shirt and then fastened it as she ran into her bedroom to grab a backup gun from the gun safe. Russ was likely chomping at the bit, but she wouldn't attempt to rescue her sister unarmed. She charged toward her car. By the time she arrived, he'd turned it around and flipped on the light bar.

She jumped in. Before she closed the door, Russ took off. He flipped on the siren, and she sat back, finally feeling the strain jogging had placed on her injured knee. She'd been so consumed with fear for Nikki, she hadn't even noticed the pain. Now it throbbed in time with the wails of the siren.

But a little pain didn't matter—Nikki did. And what they both needed right now was God's intervention.

Please wrap Your arms around Nikki and keep her safe. Help us to rescue her and let no one be harmed in the process.

She breathed out her distress and let God's peace take over before opening her eyes.

Russ glanced at her, his eyebrow raised.

"What?" she asked.

“What’s with changing your vest over your shirt?”

She hadn’t expected him to question her, but he had to know from when he held her at the murder scene that she’d had the vest on under her shirt.

She explained her reason for the change. “When we get there, you can wait in the car. I’ll go in after her.”

Russ cocked an eyebrow. “Your logic is full of holes. Did you take something from Dixon’s house?”

“No.”

“Then this could just be a ploy to get you out in the open to take you out.”

She exhaled sharply. “I’m willing to take that risk to save my sister.”

“This is exactly what I was warning you about earlier when you followed Dixon. You have an emotional investment here. You can’t simply bypass everything you’ve learned about safety and act irrationally.”

He was right. She knew that, but they were talking about her sister. Not a stranger. *Her sister*. She had to do everything in her power to keep Nikki safe. “Do you have a better idea?”

“We follow protocol and stay together. The area outside the pit is wide open. If this guy has a rifle, we’ll be sitting ducks. If you won’t stay in the car, we go in together, working as a team. And I have an extra vest in my trunk for Nikki.”

She peered out the window. “It’s overcast so that’ll help.”

“But we’re too far from the lake to count on fog hiding us.”

“I still think you should stay in the car.”

He snorted. “Not a chance.”

“I told you—he’s not going to shoot me. He might try to take you out or even Nikki, but not me.”

“I’ll risk it. I’m not letting you go alone.”

His rigid posture said this wasn’t negotiable and no point in arguing more.

“I’ll need the phone number from that text to have Baker run it down,” he

said.

She picked up her notebook from the console and jotted it down. She ripped off the paper and gave it to Russ. “He should also check to see if it came from the same phone as the text we received on Dixon’s phone.”

“Baker will cross-reference it,” he answered, then fell silent.

Could he be thinking about how crafty their killer was? Using Dixon’s phone at his house, when he obviously had her phone number. Maybe to add a little more emphasis to the message.

Or maybe the killer used Dixon’s phone for another reason?

She looked at Russ. “You think he sent the message on Dixon’s phone to make sure we discovered the phone?”

“First, we aren’t positive it’s Dixon’s phone, but I can’t see why the killer would want us to find that. He might’ve simply used it to show us how creative he is. Or maybe he didn’t have your phone number yet.”

“We may never know.” They approached the pit, and she took out her weapon.

“We’ll go in silent and block the drive. We don’t scare a bunch of inebriated teens into cars and onto the road.” He flipped off the lights and siren.

They turned onto the gravel pit’s rutted driveway, the big cavern created by earth removal looming ahead. He killed the headlights and slowly drove them to the far end of the drive and swung across it. He shifted into park and faced her. “No cars. You think we’re wrong?”

“I hope not.” She tried to sound confident, but they should see some cars at this point.

Concern for Nikki gnawed at Sydney, and her stomach clenched into a tight ball. She looked away from Russ and sent up another prayer.

If they were wrong, Nikki might have set out for a party somewhere else. Or the killer could already have her, and she was at his mercy as he tried to recover something from Sydney that she couldn’t possibly produce.

Sydney kept up with Russ as he crept toward the mounds of gravel, his extra vest swinging from his free hand, his weapon raised in the other. As she'd suspected, fog wasn't a factor, and the moon had emerged from behind heavy cloud cover. If Nikki and her classmates were here, they would congregate in the back area of the pit, ringed on three sides by earth previously cut away and leaving only one way out.

Also leaving a potential ambush.

Worry for Nikki had Sydney moving fast, but her feet faltered in deep ruts, slowing her down. She wished a whole cavalry of officers were advancing with them, but she and Russ agreed not to call in backup, putting other officers in a potential sniper situation. Once they got Nikki out safely, they'd request uniforms to break up the party.

Finally, at the opening, she heard voices and music drifting into the night.

"They *are* here," she whispered to Russ, who stopped next to her, but she kept her focus on a small bonfire with cars parked nearby. A flickering light cast over the group, giving her a good look at them. She counted approximately twenty-five teens hanging in small clusters.

"There's Nikki." She pointed to where her sister, cup in hand, talked with Emily. Great. She was drinking.

Alcohol. The button most guaranteed to set Sydney off. She gritted her

teeth.

Russ knelt beside Sydney and set down the vest. He scanned the landscape. “Looks like we’re alone, but I don’t think we should take any chances.”

Sydney had almost forgotten about the killer. She’d let thoughts of Nikki getting involved with the thing that had incapacitated their mother for years take over. But Russ was right. They weren’t out of the woods yet.

Still, Sydney took the time to breathe, slowing her racing pulse. To think this through when deep down all she wanted to do was rush over and throw her arms around her sister. To hold her and plant kisses all over her sweet face for being alive.

Then to let her have it for sneaking out and underage drinking. For doing something that could ruin her life forever.

Hugging her wouldn’t teach her what she’d done was wrong. Besides, there was still the issue of the missing weapon to potentially add to her count of wrong doings. Nikki had to learn her actions had consequences. Plus if the killer lurked in the woods, he could still end her life.

“I’m going in after her.” Sydney hated the way her voice wobbled from stress. “Watch our backs. I’ll bring her out.”

Russ clamped a hand on her arm. “We never agreed to that. I have more experience. I’ll go.”

Sydney shook off his hand and picked up his extra vest. “True, you have experience, but like we discussed already, the killer would be more than happy to plug you. He wants me alive, and I have less to lose.”

He watched her for long uncomfortable moments. “Fine. I’ll cover you,” he grudgingly said.

Sydney had no doubt he’d do his best to keep her safe. She gave him a smile, got a flat-lipped one from him.

She pushed off and crept to the opening. Once inside the area where walls of gravel kept them out of a shooter’s range, she followed the edge then

marched into the group.

Nikki's friends looked up, anxiety spreading across their faces.

Good. They *should* be apprehensive.

Sydney was very thankful her sister was alive, but a sudden wave of anger over her taking this chance with her life just to have a beer made Sydney grab the cup from Nikki's hand and toss it away. "You're coming with me."

Nikki planted her feet. "Seriously, you didn't come here."

"Seriously, I did." She held out the vest to Nikki. "Put this on and let's go."

Surprisingly, Nikki didn't argue but slid the vest over her head and looked at her friends. "Later."

They responded with disappointed goodbyes but also seemed relieved that Sydney had only come for her little sister and not to break up the party. They'd be sorely disappointed when other officers arrived on the scene.

Once outside the group's hearing range, but still in the protective ring of gravel, Sydney forced herself to remain calm and not rush in. She checked out the area, looking for any hint of a shooter.

No one. At least no one she could see.

When they reached the car where she expected to find Russ, but he'd stepped away, she looked at Nikki. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"My duty weapon. It's missing, and you're the only one who had access to it."

"What?" Nikki's voice shot up. "I don't have your gun."

"Are you telling me the truth? You didn't take it from my backpack when I was having dinner with Russ?"

"Why would I want your stupid old gun?" Nikki rolled her eyes.

Sydney wanted to believe Nikki, but she'd lied too often lately. "I hate to do this, but I have to search you."

Nikki glared at her. “Why am I not surprised you don’t believe me? You never believe me.”

The hurt in Nikki’s voice cut to Sydney’s core, but she ignored it.

“Lift your arms.” She gritted her teeth as she searched.

Nothing in life had prepared her for this. Sure, the academy had taught her how to properly search a suspect, but her sister? How could she pat down her sister without ruining an already deteriorating relationship?



Russ had taken a stance by the earthen wall where he could keep Sydney in his eyesight. What in the world was Sydney doing? Searching her sister like a common criminal. He could never imagine treating his son like that. No matter what Zach had done. But then, he couldn’t have imagined letting alcohol control his life to a level that he would lose custody of a child who meant everything to him. That left him in no position to judge Sydney for her actions, but maybe he could help.

He joined the pair as she took Nikki’s arm and put her in the car’s backseat, firmly closed the door, and then used her radio to request units to break up the party.

Was she planning to turn Nikki over to the officers when they arrived? If Sydney wanted Nikki to hate her for life, she was doing the right thing. If not, she was making a colossal mistake. He should know. He was the king of relationship blunders.

But this was her life. Her sister. He was simply a fellow officer, and if he were in her shoes, would he want someone to interfere?

Should he tell her what he thought or walk away? Crossing over that professional boundary with Sydney wasn’t a good idea. But could he stand by and watch her ruin her relationship with Nikki if he could help them?

He’d probably be sorry for trying to butt in, but he had to step in as he’d

like to think he would want someone to do for him in a similar situation.

He stepped closer to her in the chilly night. “You’re not arresting Nikki, are you?”

Sydney looked at him and gritted her teeth. “She’s lied to me one too many times. Maybe hauling her in for drinking will scare some sense into her.”

“Or not.”

Her eyes zeroed in on him. “I know what’s best for my sister.”

“I wouldn’t think of telling you what to do. Just trying to help you think this through before you let anger get to you and do something you might regret later.”

She searched his face. “So what do I do with her? This is the second time I caught her partying. It’s got to stop.”

“You’re certain she was drinking tonight?”

Sydney tilted her head. “She had a cup in her hand, but I don’t know what was in it. We both know she wasn’t here long enough to get drunk, and she didn’t act like it, but why else would she come to the party?”

Sydney had a point but was reacting in haste. “Tell you what. Why don’t we take her home? I’ll administer a breathalyzer. If she’s been drinking, I’ll talk to her and put the fear of the law into her.”

Sydney’s jaw tightened. “Why would you do that?”

Why indeed? Because Sydney’s wounded eyes had kept him from behaving like himself all night. But he wasn’t about to admit that. “I’ve experienced what you’re going through and would like to help.”

He didn’t add that his experience was from the other side of the fence. That he’d lived in the black hole of alcohol dependence for two years and barely escaped alive. That he’d fought hard to reclaim his life and relationship with his son, put his mistakes behind him and come out with regrets he didn’t wish on anyone else.

No need to reveal his ugly history, to risk it getting around town and

cause the people of Emerson County to start doubting their sheriff. No. Not a good idea at all. Especially with a murderer on the loose.



Russ got up from the sofa in Sydney's family room and couldn't stop the smile spreading across his face. He'd spent the past thirty minutes administering a breathalyzer and talking with Nikki. They'd really connected. Totally surprised him. She'd started out belligerent, but when he listened to her, she opened up and expressed her frustrations over Sydney not taking the same time to listen.

Now all he needed to do was find Sydney in the garage to tell her that the breathalyzer had come back with a zero reading and discuss Nikki's complaint. Hopefully the two of them would be on the road to better communication by the time this night ended.

He headed for the door, his steps lighter than they'd been in years with hope trying to ease its way into his heart. Been a long time since he'd hoped for anything. Felt kinda good.

If this was what happened when he opened himself up to others, maybe he should believe what they said at AA about deserving a second chance at life and really start living again.

Easier said than done.

He passed Nikki coming out of the kitchen with a soda.

"You still here?" she asked, but he heard the humor in her tone. "Thought you'd be out in the garage telling Sydney how great I am and to lighten up."

He laughed. "I'll do that if you remember your promise to talk to her about this."

"Said I would, and I will." The good humor disappeared with a shake of her head.

"And if she doesn't hear you right away, don't clam up and take off."

She stalked across the room. “Or if she does something so lame again, like accusing me of taking her stupid old service weapon.”

Hold up. Was Sydney’s weapon missing? If so, it explained why Sydney had patted Nikki down. He wondered if that was the real reason she hadn’t been carrying at the townhouse. Then again, she had a weapon at the gravel pit. But it could’ve been another handgun.

He hated to think she might have lied to him at the townhouses when she told him she’d left her service weapon in the car. He was a good judge of character. Lying didn’t fit what he knew of Sydney, but it did fit a teenager.

“Did you take her gun?” he called after Nikki.

She stopped and looked back at him. “If you have to ask, you’re just like her.” Shaking her head, she went down the hallway.

Despite the return of her attitude, he had to say he believed her. She sounded convincing. Plus he hadn’t seen Sydney pull a weapon from Nikki during her search. Something else to discuss with Sydney.

He went to the garage. She was lying on her stomach in the front seat of her cruiser, digging under the passenger’s seat.

“Syd,” he called out.

She snapped up, banging her head on the steering wheel and groaning.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” He handed her the breathalyzer case. “The test read zero.”

“She wasn’t drinking.”

“Not a drop.”

“Then why was she at the party?” She set the breathalyzer kit on the seat.

“She didn’t say, but she wants to tell you about it, if you’ll listen.”

When Sydney’s eyes narrowed, Russ took a step back. This was probably the same look she used on traffic stops. Very effective.

“Did Nikki tell you I don’t listen?” she asked, her tone testy. “I listen all the time.”

“Like tonight? When you patted her down and threw her in the back of

your car without letting her explain?”

Pain swept over Sydney’s face. Oops. He shouldn’t have been so direct. He knew how hard it was to be a parent. His wife had left him and taken Zach when Russ was too deep in the bottle to be a good father, so who was he to accuse Sydney of anything?

He peered into her eyes. Eyes that were older than her years, as if they’d seen far too much trouble in her young life. But they were also compelling and deep enough to drown in, if he ever let himself take a plunge.

He closed his eyes for a moment to clear his thoughts. “I’m sorry, Syd. I should never have said that. I know how hard it is to raise a five-year-old boy. It’s got to be even harder to parent a teenager. I could never do what you’re doing.”

“I appreciate your apology.” Her voice thick with emotion, she looked off into the distance.

He caught a glimpse of disappointment before she turned away.

Was she upset with herself or him for questioning her? If he told her about his failure with Zach maybe that would help. Or would it just blur the lines of professionalism between them that he couldn’t seem to stay behind? It was better to leave before he confided his problems and involved her in his personal mess.

“I’ll get someone to drop off my car so you can have that talk with Nikki.” He dug out his phone and pressed Garber’s speed-dial number.

“It’ll take a few minutes for someone to get here. Why don’t we wait inside?” Her lips turned up in an engaging smile, making him want to do what it took to be on the receiving end of similar smiles more often.

He stood there. Letting the strong connection settle over him and watching her eyes flash with interest.

“You there, Sheriff?” Garber’s voice came over the phone.

Her eyes turned shy. She spun and went to the door.

Russ eased out a breath and put the phone to his ear. “I need someone to

drop off my car at Officer Tucker's residence." He remained in place as Sydney entered the house.

He'd told himself to treat her just like one of his deputies and not to let his awareness of her as a woman muddy the waters. This shouldn't be such a complicated thing. Especially when he knew better than to lead her on. No woman deserved to get involved with him after the way he'd failed his ex.

"It might take a while," Garber said. "We've got a lot going on tonight."

"I can wait, but do your best to get it here as soon as you can." Russ disconnected and climbed the single step to the house. Sydney sat in the family room, sipping a glass of water.

She held it up. "You want anything?"

He shook his head and took a seat as far away from her as possible.

"I've been thinking about what you said." She shifted to face him. "You were right. I *have* been jumping down Nikki's throat lately and not listening to her. Not that it's an excuse but she's been acting out, and her grades are starting to suffer. I want her to have opportunities I never had. But I'm not helping, and I'll have to work on how I react from now on."

"Glad I didn't offend you." He let that warm feeling from helping slide over him like one of Zach's soft blankets.

She set her glass on the table. "Not that there's any excuse for how I've been treating her, but I lost it when I caught her drinking. Our mother was a mean drunk." She shuddered. "I don't want Nikki to follow in her footsteps, and I overreacted."

Boom. His warm hopes exploded like one of the big weapons he'd managed in the Marines. She'd said *drunk* with more disgust than he'd ever heard the word uttered. Couldn't hurt more if she'd actually slapped him in the face.

Sure, his ex-wife had called him a drunk many times, and with great passion, but it never carried the depth of feeling Sydney expressed. So much for thinking he might deserve a second chance at a normal life.

He had to face the fact that he'd wrecked his life, and second chances didn't come easy.

Had Sydney said something wrong, or did Russ go hot and cold like this all the time? If so, life around him would never be dull. Not that she was planning life around him. Especially after his comment in the garage about never being able to raise a teenager like she was doing. He was just like all the other guys her age—didn't want a teen to tie them down.

She wanted to be disappointed in him, but honestly, she could understand why a guy wouldn't want the extra responsibility. She loved her sister, but there were days when she'd be happy to live like other young single women. At least he wasn't one of the guys who'd led her on and then bailed when they realized what the responsibility of raising Nikki would be like.

Still, she could imagine one day staring across the table at his compelling eyes. Eyes that had locked on hers in the garage, kicking up her pulse. Blue eyes now narrowed as they roamed the room as if searching for a way out.

Oh, man, she was out of her depth here and wished she could go next door and talk this over with her friend Kate, but it was too late, and also, Sydney didn't want to burden Kate with worry over what was going on. Plus the feelings were too new for Sydney to even know what to say in answer to Kate's probing questions that were sure to come.

"You okay?" she asked keeping things light. If he wanted to talk he would. If not, she wouldn't press him.

“Tired.”

“I hear you.” After all they’d shared tonight, she regretted that they were heading toward inconsequential small talk.

He got up. “I can wait for my ride on the porch.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Nikki wants to talk to you,” he said.

“She won’t be going to bed anytime soon.”

“Still, I should go.” He headed to the door.

“Then thanks again for talking to Nikki. I hope she didn’t tell you any deep, dark family secrets.” She grinned to lighten the mood.

He didn’t return it, and she took a sip of water to cover her nervousness.

He gave her the hard stare that’d made him famous as a tough lawman around town. “It’s really none of my business, but did you lose your service weapon?”

She choked on her water and coughed until her throat cleared.

“I’ll take that to mean you did.”

She guzzled more water and fought for calm. She wanted to trust the caring expression he’d trained on her earlier, to confide in him about her missing weapon, but she couldn’t tell him before she reported it to her supervisor. Her boss deserved a heads-up before her carelessness made it to the town’s gossip chain.

Anyway, she still hoped a more thorough search than the quick one she’d just done in her car would produce the weapon.

“Sydney?” Russ’s tone grew more insistent.

When her phone chimed a text, she startled. Could it be another text from the killer?

She called it up on her phone and squinted at it.

Your sister may have gotten home safe tonight, Officer, but tomorrow’s another day. Give back what you took or both of you will pay.

Her heart dropped and dizziness swept over.

“What is it?” Russ asked. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s from him again.” She handed Russ the phone and fought for control over the fear invading her body. “Why is he doing this? I didn’t take anything.”

Russ’s expression darkened. “More pressing is that he knows Nikki’s home.”

“Right. That.” Sydney had been so busy thinking about the item she’d supposedly taken from Dixon’s house and what the man who wanted it could do to her sister that she hadn’t even questioned how he knew Nikki’s whereabouts. “He’s still got to be watching us.”

Russ clamped his hands on his waist. “At this point I’d say that’s the likely way he’s keeping tabs on you. We can explore it more tomorrow. But for now, show these messages to Nikki so she sees the full magnitude of the situation.”

Could she do that? Should she? “I’ve already scared her enough. This’ll terrify her.”

“She needs to know this guy means business.” He gripped his sidearm. “We can’t have her taking off again.”

Sydney just didn’t know what to do. “I need some time to think about the best way to handle the situation.”

“Think on it, but while you’re doing that, I’m arranging for a protection detail for tonight. And think about moving to a safe house tomorrow.”

“A safe house?” She flashed her gaze up to his. “Is that really necessary?”

“The killer’s messages are clear, Syd. He’s not about to stop until he gets what he wants.” Russ planted his feet and trained a steely gaze on her.

She was more confused than ever. She couldn’t think with his eyes drilling into her like this. “Make the arrangements for tonight—for an outside detail only. I don’t want anyone in the house until I decide what to tell Nikki.”

He headed for the door then spun, facing her, a grave expression. “I get

that you're trying not to scare Nikki, but you need to prepare her for what could happen if this escalates."

Numb, Sydney watched Russ leave.

How did she tell her kid sister that she might have to go into hiding because a killer had threatened her life?



Russ sat on a metal chair on the porch outside Sydney's duplex, keeping an eye out for any danger, and got out his phone to call Garber. He didn't have enough deputies on duty tonight to put a protection detail here for the full night. But he could get someone to sit duty until he could enlist the help of his brothers and the men they employed in their family business. His brothers and the guys of Shadow Lake Survival all had law enforcement or military experience. Likely more and better experience than many of Russ's younger deputies who worked the night shift. Russ would feel better about having them onboard.

"Any word on my vehicle?" Russ asked Garber when he answered.

"ETA five minutes or less."

"Schedule the deputy delivering it to remain here for an hour or so while I run an errand."

"Roger that. Anything I can do to help with that errand?"

"I got it. You just make sure that murder scene is protected even if you have to spend the night there."

"I've got it covered, and I'll be in the office first thing in the morning."

"Be sure I'm informed of any developments no matter the time."

"Will do."

Russ ended the call and created a group text to his brothers and the other three men on the team asking them to meet him at their meeting facility on the Shadow Lake Survival compound. Even nearing eleven p.m., they would

show up without question as the affirmative responses confirmed.

The only one who could have an issue would be Reid. His older brother would need someone to watch his seven-year-old daughter, but his live-in housekeeper should be available.

A patrol car pulled up to the duplex, and Russ jogged from the porch to greet his deputy, glad to see it was a seasoned guy, not one of the younger recruits.

He got out of Russ's car and stood at attention. "Sarge says I'm to stay here until you come back. Smitty is right behind me with my vehicle."

Russ nodded. "You'll serve as protection detail for Officer Sydney Tucker and her sister who live on the south side of the duplex. The man who killed Dixon tonight is targeting them. Keep an eye out, and call me if even the littlest thing seems off." Russ slid into his car and reversed out of the lot.

He made record time to the family compound where he entered his code and the stockade fence swung open. He drove past Valley View Lodge, part of the family's original vacation resort where Reid had come home to live after cancer took his wife. He'd served as an FBI agent but he wanted to be more available for his daughter. That was when Russ and his brothers formed Shadow Lake Survival where they taught survival skills to city folks who were willing to pay big bucks to learn them. Their younger brother Ryan worked with the team, and Russ helped when he could.

He swung down the hill and past the lake where his and Ryan's cabins sat. The moon shimmered off the lake. He headed further down the drive past the guest and other team members' cabins to pull up in front of their large meeting room.

Lights shone through the front window but no cars sat out front. Not surprising. The building was a quick walk from the living quarters.

The guys were seated at one of the long tables, and they wore the company uniform of a green polo shirt with a Shadow Lake Survival logo on the chest and khaki tactical pants. All of the team was present, his brothers

Reid and Ryan, the Graham brothers, Colin and Devan, and even Micha, his Marine brother and weapons expert who also served in military criminal investigations. Russ hoped they wouldn't need weapons expertise, but they might before this was all over.

Reid dropped the front legs of his chair to the floor. "What's so urgent that it couldn't wait until morning?"

Russ stopped at the far end of the table. "You all know Sydney Tucker, right?"

Affirmative nods answered him.

"Sydney and her little sister Nikki are being threatened by a guy who killed a local drug dealer tonight," he explained. "They need a protection detail, but I can't effectively cover the county and provide a twenty-four/seven detail for them."

"So you want us to do it." Ryan leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

"Exactly." Russ looked at Reid. "Can you spare the manpower?"

"We should be able to rework the schedule to free up at least one guy. What did you have in mind exactly?"

"I'll take the shift tonight. Then Nikki will need someone to pick her up in the morning and spend the day at school with her."

"That should be Micha." Colin's mouth quirking up in a smile. "He's always telling lame jokes like a teenager and should fit right in with them."

"Funny, man." Micha rolled his eyes. "Real funny."

"Ryan counsels teenagers," Dev said. "And he knows that age group the best."

"Might not make him the best one for the job though," Russ said. "He could cut Nikki some slack that she doesn't need."

"Agreed," Reid said. "Micha is the youngest and might stand out less."

Micha frowned but then it vanished as fast as it had come. "I can do it tomorrow if someone can take my basic handgun classes."

“I got it,” Dev said. “I mean how hard can it be to teach someone to shoot a handgun.”

Micha cocked a thick eyebrow. “About as hard as it is to teach them boat safety like you do.”

“Now, boys. Don’t make me call in our mom and dad.” Reid laughed.

“Can we focus here?” Russ planted his hands on the table. “This is serious.”

“We got it, man,” Ryan said. “Just trying to keep it light.”

“Not sure you would’ve wanted it light when someone was threatening Mia this summer.” Russ shouldn’t have brought up when someone was trying to scare Ryan’s fiancée away from Shadow Lake last summer, but he wanted to be sure the guys realized the seriousness of the threat.

Ryan arched a brow and stared up at Russ. “So it’s like that, huh?”

“Like what?”

“You got a thing for Sydney. I know she chased you in high school, but you didn’t seem at all interested then.”

Russ wasn’t about to admit his feelings to these guys. “Now she’s a law enforcement officer who’s being threatened by a killer, and I want to be sure she remains safe. End of discussion.”

“Right.” Reid grinned.

Russ would never convince this group that he didn’t have a thing for Sydney as not much could be hidden from them, and he would waste time trying. “Reid, I’ll get a timetable to you so you can schedule the details. Sydney is working the investigation with me. I’ll be with her during the day. For now, I can handle her protection at that time. If this escalates we’ll revisit.”

“I assume you want us carrying,” Colin said.

“I do,” Russ said.

“What about at the school?” Micha asked. “I mean, we’re within our rights to carry there, but do you want to go down the path of potentially

freaking parents out?”

They all knew federal law prohibited guns within a thousand feet of schools unless the gun holder had a concealed carry permit, which everyone on the team had.

“You’ll carry,” Russ said. “But don’t make a big deal of it or the principal might request Nikki stay home.”

Micha raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t be a bad thing, would it?”

“Nikki’s grades are already suffering. If we can facilitate her attendance, that would be best.”

“One other thing.” Russ looked at Colin. “This guy is somehow tracking Sydney. I figure he’s watching her, but he could have some kind of tracker on her phone, car, or even something at her duplex. Can you look at her electronics and sweep her car and house?”

“You’ll have to wait. I have classes until one. I’m free between then and three. You provide lunch, and I’ll be glad to do the sweep and review her devices then.”

“That’ll work,” Russ said. “I’ll want you to do her sister’s phone too.”

“No problem. Will only take a few minutes to check for spyware.”

“I’ll make sure that time works with Sydney and text you her address.”

“Don’t cheap out on the lunch.” Colin laughed.

Russ rolled his eyes. “Any questions?”

The men shook their heads in response.

“Okay, then.” Russ clapped his hands and looked each man in the face. “I need your best on these details. We’ve already had one murder. We don’t want another one.”

The mood, now somber, his brothers remained seated but the other guys got up, and he fist-bumped them on their way out to show his appreciation for their support.

When the door closed behind them, he dropped into a chair near his brothers.

“Haven’t seen you this freaked out since high school when you dented the truck Dad restored.” Reid chuckled.

“Thanks for reminding me of that.” Russ shook his head. “That’s all I need to think about tonight.”

Reid’s smile fell away. “Seriously, though you’re freaked out.”

“Like I said earlier, I need to figure out how the suspect is tracking her and eliminate it if possible. Then I’ll rest a bit easier.”

“No one better than Colin to do that for you,” Ryan said. “But good luck in prying Nikki’s phone from her hands before she goes to school tomorrow, ’cause I’m sure you don’t want them carrying the devices until Colin clears them.”

Russ easily imagined Nikki’s reaction to his request for her phone. “Yeah, that could be the hardest part of all.”

“You could get them each a prepaid phone to use in the morning,” Reid suggested. “That way they’d both have phones until theirs are returned to them.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Russ always appreciated the help his brothers provided. When it didn’t go as far as meddling, which Reid was more known for than Ryan.

Russ’s phone chimed. He looked at the text from Baker. *Phone you recovered does belong to Carl Dixon. Emailing the log to you now.*

Russ looked up at his brothers. “I’m getting a phone log and need to review the numbers. Either of you willing to help?”

“Right now?” Ryan asked.

“That a problem?”

“Nah, just haven’t seen Mia today. But Sydney’s safety has to come first right now.”

“I’m in,” Reid said.

“I’ll get it printed, and we can narrow it down to viable suspects. Then I’ll have Baker run them down in the morning. Maybe we’ll finally have

something actionable to go on.” At least Russ hoped they did so they could stop this killer in his tracks.

The next morning, before Nikki was up, Sydney laid her Bible on the table and stretched. Her knee still throbbed, but thankfully her forehead was only painful if touched. After a restless night, her morning devotion really hit home and reminded her that God was in control of their lives. He promised Christians a perfect eternity even if they suffered on earth.

She was going through something tough right now. The guilt she felt over not being good enough at her job to save Dixon. A killer stalking her. Nikki battling her at every turn. It was all temporary, as was life here on earth. She often saw her problems as God's way of shouting at her to get her attention. When life was swimming along just fine, she became sleepy and distracted. Busy, rushing, maybe missing His whisperings. She needed to take more time to be still and know He was God.

“Just remember that, Sydney,” she said as she crossed the room. “Even if this day doesn't go according to plan.”

She peeked through the blinds as she'd periodically done throughout the night when sleep evaded her. How could she sleep? Not when thoughts about the killer and losing her sidearm kept assaulting her.

After Russ departed last night, she'd thoroughly searched the interior of her car and confirmed there'd been no forced entry of the vehicle. If someone stole the weapon while she was on the hill, then the thief had probably used a

wedge and long rod to get into the car and unlock it, leaving no evidence behind. But if they were after weapons, why hadn't they taken her shotgun? It was almost as if whoever took the handgun knew she would get in trouble for losing her service weapon and had done it more for that reason than to possess it.

Who could that be? Was there someone in her department who wanted her gone? Maybe because she was a woman? Even in this day and age, she had her share of issues on the job over being female, but she didn't think things had reached such a high level. However, she couldn't dismiss the possibility that maybe she'd overlooked something. She'd have to be on alert for another officer who seemed bitter toward her. Maybe once she told her chief about the missing weapon, he would shed some light on the problem.

She sighed and peered at Russ's vehicle parked in the driveway. Arriving shortly after midnight, he'd parked in the driveway and spelled his deputy. At least she had a bed to toss and turn in. He only had a car. She'd considered telling him he could bunk on the sofa, but after the way she'd responded to him last night, it wasn't a good idea to have him under the same roof.

So because of her, he'd had to stay out in the cold. Not fair to him. She could do better by him. Starting now. She marched out the door toward his car.

The gray clouds had split wide this morning, letting the sun's warm rays bring relief from the early morning drizzly rain. Still, the grass and driveway glistened with moisture. She was careful not to slip on mossy patches courtesy of the steady rain so far this month.

Russ had gotten out of his car and leaned on the door in a relaxed stance. When their eyes met, a fluttery sensation in her stomach brought all her teenage feelings for him flooding back. And yet they weren't the same. More intense, actually.

"Everything okay?" His voice was warm and sleepy as his gaze drifted lazily over her.

She forced her mind off his attention. “Would you like to come in for breakfast? We can talk about what to do next.”

“Sounds good.” He pushed off his car but opened the door and grabbed a reusable shopping bag with a local convenience store logo on it.

She wanted to know what the bag contained but figured he’d tell her when she needed to know, so she set off across the yard. Acutely aware that he was following her, she led the way into her duplex.

“Coffee?” she asked from the kitchen.

“That would be great.” He took a seat in the same chair as last night, set the mysterious bag on the table, and stretched, drawing his shirt tight across his wide chest.

As she went to the counter to prepare a tray, she remembered the feeling of security he’d provided last night when he’d held her. The warmth of his body easing out the cold. She’d been alone for so long, carrying the responsibility of raising Nikki, that it would be so great to find someone to share the burden.

Enough daydreaming because that was all it was. A daydream.

Tray loaded with coffee, bagels, and cream cheese, she went back to the dining area and hoped he was in the mood to listen. A night in a cold car wasn’t likely in her favor. He was stretching and bending as if a night in the cold had kinked his muscles.

“I’m sorry you had to spend the night outside.” She set a steaming mug of rich coffee in front of him.

“That’s my job.” He took a few careful sips of the deep brown liquid. “This will keep me awake until I can grab a quick shower and another gallon of coffee.”

He offered a crooked grin, so like that of the boy she’d once hoped would smile at her in the same way. She didn’t know how to respond and simply dropped onto the chair across from him.

“Any new developments on the case overnight?” She took a long sip,

savoring the nutty flavor of her fresh-ground coffee.

He glanced up, the teenager's grin long gone. "A few. We confirmed the weapon used was a nine-millimeter. With so many people owning nines these days, that really doesn't narrow things down." He set the mug down and traced the rim with his forefinger. "Baker confirmed the two texts came from the same phone number. Phone company identified it as a prepaid. We're trying to track registration details, but I'm not holding out hope it'll produce a name."

"Help yourself." She pointed at the blueberry bagels she'd loaded onto the tray. "So what happens next?"

He split one of the crusty bagels open, releasing the blueberry scent, and slathered it with cream cheese. "We'll check out your pictures when we get to my office, but if you could text the ones with the dirt bike to Garber now, he'll look at them right away."

"Sure." She got out her phone, asked for Garber's number, and then sent them.

He set down his knife. "After that, we'll interview Dixon's boss and coworkers. And, of course, the Veritas team will arrive."

"I'm looking forward to talking to the foreman," she said. "It might just be a coincidence that Dixon worked on the townhouse construction site, but I don't think so."

He nodded and took a big bite of his bagel, chewing slowly and then swallowing. "I need you and Nikki to leave your phones here this morning."

"Our phones? But why?"

"The killer could be tracking you that way. The IT guy on our family team is a retired FBI agent. He worked cyber-crimes and has top-notch IT skills. He'll check them out and also sweep this place and your car for any bugs, but he's not free until one."

"Not sure how the killer could've accessed my phone without me knowing, but I suppose it's possible."

He glanced down the hallway and then back to her. “Do you want me to tell Nikki or will you?”

She started to take another drink of her coffee but held off as her mind traveled to her sister. “It might be better coming from you.”

He tapped the bag. “I picked up a prepaid for each of you so you can communicate this morning. We could enter numbers you need before we leave your phones here.”

“Okay.” This seemed like a perfect time to broach the subject of a protective detail. She set down her cup and flexed her hands to relax. “I wanted to talk to you about plans for our protection.”

He paused, bagel midair to eye her. “I haven’t changed my mind about the detail if that’s what you’re hoping.”

“Not exactly. Just thinking we could compromise.”

He lifted an eyebrow and set down his bagel. “I’m listening.”

“Since I’ll be spending the day with you anyway, Nikki is really the only one who needs someone with her. I showed her the text messages, and she agreed to let someone escort her to school.” Sydney smiled. “She said it might even be cool to have her own personal bodyguard.”

“That works for me.”

“There’s one more thing.”

He groaned and leaned forward again. “I knew that was too easy.”

“I have to see Krueger before my day starts. I’ll be happy to let you follow me to the office if you want, but I don’t want you sitting in the parking lot waiting for me.”

“You’ll have another officer accompany you on the drive to my office?”

“If that’s the only way you’ll agree to this, then yes.”

He met her gaze, his softening. “You may think I’m insensitive, Syd, but I get that you don’t want to look weak around your coworkers. I’ve worked with enough women in this business to know you’re held to higher standards.” He didn’t look away. “But first and foremost, I want to make sure

you're safe. And this guy has proven that he knows what he's doing."

"I appreciate all you're doing. Really, I do." She let her eyes remain glued to his and hoped her sincerity shone through. "But I've worked so hard to be respected as a fellow officer, even if I'm a rookie with a lot to learn. I don't want this incident to cause a setback."

"I can understand that."

She didn't see a smirk or any other evidence that he was humoring her, but only time would tell. For now, they'd made an uneasy peace. Hopefully, nothing would happen today to take it away.



Sydney stood at attention in front of Chief Krueger in his pristine office, and he sat behind his polished wood desk. His posture was perfect, and his bald head gleaming in the overhead light.

He planted his hands on his desktop and fired a testy look in her direction. "I don't much like how you wormed your way onto the investigative team."

Right. He was blaming her. No point in trying to correct him. Just stick to the facts and give him an update on the investigation. She started listing the details for him.

He tilted his head and listened carefully, his laser focus pinned to her like the patrol district maps pinned to the wall behind him.

She continued and resisted squirming under his attention. "That's it, sir. Everything I know."

"I want a written report by end of day and each day going forward. And you'll report in on a regular basis. At least twice a day or anytime there's a major development. Call me directly."

"Yes, sir." She swallowed hard. "I have a temporary phone in case our suspect is using my real one to tail me. Do you want the new number?"

"Record it in your personal record online, and I'll get it that way."

“I’ll do it the moment I leave here.”

He started to flick her away with his hand.

She couldn’t go. It was time. Time to tell her boss, who was already mad at her, about losing the weapon.

She squared her shoulders and blurted out the truth. “I don’t know where my service weapon is.”

She quickly explained what had happened and held her breath as she waited for him to erupt like a volcano.

He sat silently, long jaw clenched and eyes narrowed in hard slits, studying her like she were a suspect in a serial murder investigation.

Okay, not good. An eruption would actually be better.

She fidgeted with her hands behind her back but refused to fall apart. Last night she’d acted like a helpless baby. Seeing Carl Dixon’s body had stolen her peace from her, but her prayers and successful negotiation with Russ that morning gave her the confidence to withstand the chief’s glare. She would wait him out.

Time crawled by. Slow. Painful. She ticked the seconds off with her fingers. She reached fifty-two. He shoved his chair back and stood, towering over her. “This why you weren’t carrying last night?”

“No!” She paused to let her shrill tone return to normal. “I left my weapon in my backpack like I told you.”

His glare deepened and would make an innocent person admit to a crime. “It’s one thing to lose a sidearm. Another to cover it up.”

Her temper spiked at his insinuation, but his response didn’t surprise her. He’d become jaded over the years and didn’t trust anyone. At times, not even his own officers. The force had a high turnover for that very reason, but she’d still taken the job. Finding a rookie job in the town where Nikki went to school was a real blessing, and she would tough it out for as long as needed to give her sister the quality of life Sydney’d never had.

“I’m not covering anything up.” She tried hard not to sound defensive.

“The weapon was in my backpack like I said.”

“Fine, but if I find out you’ve been playing me, I’ll have your job.” His glare diminished a fraction, but he continued to eye her.

Hoping this was over, she started to back away.

“Hold on. I’m not done with you.” He tilted his head. “You do realize I’ll have to write you up for this?”

“No.” She clenched her hands. “I mean, no, sir, I wasn’t certain you’d have to do that, but I understand your position.”

“See that you do understand how serious this is. You’ve lost a weapon. If it falls into the wrong hands, it could be used in a crime. Don’t let it happen again. And don’t go blabbing about this to Sheriff Maddox.” He exhaled. “Maybe we can keep this quiet and the negative mark on our department’s integrity from spreading through the community.”

“Yes, sir,” she said as a rush of heat flooded her face. She hated that her actions tarnished the team’s reputation.

“I’ll authorize a loaner for you, but you better hope the missing one wasn’t stolen and search a little harder for it.” He jerked his head toward the door. “Now get out of here, and see that you don’t leave this one in your car.”

Face still flaming, she bolted for the door. She rushed out of view and stopped to gain her composure before picking up her new duty weapon and recording her new phone number.

She wasn’t surprised the chief wanted to keep her screwup quiet. A lot of competition existed between the sheriff’s department and Shadow Lake PD. Letting Russ find out about the missing weapon could make the chief look bad. Not a good thing. If she’d learned anything in her first few months on the job, it was not to let the big guy down.

Now her job might hinge on her doing exactly that.

Russ charged down his office hallway to the main exit and held the door open for Commissioner Fred Windsor. Russ had chosen to escort the guy to the lobby to get him to leave faster, allowing Russ to get to items more pressing than babysitting a county commissioner. Like interviewing the girl named Rachelle Zuck, who showed up at his office that morning to claim she had compelling information about a party she attended where Dixon plied Nikki with alcohol.

Instead, Russ got Fred Windsor offering advice on how to handle this case, while the girl cooled her jets in an interview room. Windsor had been on the committee that helped get Russ elected. He often weighed in on how Russ did his job, but Windsor didn't have a clue as to the intricacies of running a murder investigation—or a sheriff's department, for that matter. Which Russ had told the man for the past thirty minutes.

"I hope you have a great day." Russ gave a pointed look at the door.

"See that you keep me informed, Sheriff," Windsor commanded. "We can't have our citizens afraid to leave their homes."

"Will do." Russ pushed the door open wider and tapped his foot.

"You have my phone number," Windsor said. "If you need to consult on the murder, don't be too proud to use it." Windsor slapped his meaty palm into Russ's hand for a firm shake, then exited the building.

The commissioner paused and executed a dramatic turn.

No. No more talking. Russ had given him enough time. He turned and wound his way through the squad room that was so different from the busy Portland office he'd once served in. Emerson County employed a healthy force for the size of the rural county, but they still often had to wear many hats. If this investigation didn't end quickly, he still might have to request help from City or State in addition to the Shadow Lake Survival team. That idea sat as well with him as the thought of consulting with Windsor.

At Garber's desk, Russ waited while his sergeant finished his phone call. Sounded like he was talking motorcycles to a person who was as into them as Garber was.

He hung up and leaned back, looking pleased with himself.

Could he be on to something? "Please say you've got a good lead for me."

"Maybe." He leaned further back, threatening to tip his chair over. "I reviewed Officer Tucker's pics of the bike like you asked. She didn't catch the plate in any of the photos, so I can't confirm this bike matches the digits you caught."

Russ resisted groaning. "With only a few digits, it could take us forever to run the bike down then."

"Or not." Garber grinned. "You'll be glad I'm such a gearhead and recognized the make. It's an upper-end Honda. Retails for over fifteen grand."

Russ let out a low whistle. "Not many people around here can afford that kind of cash for a dirt bike."

Garber nodded. "Figured there might only be one in the county, but when I ran the make through DMV, I came up with more. None of them matched the first digits from last night though."

Strike two. "I could've been wrong. Plate was mud-spattered."

"Figured as much." Garber tapped his phone. "I still whittled the DMV

list down to two potential bikes to follow up on, but I also got on the phone with Larry. He's the local motorcycle club president. Club covers a few counties. He gave me the current details for three additional owners he knows in the area so I can follow up."

"Does he think any of them are viable as killers?"

"Does anyone ever think that of people they know?" Garber frowned. "But he did say one of them has had trouble with the law. All three are known to use illegal substances. Could be the connection to Dixon. I was just about to run their particulars."

"Good. That's the first solid lead we have. Keep after it. Anything else happen while I was with Windsor?"

"Baker asked if you'd stop in the interview room." He pointed at the first interview room where light beamed through the small window in the closed door. "He's still talking to the girl."

"Let me know what you turn up on the bikes, and let's get the homicide team together in an hour for an update meeting." Russ clapped Garber on the back before heading down the hallway toward Interview Room One.

He pushed open the door and took in the occupants. Rachelle slouched so low in the chair that he thought she might slide under the table. Her eyes were glazed as if under the influence, and she was dressed in a revealing V-neck shirt, torn jeans, and high-top sneakers.

Russ leaned against the wall and waited for his detective to take lead.

"Sheriff," Detective Baker said and nodded at the girl. "Rachelle, go ahead and tell the sheriff what you told me about Dixon's arrest."

The girl picked at her chipped purple fingernails. "After Nikki's sister slapped the cuffs on the dude, she went all kamikaze on Carl. Gettin' in his face and yelling that if he ever came near Nikki again, she would kill him." She paused as if she'd dropped some big bombshell.

"And then what happened?" Russ asked, not impressed with what he'd heard so far.

“Well, nothing, but, I mean, she was really mad. I thought she might kill him right there.” She sat up a bit. “So when I heard he was dead, I figured she did it.”

“That it?” Russ asked Baker.

Baker gave Russ a knowing look that Russ didn’t like.

“Outside,” Russ said. When they both moved into the hallway, Russ shoved the door closed. “You really think Officer Tucker offed Dixon?”

Baker shrugged. “Maybe. At least it’s possible. I’m not sure what I would’ve done if Dixon had taken advantage of someone in my family like that.”

Russ ran a hand around the back of his neck. Maybe he needed to give the possibility more thought. If he were in Sydney’s situation, and he’d caught Zach drinking, what would he have done? A boy might not be as vulnerable to a predator like Dixon, but still, Russ wouldn’t want anyone to expose his son to drugs and alcohol, and Russ would make sure any creep who did so paid.

But how far would he go?

Actually, the most important question here was how far would—did—Sydney go? Maybe Sydney was in on what went down last night. Maybe the killer was planning to take her out not for what she saw, but because she was part of the operation. Maybe...but his gut told him otherwise.

Still, he had a job to do. That included following this and every viable investigative avenue. “I’m not liking her for this, but we need to pursue it. Run with it, but keep it to yourself for now.”

“You got it,” Baker said.

“And let’s follow up on this girl. We need to see if she has any connection with Dixon, and if this impromptu interview is her way of trying to cover up any involvement on her part. Get with her school counselor and set up an interview ASAP for me with her parents. I’ll do it at their place so I can assess the home environment.”

“Right.”

“Anything on those numbers from Dixon’s phone that I gave you last night?” Russ asked.

“I’ve eliminated one as the burner we can’t get data for, but am still tracking down a few of them.” Baker rested his hand on the doorknob as if waiting to be dismissed.

“Let me know as soon as you have anything.” Russ headed back toward his office. At the end of the hallway, he spotted Sydney coming through the door, dressed in a clean, well-fitting uniform that emphasized the length of her fantastic legs. A few long strides took her into the bullpen area.

Baker remained in the hall and leered at her. She offered him a passing smile as if she didn’t see the fuss she was creating.

Russ wanted to yell at Baker for acting like a teenage boy, but what good would that do? Even with the strain of the night lingering on Sydney’s face, she was a gorgeous woman. Tan, smooth skin. Eyes wide with long lashes. He couldn’t stop the guys from looking at her, but he wanted to. More than he cared to admit.

Baker, who wasn’t known for his tact, tossed out a lame pickup line.

Russ chewed on the inside of his cheek to keep from saying anything. Sydney laughed and fired back a comment, confirming her experience in handling situations like this. She might be a rookie in law enforcement, but she wasn’t a rookie in dealing with unwanted male attention.

And he wouldn’t be one of those guys to be overprotective in such matters. In the hours he’d sat outside her house last night, he’d cemented his decision to keep their interaction professional. He couldn’t let the mere sight of her derail his plan. He certainly didn’t want to end up sporting the same goofy look plastered on Baker’s face. He’d start by asking about her threat to Dixon.

He took a defensive stance and steeled his mind for her arrival.

She stopped closer to him than he’d have liked. “Something wrong?”

“Tell me about threatening Dixon the night you arrested him.”

“Can we do this somewhere more private?” She tipped her head to the side.

He followed the direction of her gaze to see his team still gawking at her. He glared at them, and they scattered.

“Let’s go to my office.” He led the way, walking fast, her boots thumping along behind him.

When she sat and crossed those legs that went on for miles, he perched on the side of his desk and waited to hear her explanation.

She rested her hands on her knees and calmly looked him in the eyes. “You don’t really think I killed Dixon, do you?”

This wasn’t how he’d expected her to start. “You didn’t tell me last night that you threatened the guy, so what am I supposed to think?”

“I didn’t think it was a big deal. I just needed to blow off some steam. Sure, I yelled at him, but then I had to let it go or it would eat me up inside.” She sighed. “I’m guilty of losing my cool on the job, but I didn’t kill him.”

He believed her, but was it because she told the truth, or did he just want to believe her? “What about that unresolved issue from last night? You ready to tell me about your service weapon?”

A brief flash of unease crossed her face before she controlled it. She clapped a hand on her holster. “Would you like to examine my service weapon up close or is seeing it good enough for you?”

He should trust her, but her expression warned him not to. It might not have anything to do with this case or it might have everything to do with it, but he knew asking to examine the weapon would do more harm than good in their working relationship. If she was to confide in him in the future, she needed to trust him.

He would drop the subject for now. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Her shoulders sagged.

Relieved? Yeah, she was relieved all right, and he was on target here. She

might not have killed Dixon, but something was going on that she didn't want him to know about. Her evasiveness didn't produce her desired effect. He wouldn't forget about the gun. Not at all.

In fact, he was more determined than ever to ferret out the truth. No matter how long it took.



Sydney sat across the desk from Russ and hoped her expression didn't give away her attempt to sidestep his questions about her service weapon. He'd accepted her answer about the handgun, but his tenacious expression said he wasn't letting the issue go.

She hated not telling him the truth. She hadn't technically lied to him. The weapon in her holster was a service weapon. Just not hers. She only hoped that news of her missing weapon didn't get out. His disappointment in her would be unbearable to witness.

"Here we go." Russ pointed at his monitor.

She leaned closer to look at the first picture of Dixon's street that she'd taken the night of his arrest.

"See anything?" Russ asked.

She took a long look. "The party's in full swing, but seems nothing worth killing me for."

He clicked on the next picture of the white bungalow captured in dim light. She studied the version nearly identical to the first. "Nada."

He clicked again. Same scenario. Last photo, a dark-haired girl, about sixteen, wearing jeans and a lime green body-hugging T-shirt, hung out near a red dirt bike.

"That's the same bike that our suspect took off on," Russ said. "Garber's compiled a list of potential owners, and I've scheduled a meeting to bring everyone on the team up to speed and assign tasks as necessary. He should

have more information by the time we meet, and I need to print the photos to share in case we're missing something."

He clicked on the files and sent all of them to the printer. The machine kicked to life and hummed on a credenza behind him, but she kept her focus on him. She spotted a small scar on his chin that she hadn't noticed before. She hadn't seen that scar back in high school. She'd spent four summers studying everything about him. She would've seen it if it had existed then.

Odd that she hadn't seen it last night. Or this morning at breakfast.

Maybe it was visible now because he'd shaved since she'd last seen him or because she was closer to him than she'd ever been other than the hug last night. Close enough to catch the lingering scent from his minty soap. So masculine and appealing.

"I got your email with your arrest reports." Russ leaned forward and picked up copies of the reports she'd emailed to him when she'd stopped to talk with the chief. "Nothing glaringly obvious in here, but maybe one of the teens' parents had the same reaction as you did to Dixon's behavior and decided to take things into their own hands."

"I'm not really sure how that would explain the texts I got asking for the item." She went around the desk and sat in a stiff wooden chair. "Still, it's a lead we can't ignore."

He retrieved the pictures from his printer and looked at Sydney. "I'm assuming you'll want to join us for the meeting."

"Yes, please."

"Then follow me." He spun on his heels.

She didn't know what was up with the formal tone he'd adopted since she'd arrived, but it was good that he didn't have the same awareness that she had of him. It would help them stay focused.

He took long strides down the hall. He was over six feet tall, and even at five-ten herself, she had a hard time keeping up. It was almost as if he was trying to run away. Maybe he'd detected her interest in him and was trying to

run from her just like he'd done in high school.

That shouldn't sting—but it did.

He abruptly peeled off left and into a room where three officers were seated at a long table. They didn't seem surprised to see her. He'd likely informed them she'd be representing the city on this case. No one looked particularly upset over a City officer in their midst, but the room was thick with tension.

Sergeant Garber, who she recognized from the crime scene, sat at the far side of the table while the detective with carrot orange hair who had hit on her sat next to him. A younger guy in uniform, but with a receding hairline, sat on the other side.

“Everyone, this is Officer Tucker.” Russ motioned for her to take a seat.

She nodded her greeting, then chose a spot at the end of the table where she could clearly see the others without having to swivel her chair back and forth as they made their reports.

Russ remained standing at the head of the table. “Baker, update us on your assignments, then we'll go down the line. Be sure to start with your name for Sy—Officer Tucker.”

Eyes widened at Russ's near slip of her name, but no one commented.

“Detective Baker,” the officer who'd hit on her said. “We met in the bullpen.” He got up and as he passed her, gave her a smarmy grin.

She ignored it to focus over his shoulder, but she felt her face flush over his reference to the way he'd tried to pick her up. She willed it to stop, but the heat flooded all the way to the top of her head.

He shrugged as if ignoring him was her loss and tacked up photos of Dixon on the board. “First, I'm running down phone numbers from calls on Dixon's phone. We have a few to give a deeper look. Second, I've run the vic's background. He's from Portland. Haven't located any next of kin yet, but he was on the narcotics radar at the Portland Police Bureau.”

He glanced around the table. “They've questioned him but never arrested

him. They agreed to follow up with his known associates. Anything worthy of our attention and they'll contact me."

"Thanks," Russ said. "Baker and I also just interviewed a girl who was present the night Dixon was first arrested by Officer Tucker. The girl might prove helpful."

"I'll follow up on her to see if she has any connection to Dixon," Baker said. "And will share more information then."

Cryptic. And Sydney didn't like it. Why not tell them her name and share the information they'd gleaned?

"Take a seat, Baker." Russ squared his shoulders as if he didn't like something Baker said.

She had no idea what it could be. She wanted to ask, but Russ was in charge, and he let it pass, so she wouldn't put him on the spot in front of his men.

"Garber, you're up," he said.

The sergeant leaned forward to offer Sydney a tight smile. "We met last night, but in case you forgot, I'm Sergeant Garber. I'm still following up on the dirt bike." He scrubbed a hand across his face. "You all have the photos of the bike in front of you. We've issued an alert, and I have a lead on three suspects. One with a sheet. The other two are clean but are known to frequent the drug scene."

"You have enough background for us to pay any of them a visit yet?" Russ asked.

"Give me a coupla hours to prioritize them for you," Garber said.

Russ nodded. "Anything more on that number that sent the texts to Officer Tucker or anything else on Dixon's phones other than the calls Baker is working?"

"Not yet." Garber started twiddling his thumbs. "IT just finished imaging Dixon's phone. I have the data, but haven't been able to review it. I gave it a quick look, though, and that's when I determined that both texts came from

the same prepaid phone. I have a call into the phone company to see if we can learn more there.”

“Keep up the good work, Garber, and let me know when you have the background on our bikers.” Russ’s honest praise was refreshing to see. Her chief never told his officers they were doing a good job, but he sure did find ways they could do better. “Okay, Olson. You’re up.”

“Deputy Olson,” the younger guy said. “I’m working down the list of students present at Dixon’s first arrest. Looking for any connection to the homicide. Focusing on parents who might’ve decided to take the law into their own hands.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” Russ said. “Get a list together of any good candidates to interview ASAP so we can talk to these parents.”

“You planning on doing the interviews alone or with Officer Tucker?” Baker asked, settling a knowing look on Sydney.

She forced herself to sit calmly. Could this be the guy who told Russ that she’d threatened Dixon? Maybe from the interview of this unnamed girl? As much as Sydney wanted details about what was going on, she wouldn’t give Baker’s comment a response.

“Thanks, Olson. Keep us in the loop.” Russ faced the board and wrote Veritas Center. “The state lab is swamped and would be a few days out. I’ve arranged to have the Veritas team handle our forensics.”

“Those blowhards?” Baker gaped at Russ. “We can’t possibly afford them, can we?”

“I have a connection to the team, and they’re handling it pro bono. They’ll start with the murder scene at noon today and then I hope to have them move on to the rental house.”

Russ grabbed the photos he’d printed but held onto them. “Officer Tucker and I’ll head out to the crime scene to meet with the Veritas staff, then talk with the construction foreman and Dixon’s coworkers before we conduct parent interviews.” He handed the papers to Garber. “Take a look at these

pictures. They were taken outside Dixon's house on the night of his drug bust. Anyone recognize the girl by the bike?"

Garber studied the photo, then shook his head and passed the pages down the line. Each officer looked at them but gave negative responses. Deputy Olson tried to give back the photos.

"Keep them, Olson," Russ said. "Since you're running down leads on the girls who attended the party, see if anyone at the school can ID this girl."

"Roger that," Olson said.

"I don't have to tell you this is a priority." Russ ran his gaze over the group, pausing at each man for a moment before moving on. "We still need to keep up with our regular workload. So make sure you balance the two without breaking my overtime budget."

As the meeting broke up, Sydney watched Russ interact with his men. They'd just discussed murder, but once the official meeting ended they'd taken on a familial kind of easiness, with Russ assuming the role of the father figure. It was easy to see the respect they held for him—an admiration far different from the deference her chief demanded from the officers who served under him.

Her job would be so much better with a leader devoted to making the team the best they could be. Russ was that kind of leader. He was probably that kind of father. Maybe that kind of life partner.

Why had his marriage broken up? Had it been his wife's fault? His? If so, what had he done?

Seriously, Syd, What difference does it make?

She was already seeing that he'd gone from the honorable teen she'd known to an equally respectable man. Since her dad had bailed on the family, Russ's commitment to his son and men meant a lot to her, and her attraction went beyond his good looks. But that wouldn't change the fact that Nikki still needed her, and Russ had been clear last night when he said he couldn't handle raising a teen.

She sighed.

Russ locked his attention on her. Digging. Questioning. Probing.

She shrugged and leaned back, acting casual in an effort to tell him not to worry about her. His knowing look in return told her all she needed to know. He wouldn't give up so easily on finding out what was bothering her.

Yes, he was a man who cared. One who was trying to hide that he was a man who cared too much for his own good. Maybe hers too.

Russ didn't know why Sydney had clammed up, but on the drive to the townhouses, she'd been too quiet for his liking. She seemed to be brooding since he caught her sighing at the end of the meeting. He'd wanted to ask what put the distressed look on her face but opted to respect her privacy. So far, anyway. But he couldn't put off talking to her for long. Not when it might have to do with the case. He didn't want to add to her troubles, but he was sworn to do his job to the best of his abilities no matter the consequences, and he took the oath to the people of his county seriously.

"It's not like you to be so quiet." Yeah, okay, he was fishing but he was leaving it up to her if she talked or not. "What's going on?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw her shrug.

"Same shrug as in the conference room," he said. "If you're holding something back about this investigation, I hope you'll change your mind and tell me about it."

She crossed her arms. "There's nothing you need to know."

He glanced at her. "Have you gone back to feeling guilty about Dixon?"

She groaned. "You don't give up, do you?"

"That's what made me a good homicide detective," he said with an exaggerated wink to try to lighten things up.

She shifted to face him. "If you were so good at it, why'd you leave?"

He shook his head. “Oh, no, you don’t. We were talking about you, not me.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Now who doesn’t want to talk?”

“Let’s make a deal.” He slowed at the stop sign and looked at her. “You tell me what’s bothering you. I’ll tell you why I left Portland.”

She bit her lip. “You first.”

“Uh-uh. You go first or we don’t have a deal.”

“Fine.” She uncrossed her arms. “It’s really no big deal. I was a little jealous of how well your team works together. Chief Krueger doesn’t encourage teamwork. He calls all the shots, and we can’t question anything.”

Oh, wow. Not what he’d expected her to say. “Are you unhappy in your job?”

“Unhappy? No...I like it...I’m just saying I would work better under your style of management than the chief’s. But I guess that’s the only way he can operate.”

“He’s retired military so he probably can’t roll any other way.” Nearing the crime scene, Russ turned on his blinker. “I can tell you I’ve never seen another PD where everyone calls the commanding officer sir. In most places that would irritate the commander.”

“Actually, I don’t mind that. Makes me remember I’m a rookie and still have a lot to learn to be the best officer I can be.”

He shook his head. “Never imagined you’d end up in law enforcement. At least from the arresting side of the coin.”

“Thanks a lot.” She shot a playful punch to his arm.

He faked an injured look. “I’m just saying you were a bit rebellious in high school.”

“Only in my looks and maybe my smart mouth and some harmless partying. Then I found God. Now I’d never do anything to break the law.”

“You were never one for church back in the day, and that’s another story I need to hear.” He swung into the parking lot.

He expected her to shut down again or demand his reason for leaving Portland before giving him additional information, but she smiled.

“Coming to faith is a story I’ll gladly share. One day my mom was so mad at Nikki for spilling milk that she threatened to give her away.” She shuddered. “This was about a year before we took off. I thought she’d really do it. I panicked. Called 911.”

He shifted into park and watched her face contort with pain. He wanted to fix it. Couldn’t. He’d learned from his ex-wife that nothing he could say would ever take away the heartache caused by an alcoholic on a drunken spree.

AA had also taught him that talking about the pain helped. She didn’t have to be a recovering alcoholic to benefit from the principle. Spouses and children of alcoholics needed support too. Maybe even more.

He swiveled toward her and gave her an encouraging smile. “Must have been hard on both of you.”

“It was, but the officer who responded to the call helped us. In fact, she changed our lives.” She stared ahead, a gentle smile on her face. “Vicki—the officer—called social services, but she knew since this was the first report they’d probably give my mom the benefit of the doubt. They did. But Vicki didn’t leave it at that. She told me about her church and asked if it would be okay if she arranged for Nikki to go to preschool there for free while I was in school. That way I wouldn’t have to worry about her staying with my mom while I was out of the house.”

Russ loved to hear stories of any law enforcement officer who went out of their way to make a difference. He hoped he was that kind of officer. “A very generous offer.”

Sydney gave a vigorous nod. “What I didn’t know at the time was that Vicki paid Nikki’s tuition, not the school. I didn’t want to go home after school, so I started hanging out at the church until the daycare closed and I had to take Nikki home. Through the generosity of the people there, Nikki

and I both came to know God.”

“This is why you went into law enforcement.”

“It is,” she said with passion. “I want to give back the same way Vicki gave to us.”

Russ let the warmth of her soft smile chase years of darkness from his heart. He’d only spent a short while with her, but could already tell she was a special woman. A woman he was as attracted to now as he had been in their younger years. Maybe more so now. Sure, when she smiled at him, a jolt of interest shot through him, but it was the person she’d become that was the most attractive.

She was also a woman who deserved someone who wouldn’t hurt her after all she’d been through. He wished he was the guy for her, but as a recovering alcoholic, she could never trust him.

He was a realist and had to face facts. He wasn’t the guy for her and due to his past, he never would be.

His phone rang, and thankful for the call from Garber to get them back on track, he used his car’s infotainment system to answer. “What’s up Garber?”

“I think I found our bike. All the local names alibied out so on a whim, I searched ViCAP.”

“Not a violent crime though,” Russ said as ViCAP was the FBI’s Violent Crime Apprehension Program database that held details for unsolved violent crimes.

“Yeah, well, it paid off. A Penn Jessup reported his bike stolen about six weeks ago. He was attacked from behind at a stoplight and thrown from the bike. That’s why it made ViCAP. The bike’s plate matches the first digits you saw last night.”

“Any further details?”

“Not really.”

“The guy seem on the up and up?”

“Yeah, he alibied out too, but I’ll follow up with the detective who

worked the investigation. Maybe he can give us a lead on the person who boosted it.”

“Keep after it,” Russ said and tried to find some optimism in what looked like a dead-end on what he thought would be a solid lead. The lead might not take them anywhere, but at least when they tracked down their biker, they would have ammunition to use in the interview.



Sydney had done it again, but she didn't know what *it* was. Russ seemed so open for a while, but now he'd closed down tighter than the ship Krueger ran. She hoped Russ would ease up when they talked with the foreman and Dixon's coworkers so he didn't cause them to close down.

They climbed the hill toward the area not cordoned off by crime-scene tape, the rapid fire of pneumatic nail guns filled the crisp fall air. Their feet crunched over colorful fallen leaves. The fresh feeling of the day contrasted so starkly with the terror she'd felt in this general location the prior night.

Thankfully, Russ remained at her side, his head on a swivel. Protection. He was offering her protection. As an officer, she didn't need it. As a person, she appreciated it and kept her own eyes alert. The killer could be watching them. Could be planning something.

They continued until they located a ten-man crew, where they worked on framing a row of garages. Russ and Sydney located the supervisor and pulled him aside. Sydney didn't miss the workers' skeptical looks fixed on her as she passed. They didn't think she could do the job. Not unusual, and she could handle anything they threw her way. She'd dealt with guys on the street who'd tested her resolve. This wasn't any different.

Outside one of the garages, Russ introduced himself and Sydney to the supervisor and offered his hand.

“Nate Johnson.” The supervisor shook hands.

Russ took out a small notepad and pen from his cargo pocket. “Tell us about your relationship with Carl Dixon.”

Johnson planted his gloved hands on his bulging waist and cast the group in the nearby garage a pointed look. They’d stopped working and were staring, but at Johnson’s look they turned back and the sound of nail guns disturbed the quiet again.

Johnson shifted his attention back to Russ. “Not much to tell about the guy. He wasn’t an ideal employee. Came in late, liked to take long breaks. But when he did work, he framed faster than any of my other men and made up for the slacking off.”

Russ nodded. “We noticed on Dixon’s phone logs that he called you quite often.”

“Like I said—he was a slacker. Kept trying to make excuses about missing work. He might’ve had mad skills, but once we finished framing on this project, I would’ve let him go.”

“Dixon know that?” Russ asked.

He scowled. “Not likely. The guy lived in the moment, ya know?”

“Can you think of anyone who might’ve wanted to kill him?” Sydney asked.

Johnson shook his head. “He wasn’t a real stand-up kinda guy, but he got along with the rest of the crew.”

Russ raised an eyebrow in the inquisitive look Sydney knew so well. “Anyone in particular he hung around with?”

“Dixon and Eustis were pretty thick.”

Finally, something to go on, and Sydney wanted to follow up before they left the job site. “Is Eustis here today?”

Johnson jerked his head toward one of the men with a nail gun in his hand. “The one with the red bandana.” The man stood near an interior wall going up.

The guy was working, but also watching them, his expression uncertain.

He scrubbed a hand down his shirt as if his palms were sweating. Did he have something to hide?

A quick glance at Russ told her he'd seen Eustis's nervous expression, but he looked back at Johnson and pulled out a picture of the motorcycle. "You recognize this bike?"

Johnson removed his gloves, tucked them in the back pocket of his overalls then took the paper. "Yeah. Eustis has one of those. Heard it cost a pretty penny. If you ask me, it's kind of a waste of money to own one of those in an area that gets as much rain as we do."

"He ride it to work today?" Russ asked.

"Nah, he doesn't bring it on the construction site. Just rode it once to show off after he first got it. He's big into bragging."

She and Russ turned toward Eustis.

He looked up and paused, nail gun held midair. His eyes flashed open. He searched the area, his head swiveling fast. His mouth fell open. He blinked a few times. Then backpedaled. Slowly, his expression tightened, and his eyes narrowed.

"He's gonna run." Sydney didn't wait for the guy to take off, but sprinted in his direction.

He dropped the nail gun and bolted.

She raced across the uneven terrain, working hard to keep from face-planting, Russ bolted in the other direction, his footfalls pounding down the hill toward the parking lot. Good. If she didn't catch Eustis, Russ would cut him off before he could reach his vehicle.

Pain from her knee injury shot up her leg, but she ignored it. Eustis was quick. But he wore heavy construction boots, weighing him down. She gained on him. Step by step. He reached the parking lot. Looked like he planned to dart across it to a vehicle. Russ hadn't arrived yet.

Fine. It was up to her.

She launched herself from above. Flew through the air. Landed on his

back. Circled his neck. Tackled him to the ground.

He landed hard. A solid thud. She came down on top of him. His body cushioned her fall. Adrenaline giving her strength, she pressed her good knee into his back and dragged his hands behind him and cuffed his wrists, then doublechecked the security of the bands.

Russ came up beside her, breathing hard. “Good job in anticipating his moves.”

His praise meant a great deal to her. She wouldn’t show how much though and shrugged it off.

“I mean it. Really good work. There are seasoned officers who wouldn’t have picked up on the guy’s signals before it was too late.” Russ grabbed Eustis’s arms, and together they hefted him to his feet.

The other workers came down the hill and watched them haul off their coworker. Their faces held a measure of respect instead of the patronizing stares she’d gotten earlier. She’d redeemed herself a bit, but the guilt over failing last night when a life hung in the balance managed to overshadow the positive feeling.

Russ searched Eustis and put him in the backseat of his patrol car. “We’ll head straight to lockup. Interview this guy and find out why he needed to run. We can come back and talk to the others later.”

He got behind the wheel, and she settled back in the passenger seat. No way they would discuss anything with Eustis in the back. Other than the guy complaining about false arrest, they rode in silence to the jail.

When they arrived, Russ turned to smile at her. “He’s your collar. Go ahead and take him in while I make a few calls. I’ll meet you inside.”

He was letting her haul in Eustis to repair any damage done to her reputation from last night. Something Russ didn’t need to do. That made it even more special, and she was grateful. Without thinking it through, she put her hand on his to thank him.

Surprise flashed across his face, but instead of pulling away, he gave her

hand a quick squeeze and looked deep into her eyes. A quick shiver of awareness flared. She lost herself in the moment.

“It’s getting hot back here,” Eustis snapped at them.

A shutter went down over Russ’s eyes, and he released her hand.

Chastising herself for forgetting she was on the job and losing herself in those startling blue eyes, she climbed out to retrieve Eustis. How had she so easily let Russ get to her? Was it because she saw the same longing for a relationship in his eyes as filled her heart?

What difference did it make? He was not an option for so many reasons it wasn’t even worth thinking about the possibility of a relationship with him.

She jerked Eustis from the back seat more forcefully than necessary, taking out her frustrations on the man. She needed to do a better job of focusing on the case—not on Russ. She couldn’t handle being hurt again as she had last year when her boyfriend bailed, saying he couldn’t imagine a future that included Nikki. Her work and caring for her sister would have to be enough until Nikki was grown and on her own, because Russ was totally off-limits.

Russ straddled the chair next to Sydney in the small interview room at the county jail that Russ supervised as part of his job. Eustis had been booked, his thick black hair untidy without the bandana removed for his mugshot. He sat across from them chewing on his fingernails and tapping his foot.

Good. The guy was still nervous. That would work in Russ's favor. He had to admit he liked doing suspect interviews. As sheriff, he didn't get to do enough of them anymore, but as a detective, it had been a common occurrence. There was a sense of satisfaction when he played the interview just right and the suspect confessed or provided the needed information.

It had taken years to perfect his skills, and hopefully, he wasn't rusty. He rested his arms on the chair back, hoping to appear casual. "So tell me about your friendship with Carl Dixon."

Eustis gave a shrug. "Nothing to tell. We got along on the job, so started hanging out afterward. Shared a few beers. Some movies. Gaming. That's about it."

"What about Dixon's drug dealing?" Russ asked. "Share that too?"

"Of course not," Eustis said, but his eyes narrowed.

"But you knew he was dealing."

"So what?" His shoulders rose. "Who in this dinky little town didn't know?"

The man wasn't wrong. "You ever see him make any deals?"

"Once or twice."

"Why didn't you report him?" Sydney asked, accusation in her tone.

Eustis recoiled. "None of my business, and I'm not a snitch."

"Do you have any thoughts on who might've wanted to kill him?" Russ asked.

"Not me, if that's what you're thinking. We were buds."

Russ pressed his hands on the table. "Where were you last night between six and ten p.m.?"

"Home," he answered right away.

"Can anyone verify that?"

"Nope. Was all alone. Came home straight from work. Nuked a meal. Had a couple beers and watched TV before I hit the hay around ten." He leaned back. "Hey, can't you tell by my phone location where I was? I see that on those CSI shows all the time."

"Sure, we can get the location your phone pinged from at that time, but doesn't mean you were with your phone."

He rolled his eyes. "And you can't prove I wasn't."

He had a point. One Russ didn't like. "Did you make any phone calls?"

"Called my brother. Not sure what time it was, but you can find that out too. Does that help?"

"Could." But Russ didn't explain that if the phone call originated at Eustis's house and his brother confirmed it was Eustis who called that it would help prove he was home at the time of the murder.

For now, Russ would move on. "What about others who would want to do Dixon in? Know of anyone? Maybe someone on the job. A client in his drug business."

"Like I said. I stayed out of the drug thing. But he would have to have suppliers. Maybe he crossed one of them."

Sydney eagerly sat forward as if she might pounce on him. A rookie

move for sure instead of playing it cool. “You have reason to think he might?”

Eustis looked up at the ceiling. “He did like to take shortcuts. And always had some sort of get-rich-quick plan in his head. Could’ve messed with his supplier to get there.”

“You ever meet or even get a look at any of the suppliers?” Russ asked.

Eustis shook his head. “Not sure how many ways I have to tell you I stayed away from that.”

Russ was inclined to buy his answer. He said it multiple times, not wavering from the same story, and his expression was earnest. But Russ never trusted any suspect until he could confirm their story.

He slid the picture of the dirt bike across the table. “Tell me about this.”

Color drained from Eustis’s face, but he swallowed hard and leaned back. “It’s a dirt bike. What about it?”

“Your bike?” Sydney asked.

“What if it is?” He tipped his head and eyed her.

“First let’s establish if it’s your bike,” she said, unfazed.

“Could be.”

“Interesting.” Russ sat up straight. “DMV records don’t show a dirt bike registered to you.”

“Must’ve slipped my mind.”

“So it *is* yours, then?” Sydney asked.

Eustis crossed his arms. “So what?”

Russ had him. Finally. “So we have reports of a bike with the same plate stolen in Portland.”

Eustis’s cocky expression vanished. “So what?”

“So if we search your property,” Sydney said. “Will we find the bike with the stolen vehicle’s registration details?”

“Nah. I don’t have my bike anymore.” He cast Sydney a narrow-eyed gaze. “Was boosted outside Dixon’s house the night of his big party you

crashed.”

Sydney’s eyebrows rose. “And you didn’t report it because you’d previously stolen it.”

His shoulder went up in another shrug.

Without them having the bike as evidence, there was no real proof he’d been in possession of it, and Russ doubted he would get him to admit to stealing it. “Whether you took it or not, we have witnesses at your work who said you showed off this stolen bike for them. So we have you on possession of stolen goods.”

“Really?” His coloring returned, and he smirked. “They can tell you the bike was this exact one? Because I doubt they were looking at the plates.”

Another good point. One Russ wouldn’t concede to. “You’d be surprised what guys notice when studying a sweet ride like this one. I am confident enough in my assessment that you’ll remain in lockup until our investigation into the theft concludes.”

“But I...I...” He shook his head and slunk down in his chair. “I didn’t have nothin’ to do with Dixon being murdered, and you’re just taking it out on me.”

Russ stood. “If you decide to be forthcoming with me, we can talk about that.”

“Fine. I mighta met one of his suppliers. But that’s all I’m saying. If I tell you who he is, he’ll come after me.”

Russ dropped back into his chair and made sure he didn’t look superior for winning his game of chicken. “He doesn’t have to know who shared the information.”

Sydney pushed her notepad and pen across the table to Eustis. “Write down his name and anything you know about him. Your brother’s contact information too, so we can follow up on your alibi.”

The guy grabbed the pad and started scribbling. Russ shared a victory look with Sydney. They made a good team, and he could get used to working

with her. Didn't matter. He would never hire her. *Never*. He couldn't have a deputy reporting to him who he had an emotional attachment to, and it was becoming clear he had a thing for her. How deep of a thing remained to be seen.

Eustis pushed the pad away. "There. What you needed. Happy now?"

Russ ripped the page off the pad and took his time looking at the details that listed Ace Crockett. "Not fully. This the guy Dixon called *Big Cheese*?"

Eustis shrugged. "No idea. Just heard the name in connection with drug suppliers. Now is that all?"

"No," Russ said.

"Of course not." Eustis scowled. "Why'd I think you would cut me a break?"

Russ met his gaze. "I'll also need your permission to search your residence and take the phone we confiscated at your arrest into evidence and have it reviewed by our IT staff."

"Man, my phone? Seriously? That's my lifeline. Don't know anyone's phone numbers, you know?"

"I get it. But if you want to clear your name and be released, letting us review it and search your residence are key factors." Russ didn't look away.

"Fine." Eustis wilted into his chair. "You have my permission."

Russ got up and shoved the paper in his pocket. "I'll grab a form for you to sign, and then we can call it good."

"For real?"

"For real." Russ didn't add *for now* as this guy was withholding information, and Russ would be coming back to question him again.

Sydney nearly leapt to her feet, grabbed her notepad, and entered the hall at a quick clip. "C'mon let's get this guy's place searched before he lawyers up and changes his mind."

"Eager much?" he asked with a teasing tone.

"Are you kidding me? This could be the lead we were looking for. All we

have to find is a gun or even the phone he's been texting me on and this case is closed."

"I doubt he would've agreed to a search if these items were in his place."

"He could think they're hidden well enough that we won't find them."

"Yeah, maybe, but he's locked up and can't alter anything," Russ said. "Hang tight while I arrange for one of my deputies to get him to sign the right consent form."

Russ went to the guard station and arranged for them to get Eustis's signature. He took out the paper from Eustis and texted Baker.

New suspect. Ace Crockett. I want a background check ASAP. And check Eustis's alibi for the time of Dixon's murder with his brother. Russ added the brother's name and phone number.

On it, came Baker's reply.

With the unusual suspect name, Russ was confident Baker would get Russ what he needed and do so quickly.

Russ headed back to Sydney. "Let's go. First stop is to get Sierra started, and then hopefully, Baker will come through with an appointment for the parents of the girl I mentioned in the meeting or details on Crockett." He pulled open the exit door but stepped into the brisk air ahead of her to take a look in all directions before he would let her leave. He searched the lot and the nearby road. Nothing.

Satisfied no one lurked in wait, he stepped back. "Straight to the car."

Russ kept his eyes alert as they moved toward his vehicle. The killer could be hiding. Watching. Waiting to strike. One bullet was all it took. Despite Sydney's protest of being treated as less than an equal, he eased as close to her as he dared.

A hinky feeling settled over him, and they were moving too slowly. She was at risk.

He laid a hand on the small of her back, urging her to move faster. She gave him a surprised look, but he kept pushing until they reached the car. He

opened her door.

She looked him in the eye. “Mind backing off a bit in front of your staff?”

He was likely overreacting. He didn’t care. They’d made it this far unharmed, and he didn’t intend to lose her.

Not now. Not ever.



Russ didn’t like being late. Ever. But especially not when he was supposed to be greeting the woman who was doing him a monumental favor. But by the time he pulled up to the crime scene with Sydney, Sierra and her assistant Chad were already up the hill studying the scene. Both wore white Tyvek suits and blue gloves and booties. Sierra looked just as he remembered, with long, dishwater blond hair, but her pregnancy had advanced enough that her suit threatened to split at the zipper.

“C’mon, I’ll introduce you to Sierra,” he said to Sydney and opened his car door.

In the brisk breeze playing over the parking lot, they met in front of the vehicle and started up the hill side-by-side. He waved at the deputy of record, who would record their visit on the log.

Sierra turned to wave at them and smile then squatted to study the area by the cigarette butt marker. He had no idea how she managed to balance, but she did and was also able to get up again by the time they reached her.

She looked at her assistant. “Take pictures of the butt and then bag it.”

She swiveled to face Russ and a broad smile lit up her face.

He flashed her a quick one back. “Thank you for coming and for getting here so fast. Sorry we’re late.”

“No worries. I had to drive down before this one decided to make his entrance into the world.” She rested her hands on her belly and got a dreamy look on her face.

Memories of the anticipation of Zach's birth came flooding back, and the pain of losing the right to see him more often cramped his gut. He needed to figure out a way to convince his ex to up his visitation rights and do it soon.

"I'm Officer Sydney Tucker, Shadow Lake PD," Sydney said. "I'd shake your hand but don't want you to have to remove your gloves."

"Thank you for your consideration and nice to meet you, Officer."

Sydney waved a hand. "Call me Sydney."

Sierra's eyebrow rose, and she studied Sydney as intently as she had just looked at the cigarette butt. "Are you working on the investigation?"

As the one in charge, Russ took over and explained Sydney's role and what had happened last night. "It was a close call for sure."

Sierra shuddered and kept her focus on Sydney. "Must've been terrifying to have an armed man hunting you."

"It wasn't my best night." Sydney smiled, obviously trying to make light of the situation, but Russ caught the residual pain in her eyes.

Best to move on. "Please tell me that the cigarette has a good likelihood of returning prints and DNA."

Sierra nodded. "We might even get lucky, and they'll be in the system."

"If the butt even belongs to our shooter." Sydney eyed the bag. "Seems careless to leave it behind when he took the time to pick up his casings."

"Maybe he'll realize it and come back for it," Sierra said.

"You could be right," Russ said. "I've warned my deputies manning the scene to keep an eye out in case he does. I'll keep someone here a few nights or until we catch this killer. And if you plan to work into the night, I need you to be alert too."

"We'll knock off before dark and will most certainly take you up on the offer of that cabin for the night."

"Already clean and waiting for you." Russ dug a key from his pocket. "And you might need it for another night, since I want to ask you to process the victim's house when you finish up here."

“Text me the address, and we’ll do it.” Sierra tugged her suit down over her belly.

“I’ll also text you the address for our compound along with the security code to get in.”

Sierra’s eyebrow rose in a perfect arc. “Security code for a cabin?”

“We had some crazy preppers go off on us and tried to help themselves to our guns and ammo, so we’ve secured the property.”

Sierra shook her head. “It’s hard to think about crimes occurring out in this beautiful rural setting, but it’s invading our lives more and more.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” Russ said. “Too bad our budget doesn’t increase accordingly. Which is why I’m so thankful for your generous help.”

“Glad to do it.” Sierra waved a hand. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to get to work. I’ll let you know if we find anything else.”

“Thanks for the update and nice to meet you,” Sydney said.

“You too.” She looked at each of them but lingered on Sydney. “Let’s hope we can help you catch this guy who’s out to get you.”

Sydney paled, and Russ wanted to take hold of her hand. But that wouldn’t help keep her safe. His best detective work and top-notch protection skills were the only things that would help keep her alive.

He escorted her to the car. The moment he sat, his phone rang. He answered the call from Deputy Olson and put it on speaker so Sydney could listen in.

“I showed the pictures from the party to the school counselor,” Olson said. “She ID’d all the girls, including the one by the bike. A Lily Peterson. I ran all the names and none of them have a record except Rachelle Zuck. She’s been arrested for possession twice. The counselor said they were all known party girls, but Zuck is the most likely person to have frequent contact with a drug dealer.”

“I need you to get ahold of Peterson and bring her in for questioning. And we need to speak to Zuck’s parents.”

“I called the Zucks like you asked. They’re waiting to see you right now if you can get over there.”

“We can.”

“And I placed a call to the Petersons. I’ll keep you updated.”

Russ ended the call and cranked the engine. “Rachelle Zuck is the girl I mentioned in the meeting. She claims she was at the party and she was the one who saw you threaten Dixon.”

“Do you think Rachelle was involved in Dixon’s murder?” Sydney asked.

“No, but I *do* think she might have information that could move the investigation forward.” He shifted into gear and looked at Sydney. “Hopefully, so do her parents.”

Especially if the cigarette butt didn’t lead anywhere, and they were back to square one on one of the most personal investigations Russ had ever worked.

Rachelle Zuck’s parents cast wary gazes at Russ across their coffee table, and he could do nothing to ease their concerns, but he wanted to. He’d seen pain like theirs in many eyes during his career—even in his own family—and it never got easier. Especially when his family had looked at him with such sadness and frustration when he chose not to control his drinking.

The Zucks had tried to be cordial, inviting him and Sydney into their high-end home on the lake. But as they sat beneath vaulted ceilings and soaring windows overlooking the glistening water, their expressions were becoming resigned.

“She’s an addict.” Mr. Zuck shifted uncomfortably on the green velvet sofa. “Plain and simple. The drugs have taken over her life.”

The mother shoved back her thick black hair liberally mixed with gray, her eyes circled by crow’s feet. “We’ve tried everything to help her kick the habit. I mean everything.”

Mr. Zuck took his wife’s hand as she drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We get her through rehab. She’s clean for a while. Really trying, you know? But life is tough at school for her. She’s alienated all her friends, and she doesn’t have anything in common with them anymore. So then...” She paused to gulp in more air.

“Then?” Sydney asked, her tone hesitant.

“Then she goes back to the boyfriend,” Mr. Zuck let go of his wife’s hand to plunge his into shaggy auburn hair. “He’s her only friend, so there’s no keeping them apart.”

“He understands what she’s been through,” Mrs. Zuck said. “And he has a ready supply of drugs to calm her down. So she starts small. Builds up. Before you know it, she’s strung out again within days.”

Russ had lived that life. Getting clean and relapsing several times before he finally took control of his addiction.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Sydney said. “I have custody of my little sister, and I can imagine how hard that must be for you and her. You should know, the area’s largest known drug dealer was murdered last night and that should curtail the supply of drugs.”

Until someone steps in and fills the void. Russ kept his thoughts to himself to stop from discouraging these distraught parents even more.

“Not hardly,” Rachelle’s father said. “Her boyfriend’s her dealer and he’s alive and kicking. I know because he called her this morning.”

Interesting. Russ leaned forward. “So she wasn’t dating a guy named Carl Dixon?”

Her dad shook his head. “I’ve heard the Dixon guy’s name mentioned, but this jerk’s name is Mike Eustis.”

Eustis? Russ let the news settle over him and suppressed his enthusiasm for the lead before he let the parents see how important this information could turn out to be. If Eustis and Dixon were both dealing, maybe they were fighting for turf and Dixon lost the fight.

He glanced at Sydney. Her expression was unreadable, but she had to be thinking the same thing. “Are you familiar with a girl named Lily Peterson?”

Mrs. Zuck shook her head. “Should we be?”

“No.” He got to his feet and gave the older couple a tight smile. “Thank you for your time, Mr. and Mrs. Zuck.”

The dad slowly struggled to his feet. “Just glad to hear that Rachelle’s not

in any trouble.”

His wife sighed and clutched her hands in her lap. “Or dead. We live in fear of getting that visit telling us she overdosed. What with all the fentanyl-laced drugs out there these days.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Russ said. “It’s a tough time for all.”

“Except the dealers.” Mr. Zuck cast Russ a baleful look.

“I have to say it was tough for Carl Dixon,” Sydney said. “Not that I condone drug dealing, but I also don’t condone murder.”

“Nor do we, but…” Mr. Zuck frowned and escorted them to the front door at a quick clip as if he was eager to get rid of them.

On the stoop, Russ looked back at the man. “You have my card if you think of anything else or if anything comes up that we should know about.”

The father’s shoulders drooped as if an unbearable weight rested on them, and he closed the door.

“As someone raising a teenager, my heart breaks for them.” Sydney started down the sidewalk, scanning their surroundings as she moved.

Russ followed suit and opened her car door. “Let’s get over to Eustis’s place. If he failed to tell us about a girlfriend, he could have other secrets waiting for us to uncover.”

She settled into the passenger seat. “I’ll plug his address into the maps program so we don’t waste a second with a wrong turn.”

Russ had responded to many calls in that complex and knew the way to the property, but let her go ahead. Entering the data would make her feel useful. Something she needed in her quest to find the man tracking her.

He feared any talk on the drive would end up in the personal realm, so he turned up his radio and listened to dispatched calls and the female GPS voice until they reached the downtown complex.

He killed the engine and looked at Sydney. “I don’t have to tell you this isn’t a great neighborhood, so we go straight inside.”

“Got it.” She stowed her phone.

He climbed out and quickly escorted her into the enclosed courtyard where they located the manager's apartment. Russ explained his request to see Eustis's place to the burly manager wearing an undershirt and torn jeans.

"I'm not climbing those stairs." He jerked his head at rusted metal stairs. "Here's the key. Bring it back when you're done." He slammed the door and bits of peeling paint slivered to the concrete.

"Nice guy." Russ held his hand out for Sydney to go before him.

Not liking this run-down complex, he surveyed the area and climbed the stairs next to her, keeping his body between her and the parking lot. He switched sides on the landing until they tracked down the apartment. If she noticed his protective actions, she didn't comment.

He opened the door. The stench of rotting garbage hit him in the face, but it was better than many of the odors he'd faced as a homicide detective.

Sydney held her hand over her mouth and nose and joined him in the combined living, dining, and kitchen space. He gave the place a quick once-over.

He would take pity on Sydney's sensitivity to the smell and let her stay by the open door. "You do this end of the room."

She moved toward a desk located closer to the exit. "What would any girl see in this guy? I mean, this place is a pigsty. And it's not like Eustis is so attractive or charming that she'd overlook all of this just to be with him."

Russ ran his fingers along the bottom of an end table and pulled up a baggie of cocaine. "This is what she sees in him."

"But if what her parents said is true, she's been clean and still comes back. She has to get a good look at him and this place when she's sober."

"The craving for the drug is so strong she doesn't care." His forceful tone carried his struggle to overcome his addiction and stay sober, and he regretted saying anything the moment the words came out.

Looking up, Sydney peered at him. Searching. Testing. Her eyes seemed to pierce through him before he looked away.

“Sounds like you’re speaking from personal experience,” she said.

The urge to blurt out his past ate at him, but he couldn’t stand to think of how she’d react. “Something like that.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Something like that, or you’ve had firsthand experience?”

He glanced at her. Saw only caring, not judgment, so he shared a little more. “Alcohol, not drugs.”

“Someone close to you.” Her eyes were so soft, warm. Encouraging him to get to know her better by sharing his life with her.

And he wanted to respond. To tell her about his past. To see if she could look beyond his failings to see the man he was today. But he had to stop thinking that way. He couldn’t involve her in his mess of a life. It would do neither of them any good if he told her about his past.

“You find anything yet?” he asked.

Lips pressed together, she shook her head.

So she was disappointed in him. He got it, but could do nothing about it. He jerked out another drawer, slid his fingers under papers and along the sides. Nothing. Frustration started to bubble up.

“I found a laptop.” The thrill of discovery lifted her voice. She pulled a silver notebook computer out from under the sofa. “Look at this decal.”

Russ glanced at the computer to see a black S with a nine-pointed star behind it. “Slipknot logo. Just like Dixon’s place. Could be his missing computer.”

“Sounds quite possible.”

What could this discovery mean for their investigation? He sought answers but only questions came to mind. “If it belongs to Dixon, why does Eustis have it?”

“That’s the question of the hour.” She locked gazes with him.

He didn’t look away. “And one we need to find an answer for and find it quickly.”



Russ returned to the kitchen where Sydney stared into Eustis's freezer. They both wanted to get the computer she'd discovered analyzed as soon as possible, but they wouldn't skip any steps in their review of Eustis's home. She worked on the kitchen while Russ had gone deep into places like air vents, toilet tanks, and between mattresses and box springs. But an hour later, they'd both come up with nothing more than additional drugs and cash. Not helpful in their investigation. Still it would help keep Eustis behind bars for now.

Russ rested against the counter where she'd placed the computer. "You about done there?"

She closed the freezer door and looked at him. "I'm done and found nothing but the computer."

He didn't like how discouraged she sounded. "Let's not downplay the find. It could turn out to be important." He picked the computer up and settled it in an evidence bag.

"Yeah, it might be a good find. Time will tell." She headed for the door. "After we drop off the computer for imaging, can we go back to Eustis to ask him about Rachelle and the computer?"

"Absolutely." His phone chimed, and he slowed to look at the screen. "It's a text from Colin. He wants to meet at your place now. I guess we do that first."

She looked back at him. "I know it's important, but I hate to take the time."

"Nothing is more important right now than making sure our killer can't track you." He thumbed an answer into his phone and it beeped a response. "Okay we need to grab lunch for Colin at the Downtown Deli on the way. You can check out the menu in the car and place a To Go order, and then pick up will be faster."

“Ooh, I love their turkey and avocado.” Her stomach grumbled loudly and she sped up.

Russ wouldn't rush but continued to maintain his situational awareness and scanned the area as he moved. He opened her car door. “I'll have the ham and Swiss and so will Colin. Extra pickles for him.”

“Got it.” She slid in.

He closed the door, put the computer in his trunk for safekeeping, and got behind the wheel. She had her temp phone out and was intent on their order, so he made the drive to the deli, making a few extra turns to check for a tail. Sure they weren't being tailed, he made quick time to the deli and then to her duplex but Colin was already leaning against his truck in the parking area out front, ankles crossed.

He slung his backpack over his shoulder and met them at the car.

Russ opened his door, and Colin peered inside.

“Good. Glad to see you didn't renege on lunch. Will work for food.” Colin laughed.

Russ rolled his eyes and got out to get their drinks from the floor in the backseat.

Colin moved to the hood of the car. “Hey, Sydney. Sorry you're having problems with this creep.”

She strode over to him, deli paper bag in one hand, her backpack in the other. “Thanks. I appreciate your help.”

“Hopefully, I won't find anything, but let's get started.” He turned toward the door. “I need to get to it, so I can get back on time for my next class.”

Sydney dug out her keys from her backpack. “What are you teaching?”

“How to eliminate an online presence and not add anything new.” He shrugged his pack higher. “Our guests pretty much want to disappear off the grid. Most of them can't go to that extreme yet, but they want to start moving in that direction.”

“I never understood that, but then I like my modern conveniences.” She

entered the duplex, and Colin and Russ followed her inside.

Colin went straight to the phones sitting on her breakfast area table where they'd left them that morning. "Please tell me these iPhones aren't jailbroken."

"I could tell you that, but I have no idea what it means." Sydney laughed and set their lunch on her kitchen countertop.

"If you don't know what it means, then you couldn't have done it." Colin dropped into a chair and looked up. "But what about your sister? She a computer nerd?"

Sydney drew sandwiches out of the bag, filling the room with a tangy aroma. "Not really. Her friend Emily is though."

"Has Emily ever had access to your phone?" Colin asked.

"No. Nikki either. I mean she often helps me with things I can't figure out on the phone, but I'm standing over her shoulder when she does it." Sydney grabbed plates and put the wrapped sandwiches and chips on them, then handed them out.

Russ distributed their drinks, then waited for her to sit and took the chair next to her. "I know what a jailbreak is when it comes to my line of work, but what exactly is it on a phone?"

Colin unwrapped his sandwich. "I won't bore you with technical details, but first you should know that iPhones are the most locked-down mobile devices currently on sale. Apps are often the cause of malware issues, and you can only download Apple-approved apps from their store. Jailbreaking is a way to install apps not approved by them and a way to customize the interface to be more like an Android phone."

"And people do this?" Sydney removed a dill pickle spear from her sandwich wrap.

"Some do, but it can lead to big issues with the device, even as far as bricking it." Collin chomped off a bite of his sandwich.

"Bricking?" Russ asked as he squeezed a packet of spicy mustard on his

sandwich.

“Corrupting a device and rendering it unusable. It can happen in many ways and the list is too long to go into.” He picked up Sydney’s phone. “You use a passcode or Face ID?”

“Neither.”

Colin blinked at her as if she were an alien. “You don’t use a password? None at all.”

“Is that bad?”

“Not if you want people to have access to all of your personal data or to be able to install malware on your phone.”

“It’s a real pain to enter the passcode.”

Colin held his sandwich near his mouth. “You haven’t set up facial recognition then?”

“Nikki keeps telling me to do it, but I haven’t found the time.”

“Let’s get that going before you leave today. You can always turn it off if you don’t like it.” He took a big bite of the sandwich. After wiping his fingers he picked up Nikki’s phone. She’d written her passcode on a sticky note for them, and he thumbed through her phone.

Russ scarfed half of his sandwich loaded with thick slices of ham, cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes with a special sauce oozing out the side, then moved on to his greasy, salty kettle chips as he watched Colin.

That guy’s intensity was over the top. He attacked his sandwich as much as he did when he moved onto Sydney’s phone until he quickly set it down to chug half his bottle of water.

“Okay, got some malware software running,” he said. “I’ll scan the duplex while it runs but will need access to your wireless router and all electronic devices here.”

“I’ll have to get the password from my laptop.” Sydney got up and went to the coffee table to grab her computer. She set it on the table, opened it, and tapped the mouse a few times before turning it to face Colin. “Password and

info are here in my password app. I'll get Nikki's laptop. She has her iPad for school."

"Does it have phone access?"

"No."

"I'll still want to look at it, but it should be safe."

Sydney went down the hallway.

Russ crumpled up his chip bag. "Things looking good so far?"

"Too early to tell." Colin shoved a few chips into his mouth and bent his head over the computer.

Sydney returned with a smaller MacBook. "Same passcode."

Colin looked up. "Okay, I see both computers and phones on the network but there's one other item. Guessing it's your TV over there? Is it a smart device?"

"Yes. Finally, something I know the answer to." Sydney chuckled and returned to her chair.

He tapped the screen on both phones. "Almost done. I'll get looking for other devices while they finish."

He reached into his backpack and came out with a small black device that had two short antennas poking out the top, one with a circle in the middle. "This is basically a radio frequency detector. But it will also scan for magnetic fields, ultra-small hidden cameras, and infrared devices. I'll search the whole place for transmitters, and you'll hear it beep if I find anything."

He shoved the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth and leaned forward to run the detector over her backpack. Russ held his breath, waiting for a response.

Silence.

"Clear. Sit tight. It'll take me a few minutes to do this room." He started around the room, moving the instrument slowly and methodically over the space.

"Part of me hopes he finds something so we know how I'm being

tracked.” She picked up her nearly untouched sandwich. “The other part is freaked out that he might.”

“I get that,” Russ said. “But I think it’s better to know.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the one who might have a hidden tracker or camera or something in your home.”

“Not easy at all.” He looked deep into her eyes to convey his sincerity. “The thought of some killer tracking you makes me want to punch something.”

“I didn’t know you felt that way.” She blinked at him, those long lashes fluttering at the speed of hummingbird wings.

“Yeah, well, now you do.” And now he would have to backpedal as his intensity all but told her he was falling for her. Maybe had fallen. Maybe had fallen years ago and just delayed this moment in time. He hadn’t said it with so many words, but his look and tone had given him away. At least her shocked response said as much.

“This room is clean,” Colin said, thankfully drawing her attention. “Everything okay?”

Yeah, she was shocked enough at Russ’s response for Colin to pick up on it.

“Fine,” she said, but remained looking confused.

“Do I have your permission to do the rest of the place?”

“Yes. I’ll come with you in case you have any questions.” She jumped to her feet and all but ran from the room.

“What’d you say to her, man?” Colin asked on the way past. “She’s freaked out big time.”

“Her stalker has her worried.” The truth, but...

“Okay, I get it. Mind my own business.” Colin headed down the hall.

Russ had to do something, anything to let go of her expression that was lingering in his brain. He got out his phone to check his email. He still had his sheriff’s job to do and really shouldn’t be taking time to run this

investigation, much less run down leads or sit here while Sydney's house was scanned. But he wanted to be here to support her if something was located.

Problem was, it looked like the best way to support her might be to leave her alone. Something he would do if a killer didn't have her in his sights.

“Let’s check those phones,” Colin said to Sydney and left the bedroom to head down the hallway.

Sydney dragged her feet behind him. She didn’t want to go back into the kitchen with Russ there. She’d finally seen in those amazing blue eyes the return of interest in her that she’d always hoped for—and it scared her. Scared her big time. She wasn’t ready for it. She didn’t think he was either. Not when he wouldn’t open up earlier. He’d been vague, and it seemed as if he was keeping something from her. But what?

It was when they were talking about alcohol. Did someone he was close to have the same issues as her mom? Couldn’t be his wife as she surely wouldn’t have custody of their son if she was an alcoholic. So was it Russ? Nah, no way something like that could be hidden in a small town. Unless of course he had an issue in Portland and dealt with it before coming home. Might explain why he lost custody of Zach and why he got divorced.

If that was it, she couldn’t possibly get involved with him, could she?

Memories from her childhood rushed back. Little, if any, food in the house. Her mom passed out stone cold on the sofa. Vomit on the cushion and her face needing to be cleaned up. Searching her pockets for any money to buy food. Finding enough for a little bit of milk for the last of the cereal. Shielding Nikki and giving her the only food and not eating herself.

Sometimes for days until the welfare check came in. Then Sydney cashed it and hid most of the money from her mother. Taking a slap across the face for doing it, but still, she'd had Nikki to worry about.

Meant Sydney had to be independent. Fierce. Pushy even to make sure she and Nikki survived, and Sydney had never let that go. She couldn't. Not until she'd finished her job raising her sister to be a responsible adult. Then and only then would Sydney be able to relax a bit.

Her stomach cramped. Not only couldn't she deal with someone who had an issue with alcohol again, she sure wouldn't expose Nikki to it.

"We can stop by when we leave here," Russ said into the phone he held to his ear. "See you then."

He ended his call and set his phone on the table. "Sierra wants us to stop by the murder scene."

"Did she locate something?" Glad for the change in focus, Sydney settled into the chair.

"Not sure. She was being vague and said she wanted to talk about it in person." Russ looked at Colin. "What about you two? Did you find anything?"

"Nada." Colin sat and put his detector away. "Let's see what the phones reveal."

He tapped her screen. "It's clean. No spyware or tracking software at all."

He moved on to Nikki's phone and woke it up. "Same thing here. She's clear and has surprisingly few apps for a teen."

"I also want you to scan Sydney's car," Russ said. "It's at my office."

Colin looked at his watch. "I should have time if I book it over there."

"We have to go see Sierra. Okay if Sydney gives you her keys and you check it out alone?" Russ shoved his phone into the belt clip.

"Of course."

She grabbed her keys and almost tossed them at Colin. "Is it safe to take my phone now?"

“You’re good to go after we do the facial recognition. I’ve got it open to the right place. Just follow the directions on the screen.” He handed it to her, and she started following the directions, listening to the guys’ banter as she moved her head as directed.

“Never knew you were such a security freak,” Russ said.

“I didn’t used to be, but you see the things I saw on the job and you would be too.”

“I get it,” Russ said. “I’m like that with personal security but haven’t had to deal in the online world as much. I’m having to do it more and more, but I rely on experts like you to handle it.”

“Done,” Sydney said when the phone declared she’d finished the set up.

“See, I told you it wouldn’t take long.” Colin gave a wry smile. “Now close your phone and open it. See how easy it is to use.”

She did as requested and when the screen came to life from just looking at it, she shook her head. “Don’t know what I was waiting for.”

Colin eyed her like he didn’t either, but thankfully, he didn’t utter an I-told-you-so.

She picked up her backpack, waited for him and Russ to exit, locked the door, and then hurried beside Russ to his car. Odd that he didn’t offer to carry her backpack. That was the second time. Maybe he wanted his hands free to be able to go for his sidearm if needed.

Great. Keep thinking that way and you’ll worry yourself even more.

Russ drove them toward their location, and his car notified him of an incoming call from Deputy Olson. Russ answered it on speaker.

“I interviewed Lily Peterson,” Olson said. “She wasn’t going to the party. Lives a few doors down from Dixon and was on her way home. Stopped to look at the dirt bike. Said the red color caught her attention. She took off when officers arrived as she was afraid we’d think she was at the party.”

“And you buy her story?”

“She seemed legit. No reason to believe she’s lying. Her counselor said

she wasn't one of the party girls, but then she didn't know that for a fact. She's on the honor roll and in a bunch of extracurricular activities. Lily also seemed disgusted with having Dixon live on their street and said that her mom reported him a few times. Her mom corroborated that."

"Get with City and check their call logs. Let's see if this mom really did make those calls. If so, we put this girl on the back burner."

Russ disconnected.

"Another lead that goes nowhere," Sydney said, trying not to let her disappointment show.

"Don't lose hope. It's all par for the course of an investigation. We'll catch a break soon." He turned into the lot. "Maybe Sierra has something for us. But first, I want to check my emails. See if we have any other updates."

He tapped his computer mounted on his dash and she sat watching him. She wanted to race up the hill to Sierra but he took his time. He was thorough and meticulous. She'd best try to emulate that on the job. Would make her a better officer if she did.

"Nothing related to the investigation," he said. "But I have to answer one email before we head up there." His long fingers flew over the keyboard, his lip caught between his teeth. Total concentration, but still she knew he was fully aware of what was happening around him.

She'd taken him away from his real job and hadn't really considered what that meant for him. He was wearing two hats and doing them both well from what she could tell.

"Okay." He closed his computer. "Let's go see Sierra."

She followed him out of the car, and they checked in with the officer on duty.

"Anything odd going on?" Russ asked as he reviewed the log of visitors to the site.

"Been quiet since I came on."

Russ nodded and gestured for Sydney to head up the hill to Sierra. She

was about ten feet up the trail from where they'd last talked to her that morning. She was still dressed in her white suit but streaks of dirt covered the knees and belly now.

"I don't suppose you've located any additional evidence yet," Russ said, sounding desperate.

"Typical law enforcement." Sierra rolled her eyes. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

Sydney wished Russ wouldn't push so hard. Not when Sierra was doing them a favor by being there.

Russ shoved a hand through his hair, leaving little tufts sticking up. "Sorry. I don't like that there's a killer running free in my county, and I have no idea who it might be or who he might kill next."

"I get that. And actually..." She bent to grab an evidence bag from a case sitting at her feet. "I did find a couple of things, which is why I called you here. The first is a scrap of fabric that caught on a tree. Contains a splotch of what looks to be paint."

Sydney looked at the tiny scrap of beige fabric. "Could it be from one of the construction workers?"

Russ took the bag from her and studied the evidence. "Paint is purple. I don't see any purple on the townhouse exteriors."

"It's an unlikely shade of paint for a new build unless you have someone who requested custom colors," Sierra said. "I can analyze the paint for the chemical makeup. That will tell us what it might be used for. Like for a home, interior or exterior, or an automobile, or anything that's painted really."

"That would be great." Russ gave the bag back to Sierra. "You mentioned a couple of things."

She took the bag and bent to grab another one. "I also found a pocket knife. Has the initials OP engraved on it, and I wanted you to see it right away."

Russ took it from her. “Would seem careless of our killer to have left it behind.”

“True,” Sierra said. “But it could’ve fallen out of a pocket or dropped out when he got something else out.”

Sydney took the bag from Russ. “Looks old. Like a keepsake. Maybe passed down from a father or grandfather.”

“Or the owner likes vintage and antique things and didn’t care that it has initials engraved,” Sierra said.

Russ swallowed. “I could see some guys carrying a sentimental thing like that, but I wouldn’t want to count on it for my safety. Not when a modern one like mine is lighter and has a cryo-treated blade that stays sharp and has superior edge retention.”

Sydney didn’t know a lot about pocket knives. She’d just started carrying one when she finished the academy and chose one recommended by her instructors. She had to admit the final deciding factor was the fun purple color.

“Sounds like you know your knives,” Sierra said.

“I served with Micha as a weapons maintenance tech in the Marines. Got close up and personal with a variety of weapons.”

He served in the military? That was news to Sydney. “You could be a good resource for this piece of evidence.”

He shrugged. “There are tons of knives out there, and if this is vintage, I doubt I would know the brand. But still, it could be a good lead.”

Sierra nodded. “Could give us prints and DNA too. And I can have one of our weapons experts look at it. If there’s anything to know about it that will help in the investigation, Grady or Trent will be able to tell us.”

“Let me snap a picture of it.” Russ got out his phone and took several snapshots. He was stowing the phone in his belt holder when it rang. He glanced at the screen. “I have to take the call. It’s Garber.”

He answered, and listened, looking into the distance. He worked the

muscles in his jaw and tapped his foot. His fingers holding the phone turned white. “Hold on.”

He clamped his hand over the mouthpiece and looked at her. “Isn’t 113 State Street the other side of your duplex?”

“Yeah, my friend Kate Cleary lives there, why?” She held her breath for the answer that his reaction to the call said she wouldn’t like.

“Dispatch just reported an assault at that address.”

Her heart dropped. “Someone hurt Kate? But we’ve only been gone for a little over an hour.”

“Someone must’ve broke in right after we left then.”

“How badly is she hurt?” Sydney asked but really didn’t want to hear the answer.

“Let me get details.” He turned back to his phone. “You en route to the scene?”

Russ listened, phone still in a death grip.

Her heart hammered, and she wanted to take his free hand and hold it.

Sierra stepped closer as if in support.

“Keep me updated.” He ended the call, his expression tight. “No details yet, but an ambulance has been called to the scene.”

“No, oh, no. This is because of me, isn’t it?” She managed to get out over a closing throat.

“Not because of you.” His gaze softened. “But it could be related to Dixon’s murder.”

Sydney’s mind flashed over the possibilities of what had happened, liking none of them. “I need to see if she’s okay.”

He took a breath. Let it out slowly. “I wouldn’t advise that. This could be a trap to bring you into the line of fire.”

“I’m willing to risk that,” she said with as much determination as she could muster when her leg muscles threatened to collapse. “Kate’s my friend. I’m going. If you don’t want to drive me, will you take me back to my car?”

He chewed on his cheek and shoved his phone into the holder. "I'll take you to her place under one condition."

"Name it," she said, hoping she could comply.

He planted his feet in the dirt, a force to be reckoned with. "You will listen and follow every directive I give you at the scene."

"Fine," she reluctantly agreed.

He clamped a hand on his sidearm and continued to watch her. "Fine or yes, Russ, I promise to listen to you?"

"I promise."

He looked at Sierra. "Then if you don't have anything else for us, we'll get going."

"Only that I need you to prioritize my work here. We'll be done here in an hour or so. I can either take this evidence back to the lab tonight and process it or we can process your victim's house first. Which would you like me to do?"

"Can I think about it on our drive and get back to you?"

"Sure thing. Just don't forget."

"I won't." He gestured for Sydney to go before him, and they set off for his car.

Once he got them on the road he glanced at her. "Which do you think we should have Sierra do?"

"I don't honestly know if I'm in a frame of mind to think clearly, but my gut says getting that knife in for prints and DNA is the priority."

"I was thinking the same thing. With all the parties Dixon's had at his place, I'm sure Sierra will lift a ton of fingerprints there. Processing them could just be time-consuming and not reveal much."

She leaned on the armrest. "On the other hand, the knife or fabric could be from a worker or even someone who came to look at the townhouse progress, like me."

"Yeah. But she can process it along with the cigarette butt and fabric, and

if they don't provide a lead, maybe she would come back for Dixon's house."

"Too bad she couldn't leave her assistant here to do Dixon's house and go back herself, but I would never want a woman as pregnant as she is on the road alone."

"We could send someone else with her," he suggested.

"Aren't your deputies and Shadow Lake Survival guys all booked?"

"She doesn't need protection, just someone who could get help if needed. Maybe Poppy would go. Or my dad even. I'll call Sierra as soon as I can to suggest it." He gave Sydney a tight smile. "Good thinking."

She appreciated the compliment, but as they turned onto Kate's street, visions of her best friend took over. Maybe lying on the ground, her wheelchair nearby. Hurt. Bleeding. All because she lived next door to Sydney.

Russ's phone rang, startling both of them.

"It's Garber." Russ put the call on speaker and told him Sydney was in the car with him.

"I've secured the scene," Garber said. "The victim has been transported to the hospital."

Victim? Sydney hated that term and even more so when it related to Kate. "Will she recover?"

"Yes. Looks like a head wound. Maybe a concussion. But nothing life-threatening."

Sydney released a shaky breath. "Did she say what happened?"

"She told the responding officer that she heard a commotion in the other half of the duplex and checked it out. There was an intruder. He plowed her down as he took off."

Sydney couldn't stop her mouth from falling open. "Someone broke into my place?"

"That's what your friend stated," Garber said.

"What's going on?" She swiveled to look at Russ.

“I think it’s pretty obvious.” He gritted his teeth. “Our killer is getting more desperate for what he wants and broke into your place to find it.”

Her stomach soured as they crept down her street. Some evil person hurt her friend. Sweet, dependable, kind, loving Kate didn’t deserve this. She’d already faced enough challenges with the onset of multiple sclerosis a few years ago and then losing her ability to walk last year. Sydney couldn’t imagine being confined to a wheelchair, but Kate had taken it all in stride, saying God could use her in a chair as much as he could use her on her feet.

Such faith. If only Sydney’s was that strong. Here she’d been blubbering like a baby over what had been happening in her life, and Kate was probably trying to help those who came to her rescue. She was too special to be involved in this mess.

Sydney bowed her head. *Please hold Kate in Your arms. Heal her wounds. Help us to find the person terrorizing all of us and bring him to justice.*

Feeling a bit better, Sydney looked up and waited for the first glimpse of her second crime scene in less than twenty-four hours. She wanted to look away but couldn’t.

There it was. What she’d dreaded. Kate’s wheelchair, frame bent, lying at the base of concrete steps that abutted a ramp. A large bloodstain had soaked into the concrete. Kate was alive, and Sydney was glad to still have her friend. That was all that mattered as long as there were no lingering effects from the injury.

Still, the guilt over not finding the suspect before he hurt her friend peppered her stomach with acid.

Russ killed the engine and laid a hand on her arm. “Are you sure you’re ready to see this?”

She nearly laughed, perhaps in hysteria. “I saw a man who’d been murdered last night. How could a burglary be worse?”

He caught and held her gaze. “This is a personal attack. Someone violated

your space.”

He was right, but she couldn't cower in the car. She had to see what the intruder had done. “I'm good. Really. I need to do this.”

She glanced at all of her neighbors hanging outside, the freshly strung crime scene tape flickering in the light breeze, and wasn't sure she'd spoken the truth. But like she'd said, she had to see the scene in person. She was the only one who could tell if something was missing.

Russ reached into a small bin and pulled out paper booties and disposable gloves. He handed a set to her. “Stick close to me and put these on when we get to the front door.”

He got out and rushed around to open her door. He took her arm, held her close, and moved them through the group with sharp *excuse mes*. Her neighbors tossed out questions. So many, but she ignored them all to scan for threats. Looking for anyone who shouldn't be there. Anyone paying too much attention. Looking dangerous. Questionable. Maybe brandishing a weapon.

She found no one, but her gut remained tight and queasy.

At the front porch, she took the steps two at a time to the door she'd lovingly painted a bright yellow. Russ was hot on her heels. She paused before entering to slip on booties and gloves, then forced herself to peer into her family room.

She gasped. Her throat constricted. Her pulse raced. The sight. The smell.

The sofa lay overturned with the fabric slashed open. The cushions had suffered the same fate. Keepsakes she'd collected over the years lay shattered in tiny fragments on the hardwood floor. Scented candles smashed and the once pleasant smell now a sickening odor to her. Her life in a heap. In a pile on the floor. Damaged. Destroyed.

Russ came up behind her. “I'm so sorry, Syd. We'll get this guy.”

His understanding tugged at her heart, but she ignored his kindness to hold back a flood of tears. Anger flared instead, churning, boiling, threatening to erupt. This was the last straw. Russ was right. This creep not

only wouldn't get away with hurting her friend, but he wouldn't get away with the invasion of Sydney's privacy. She would be certain of that.

Garber had cleared the house, and she had no reason not to enter as long as she was careful and didn't disturb the crime scene or destroy any evidence. She stepped into the family room and picked her way through the mess room-by-room. Kitchen, bathroom, both bedrooms. All trashed in the same way. Everything she owned. Nikki's things. All had been touched by the killer. Contaminated by hatred.

What kind of person had such cruelty in their heart?

She dropped onto a hard kitchen chair, the jolt adding to her misery. Frustration and fatigue set in. Anger ebbed. Her phone chimed from her pocket.

Kate. Was it an update about her condition?

Sydney dug for her phone. Her hands still shaking, she fumbled the device, then caught hold to see the screen.

The same number from last night.

Oh no. Not again.

Her heart thundered hard. She looked up to catch Russ's attention. "Another text."

He came up behind her as she thumbed the icon to read the message.

Welcome home, Officer Tucker. Sorry I left such a mess, but I will get what I'm looking for. When I do, your life will end.

The blood drained from her face, and she couldn't catch her breath. She had to figure this out.

What in the world did he want? Did it even matter right now?

He'd made his point very clear. He'd assaulted her friend and trashed Sydney's house in his desperate quest for this *thing*. And now he'd confirmed that once he had it in hand, he was willing to kill again.

To kill her.

Through the picture window, Russ surveyed the scene outside Sydney's duplex. He wanted to do something—anything—to protect Sydney from danger, and his gut said the killer could be watching them. Perhaps among the group of locals outside. It would do no good to alarm Sydney with the thought that the intruder might be watching the house right now, but Russ had to make sure Garber was taking down names of the onlookers just in case.

He squatted by her chair to gain her attention. “Could you stay here and look for anything missing while I check in with Garber?”

“Sure,” she said, but her answer lacked conviction.

“It'll be okay.” He patted her arm when he wanted to do so much more for her. “We'll get this creep who's stalking you, and you'll be able to move on.”

“Yeah.” Even less conviction.

“Be right back.” He headed for the door. Leaving her so dejected cut into him, but he was walking that fine line of sheriff and friend, maybe more, and he had to keep balancing them both.

He stepped outside and searched the lookie-loos. The crowd had grown since he'd come inside. He counted twenty anxious faces peering at the house. Garber talked with them, jotting notes in his small pad.

Hopefully, he was following protocol. Taking down names and asking what the people had seen, trying to confirm what happened but also looking for anyone out of place. Criminals liked to admire the chaos their actions had caused, and Garber could well find their suspect in the group.

But notes didn't cut it for Russ. If their killer was lingering in the crowd, watching, Russ wanted a visual record. He pulled out his phone and snapped copious pictures, and followed up with recording a video.

Certain he'd gotten a clear shot of each onlooker, he joined Garber.

"A word." Russ moved out of the crowd's earshot. "Our killer could be tailing Officer Tucker. Take extra care in recording everyone's name. Keep your eyes open. Detain anyone acting suspicious. And I mean anyone who even looks at you funny."

"This isn't like you." Garber eyed Russ. "What's got you so spooked?"

Way to go, Maddox. He hadn't controlled his concern for Sydney. Not good. He needed to play it cooler. He didn't want to start any rumors. Though now that Garber's interest was piqued, the sharp guy might see right through Russ's sidestepping.

The best bet now was to redirect the conversation. "Bring me up to speed on what you've learned so far, and we'll go from there."

Garber studied Russ for a long, uncomfortable moment but then shrugged it off. "The victim claims the incident just occurred. She lay there waiting for someone to find her. Intruder wore a ski mask, and she couldn't ID him. Said he was tall, but coming from someone in a wheelchair, her perspective may be skewed."

"That all?" Russ couldn't control his irritation, and his tone said as much. "None of these people saw anything or the suspect?"

"Just the woman who discovered Kate. By then the suspect was long gone." Garber clicked the end of his pen. "After I finish taking down names, I'll start a door-to-door to check in with neighbors I haven't already talked to."

Russ always appreciated Garber being a self-starter. “I’ll get a few uniforms over here to help.”

Garber gave a sharp nod. “What happened at Eustis’s place?”

“Mostly a bust.” Russ told him about the computer. “We also received another text. With Eustis in jail, it pretty much rules him out as the one sending them, but he could be working with someone else—like *Big Cheese*—and he took over the texts.”

“Maybe there’s something on the computer that will help.”

“I’m going to ask Colin to work on it for me,” Russ said. “I’ll drop it off with him to be imaged when I leave here. Once we know if it was Dixon’s computer, I planned on grilling Eustis again, but this came up and I need to interview Kate. I’ll let you know if the computer belonged to Dixon, and you have a go at Eustis for me when you finish up here. See if he can explain why he had Dixon’s computer in his possession.”

“I’m more than glad to lean on the creep.” Garber grinned.

Russ would have enjoyed it too. Sure. But nothing worth smiling about. Not when Sydney’s friend was hurt, and Sydney was torn up about it. “You hear back from that Portland detective?”

“I did. As we thought, Jessup checks out. They do have CCTV of the attack. You can’t see the attacker’s face, but he fits Eustis’s short build, not your killer’s build, so Eustis could’ve stolen it and then someone stole it from him.”

“Or he gave it to someone to use. Follow up with him on that. Also get with Baker for me. The Veritas team located a pocket knife at the murder scene. Has the initials OP engraved on it. Have Baker review the call list to see if Dixon phoned anyone with those initials and get back to me ASAP with the results.”

“Will do. I’ll press Eustis on it too, in case he knows someone with those initials.”

“As always, keep me in the loop about any new developments.” Russ

headed for the house.

A sense of unease chilled Russ. He spun and scanned the crowd. Searched. Every face.

Nothing had changed.

He widened his search to the surrounding area. Trees. Shrubs. Rows of well-kept houses. Nothing unusual. Didn't mean the killer wasn't hiding—watching.

He shook off the feeling, but stopped on the porch to call his dad. He brought him up to speed on what was going on. “Would you be willing to drive the pregnant forensic expert back to Portland today?”

“Today, huh?” Russ could almost see the wheels turning in his dad's head. “Sure, I don't see why not. I could bunk with an old friend overnight and drive back in the morning. Just let me arrange that and I'm good to go.”

“Thanks, Dad. I'll owe you one.”

“My fence *does* need painting.” He chuckled and hung up.

Russ couldn't imagine a much more boring chore, but he would do it to pay his dad back. He would do it even if his dad didn't go to Portland now that Russ knew he wanted it done. But there'd be no time until this investigation was over.

He dialed Sierra and told her about this latest scene. “As much as I need this scene processed, I think the knife and fabric remain top priority. What if you headed back to Portland and Chad stayed here? I asked my dad to drive you. He said he'd be glad to do it. Or maybe you and Chad both could go back and send someone else here.”

“I'll assign two more techs, and I'll leave Chad here so he can take charge. I would be grateful if your dad could drive me. I could leave anytime.”

“His name is Hank. I'll text you his phone number, and you can coordinate with him. Just promise me you won't repeat any of the countless childhood stories he's bound to tell about me and my brothers.”

“Promise.” She laughed. “And thanks. I’ll get back to you the minute I have any results.”

Glad one thing was settled, Russ entered the duplex where Sydney was looking through the rubble on the family room floor.

He swallowed away residual anger over the horrible situation she’d found herself in. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” The strain of the events hung in her eyes, contradicting her statement.

He had to do better at protecting her. Find this guy and bring him in. His thoughts waffled between the job at hand and her suffering. She needed him to let go of her pain. Focus. Do his job and do the best work he’d ever done in his life.

He dug deeper. Remembered a training officer’s teaching on how to get through a victim’s grief when it became overwhelming. Look away from the victim’s face and don’t look back until he could control his emotions. That should work. For now, anyway.

He shifted his focus to the trashed room. “Anything missing?”

“Not that I can tell. Our electronics are all here. Not a routine break-in for sure. And the intruder said he was looking for the item in the text message, further confirming this break-in was nothing but routine.”

Yeah, Russ got that. As much as he wished it were different, it wasn’t. A killer was after Sydney and wasn’t backing down. If anything, he was escalating. “You check the phone number for the text?”

“Same one as last night.”

“Not that I really liked Eustis for the murder, but with him in jail, he couldn’t have sent the latest threatening text.”

“But he could still be involved,” she said with conviction. “Maybe he’s working with someone who has the phone. Maybe the Crockett guy he gave up. Especially since it looks like Eustis had Dixon’s computer. Hopefully, we can get it imaged fast and get a look at the data.”

“I want to get Colin to review the computer. All the electronics actually. We should get our data faster, plus he’s better skilled than our local techs. If there’s anything to recover from the hard drive, he’ll find it.” Russ looked around the room. “I’ve asked Sierra to get her people over here too, and she’ll bring in additional staff to make it happen.”

“What about those final calls from Dixon’s phone that Baker was running down?”

“He should be finished anytime. Maybe *Big Cheese*’s information will be in there somewhere.”

“Hopefully,” Sydney said, but her eyes creased in fear.

His phone chimed a text from Colin through Russ’s speaker, and he accepted the text.

“Car clean. No problems,” the automated voice read the text and asked if Russ wanted to reply.

Russ fired back a thank you to Colin and asked if he could make time to review the electronics.

Will have to do it around my work schedule.

“I’ll take any time you can give and will drop them off,” Russ replied.

One thing complete. Just one. But Russ really wished he’d resolved something because he was fresh out of questions. Well maybe except how in the world was this guy tracking Sydney and was he smarter than Russ and his team?

More importantly, would they figure it out before the killer returned, and would she live long enough for it to make a difference?



After picking up Dixon’s and Eustis’s phones from the county tech staff, Russ dropped them and the computer off with Colin, then drove Sydney toward the hospital where she’d insisted on visiting Kate when he

interviewed her.

Sydney had brought up her plan to go there. Crossed her arms. Stuck out her chin. Firmed her shoulders. Her mind was made up. She cared for her friends as if they were family, and she would see with her own two eyes that Kate was doing okay. He'd learned in the time he'd known her that once she'd made up her mind, he likely couldn't change it. She'd learned to be independent in caring for Nikki when their mother bailed on them.

Didn't mean he had to just give in to her demands. That would be doing her a disservice.

He gripped the wheel but made sure he used a neutral tone. "You know how dangerous visiting Kate is."

"I know, and I'm sorry if it puts you in danger too, but I have to see Kate. I just have to."

He got it. Not that he had many friends outside of his brothers, who, in the rare times he was free from work or being with Zach, he hung with. He didn't want to take Sydney to such a public place, but if one of his brothers had been hurt, no one could stop him from visiting them.

He flicked on his blinker and made a quick left turn to change his direction. He glanced in his mirror to see if anyone tailed him, but it was clear. Good. "We'll go in the service entrance and keep a low profile."

"Thank you, Russ." She reached out, squeezed his arm, and left her hand there.

Her touch did nothing to stop his worry, but it did fire off all kinds of emotions. Would he ever recover if he let her get hurt? Not likely.

"You know, it might be time to consider moving you and Nikki to a safe house."

She removed her hand and eyed him. "I'm a police officer. I can take care of myself and my family."

He bit back a harsh retort. He never wanted to hear that comment again, but he had to admit he was treating her differently than he might a deputy on

his team. But then, their eyes didn't make him want to fix all of their problems and give them the life they deserved.

He took a shaky breath. "You'll have to stay somewhere else until we process your house and it's released. Might as well be somewhere safe."

"I'll think about it."

He didn't expect that, but he would take it. "Okay, good. That's all I can ask."

He could offer not to spend the night at the lodge with her, but he wasn't about to leave her unprotected in any location. However, if that's what it took to get her to stay on their compound, he would sleep in his car again. He would circle back later and ask again once she'd had a chance to digest his request.

He concentrated on his driving, and the ride was uneventful, even more so than expected. As the sheriff, he could park anywhere without a problem, so he circled the building to the small loading dock.

On high alert, he led Sydney through the receiving maze and lower levels of the hospital to the long corridor with Kate's room that smelled like antiseptic cleaner and rubbing alcohol.

Russ had posted a deputy outside the room, and Deputy Ford, a younger guy with a slight build, came to attention, his expression wary.

Russ waved him down. "Any problems?"

"Nothing so far."

"Keep alert."

Ford nodded.

Russ stepped in front of Sydney just outside the door. "Kate's your friend. You'll want time with her, but I need to talk to her first. Then I'll leave the two of you alone."

She cocked her head at a feisty angle. "I'll be present during the questioning."

Her agreement was too easy. He'd expected an argument. Might still get

one. “Of course. I wouldn’t leave you out here in the hallway. I’ll do all the talking.”

She opened her mouth, but he held up his hand. “The minute you lay eyes on Kate, you’ll want to protect her. Some of my questions might upset her. You’ll want to answer for her or jump to her defense. I can’t have you doing either one.”

“Is giving her a hug out of the question?”

“A hug is perfectly acceptable behavior.” He opened the door and hung back. “After you.”

She raced across the room to her friend and pulled her into her arms. The woman who looked to be about Sydney’s age had short black hair, darkly painted eyebrows, and equally dark nail polish. The pair didn’t exchange any words. Not a single one. But they seemed close. Very close. Something that somehow seemed more important to Russ since reconnecting with Sydney.

Sure, Russ had two brothers, both of whom would come to his aid when he asked, but since he’d disappointed everyone during his dive into alcohol, he wanted to stand on his own and prove he’d regained control of his life. So he’d gotten prickly about accepting help, and they’d learned to wait until he requested their assistance.

“Enough,” Kate said, extricating herself from Sydney’s arms.

“You sure you’re okay?” Sydney perched on the side of the bed.

“Fine.” Kate peered around Sydney. “I’d recognize you anywhere, Sheriff Maddox.” She held out her hand. “Kate Cleary.”

He shook her hand. “Wish we could’ve met under different circumstances.”

“Me too, but then sometimes God likes to toss a few surprises into our lives to get our attention. I wake up each day waiting to see what He’ll do next.”

Interesting take. Sure, Russ believed in God, but how did he respond to this enthusiastic expression of faith? Best to leave it alone. Stick to the

questioning. “Mind if I ask you a few questions about the incident?”

She grinned with the innocence of a child. “Avoiding the subject of God, I see.”

“Not avoiding entirely. Just sidestepping for now.” He glanced at Sydney, who watched him with rapt attention. So she wanted to hear his answer too. But why?

“Fair enough,” Kate said. “What did you want to know?”

“Tell me what happened.” Russ got out his notepad and pen.

“Not much to tell. It all happened so fast.” She faced Sydney. “I heard a noise at your place and thought Nikki decided to skip school again. I wanted to encourage her to go back before she gave you something else to worry about.”

Sydney patted her friend’s hand. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

“But it wasn’t Nikki,” Russ said to get Kate back on track.

“No.” She shuddered. “I pounded on the door and yelled for Nikki. The door flew open. A man rushed out and shoved me out of the way. My chair caught on a column and crashed down the stairs. I laid there until Mrs. Jaxon came home and called 911.” She sighed. “And that’s all I can tell you.”

Sydney’s shoulders drooped.

“Can you describe the man?” Russ asked before Sydney could waylay the conversation by expressing her sorrow over what happened.

“Not his face. He wore one of those black ski masks. He was tall, though.” She studied Russ. “Taller than you. Not muscular, but thin. Wiry.”

“What was he wearing?”

“Jeans. A black leather biker’s jacket. Black leather boots.”

“What else did you see while you were lying there?”

“Nothing, really. I was facing the house, and my legs were wedged in so I couldn’t scoot around.”

“Maybe you heard or even smelled something that could help.”

“Maybe.” She stared off into the distance. “There was one thing, but I

don't see how it could be related."

"Tell me, and I'll decide if it's important." Russ ended with a smile meant to encourage Kate to talk.

"Okay," she said. "Shortly after I fell, I heard a motorcycle take off down the alley."

The stolen dirt bike? Russ darted a look at Sydney. Saw the same conclusion in her eyes.

Kate looked from one to the other and back again. "What're you not telling me?"

"It's nothing." Russ worked to keep his tone laid back. "Did you hear anything else?"

"I don't think so, but give me a second to think about it." Kate closed her eyes.

Sydney's phone chimed. Russ watched her click to the text and stare at the message. She glanced at Kate, then motioned for Russ to come closer.

He bent over the phone.

Nice of you to visit your friend, Officer Tucker. If you keep stonewalling me, you'll make another trip to the hospital. But then you'll be visiting the morgue.

Russ's protective instincts shot to attention. He went to the window and searched the area below. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he lowered the blinds and turned back. Sydney's face had gone white, and her gaze darted around the room like a trapped animal.

Kate opened her eyes. "Other than birds and dogs, that's—what's wrong?"

Sydney palmed her phone and forced out a laugh. "Nothing. Everything will be fine."

Russ swallowed his concern and smiled. "Sydney's right. Everything will be fine."

He was able to speak in a calm, even soothing tone, but he didn't fool

Sydney. She knew this killer had to be smart and cunning to know her exact location right now.

Russ needed to step up his game even more. And fast.

“That’s all for now.” He handed his business card to Kate. “In case you think of anything else. Call me directly.” He turned to Sydney. “I’ll wait outside for you.”

“I won’t keep her long.” Kate smiled a sincere goodbye to Russ.

Sydney and Russ exchanged a long, knowing look as he walked to the door. She put on a brave smile that she aimed at Kate as he exited the room.

He discovered a secluded spot in a waiting area off the busy hallway and called Reid. As a former FBI agent, he had skills no one else in the area possessed. Russ dreaded asking for more help from the guy who’d single-handedly pulled Russ out of the pit of his alcoholic binge—he’d done enough for Russ—but lives were at stake, and he needed the best on his team.

“Hey, bro,” Russ said after Reid answered. “I hate to do this, but I need a favor.”

“I’m listening.” Reid’s cautious tone was courtesy of his many years as a fed.

Russ recounted the events that had occurred since he’d spoken to his brothers last night. “I was hoping you’d let Sydney, along with Nikki and their neighbor, stay at Valley View. I figured Jessie could bunk with Mom to keep her safe.” He explained about their dad driving to Portland. “I know Mom would like to have Jessie, and Jessie would love it too.”

“Have you already asked her?”

“No. I didn’t want to get their hopes up if you didn’t want to do this.”

“I’ll call her. Sydney can stay at the lodge. It’s the easiest building to secure.”

“Great...thanks. Text Mom’s answer to me.”

“Sure, but you know it’ll be yes.”

“Yeah. She’s as good of a grandma as she is a mom.”

“What time will you be bringing them by so I can get rooms ready?”

“Nikki’s out at three and Micha will be waiting for us to help with her transport. Thirty minutes or so for the traffic to clear, then we’ll be at the lodge.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“Thanks, bro. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

Reid chuckled. “OPSEC advice from my little brother. How touching.” OPSEC—operations security—was one of Reid’s areas of expertise.

“Okay, fine. You don’t need me to tell you what to do, but still be careful.”

“This guy’s really got you freaked.” His tone had sobered.

“Totally. He isn’t tailing us, doesn’t have her car, phone, or home bugged, but somehow he’s figured out our every move. Until I know how he’s doing it, I have to overreact.”

“Seriously? Colin didn’t find anything?”

“Nothing. Can you think of anything I might be failing to come up with?”

“Nah, man. A drone would be my only other thought, but you would’ve made that by now.”

“One other favor. Which of the guys can get to the hospital ASAP to help with a transport detail?”

“Hang on while I check the schedule?”

Russ tapped his foot and stared out the window over the rooftop below, which served as the heliport. The circular target painted in white with a cross in the middle reminded him of how little he’d been praying of late. If ever a situation called for prayer it would be now, but did he even deserve to pray after the way he’d been shunning God?

“Ryan and Dev are free. I’ll have Mom get Jessie from school, and I can join them too. I’ll get Poppy to make up the rooms and then grab the guys, and we’ll meet you at the hospital.”

“Wait for me at the loading dock. Don’t wear the company uniform. I

don't want you to draw attention to yourselves, which you're bound to do in uniform with a mission in mind."

"Got it."

Hoping Reid really got it and didn't draw undue attention that three buff guys striding with purpose through the space might do, Russ disconnected.

His phone rang.

"What do you have for me, Baker?" Russ answered.

"Just wanted to let you know I tracked down the last person on the phone log. He's a no-go. Alibied out for the time Dixon was murdered."

"So that's it then, right? No one left to consider on Dixon's call log."

"Yeah, I mean we still have three calls that went to an unregistered burner and can't trace those, but otherwise, we're tapped out here."

"And the knife? Anyone with the initials OP on that list?"

"No. Not even close."

Russ resisted slamming a fist into the wall. "Any info on Crockett yet?"

"Guy has a Portland address. No rap sheet. Nothing. Not even a speeding ticket. I made a call to my PPB contact to see if he's known to them."

"Eustis claims Crockett is Dixon's supplier. I gotta figure he could even be *Big Cheese*." Russ relayed the information from Rachelle's parents too. "Let me know the minute they get back to you and start tracking a connection to Dixon or Eustis or both."

"FYI, Eustis's brother confirms he was on the phone with Eustis when Dixon was being murdered."

"Figured as much. Could mean something or could just mean he's protecting his brother." Russ ended the call and headed for the cafeteria.

If they were going to stay ahead of this cunning foe, they needed to not skip meals and keep up their strength. After he dropped off the meal with Sydney, he would implement the plan he'd coordinated with the hospital administrator to facilitate her transport to Valley View.

All Russ had to do was convince Sydney to go along with him.

All? Shoot. Could be a tough sell, but she would be glad to have Nikki and Kate under wraps. And maybe, just maybe, the attack on Kate had scared Sydney enough that she could let go of her need for independence enough to follow his plan.

And stay out of the killer's crosshairs.

Sydney sat on the edge of Kate's bed, clasping her friend's hand as she offered a prayer of thanks for keeping both of them safe and asked for a quick closure to this mess. They sat together, the peace of God surrounding them, but at the same time, Sydney's heart remained weighed down by fear for Kate. For herself and Nikki too.

Why couldn't she let go of this worry and simply trust that God's will would be done and He would work it all out for good?

Perhaps if this maniac was only gunning for her, she could let go. But he'd crossed the line and included Nikki and Kate, leaving the fear firmly lodged in her heart.

Peace now fully evaporated, Sydney squeezed Kate's hand and opened her eyes. "I'm so very sorry this happened to you. Your chair is pretty much toast. When we get back to the station, I'll arrange to have a new one delivered."

Kate arched a brow, directing Sydney's eyes to the wide bandage circling her friend's head. "Don't do this, Syd."

"Do what?"

"You're focusing on the one thing in this mess that makes me different from everyone else." She sighed. "If this criminal hurt another friend, what would you be doing?"

“I’d hold their hand and tell them everything will be all right.”

Kate held out her hand. “Then be my friend and let me take care of the wheelchair.”

“Okay, friend.” Sydney smiled back. Not a forced smile this time, but a genuine show of affection for the woman who’d overcome so much. Part of that strength came from not highlighting her differences, but from letting people see Kate the person, not Kate the handicapped woman.

“As my friend, why don’t you tell me what’s really going on. Including how you got that gash on your forehead.” Kate held up her free hand. “And before you protest, I’m not blind. I saw the cryptic looks you shared with Sheriff Maddox.”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Ha! Like I believe that. I got a good look in your family room before I hit the ground. I’m not a cop, but I’ve watched enough cop shows on TV to know that wasn’t a simple burglary.” A shadow crossed her face. “Someone was looking for something, and I’m worried about you and Nikki.”

“You don’t need to worry about us. We’re safe.”

She gave an irritated sigh. “I’m not sure I believe that, and I won’t quit asking questions until you tell me the whole story.”

She was requesting privileged investigative information—something Sydney couldn’t give. “I can’t share anything more. Russ is in charge of this investigation, and I can’t give out details without his permission.”

“Russ, is it?” Her eyes lit with renewed interest. “I didn’t know you were on a first-name basis with our distinguished sheriff.”

Nice one, Sydney. She’d given Kate the image she didn’t want to put into the ever-impetuous woman’s mind. Or anyone else’s, for that matter. Sydney needed to be careful in the future to use Russ’s title, especially around other officers.

At least her little slip-up had taken her friend’s mind off the other issue. “Don’t read anything into it. It’s pretty hard to change what you call a guy

you've known for years."

Kate studied Sydney's face, which grew hot under the scrutiny. "You're not telling me everything again. Something else is going on here too, isn't there?"

"You are the most frustrating friend in all the universe," Sydney said lovingly. "Always trying to dig up something that doesn't exist."

"I'm not digging up anything. Your face tells it all. Besides worry about the break-in, there's a healthy dose of respect for Sheriff Maddox, along with something else sparking in your eyes. I think you're developing a thing for our good sheriff." Kate smiled softly. "I don't like the circumstances, but, oh, how I hope something does develop between you two."

Sydney shook her head. "You of all people know men are off-limits until after Nikki is through college and established on her own."

"Ah, but that doesn't mean you're not interested, does it?"

Sydney let go of Kate's hand. "What I'm interested in is you getting some rest."

"The only way that'll happen is if you get *your* Russ in here and make him tell me what's happening."

"He's not *my* Russ," Sydney insisted.

"Fine, but I'm serious about wanting to talk to him. Will you please ask him to come back?"

"If you promise to drop this whole matchmaking thing."

"Deal."

"Okay, then." She squeezed Kate's hand and went to find Russ.

In the corridor, she stopped short before running into fellow officer Todd Young. His arms were crossed over his chest, his eyes tight with concern.

"What're you doing here?" she asked him as Deputy Ford had been on door duty just a moment ago.

"Sheriff Maddox said he was stretched too thin and asked the chief for a protection detail for your friend."

She was surprised Russ requested her department's help, even if he'd stretched his staff as far as he could. Krueger would have high expectations in return, but Russ was a do-the-right-thing kind of guy, no matter how much he had to pay for doing it.

"Where is the sheriff?" she asked.

Young pointed down the hall where Russ spoke with a white-coated male. Likely Kate's doctor and she didn't like the grim expression on his face. Kate's MS could complicate things and something more serious than a concussion could be wrong.

Anxious for an update, she headed toward the two men. On the way across the corridor, she thumbed through calls she'd missed while praying with Kate. She pulled up a text from Nikki.

Who knew having a bodyguard could make you a rock star? Especially a hot guy like Micha :)

Her sister sounded happy. A good thing. A very good thing. If only Nikki could keep her spirits up until this horrible situation ended. That was Sydney's prayer as she moved down the hall.

She continued to watch Russ, memorizing his sparse movements. The doctor gestured wildly, but Russ held firm, like a strong tree that could withstand great gusts of wind. As if feeling her eyes on him, he looked up. His expression telegraphed the same strength.

He might keep his emotions battened down due to something in his past, but he'd proven that he was a man to count on. A man who would do his best to protect anyone who needed him. A man—if she ever forgot that men were capable of abandoning those they claimed to love—that she could see getting to know better. But men did bail when the going got tough or uncomfortable or took a turn from what they expected. For all she knew, Russ was just like her father or the other guys who'd taken off when they'd learned of her responsibility to Nikki.

Before she reached them, Russ shook hands with the doctor, who then

spun and walked away. Russ met her gaze and nodded for her to follow him.

He stopped in a corner near the emergency exit door where his brother Reid waited, feet planted, arms crossed. He wore black cargo pants and a black T-shirt that stretched across a toned chest. He was thinner than Russ but just as tall and had darker hair that was bleached by the sun.

She smiled at him. "Hey, Reid."

"Sydney," he said.

"Reid, Ryan, and Dev will be helping with your transport from the hospital."

She blinked a few times trying to process why they needed the men to help her leave the hospital, but Russ was likely not taking any chances since the killer had proven he knew she was in the hospital. But more important at the moment was finding out about Kate's condition.

She faced Russ. "I assume that was Kate's doctor you were talking to."

"Yeah. He wouldn't go into details of course, but said this overnight stay is only precautionary because of her other health issues, and he expects to release her tomorrow."

"Praise God!" A tsunami of emotions hit Sydney. Tears rushed out. Tears of joy for Kate. Tears of anger and fear for herself and Nikki mixed in. She moved away from the men, deeper into the corner and gritted her teeth to stop them.

Didn't work.

She clenched her hands into fists. Let her nails bite into her palms. No success. Tears still raced down her cheeks.

She heard Russ step up to her, but took a few breaths before facing him.

She batted the tears away. "You must really think I'm a total failure as a police officer."

"Why? Because you cry?"

She nodded. "I'm sure you never have to deal with this with your staff."

"On occasion. I'd rather deal with tears than what happens when they

keep things bottled up.”

“If it was just me, I could deal. But when he hurt and threatened Kate, I couldn’t—” Her voice broke.

“It’s really okay to cry. After you’ve worked in law enforcement long enough, you realize one of the hardest things we face is seeing bad things happen to good people. It’s harder when it happens to someone you care about.” His expression softened. “It’s even worse when we feel responsible for what’s happening.”

She let herself linger on his face. Then she saw it. The thing he was hiding. Pain. Deep pain that he kept buried rose to the surface and sat on his face like a weeping sore. She reached out. Rubbed his upper arm. As soon as she touched him, the hard shell closed over like plated armor, and he looked away.

She removed her hand, but she wouldn’t forget what she’d seen. He was too good of a man to live with such deep pain. She hoped somehow to repay him for risking his life to keep her and those she loved safe. She would start by doing whatever he asked of her without putting up a fight—within reason of course. Then maybe she could also repay him by helping him work through whatever his issues were, and he could take back his life.



Russ gritted his teeth and tamped down the urge to tell Sydney what had happened to Willie Babcock and how it had sent him down the spiral of self-destruction. That it gave him great insight into the way she was feeling.

Helpless. Angry. Confused.

All melded together into a rage that could consume her if she let it. He ought to know. He’d let it. But he would do his best to stop that from happening to her, even if he had to tell her about his mental crash leading to alcoholism.

For now, he would stay strong. Give her someone to rely on and keep her from feeling the sheer despair and hopelessness he'd felt. As vulnerable as she was right now, he would give her something positive to focus on by sharing his transport plan and the protection of the Shadow Lake Survival guys.

He sought her eyes again. The compassion and caring nearly pulled him back into the place he avoided, but he shook it off. "I haven't figured out how the killer knew you were here, but however he figured it out, we have to step up security."

She tilted her chin down and frowned. She was disappointed in his change in subject. He got it, but he would continue and, hopefully, she would get invested in the transport and set aside her disappointment in him. "We've swept this wing and posted a round-the-clock protective detail for Kate."

"What happens tomorrow? She obviously can't go home."

"I've arranged a safe house for you and Nikki for tonight. Kate can join you tomorrow."

"Where." She rested her hands on her hips.

"Reid has offered the lodge for our use."

"The lodge at Valley View? With you?" Her voice shot up. "You want us to stay with you?"

Wow. She really didn't want to be with him. He knew she was still attracted to him, but she must not like him much. Or that earlier look scared the living daylights out of her. It had freaked him out, so why not her?

"I was going to suggest my parents' place," he said. "But I don't want to endanger them. I know the risks of the potential threat to my safety. Plus the compound is secured and safer than anywhere else that I can think of. And we have a strong team of men who can help protect the pair of you."

"What about Jessie?"

"She'll stay with my parents."

She rubbed a hand over her face. "I'd rather just Nikki and Kate go. The

further they are away from me the better.”

“And what about you? The killer isn’t about to stop until he gets what he wants from you. Even then he says he’s going to take you out. I can’t let you put yourself in danger like that.” He took a defensive stance and trained his eyes on her.

“I want to do what you ask. I really do, but I feel like they’re better off without me.”

“You really think it will be better for Nikki in a strange place without her big sister there to keep her from worrying?” The narrowing of her eyes said he’d hit a nerve so he continued. “Commit to one day. Just one, Syd. Then we’ll reevaluate if needed.”

“Okay, we’ll try it your way, but I want to remain on the investigation.”

“Of course. I’m part of the protection detail, so you’ll be safe with me.”

He waited for her to balk at the fact that he was part of her detail.

Instead, she gave a clipped nod. “Now we need to see Kate. The only way she’ll agree to your plan is if she knows what’s going on. I hate that we have to scare her like this, but I know how strong-willed she is. This is the only way she’ll cooperate.”

He wanted to chuckle. Sydney could see the stubborn streaks in Nikki and Kate, but she didn’t have a clue she possessed the same trait. Not that he saw it as a negative. Not most of the time anyway. He liked strong women and her tenacity drew him like a magnet. He wanted to spend time with her away from the investigation. To get to know her better.

Focus on the work, Russ.

“I’ll break it to Kate.” He waited for Sydney to turn toward Kate’s room then motioned for Reid to stay put and alert before following her. Kate might be lying in a bed from being attacked and confined to a wheelchair from MS, but she was a rich woman for having a strong protector like Sydney on her side.

On the walk, he updated her on the details from Baker’s call so she was in

the know about everything. “Looks like we might need to go to Portland to interview Crockett unless we find him in town.”

She frowned. “That drive will eat up a bunch of time we really don’t have.”

“Agreed, but it can’t be helped.” He pushed open Kate’s door and let Sydney enter before him. She crossed the room, sat on the side of the bed, and placed a protective arm around Kate’s shoulders. She reminded him of a fierce mother cat protecting her kittens from an attacker.

Man, he was lonely. Isolated. Shockingly so. And he never realized it until now.

He loved his job, and Zach was in his life again. Maybe Russ didn’t see his son as often as he wanted, but as much as was possible after how he’d treated his family. Despite his progress in getting things together, his time with Sydney made him want more. He wanted to let down his guard for once and find someone who cared about him as she did her family and friends.

Too bad he’d ruined his chance at that kind of life.

He shared the investigative details he was willing to give with Kate, who took it all in stride. He left her with Sydney to meet with the team to nail down the final details for Sydney’s transport to Valley View. After ensuring they had a solid plan, he returned to Kate’s room and knocked softly before opening her door. Kate slept, and Sydney sat on a hard chair by the bed, her face peaceful as she gazed at her friend. A complete change in her demeanor and a surprise to be sure.

She looked up at him and smiled.

How could she have achieved such calm? When he’d left her earlier, she’d been tense and overwhelmed. Now this?

“We’re ready to go,” he whispered to keep from waking Kate.

She stretched and got up. She gave her friend a lingering look and then crossed to the door. He held it open.

She tugged the door closed behind her and marched away from Officer

Young, then stopped to look at Russ. “I’ve been thinking. We really do need to reconsider housing me with Nikki and Kate.”

Not this again. “Not up for discussion, Syd.”

“Please hear me out.” She laid a hand on his arm, the warmth of her fingers threatening to thaw his resolve. “I can stay at home. This guy won’t try to kill me. He thinks I have something he wants, right? So if he kills me, he’ll never get it. But if he comes for me at Valley View and finds Kate or Nikki there, maybe he’ll abduct one of them instead. Then he has the leverage he needs to force me to talk.” She sighed heavily. “Since I have nothing to give him, he could even kill them to prove a point. I can’t let that happen.”

“You have a valid concern, but if you don’t lie low, he’ll snatch you and try to make you talk.”

“But at least I won’t lead him to Kate and Nikki.”

Russ leaned against the wall. She was arguing with him, but her voice held no anger or frustration. It wasn’t even in her body language. Almost as if she’d made some sort of decision while he was working things out, and she was at peace. Maybe she’d decided she had to die to let Nikki and Kate live.

If so, he wouldn’t have any part of that. “You already agreed to my plan.”

“I know, but only for one night. I’ll continue to stay at Valley View if you want, but can we move them to another location tomorrow?”

“I’ll try. Maybe Reid can secure another safe house through his friends at the Bureau. Somewhere out of the area. Does that work for you?”

Her beaming smile was more than answer enough.

He had to ignore it when her transport required all of his focus. “Then let’s get this show on the road. First stop is the school for Nikki.”

“That could lead the killer right to her.”

“This guy is smart. He already knows where she goes to school. Besides, I have a plan to ensure he can’t follow us.” Hoping he could accomplish what he’d promised, he jerked his head in the direction they needed to go. “This

way. Stay close.”

She followed him without question to the service elevator. Reid fell into step behind them. Russ hoped her willingness to comply meant she trusted him, not that she’d given up and would bail somewhere along the way. He’d rather think she’d based her compliance on trust. He liked the idea that she might trust him. It had been a long time since he’d felt anyone relied on him other than his deputies.

From the elevator car, he led her and Reid down into the bowels of the hospital until they reached a large storage room.

“I didn’t want to take a chance that we’d be made in my vehicle,” he said. “So we’ll be transported in a truck that the hospital uses to deliver durable equipment to patients. You okay with that?”

“Fine.” Another one-word answer.

Had all of the fight gone out of her? She didn’t appear defeated, just calm. Serene, even.

What was going on with her?

She’d had the same easy peace early this morning too, but had lost it when Kate got hurt. Now it was back, and it was so foreign to this spunky woman that it worried him.

He continued through the large space to the loading dock, where two large box-type trucks had backed in.

“I’ll keep you updated on my route.” Reid split off to the cab of the vehicle on the left.

His brother Ryan waited near the rear door of the truck on the right, talking to Devan. Ryan resembled Russ in coloring, more fair and near blond and Dev had dark hair and a close-cut beard. He was a former Clackamas County deputy and expert in water rescue.

They spun, their attention focused and intense.

“You remember Ryan and Dev,” Russ said.

“Yes.” Sydney smiled. “Thank you both for your help today.”

Ryan offered one of his charming smiles. “Good to see you, even if it is under difficult circumstances.”

Dev gave a sharp nod and jerked a thumb at Ryan. “Glad to ride along if this guy doesn’t do his usual driving.”

“As you can gather, Ryan will drive us, and Dev will ride along in the back,” Russ said. “Reid will drive a decoy truck. To determine if we’re being followed, Ryan will make a few stops on the normal route and unload equipment.” He pointed into the truck. “All the way to the front.”

She glanced around then stepped into the truck.

He followed her between stacks of boxes to a cleared section. “Have a seat.”

When she’d settled on a pile of furniture pads, he secured cargo netting to metal tines and Ryan stacked boxes to create a false wall.

“You good in there?” Ryan asked.

“Fine,” Russ replied. “Just drive with caution, and we’ll be good.”

“Ah, man, and here I thought I was going to be able to test my speed skills.” Ryan chuckled, and Russ heard him march off the truck.

Russ was in no mood for humor, but he didn’t say anything to make the mood in the truck more tense. He sat opposite Sydney. “Once Ryan finishes loading a few more bogus packages, we’ll be out of here.”

“Thanks for taking care of this.” She smiled softly. “I’m sorry for all the extra work I’ve caused by insisting on coming to see Kate.”

“No problem.” He fought hard not to squeeze her hand.

She settled against the wall. Her easygoing mood should have made him relax, but as Ryan and Dev stacked boxes on the other side, the light in the small cave grew dimmer, and the reality of their situation kept him on edge.

“Do you think all of this is really necessary?” she asked.

He peered at her to see if fear had usurped her calm, but he couldn’t make out her eyes in the dim light. “I’m pretty sure the killer didn’t make us in my cruiser as we drove here, but he knows where you are and probably assumes

we'll use it to move you out."

"Or he could think you'd do it another way and watch all traffic out of the hospital."

"That's why we have two trucks leaving at the same time," he replied. "He only has a fifty-fifty chance of tailing the right one. When we stop for deliveries, we'll know if he's followed us."

His walkie-talkie set up to communicate with Ryan squawked, and Russ jumped.

"That's it, bro," Ryan said. "We're closing the doors now. See you on the other side."

"Roger that." Russ retrieved his flashlight from his duty belt and strapped it facing up in a cord on the wall. The light reflected off the metal ceiling, bouncing softly down on Sydney. Eyes closed, she'd laid her hands palms-up on her knees, as if settling into a meditative trance.

While her eyes were closed, he had no qualms about watching her. Her facial muscles were relaxed. Her lips moved silently. She seemed to be praying, and he was beginning to see she lived her faith in a much more intense way than he did.

He'd been raised in a Christian household, but when his life fell apart it helped him see the need for God more than ever. In fact, faith had brought him back from the brink of self-destruction. He owed God big-time for that. But then he'd taken a step back.

Why? What had happened?

The divorce. Losing custody of Zach. Looking at it now, he could see how he'd let his faith slide away with these incidents. Not consciously. He'd just stopped making it a priority. Hadn't really even noticed the loss. Maybe he should take a hint from Sydney and ask for a little guidance. He certainly wasn't handling things too well on his own.

His phone vibrated, and he grabbed it to read a text from Colin. *Computer and phone images finished. One phone and computer do belong to Dixon.*

Pick up the images anytime. I'll dig into them both too. Let you know if I find anything suspicious.

Russ replied his thanks and fired off a text to Garber to tell him the computer belonged to Dixon so he could use that when grilling Eustis. Then Russ shared the information with Sydney. "We can review the details at the safe house tonight."

"Good deal. Glad you thought to involve Colin so we got them fast."

"First stop." Ryan's voice coming from his walkie-talkie startled Russ.

He sat forward. Alert now. It wasn't the time for prayer or small talk with Sydney. As the truck slowed, Russ turned off the flashlight, then clamped a hand on his weapon and listened. The back door opened, boxes shifted, and then the door closed.

He rubbed sweaty hands over his knees and waited in the darkness for the truck to start rolling again. He could hear Sydney moving around. What could she be thinking? Was she worried the killer had made them and would board the truck, guns blazing? It was a possibility, but Ryan or Dev would take him out before that happened.

Her foot settled against his calf. He expected her to jerk it away, but she must not have realized she was touching him. He liked the connection. Liked knowing she was safe next to him.

"We're a go," Ryan said over the walkie-talkie.

The truck started forward. He flipped on the light. He blinked a few times to let his eyes adjust to the sudden light. He looked up. Sydney was peering at him.

She smiled. "You said back at the hospital that the hardest part of this job is seeing bad things happen to good people."

"Yeah."

"I'm not sure I agree," she said.

"Then what?"

"I think it's when the people who do bad things get away with it." She

crossed her arms. “I mean, when bad things happen to us, we can use it to grow and become better people. But when these creeps get away with something, it encourages them to do it again.”

“But is it fair for a good person to have to go through the agony and pain?”

“Fair? No.” She paused, seemed to ponder her next words. “But take what’s going on now. Once all of this is over, I can use what I’ve learned on the job to help someone else.”

“That’s a pretty noble goal, but is it realistic? In my experience, we spend more time focusing on the perpetrators than on helping others.”

“We do, but if we touch one person, isn’t everything else worth it?”

“I’ll have to think about that.”

“What’s to think about?” She sat forward. “I’m a perfect example with what Vicki did for Nikki and me.”

Her dream to help others was admirable but how long would it be before she gave up on that plan? He’d seen other officers go the extra mile like she wanted to do, but they’d often burned out or were taken advantage of, so they gave up their quest.

The truck slowed for their next stop. He studied her face, which was beaming with hope for a better tomorrow. Maybe she would be an exception, like the officer who’d helped her. He prayed she would be. But in order for her to even have a chance at succeeding, he had to protect her from the killer who’d proven his ability to keep tabs on her.

And his willingness to kill.

For a sheriff, Russ didn't have a very good poker face. He obviously thought Sydney's desire to help others was naïve. Not surprising. At the academy, fellow officers had scoffed at what they'd called her unrealistic viewpoint, but she knew for a fact that she could combine her faith and her career to achieve a positive influence in the lives of those she encountered on the job.

She'd always thought the influence would be on someone in the community, but maybe God had put her in this situation to help Russ with whatever angst he seemed to be facing. His family were church-going folks, and she knew he'd been raised a Christian. But was he still a believer? When the door closed again, she would broach the subject.

But how did she start? Maybe she could tell him how her faith had helped her in the past. She hadn't been a good example for him since they reconnected, though. Actions spoke louder than words. She'd let these events toss her around like a tiny boat in a storm. He might not believe anything she told him. She'd have to tread lightly.

At the click of the door, the light evaporated. She could hear Russ fumbling in the dark for his flashlight. This was the perfect opportunity to speak without worrying about any nonverbal cues he threw her way.

"I wanted to thank you for being so understanding during this mess." She gulped in a breath and rushed on before he could try to change the subject.

“Seems to me the only way you could empathize so well is if you’ve been involved in a similar situation.”

“Yeah.” His tone was flat, devoid of all emotions.

“So someone died and you thought you should’ve been able to save them?”

“Yeah.”

She heard him tapping his light against his palm. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Sometimes talking helps.”

“Talked to the shrink the department insisted I see. Didn’t stop the nightmares or regret. So I’m done talking.” The finality in his tone made her want to stop but the darkness gave her courage to continue.

“I don’t know if you still believe in God, but He also listens.”

“Tried that too.”

Shut down again. She would offer an open-ended question in hopes he wouldn’t do it again. “And?”

“And He was there to bring me through the worst of it, but now I feel like I’m on my own.” His tone was thick with despair. “You mind turning on your flashlight? Mine’s dead.”

She reached for the flashlight on her duty belt and took this as his way of saying he’d closed the conversation, but as far as she was concerned, it wasn’t over. Maybe for the moment, but not forever. The ache in his voice ensured that she would continue trying to get him to open up and share what was eating away at him.

For now, she settled back and rode in silence as the truck made a few more stops before the final one at the school. Russ exited the truck, and she followed him into a dimly-lit bus garage the size of a large barn at the back of the school campus. Nikki was seated at a table on the far side of the room, playing cards with Micha. He had dark hair and a square jaw and seemed

intent on the game.

Micha caught sight of them and raised his eyes to the ceiling, letting out a long, low breath. Had Nikki been testing him? If Sydney knew her sister, she'd pushed his buttons all day long. When this was all over, Sydney would bake some cookies for him and the others as a small token of her thankfulness.

Nikki raced across the large space to Sydney. "What's going on? Why am I stuck out here? No one will tell me anything."

Sydney moved her sister into a secluded section of the room. Careful to keep her voice calm, she described the trashing of their duplex.

"Are you kidding me? Someone busted into our place?" Nikki's eyes welled with tears. "Did they take my computer? Please tell me they didn't take that."

"It wasn't a burglary. I got another text message. This guy is still looking for that same item."

Nikki's eyes crinkled, and she broke out in a rush of tears. Sydney pulled her into her arms, holding her tight and reveling in the closeness despite the sobbing. Since they'd been arguing for the past few months, she'd missed hugs from her sister. Maybe this terrible tragedy would be the start to a better relationship between them.

Nikki pulled back and sniffled. "You'll go with me to that place, right?"

The anguish in Nikki's eyes reminded Sydney of her sister's first day of kindergarten. In that situation, Sydney had needed to let her sister grow up, but tonight she could afford to baby her a bit.

"Of course I'll be there." She patted Nikki's shoulder. "But before we go we need to make a list of the things we want a deputy to get from the house."

Nikki swiped her forearm over her eyes, drying her tears on her sweatshirt sleeve. "Things, what things? How do I know what to bring if I don't know where we're going?"

She had a good question. One Sydney really couldn't answer. "Pretend

you're packing to spend the week at Emily's house."

Nikki's brow furrowed, and that animosity they'd shared of late returned. "What about Emily's party tonight? Can I still go?"

Sydney couldn't believe she was asking. "Only if this guy is caught by then."

"This is so, like, not fair." Nikki crossed her arms. "You're the meanest person ever."

Sydney didn't have a comeback, so she sighed. "Make the list, okay?"

"Fine."

So much for reconciliation.

Nikki went to the table and jotted down the essential items she'd need for the next few days. Sydney did the same, occasionally glancing at Russ. His back to her, he spoke with the Shadow Lake Survival team near an unmarked sedan. Unease over being stalked still fluttered in her stomach, but his confident stance never wavered. It spoke to his internal strength and leadership skills, even with his team.

She knew her training and limited experience should give her some confidence in keeping herself and Nikki alive. After all, she'd told Russ that often enough, but as Russ's brothers and team prepared to escort them out into the open, where the killer could lie in wait, doubt took hold again.

She should be trusting God as she'd done on the way over here. After all, He was all-powerful. He could cocoon them in a blanket of safety, but even with Russ's help, this man had tracked them down—each and every time.

What might the cost be if she didn't figure out what he wanted soon and get it to him?



Alert for trouble, Russ piloted the unmarked vehicle toward Valley View. Reid had gone ahead to make sure it was safe for their arrival, and after

loading the bags brought back by one of his deputies, Russ put a bulletproof vest on Nikki and settled her and Sydney on the floor in the backseat. Ryan rode shotgun, and Russ had departed the garage in a caravan of Shadow Lake Survival vehicles.

Now, near the outskirts of town, starting with the car in the rear, one by one the guys peeled off and sealed off the roads. Not that any cars had challenged them, but Russ couldn't be too careful.

"This is so lame," Nikki complained from the floor. "Can we sit up yet?"

He heard Sydney groan at her sister's continued surly tone. He stifled a similar response. At thirty-three, he didn't often feel old, but spending time with Nikki proved it had been a long time since his high school days. He'd forgotten how temperamental teenagers could be. Especially ones under stress who weren't getting their own way. Add in the fear of a killer stalking them, and Nikki's attitude was almost understandable.

Did Sydney remember when she'd been Nikki's age and had confidently gazed up into his eyes, declaring she'd love him forever? He was sure her memories were far different from his.

What he remembered most was the way she'd furrowed her brow, the silver ring curling through her eyebrow wiggling, when he'd told her he wasn't interested. Well, and if he was being totally honest, how her legs had looked so incredibly long below denim shorts as she'd stomped away from him.

His phone rang, startling him.

"Stupid," he muttered under his breath for letting memories distract him from the job at hand.

He glanced at caller ID to see if he wanted to take the call now or wait until Valley View. When he spotted Garber's name, he accepted it. "What's up?"

"Thought you'd want to know. The phone company got back to me, and the prepaid phone the texts are coming from doesn't have registration detail."

“Just as we expected. Any other news?”

“Yeah,” Garber said. “I had that talk with Eustis about Dixon’s computer. He denies having it. Said someone must’ve planted it at his house to frame him.”

Russ snorted. “He’s been watching too many cop shows on TV.”

Garber laughed. “Hopefully, the computer will tell us something.”

“We should have a chance to look at its files tonight. Keep me posted on any new developments.” Russ clicked off and relayed the news to Sydney, who offered no response.

Wondering what she was thinking, he made the turn onto Evergreen Resort’s driveway. Ryan’s fiancée, Mia, owned the property that sat next to Valley View. Very few people were aware of the lake road leading from Evergreen to Valley View. If someone had managed to tail them, which they hadn’t, they would think he was stopping at Evergreen.

The car rumbled over deep ruts on Evergreen’s unpaved driveway, bringing them to the lake road.

“Okay,” he called over his shoulder. “You can sit up now.”

In the mirror, he saw Sydney’s head pop up first, followed by her sister’s.

“What’re we doing at Evergreen?” Sydney asked.

He explained his plan.

“Good thinking,” she said.

He hated to admit it, but her sincere compliment warmed him like a blazing fire they often had in the winter at Valley View. He turned onto the property then swung the car as near to the big lodge as possible and parked.

“Ryan will stay here with you until I come back.” He made sure his tone brooked no argument, gave his brother a warning look to remain in the car, and climbed out.

He searched around the log lodge sitting in a cleared section of fir trees. Though he couldn’t see through the closed plantation shutters on the large windows, he knew his always dependable older brother waited for them.

Russ made a thorough sweep of the immediate area surrounding the building, finding everything in order. Not taking time to let memories of his childhood home distract him, he took the steps to the wraparound porch two at a time, opened the door, and called for Reid. His brother's footsteps came down the large staircase from the second floor and Reid appeared in the foyer.

"We all set?" Russ asked.

"We're clear," his brother answered.

"I'll bring them in." Russ returned to the car and opened the door. "Head straight inside."

Both women, slightly bulkier from the vests they wore, got out without arguing and Ryan led them toward the door. The quiet, minus the stirring of the massive spruce and fir trees surrounding them, raised Russ's alarms. More disturbing was Sydney's easy cooperation. Something was going on in that stubborn head. He dreaded what she might be planning.

By the time Russ returned to the porch, Ryan had stationed himself on one end of the porch, Reid on the other. Good. These areas were the most vulnerable for attack.

Reid's serious expression and alert eyes comforted Russ. It was good to have three guys with the agenda of keeping these women safe. And, Russ hated to admit it, two of the three guys knew what it was like to kill someone in the line of duty. He was seriously beginning to think it might come to that before this situation ended.

"Mind staying out here for now, Ryan?" Russ asked.

"You got it."

Russ jerked his head at the door, signaling for Reid to leave his post to enter the lodge. Once inside, with the door closed, Russ turned to his older brother.

"You remember Nikki." He gestured in Nikki's direction.

Reid's sober expression softened, and he wrapped an affectionate arm

around Nikki's shoulder. Since she helped save Jessie a few months back, Reid thought Nikki could do no wrong. "Good to see you again, kiddo."

Nikki looked up at him. "Where's Jessie?"

"At my parents' place."

"Is she coming home?"

Reid glanced at Russ then back at Nikki, his face apologetic. "Sorry. It's not a good idea for Jess to come over here right now."

Nikki glowered at Sydney. "I get it. I'd be a bad influence on her."

"What?" Reid asked.

She slipped out from under Reid's arm. "It's okay. I understand. I've been messing up."

"It's nothing like that. Jess is just a little kid. Even if we tell her to keep this a secret, she might let it slip."

"Right." Nikki's sullen tone said she didn't believe him.

Russ stepped closer to her and connected gazes. "I've been straight with you, right?"

"Yeah," she said, albeit reluctantly.

"Reid's telling you the truth. This doesn't have anything to do with you." He tipped his head. "Okay?"

She studied him. He tapped his foot as he waited for her agreement. For a reason he didn't want to identify, he wanted Sydney to see he'd connected with Nikki and that she trusted him.

"Okay," she whispered reluctantly.

"Good." Her agreement lightened the heavy load he'd been carrying. Didn't matter right now. No time for feeling good. Not when he had a job to do. He pointed at the sofa sitting far away from a window. "You two have a seat. We'll get your bags."

He turned to Reid. "I could use your help."

Russ could've gotten the bags himself, but he hoped for a chance to talk to Reid about Sydney's request for a separate safe house for Nikki.

Outside, he made sure the door latched behind them.

“Be right back,” he said to Ryan and followed his other brother down the stairs.

Reid locked eyes with him. “So there really *is* something going on between you and Sydney.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I thought you were a good cop, little brother. You’d have to be blind to miss the looks you two are sending each other.”

“Nothing’s going on with us.” Russ surged ahead and unlocked the trunk.

“You might not be acting on it, but your face gives you away.” Reid reached into the trunk for a tote bag. “Not a good thing when you’re charged with her protection.”

“Look.” Russ peered over his shoulder at his brother. “She might be attractive, and, yes, maybe I’m interested, but nothing is happening between us.”

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing once this is over, though. It’s time you started dating again.”

“Seriously? We’re not going to have this conversation, are we?”

Reid laughed. “You’re starting to turn into a real grinch. Someone needs to tell you to get over what happened and move on with your life.”

“I’m not doing this. Not now.” Russ went to the front seat and grabbed the drive holding the image of Dixon’s computer and phone and Eustis’s phone too, leaving Reid to close the trunk and lug both of the bags.

“Someday you’ll wake up and realize your job isn’t enough anymore, bro,” Reid called after him. “That you’ve wasted years when you could’ve been happy. With all that’s going on with Sydney, I’d think you’d understand how precious life is.”

Oh, he knew life was precious. So precious that despite Reid’s encouragement, Russ couldn’t forgive himself for failing to protect Willie. No point in letting Reid sidetrack him from the job of keeping Sydney alive.

She was a big enough distraction all on her own.

Sydney came down the stairs from making a security review and circled the room, checking the window locks. She was certain Reid had already made the rounds, but she needed something to do while the men were outside. Something other than worry about her little sister, who was already bored stiff, wandering aimlessly through the room, picking up books and magazines and dropping them when they didn't meet her interest.

Sydney resisted commenting on Nikki's behavior and settled on the sofa. She was failing her sister. Unlike Russ. He'd somehow discovered a way to connect with her. Sydney should be happy for someone getting through to Nikki, and she was. Everything helped, but Sydney wanted to be the one to break through with her. To rekindle their easy relationship of six months ago.

"Where's the TV?" Nikki asked.

Sydney looked around the room. "Doesn't look like there is one."

"Seriously? I bet that means there's no internet either." Nikki let out a torrent of air. "This is so lame. What am I going to do here?"

"You brought stuff to do, right?"

"Yeah, but I can't live without the internet." Nikki dropped onto the sofa, hitting hard and popping up the cushion next to Sydney.

"You could read."

"Read what?" Nikki stabbed a finger at the coffee table. "That Bible? As

if.”

Sydney let Nikki’s comment drop. She wouldn’t get into another argument with her sister, who’d also decided religion wasn’t her thing. Nikki believed in God, but she didn’t think she needed to go to church or youth group anymore.

The door whooshed open.

Sydney clamped her hand on her weapon and swiveled. She expected Russ and Reid, but it could be the killer.

Heart thumping, she watched the brothers enter. Reid set their bags near the stairs. Russ, after double-checking the deadbolt, put a portable hard drive on a small table in the corner.

Nikki picked at her fingernails. “This is so boring. Can I go to my room?”

Russ headed her way. “Let me cover a few game rules first.”

“Yay, rules.” Nikki crossed her arms.

“They’ll keep both of you safe if you follow them.” Russ lifted his index finger. “First, no going outside. At all. Ever.”

Nikki slumped deeper into the sofa.

“Second, stay away from windows. Keep them closed, blinds and curtains drawn at all times. Third, no phone calls, no texting, no internet.”

“What?” Nikki shot up. “Why can’t I talk to my friends?”

“Because you might accidentally say something that could give away our location.”

“I’m not a little kid like Jessie. I know how to keep a secret.”

“I need you to accept this, Nikki,” Sydney said, hoping Nikki wouldn’t continue to fight. “Not only for your safety, but mine and Kate’s too.”

“I can’t just ignore my friends. What am I going to tell them?”

“Send one text. Tell them you’ve gone out of town with Sydney, and you’ll talk to them when you get home.” Russ jerked his head at the door. “And of course, I don’t need to tell you to keep the door locked. Don’t open it to anyone but us.”

“Can I go to my room now?” Nikki snapped.

“After I secure the upstairs.”

“I already did that,” Reid and Sydney chimed in together.

“I’ll do it again.” Russ frowned and headed for the steps.

“This is going to be unbearable.” Nikki got up and flounced across the room to a leather chair.

“I would like you to give me your phone,” Russ said as he turned from the stairs.

Her eyes widened in horror. “But then I won’t even be able to listen to music. I gotta at least have my tunes.”

“If I leave it with you, do you promise not to call or text anyone? Or use the internet?”

“I promise.” She eyed Russ. “Trust me. I’m not a dummy, and I get why this is important. I just don’t like it.”

Russ smiled at her. “I know you’re not a dummy, and I also know you don’t want to put your sister in danger either.”

“Yeah, what you said.” She pulled out her phone and plugged in her earbuds.

She was being so rude and childish. This wasn’t the sweet, kind sister Sydney knew and prayed would return. But Sydney wouldn’t call her out on the behavior. She was a hormonal teenager after all, and her life had not only been upended, but threatened. She was lashing out in the only way she knew, and it was good for her to get it out or she might violate Russ’s rules and put everyone in danger.

Russ grabbed their belongings and climbed the stairs two at a time, the heavy bags not weighing him down.

Sydney had to admit she didn’t appreciate him not trusting her assessment of their safety, but then again, he didn’t trust his brother’s either, and she shouldn’t take it as an assessment of her abilities.

Reid perched on the far end of the sofa. “You don’t know much about

him, do you?”

She looked up at him. “Why do you say that?”

“If you did, his checking the upstairs when we’d cleared it wouldn’t bother you so much.”

“I’m not bothered.”

Reid laughed. “Tell that to someone who isn’t trained to observe body language.”

“Then yeah, I’m disappointed that he had to double-check.”

“It’s not that he doesn’t trust you.” Reid’s eyes sobered. “Believe me, I know. He trusts me, but he still had to follow up behind me.”

“Why?”

He looked up the stairs where Russ waited on the landing, and smiled, his fondness for his brother evident. “That’s something he needs to tell you about. I suggest you talk to him. Tell him how you feel.”

Russ started his descent, his brow tight with concentration. His gaze landed on her, and a flash of protectiveness flared in his eyes. She knew then and there that he would do anything—anything—to keep her safe. Just like she would do for Nikki.

Maybe Reid was right. Maybe this wasn’t about Russ not trusting her, and she should have that long talk with Russ. Maybe put her feelings out there too while she was at it. Maybe.

He glanced between them. “What’re you two up to?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked.

He gave Reid a pointed stare. Reid returned it with a satisfied smile. The interchange between brothers was quick, so quick she wasn’t sure she’d seen it, but the message was clear. Russ wanted Reid to stay out of his business. Reid had no intention of doing so.

Reid waved to get Nikki’s attention. “Let’s go to the den, and I’ll show you why I’m the Uno champ in our family.”

“Finally! Something to do.” She raced off, and Reid followed.

Eyes narrowed, Russ took a seat in a chair across from her. “What did Reid put you up to?”

“He didn’t put me up to anything. He just suggested I talk to you.” She tried to sound relaxed, but he clenched his jaw.

Great. She hadn’t managed it very well.

“What’s this about?” he asked.

She’d best just come out with it. “I know I’m a rookie, and I haven’t demonstrated much competence in the job.” She took a breath to go on.

“Not so. Your collar of Eustis will be talked about around here for some time.” He ended with a smile.

It felt like a ray of sunshine beaming at her, urging her to tell him how she felt. “It bothers me when you don’t trust my judgment. Like just now. I cleared the upstairs, and you couldn’t let it go at that. You had to double-check.”

The curve of his mouth flattened into a resolute slash. “That had nothing to do with you.”

“Then what’s going on?”

“Just a habit I picked up on the job.”

“So tell me about it. Maybe it’s a habit I need to embrace.”

He inhaled deeply and let out the air. “I need to remember you don’t ever give up.”

“Exactly. So save yourself some time.” She put a teasing tone into her voice to lighten the mood. “Tell me what’s going on.”

He took another breath. “When I was a rookie, my training officer searched a kid high on crack. He tossed him in the back of the car, and we headed for lockup. But my training officer missed a knife. The kid stabbed it through the screen. Sliced my shoulder. From that day on, even if my partner searched a suspect, I made it a habit to do a second search.”

“So that’s why you double-check everything?”

She expected him to nod and be done with the conversation, but his eyes

darkened, and a myriad of emotions charged across his face until indecision won out.

She'd never seen him indecisive about anything. Unease over what he hadn't said ground at her stomach. "Is there something about our killer that you're not telling me?"

"What? No...nothing like that." He got up, went to the kitchen and planted his hands on the butcher block countertop with his back to her.

She followed and laid a hand on his shoulder.

He spun, the same gut-wrenching pain he'd shown at the hospital lingered in his eyes.

Something had wounded him deeply, and it wasn't only the stab to his shoulder. It was something more serious, and she wanted to help. "What is it, Russ?"

He removed her hand and held it between his, turning it over and studying it for a long moment as if he was trying to come to a decision.

"Let's sit." He twined his fingers through hers and led her to the sofa and loosened his grip as if to let go.

She clung tighter to let him know that she would support him no matter what he said.

He pulled in another deep breath but didn't speak.

She squeezed his fingers to urge him to share.

"It was my son's birthday. Wilson—my partner at the time—and I arrested a murder suspect. It was almost time for our shift to end and arresting the guy meant tons of paperwork to complete. The job had kept me from way too many family events already, and I didn't want to miss Zach's party. So I skipped my usual second search."

He extricated his hand and lifted it to the back of his neck. "The suspect had another gun. Wilson missed it. When I hauled the suspect out of the cruiser, he'd managed to spring a handcuff and opened fire. He hit a kid. Willie Babcock. He was only six. He died in my arms."

The anguish oozed from his pores. That tragedy had occurred a few years ago, but the pain in his voice said he felt it as deeply as if it had happened yesterday.

“I’m so sorry, Russ. That must be hard to live with.” She laid a hand on his knee. “Now I understand why you’ve been so sympathetic about my mistake with Dixon.”

“I should have told you earlier. Maybe it could’ve helped you even more.”

“That’s okay. You’re telling me now.”

He jumped up again. Paced the room. It’d been hard for him to confide, but he’d shared a part of himself. That spoke volumes about his level of trusting her. She felt so close to him right now and wanted to show him how much this meant to her. Maybe how much he was starting to mean to her.

She went to him and met his gaze. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

He let his eyes settle on her face and didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. His expression said that he hadn’t told her the whole story. He was holding something back, something that troubled him as much as the loss of this child.

Something she wasn’t brave enough to probe deeper to find.



Russ didn’t like how he ended things with Sydney. She settled behind her computer with the hard drive holding Dixon’s computer image plugged into it. Even without telling her about his alcoholic past, he knew she’d seen something in his eyes that made her turn and walk away. Yet, she didn’t probe. Odd for her.

He thought she had feelings for him, but maybe not to the level he thought.

That was good. Right?

It dissipated the warm sense of homecoming he'd had when she'd sat next to him on the sofa and encouraged him to confide in her, replacing it with a hard knot in his stomach.

Well too bad if his gut ached. He didn't matter. Keeping Sydney alive did. Her earlier assessment that their suspect was more inclined to abduct her than kill her was spot on. Ryan had commitments he couldn't break and had to leave, so Russ ordered Baker to stand guard outside for the night while he and Reid staffed the inside.

If the killer got to her, he would torture her to gain the item he sought. When she couldn't produce it, he would likely end her life. But Russ wouldn't let him take her. He would personally stand guard outside her door.

He needed to be alert all night and went to the kitchen to start a pot of strong coffee. As he waited for it to brew, he looked over the rooms where he'd grown up. Nothing much had changed since his parents closed the resort and moved to town. Reid had kept the rustic décor and heavy leather furniture that gave the place a real cabin feel. He'd remodeled other parts of the property, but he'd left the main lodge alone and rented it only to special groups.

The whole family still gathered at times around the floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace in the family room, and on those days, Russ could almost believe his life would someday return to normal. Then he left the security of his family, faced the very real problems of his past, and wondered if he could ever live a normal life again.

Simple things, like the fun camaraderie between Reid and Nikki. As he waited for his coffee, the two returned from the family room complaining of hunger, pushed Russ out of the way, and heated frozen meals before plopping down at the table to eat and resume their Uno game.

Russ leaned against the counter, sipping his coffee and enjoying Nikki's laughter as she soundly trounced Reid. Sydney looked up with a smile and crossed over to stand next to Nikki. Gazing down at her sister, her face filled

with happiness.

Russ's not so much. His heart ached at the sight.

For a long time, he hadn't thought he needed such connections, but his time with Sydney was making him rethink it all. He could see himself at home with Zach and a woman like Sydney beaming down on him. When he'd let the bottle take over his life, he'd blown his chances at a future like this. Now, when he could be hoping for something with Sydney, the bottle stood between them too.

Let it go.

He poured a fresh cup of coffee before crossing the room to talk to Reid. His brother studied his face with the assessing eyes of an FBI agent.

"I hate to break this up, but can I talk to you in the den, bro?" Russ made sure his tone was lighthearted when he was anything but.

Reid slid the cards toward Sydney. "You might as well take my place." He ruffled Nikki's hair. "She's skunked me too many times."

"Oh, yeah." Nikki grinned. "And I'll do the same thing to you." She shot a dare at Sydney.

"We'll see about that." Sydney slid into the chair.

Russ led the way to the den and closed the door behind Reid, who settled into their dad's favorite leather chair.

Russ set his coffee on a table to cool and went to the window to peek between the closed blinds. He confirmed Baker stood alert outside before he took the chair opposite his brother.

"Stop worrying," Reid said. "We prepared for every contingency. We're as secure as can be."

"As *we can be* is the thing that's got me uneasy." He picked up his cup and watched the steam curl into the air.

"How'd your talk with Sydney go?"

"Thanks for that, by the way."

Reid's self-satisfied grin reminded Russ of their childhood battles.

“He evades the question,” Reid said. “Don’t tell me you didn’t tell her about your past?”

“I did.”

“But?”

“Just about Willie. Not how I handled it.”

“No way you’ll move forward with her until you tell her the whole story.”

He was right, of course, but Russ couldn’t move forward with Sydney. She was the last person he wanted to saddle with his past. Someone like her, who’d already been the victim of alcoholism, deserved a whole man. One who hadn’t treated his ex-wife badly and neglected his son.

And he didn’t want Reid to try to convince him that he was deserving. He’d only start to hope and then remember why he didn’t deserve it. “Sydney asked me to find a separate safe house for Nikki and Kate.”

“Nice change of subject.”

“Can you find a place?”

A raised eyebrow was Reid’s only comment on Russ’s continued evasion. “Makes more sense to combine resources and keep them together.”

“I agree, but she fears she will lead the killer to them, and he’ll abduct one of them to make her provide the item he desperately wants. She doesn’t even know what *it* is, and when she can’t give it to him, he’ll kill them.”

“She has a point.”

“Even if she didn’t, if we don’t comply with her wishes, she’ll worry about them. I’m not sure she won’t take off to keep them safe.” Images of her jutting out a chin at him came to mind, and Russ smiled. “She clearly has a mind of her own.”

“Just what you need, little brother, to get you back in the dating game. A woman who tests you all the way.”

“We’re talking about protection here, not dating.”

“I know. I’m just saying I like what this woman is doing to you.”

“Enough, all right? I’m serious—I don’t want to talk about this.” His

sharp tone would stop most people from arguing further, but not his brothers. Especially Reid. As the oldest, he saw himself as the family leader. “But I do want your help in locating a second safe house. Can you call in a favor and arrange a place or do I need to look on my own?”

Reid studied Russ for an uncomfortable length of time. Reminded him of when they were kids and Reid caught Russ misbehaving. Russ was older and wiser now. He wouldn’t squirm.

He stared back. “Go ahead. Say what you’re thinking.”

“Is it such a good idea for you to continue to head up this investigation? Even if you won’t admit it, it’s clear you’re getting too close to Sydney to make sound decisions.”

Russ wanted to tell Reid he could be objective and handle it, but was that true? Was his judgment impaired? Maybe she’d be better off under someone else’s supervision.

Maybe...but the thought of sending her where he couldn’t watch over her didn’t sit well. For now, she’d remain in his care. The second he determined he was a liability to her, then and only then would he recuse himself from the case.

“Just make the arrangements.” He left the room before Reid said anything else.

He went down the hallway to tell Sydney that Reid would work on locating another safe house. She was sitting on the floor at the coffee table, her injured knee stretched out, laughing hard as she slammed cards down in rapid-fire. Nikki’s laughter joined her sister’s.

Wow! Such fun. He couldn’t help but smile along with them. This was the way the two of them should get along all of the time.

Unfortunately, he was here to tell them that he’d be splitting them up. Once Sydney told her sister about the pending separation, he predicted an end to their good time.

“Uno.” Nikki tossed down a yellow card.

“Oh, yeah.” Sydney dropped a wild card on the pile and announced a color change to red.

Nikki slapped down a red three. “And that, my dear sister, is how the game is won.” Her lips curled in an impish grin reminiscent of Sydney’s younger days.

The memory of her face peering up at him with nothing but admiration and pent-up longing as a teen left him wishing he could go back to the time when life was innocent. Before he’d messed everything up.

Was Reid right? Had he totally crossed a line? Did he want her to look at him like she had when she was a lovestruck teen? If so, he’d have to work hard to keep from showing his emotions. He would never put her through that kind of crushing disappointment again.

Watching Russ from the corner of her eye, Sydney clicked through Dixon's computer files. She'd already reviewed Eustis's phone and located nothing to help. Calls and texts to Dixon, yes, but nothing to indicate any bad blood between them.

She'd had to work to concentrate and not miss anything. Since Russ had returned from his discussion with Reid, he'd openly watched her as if he wanted to talk, but seemed afraid to approach her.

So she'd made herself available by joining him in the kitchen and initiating a conversation, but he responded to her comments with one-word answers and seemed almost uncomfortable in her presence. Then when Nikki invited him to play Uno, he jumped at the chance.

Sydney wasn't certain why she even wanted to talk when things couldn't go anywhere with him, but his troubled expression made her want to help. So much that it frightened her. But he'd made it clear he didn't want her help.

She focused on the computer screen instead. She'd love to have internet access to see the sites Dixon had been looking at before his death, but that wasn't an option. An email icon sat on the desktop. The program allowed the user to download the emails from their provider's server and she should be able to see his messages even without the internet. That is if he downloaded them and didn't have it password-protected.

She clicked on the icon, and his email account opened.

“Yes.” She scrolled down the listing.

There were several emails addressed to Nikki’s friends inviting them to parties. She read message after message, learning nothing new except that Dixon had thoroughly enjoyed corrupting young girls, and that really wasn’t news.

Farther down the list, she opened an email to Nate Johnson, Dixon’s boss at the townhouses. Dixon had typed, *I have proof. You better believe I’ll blow the whistle if you don’t cooperate.*

She clicked on an attached picture showing an invoice for plumbing materials.

“How’s it going?” Russ asked.

Surprised to hear his voice so close, she looked up. He stood on the other side of the table, and Nikki had gone to the kitchen where the sound of popcorn popping broke the quiet.

Sydney pointed at the computer. “I’m in Dixon’s email. It looks like he’s blackmailing the construction foreman.”

“Let me see.” Russ came around the table and bent over her shoulder.

She clicked on the message and then the picture. “I don’t know what this invoice proves, but it must mean something to Johnson. If Dixon was blackmailing Johnson, it’s certainly motive to kill Dixon. Though I have to say, Johnson’s build is heavier than the suspect we saw at the murder scene.”

She leaned back and looked up at Russ. She could see tiny flecks of gold in his eyes as he studied her. She should move back but kept gazing into his eyes while imagining what it would be like to kiss him.

He suddenly gulped in air and moved to the other side of the table. Sitting, he let out a long breath. His phone pealed in a different ringtone than she’d heard before.

“My son.” A smile, joyous and tender, lit his face as he lifted the phone. “Hi, Zach.”

He talked with Zach about his day and what sounded like an upcoming weekend visit. She'd not heard him this cheerful since high school. Love for his son was evident in every word. As was a deep longing in his eyes—to see Zach more often? She felt a burning desire to know what happened in his marriage to separate him from a child he clearly adored. She couldn't imagine his pain. She wasn't Nikki's biological parent, but if someone took Nikki from her, she'd grieve as Russ must be doing.

He ended the call, his expression still warm and soft. “Sorry about that. I don't get to see Zach enough so when he calls, I drop whatever I'm doing.”

“How old is he?”

“Five going on twenty.” His smile broadened.

“You really miss him.”

“Yeah. A lot.” His voice caught.

“What happened, Russ?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “What do you mean?”

“With your ex-wife and son?”

His smile disappeared. He hung his head forward and rubbed the back of his neck. “It was my fault. Every bit of it.”

“You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I mean, it's none of my business.”

He looked up and peered at her for a long, silent moment as if he reconsidered speaking.

She gave him an encouraging smile.

He stared at his hands. “I couldn't handle Willie Babcock's death,” he said in a flat tone. “It ate at me every day. So I started going out after work with some of the guys. Drank a little too much. That helped me forget. But then I'd get up in the morning and there it was again. That awful, nagging guilt over costing a child his life. So I'd go out again that night. And the night after. Never drinking on the job because I could throw myself into locking up scumbags like the guy who shot Willie, but pretty much every other part of

my life until it became a real problem at home.”

She ached with compassion. “The child dying wasn’t your—”

“Don’t.” His head shot up. “Don’t say it wasn’t my fault. I know that up here.” He stabbed a finger at his temple. “But I can’t reconcile it in my heart. So I drank to forget. In the process, I let down the two people I cared about most. Amy and Zach.”

She understood. More than he could know. Dixon’s death had given her insight into his world. Yet she couldn’t imagine the pain of seeing a child gunned down, and she couldn’t imagine doing something to lose her family on top of it.

Before thinking it through, she went around the table, knelt in front of him, and took his hands in hers. “I can’t say anything to make you feel better. All I can say is I can’t imagine how much pain you were in.”

“I still am. I may have quit drinking, but the regret and pain over Willie’s death still haunts me.” He reversed their hands, turning hers over to study them. “Willie wasn’t a drug dealer like Dixon. He was an innocent boy with his whole life ahead of him.” His voice broke. “I think about Willie’s parents every day. Wonder how they’re doing and know that they hate me beyond belief.”

“Have you ever talked to them about it?” she asked softly.

“No, I couldn’t face them.”

“You need to.”

Sheer anguish contorted his face, and he shook his head.

“When this is over, I’ll go with you to see them if you’d like.”

“Why would you do that?” He searched her eyes.

“Because after what happened with Dixon, I have a small idea of what you must be going through. You shouldn’t spend the rest of your life tormented by something that wasn’t your fault. This could be the way to let it go.” She squeezed his hands.

“I wish it was that simple, but that’s only the half of it. I also let my ex-

wife and son down. I can never get that time back or undo the hurt I caused.”

“You’re a wonderful man, Russ. A fantastic boss. And from your phone call just now, I can see you’re a terrific father. You had a problem, but that doesn’t mean you should spend your whole life paying for it. You deserve to be happy.”

His eyebrows arched. “I never expected this. Not from you.”

“Expected what?”

“Understanding.”

“I know what it’s like to feel responsible for the loss of another person’s life, so how could I not understand what you’re going through?”

“You’ve been pretty outspoken about your mother’s problem with alcohol. I thought you’d feel the same way about me.”

Surprise hit her upside the head. She could see so clearly why Russ had turned to alcohol and even accept it. Accept him. He was simply trying to erase pain. She could even see that he deserved a second chance. But her mother?

Not her mother.

So why was it different? Why couldn’t she identify with her mother’s struggle?

Was it the cruel things she’d said? The harsh look in her eyes when she’d threatened to give Nikki away? Or the fact that she hadn’t cared enough to come after them when they took off for Aunt Lana’s house?

That Sydney couldn’t understand. Moving beyond the hurt would take forgiveness. Something she wasn’t sure she had the ability to offer.



Russ had said something to change the supportive look on Sydney’s face to one filled with the same gut-wrenching pain he’d felt all these years. Did bringing up her mother make her realize the full ramifications of his past?

Did it help her imagine the things he'd done to his family? The way he'd hurt people he loved?

She gave his hand a squeeze then went into the kitchen, passing Nikki, who'd tucked in her earbuds and carried the popcorn to the sofa, munching as if she hadn't recently eaten.

He was confused. Despite the anguish in Sydney's eyes, did the final squeeze mean she supported him? He had to know.

He followed her.

She opened the door to the fridge. "You want anything?"

He shook his head and settled on one of the wrought-iron bar stools he and his brothers had occupied so frequently growing up. She pulled out a cola then poured it over ice, droplets fizzing into the air.

She took a long drink and looked at him. "Have you asked Reid to find another place for Nikki and Kate?"

He was disappointed she'd changed the topic, but maybe she needed time to process his revelation. He would honor her choice and move on. "He's making the arrangements, but we'll hunker down here tonight and time the transfer tomorrow to coincide with Kate's release."

Sydney's focus drifted toward Nikki, who was playing solitaire now. "I hate to ruin Nikki's good mood. Maybe I should wait until morning to tell her."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? We both know how she'll react. It would be best to let her blow off some steam tonight, and hopefully she'll be more compliant tomorrow for the move."

"I guess you're right." She sighed. "I'll do it now, but be prepared for the fallout."

She trudged over to Nikki. He wanted to change the turmoil the sisters were going through.

"Let's go upstairs for a minute," she said to Nikki.

"But I'm having fun," Nikki whined.

Sydney peered down on her sister, a smile on her face, but her eyes were tight. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Okay, but I’m not going to bed this early.” Nikki held up the deck of cards to Russ. “I’ll be back to skunk you again.”

Russ grinned at her. She might have an attitude so big it was hard to see beyond, but he recognized it as the same determination Sydney had displayed in the old days. Sure, maybe Nikki had other issues to deal with, like a mother who didn’t want her, but with Sydney’s love and commitment to her sister, she would turn out to be a special woman, just like Sydney. A woman who deserved all the happiness in the world.

After they’d left the room, the void loomed large, and he had to keep busy. He went to her computer and studied the plumbing supply invoice.

What about this invoice would allow Dixon to blackmail Johnson?

Russ scanned the other email listings and located additional emails to Johnson, all with a similar tone and attachments, except a few of them also had pictures of the actual construction of the townhouses. Looked as if Johnson had violated building codes to save money. They needed a plumbing expert to look at these files and confirm.

Russ called Garber, who was working overtime to help bring this case to a close, and explained the situation. “Looks like Johnson was cutting corners, and Dixon found out about it. I’ll forward these emails to you. Contact the local building inspector. Bring him in ASAP to see if he can clarify the situation.”

“Will do,” Garber replied.

Russ transferred the files to his phone so he could send them to Garber using his phone service. He could actually use the WiFi. They’d told Nikki that they didn’t have internet, but Reid had just disconnected it while the place was being used as a safe house. No sense in tempting her.

As he sent the last message, Nikki stomped down the stairs and stormed past him, a sullen look on her face. Sydney had predicted this reaction from

her sister, but his big question was, how was Sydney handling it?

He imagined her sitting in her room, her face downcast. Maybe at the end of her rope. Before thinking things through, he charged up the stairs and went to her room.

Empty.

Unease tightened his gut. He lifted his weapon and eased down the hallway. Swung into each of the five bedrooms. Located Sydney asleep on his childhood bed, Bible splayed open on her stomach.

He lowered his weapon and hissed out a silent breath so he didn't wake her. He'd overreacted again.

She was the picture of innocence. He'd seen many sides of her, but not this one. Brash and outspoken in high school. Now tough and determined. Traits he could appreciate, but this sweetness emanating from her tugged hard at his heart.

He should walk away, but finding her in the room he grew up in made him linger. She seemed as if she belonged in the space where he'd spent the first eighteen years of life. As if she was part of the family. The family that had stood by him in his time of need.

Would Sydney stand by him, or after her history with her mom, would she run now that she knew the truth about him?

Run. Definitely run.

As should he—in the other direction.

With a surprisingly heavy heart, he backed out of the room and eased the door closed. He'd rushed upstairs to be her knight in shining armor, but she didn't need a knight to rescue her from the same despair he often felt. She had her faith. Something he should consider exploring more. Especially after seeing how it was helping her through this terrible mess.

In the kitchen, he grabbed another cup of coffee, but his legs were restless and he couldn't stand still or sit. He couldn't resist the urge to check on Nikki.

She was curled up in an overstuffed chair in the den with her phone clutched in her hand. She looked up and frowned. “If she sent you to talk to me, don’t bother. The only one I want to talk to is Emily.”

He couldn’t have her calling a friend. No telling what she’d say in this mood. Maybe he should try talking with her. She’d opened up to him once. She might do it again. If she did, it could make things easier for Sydney.

“If by *she* you mean Sydney, I haven’t talked to her.” Russ sipped his coffee and waited for Nikki to start the conversation.

“This is so lame. I can’t even call my friends.” She slammed her phone onto the arm of the chair and slouched down.

“I’m guessing your friends can’t talk to you even if you were allowed to call them. They probably lost a few privileges after being arrested for underage drinking.”

“Arresting them was so bogus. They weren’t hurting anyone.”

This wasn’t the direction that would gain her understanding, but now that the subject had come up, he had a responsibility to see it through.

He sat on the corner of the large mahogany desk. “I won’t lecture you on all the bad things drinking can do to your friends’ bodies, but you need to think about what would happen if they climbed behind the wheel.”

She jutted out her chin. “That’s why I was there. Drinking makes me sick so I’m the designated driver.”

“But you can’t always be there for them. Sydney won’t let you attend those parties.”

She flapped a hand in dismissal. “She might if she didn’t think drinking was such a big deal.”

“But you don’t think it’s a big deal?”

“Well, yeah, sure. I mean, it’s big enough to make our mom go all nutso. But not so big that we shouldn’t give her another chance.” She picked at a cuticle. “I want to go see her, but Syd loses it every time I say so. She won’t even talk about Mom. So why bother trying?”

Was this the real reason behind Nikki's rebellion? Experience told him if the mom hadn't sobered up, Sydney was making the right decision. And Nikki needed to know that.

"She's trying to protect you from getting hurt again," he said.

"As if." She rolled her eyes. "She's the only one who got hurt. She dragged me away from home when I was so young I don't remember anything."

"I'm sure Sydney's told you why she had to leave and take you with her."

"Not really. Just said our life got all jammed up with Mom, and we had to leave."

"And now you want to find out for yourself what your mother is like?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, so what if she has problems? She's my mother. I have a right to see her if I want to." Tears flooded in her eyes.

"When you had your talk the other night with Sydney, did you tell her that?"

She swiped an angry hand at the tears. "I tried to, but when I brought up the party to tell her I wasn't drinking, she got all preachy. She doesn't listen then so what was the point?" Nikki sighed. "She is, like, so hard to talk to."

"You still should've told her you weren't drinking to ease her mind."

"Why should she get to feel good when she makes my life miserable all the time? She thinks she knows everything. Well, she doesn't. She had a mom and a dad. I never did." She sniffed. "It's too late for my dad, but a whacked mom is better than no mom at all."

Russ let Nikki's pronouncement settle over him. Children really did need their parents. Even at Nikki's age. Thankfully, after he'd recovered, his ex-wife had given him the chance to reestablish a relationship with Zach. Their bond grew stronger every time they were together and he hoped for partial custody in the future.

If Sydney and Nikki's mom had recovered and was sorry for the way she'd treated them, she deserved the same chance. But with Sydney's feelings

still raw from her challenging upbringing, he doubted she'd see it that way.

Sydney flipped onto her side and sighed. She shouldn't have taken that nap. She was too wide awake to sleep. Not that she hadn't tried to fall asleep. She had. For three long hours, but the same impossible thoughts kept pummeling her. Thoughts about Russ as a recovering alcoholic. Nikki's argumentative behavior and wanting to see their mother on top of it all. Kate getting hurt and hospitalized. A man dying. A killer coming for her. Maybe coming for Kate and Nikki.

Was it her worry keeping her up or God trying to get her attention? He whispered to her on the good days when she was calm and collected and easily heard Him. But He used His megaphone on dark days when He seemed so far away. Was He shouting right now? Trying to tell her it would all be okay if she only trusted?

She might have a killer stalking them, but oddly enough, the area she seemed to be least trusting in was Nikki connecting with their mother. Should Sydney allow a visit?

Could it work out or would Nikki get hurt? Sydney just didn't know. Honestly, didn't know about any of it.

"Argh!" She ripped off the blankets and got up. On nights when she couldn't sleep, reading stilled her mind. That's what she'd do. Make a cup of tea and read.

Fearing she might have to act for her safety, she'd remained dressed, minus her vest. She simply slipped into her shoes and strapped on her duty belt. She wasn't going anywhere without her gun.

She tiptoed into the hallway, where Russ was seated in a plump chair blocking the top of the stairs. The moonlight filtered through an upper window, casting a long shadow over his face. Was he even awake? Aware that she'd left her room?

She wasn't surprised to find him there. He'd told her either he or Reid would sit guard up here, but after her emotional conversation with Russ, she didn't know how she felt about seeing him.

Hoping to ease past him, she approached.

"Something wrong?" He shot to his feet.

She stepped forward. "Couldn't sleep."

In the light now beaming directly on his face, his five-o'clock shadow darkened his jaw, giving him a dangerous, bad-boy appearance. His sleepy yet interested gaze roamed her from head to toe and kicked up her heart rate.

From all her recent thoughts about him, she was probably imagining this interest. "I'm going to make some tea. You want some?"

"Sure."

Now, why had she asked him to join her? That was just plain asking for trouble. She jogged down to the kitchen, hearing his soft footfalls behind her, allowing her time to control her emotions.

How could a man who was wrong for her in every way still make her heart beat faster? So what if she was physically attracted to him? Didn't mean she'd act on it. Unfortunately, her feelings went deeper than that. She was drawn to his kindness, his strength, his sensitivity to her needs. And that was so much harder to ignore.

She filled mugs with water from the tap and started the microwave. Picking up a basket with assorted teas, she turned as Russ slid onto a stool at the island.

She set the basket in front of him. “What kind do you want?”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I rarely drink tea, so you pick for me.”

“Do you want me to make something else?”

“This is fine.” His eyes lingered on her face, almost like a caress.

She hadn’t been wrong. He did seem to feel the same attraction. Despite knowing they could never be together, she liked the admiration she saw in his eyes. Liked it a lot. But she wouldn’t spend any more time reveling in it.

She averted her eyes and dug through the basket for packets of chamomile. Chamomile relaxed and promoted sleep, but with the emotions flowing between them, no amount of tea would make either one of them sleepy.

The microwave beeped. She retrieved the mugs and settled one bag into a cup before sliding it across the island. She fixed hers and prepared to head to the den and away from those smoldering eyes.

He cupped his mug. “Since you can’t sleep, maybe you’d like to hear about the conversation I had with Nikki earlier tonight.”

So much for retreating to the den. “Once upon a time when I had a great relationship with her, I’d have jumped at the chance to hear what she had to say.”

“But now?”

“Now I don’t know.” Sydney sighed. “Some days I wish I could just be her sister. Not have to deal with the responsibility of raising her.”

“I can’t imagine how you do it. I mean, teenage girls bring so much drama. I couldn’t handle something like that on my own all the time.”

She felt as if he’d jerked the rug out from under her. Just what she needed—a reminder that he didn’t want to have anything to do with a woman who had the responsibility of a teenage girl.

But she needed to know what was going on in Nikki’s head. “So go ahead. Tell me what she said.”

“Okay, but promise me you’ll hear the whole story before going off on

me.”

This didn’t sound good, but she couldn’t avoid the truth. “I’ll do my best.”

“Well, the good news is that she doesn’t like to drink. Said it makes her barf.”

This *was* good news. “So why keep going to parties, then?”

“She’s the designated driver. Says she can’t stop her friends from partying, and she wants to keep them safe.”

“So I’ve been on her case about drinking for nothing.”

“Looks like it.”

Sydney ran a hand through her hair, combing strands that had tangled while she’d tossed in bed. Maybe this would be the start of untangling her problems with Nikki, as well. “She must really be mad at me.”

“Pretty much.”

“So why didn’t she tell me that?” she asked.

“She said you overreact whenever alcohol is mentioned.”

Sydney didn’t even have to think about whether she was guilty of doing that. When it came to her mother, Sydney was the queen of overreaction. “I just don’t want Nikki to turn out like our mom.”

“Looks like that won’t happen, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. At least for now.” The first real relief she’d felt in months lifted a bit of weight from her shoulders, and she offered a quick prayer of thanks. “You said this was the good news. What’s the bad?”

“I don’t know if it’s so much bad news as something you won’t want to hear.” He paused.

His cryptic method of breaking the news left her antsy. “Tell me already.”

“Nikki wants to have a relationship with your mother.”

“We’ve already talked about this. I told her it wasn’t an option. It never can be while I’m responsible for her.” Sydney packed her words with vehemence.

Russ pulled back as if she'd slapped him. "Don't you want to think about this before taking such a rigid stance?"

"Absolutely not. No good will come of letting that woman into our lives."

"If you don't want to lose Nikki, you need to lighten up and listen to how important this is to her."

"How can I lighten up? Our mother wanted to give Nikki away. Discard her." She couldn't meet his eyes because how could he possibly understand? How could anyone who hadn't lived it understand? "And I can't tell her that."

"That was likely the alcohol talking," he reminded her.

The days and nights of her mother's drunken behavior played like a video in Sydney's mind. "You weren't there, Russ." As the pain resurfaced, she lowered her voice and looked at him. "You didn't see her eyes. Hear the conviction in her voice."

"But I have been there." He winced. "When you're under the influence of alcohol, you do and say things you'd never do sober."

"So I should excuse her, then?"

"Excuse? No. Forgive? Maybe." Russ leaned back and raised his hands as if weighing her options. "Nikki deserves to find out for herself how she feels about your mother. If you don't let them meet, she may come to resent you. Then where will you be?"

Sydney heard the logic in his words and believed he could be right, but still couldn't fathom letting Nikki see the woman who'd wanted nothing to do with them for so many years.

"I'm sorry, but I can't talk about this right now. Especially not with someone who has the same perspective as my mother."

Sydney grabbed her mug and headed toward the den. She couldn't let their mother anywhere near Nikki. She would only be a bad influence.

She shuffled across the wood floor, footsteps echoing down the long hall, giving sound to her frustration. Russ was sure to think she was mad at him,

but she wasn't. She was upset over the situation.

Well, maybe she *was* mad at him. Mad that the man she'd come to care for was in the same league as the mother who had wanted to throw her and her sister to the curb like trash.



Russ turned his untouched cup of tea on the countertop. Too bad Sydney wasn't willing to continue their conversation, but she'd made it clear that his past wouldn't allow her to trust him. Maybe she was right. Maybe his intense desire for her to accept him skewed his perception. He was tempted to head after her and tell her how he felt. He got to his feet when a scraping noise from the porch grabbed his attention.

His senses went on high alert. He focused on the floor-to-ceiling windows covered with plantation shutters. A fluid shadow seeped through the slats.

Someone was on the porch. Moving stealthily. Heading in Sydney's direction.

He whipped his weapon from the holster and called Baker on his mic.

Baker didn't respond.

Russ tried again—no response.

How had he found them again?

He raised his gun and raced toward the den. The room contained a door to the porch, giving the killer easy access. Russ wanted to shout at Sydney to take cover, but if the intruder didn't know her location, Russ would draw attention to her. Better to keep quiet and move faster than the intruder.

Russ shoved open the door and quickly scanned the room. Sydney sat facing away from him, her back to the exterior door.

He flipped off the overhead light.

"Hey." She shifted to face him.

"Get down," he said in a low, warning tone as he charged toward her and

turned off the reading lamp. “On the floor.”

She dove for cover. He landed behind her, wrapped an arm around her waist and rolled until he wedged his body between her and the door. “There’s someone on the porch.”

“Nikki.” She tried to rise.

“Reid’s with her.” Russ clamped his free arm tighter. “We need to concentrate on getting out of this room safely, then we can check on her.”

Sydney’s body relaxed under his arm. She wasn’t wearing her vest. She’d counted on him to protect her, and he’d let his guard down. If he were a swearing man, he’d issue a curse so loud they’d hear him in town. But that wouldn’t do either of them any good. He had to keep his head. Assess the threat.

He let her go and flipped to check the exterior door flanked by two windows with the similar shutters to the family room. No movement. Maybe he’d overreacted. Wouldn’t be the first time an animal came onto the porch in search of food. But an animal wouldn’t have taken Baker out.

The room was dark, but Russ knew every inch of it. He could still smell the tobacco from the pipe his father smoked after dinner and visualize the walls lined with bookshelves overflowing with books. If he and Sydney fled, they would have a straight shot to the door, but there was nothing to protect them from a bullet on the way.

Sydney moved behind him, turning to face the same direction.

“I don’t see anything,” she whispered, her breath warming his neck.

“We’ll wait a few minutes to be sure.”

“What exactly did you see?” she asked.

“A shadow moving past the family room window headed this way.”

“He could’ve already passed us on the way to the back of the house and the other set of stairs. He could be heading for Nikki.” Sydney rose.

“Wait. We’ll go together.” Crouching, he led her by the hand into the hallway. He stopped and listened. A porch board creaked. “He’s still on the

porch.”

“There could be two of them. We still need to make sure Nikki’s okay.” She sent a darting gaze around the space.

“It’s too dangerous to go through the family room. I’ll call Reid.” He eased out his phone, and Reid answered right away. “We may have a breach. Check on Nikki.”

“On it,” Reid replied.

“There’s no one better than Reid to protect her.” *Except me.* Russ set his phone to vibrate in case Reid called back. No way he wanted to alert the intruder. Then he dialed his office to request assistance.

He explained the situation to dispatch. A window in the den shattered. The shutters flew open. Something thudded to the floor. Not a body, something smaller.

“I need someone here now!” he whispered into the phone.

He reached for Sydney’s hand. “Let’s move.”

Using his body as a shield, he pushed her down the hallway. Near the end, she bolted toward the family room, obviously heading for the stairs to check on Nikki.

He grabbed her arm. “Reid will handle things upstairs. I need you to do as I say now.”

“But Nikki...”

“No buts, Syd. We’ll wait down here.” He directed her to a small bathroom under the stairs. He didn’t like the situation. Not one bit. They were sitting ducks, but this was the best option. He’d like to take a defensive stance in the hallway, but he was certain Sydney wouldn’t stay inside the bathroom alone.

“Now what?” she asked.

“We update Reid, then keep quiet so it takes longer to locate us. Then we wait for backup.” Hoping to hear the wail of sirens soon, Russ made a quick call to Reid. Would be good if Reid could back them up, but he had his hands

full monitoring two staircases leading to Nikki.

Time ticked by in slow increments. The only sound Russ heard was blood pounding through his head and Sydney's occasional deep breathing followed by air hissing out.

He could understand her feelings. If Zach were upstairs, nothing, not even another officer guarding the door, would make him settle down and wait it out. But thankfully, Zach wasn't upstairs, otherwise Russ wouldn't be able to focus on this latest intrusion and keep Sydney alive.

Sydney held her weapon at the ready and tried to calm her breathing, but the more she thought about the in-and-out process, the harder it was to do. The room seemed to close in on her, and she felt light-headed. What kind of officer was she if this incident made her go faint?

C'mon, Sydney. Get a grip.

She took a deep, cleansing breath, but the wooziness persisted. She'd already prayed, but obviously she wasn't trusting God to care for them.

Please let me trust in Your protection.

As if God thought she needed a sign to help her through this, the wail of sirens curled through the air. They'd never sounded so good to Sydney. She hated to admit it, but even though she wanted to trust God, she'd been certain the intruder would kill Russ or Nikki to get to her. She didn't want to die, but she'd give up her life for them.

She stayed in her spot, listening as Russ phoned dispatch and had the call routed to the approaching officer. He quickly updated him on the situation.

"We'll stay put until you give us the all-clear." He clicked off then phoned Reid and gave him the same information.

Sydney relaxed a bit, but they weren't out of the woods yet. The intruder could still be in the house, hoping to take one of them hostage as a means of escape. Russ's call could've alerted him to their location, but hopefully he'd

taken off after hearing the sirens.

Additional sirens joined the lone wail. *Good.* This was what they needed. A show of force.

Cars squealed to a stop outside followed by footfalls pounding up the porch steps. Floorboards creaked through the house, the word “clear” being called out. When fingers of light crept under the door and brightened their cave, Russ turned to her.

“You okay?” The tenderness in his voice melted her heart.

“I will be.” Her voice shook as a shiver took hold of her body. All the fear she’d been suppressing reverberated through her tone.

He sucked in air and holstered his weapon before crossing over and pulling her to him. Still holding her weapon, she relaxed against his broad chest and wrapped her free arm around his waist. As she inhaled his clean scent, residual fear hovering near the surface evaporated.

She was safe in his arms. He would never hurt her. At least not intentionally.

His arms loosened. She leaned back to look up at him in a shaft of light. The warmth in his eyes left her breathless. *Oh wow. He cared.* Deeply if she was reading him right.

The sweet little smirk that she couldn’t resist crossed his face. “If I’m going to keep you safe, you need to not question my every move.”

She’d expected anger and a harsh tone, but the only thing he telegraphed was the sincere desire to protect her, taking away all of her usual defenses.

“I want to trust you.” She let herself linger on his eyes. “But when it comes to Nikki, I...” Strong, almost primal, emotions took away the rest of her sentence.

He lifted a hand and ran his fingers tenderly along her cheek. “I understand. I do. Just promise me you’ll try.”

“I will.”

Their eyes locked. His tender gaze overpowered the sensible impulse to

push him away. His head dipped closer. He was going to kiss her. A wave of happiness eased out all residual fear. Warm and tender, his lips claimed hers. She clutched the back of his shirt. Lost her breath again.

She released the fabric and cupped her fingers around the back of his neck to draw him closer.

Her heart swam with emotions. Foreign. She'd never felt this way before. Sure she'd been kissed, but never kissed like this. A kiss that took her entire being and transported her to a new level of emotions.

She lost all common sense. Slid her fingers into his hair and tightened her hold.

With a groan, he lifted his head.

No. Please no. Don't break contact. She inhaled air to cool her emotions. She wanted him to kiss her again and could see the same longing on his face.

"All clear, Sheriff." A deep voice from the other side of the door placed a spotlight on all that was wrong with kissing this man.

Unspoken emotions traveled between them. She had to resist. She dropped her hand and took a few steps back. Russ didn't move, then suddenly turned to unlock the door. The light flooded in, ending a special moment that never should've happened.

"You find Baker?" Russ's voice was husky but all business now.

Sydney recognized Deputy Olson, who nodded at her.

"Yeah," Olson answered. "The suspect knocked him out. He'll be fine."

Relief flooded Russ's face. "Bring me up to speed on what went down out here."

"A bomb was tossed through the den window," Olson said.

Russ's hand dropped to his sidearm. "Then we need to evacuate."

"It's okay. Chief Krueger was in the area and responded to the call out too. He checked it out. Said it was fake. Made of putty, not C4."

Sydney was rarely glad to see Krueger in the field, but she was glad of it now. He had army munitions expertise. The man told anyone who would

listen how he'd defused most every type of bomb, and his expertise was invaluable for a situation like this.

"Have him remove it from the premises," Russ said.

"You got it." Olson took off down the hallway.

Sydney's phone chimed, and she jumped. The text was likely from the killer, bragging about his bomb, and she didn't want to wake up her screen.

"You want me to look at it first?" Russ asked.

She shook her head and thumbed to the message. Russ leaned over her shoulder.

You can't hide from me, Officer Tucker. I'm running out of patience. I suggest you give me what I want or the next time the bomb will be real.

She looked over her shoulder at Russ. "This is escalating out of control. We have to figure out how he keeps learning my location."

Russ's attention went to the far side of the foyer, where Nikki jogged down the stairs. "We'll talk about that later. Nikki needs you right now."

Eyes wide as a frightened doe's, Nikki ran for her and flung herself into Sydney's arms.

Sydney clutched her and rested her chin on Nikki's soft hair.

Reid followed down the stairs at a slower pace, eyes tight with worry. He jerked his head toward the hallway, signaling for Russ to follow. "A minute of your time."

As they walked away, Sydney peered over Nikki's shoulder, feeling somewhat helpless without Russ. A feeling that unsettled her even more as she was a police officer who prided herself in being in control in situations like this and she'd totally lost it.

Nikki eased back and looked up at Sydney. "You won't send me away by myself now, will you?"

"I have to think before making any decision." Sydney stroked her sister's back as she'd done during her childhood nightmares.

She trembled. Violently. Sydney's heart creased. Her stomach clenched.

Much like the day Sydney had fled with Nikki from their mother. On that day, Sydney promised herself that she'd never let her sister experience such pain again. Sydney didn't want to let this child out of her sight, much less send her to her own safe house, but she might have to for Nikki's own safety. Never mind how Sydney felt about it.

She conjured up the strength that had allowed her to flee their mother.

Sydney had failed on her promise tonight. She couldn't do it again or the consequences could be deadly. This maniac wanted something from Sydney, and Nikki didn't have to get hurt in the process. Nikki would go to the safe house alone as planned, but not tomorrow. Sydney would insist she go tonight. Now. As soon as it could be arranged.

Intent on telling Russ and Reid to move up the arrangements, she looked toward them. The brothers' heads were pressed together, their postures rigid. She was sure they were already discussing changes that this latest intrusion warranted. Now that the killer had breached the safe house, they probably wanted to take Sydney with them too.

Russ caught her gaze, telegraphing the seriousness of the situation. She didn't need him to convey their dire straits. She'd put too many lives in danger. These two fine men had risked their lives to keep her and Nikki safe. She owed them both so much. And she owed it to them and Nikki to end this thing right now...

If she could.



The chaos grew exponentially as the Shadow Lake Survival team arrived and swarmed like ants through the rooms. Sydney kept her cool, but the activity grew too taxing for Nikki, so Sydney sent her sister upstairs to pack. With Nikki out of the room, now was the time to tell Russ that even if he wanted her to go away with Nikki, she wouldn't be leaving.

She approached him as he talked with Reid. “I’m sure the two of you are planning to send me off with Nikki, but I’m staying here.”

Russ firmed his stance. “No way.”

“This attack proves Nikki needs to be as far from me as possible.”

Russ’s jaw clenched.

She knew he wouldn’t budge no matter what she said, so she focused on Reid. “If you and Jessie were in this situation, what would you do?”

“If I was thinking rationally, which history has proven I don’t do when it involves my child in danger, I’d like to think I’d send her away.” Reid offered Russ an apologetic glance.

“And you’d stay here like a sitting duck?” Russ’s voice rose.

“No, I wouldn’t sit around. I’d bait the guy into showing himself.”

Russ shot Reid an irritated glare. “Don’t even think of doing that, Syd.”

“Me?” she said, hoping her tone didn’t betray the plan forming in her mind.

“See what you’ve done, man?” Russ said to Reid.

Reid chuckled. “Her guilty expression says she’d already thought of doing something like that.”

She pressed on before Russ chimed in with some crazy demand. “So we’re agreed, then? Nikki will leave tonight, and I’ll stay here.”

“No, we’re not agreed.” Russ huffed out a breath.

Sydney wouldn’t let it stop her. “I don’t think there’s any way you can make me go.”

He pierced her with a sharp stare. “You’re right—I can’t make you go. But I won’t let you stay at the lodge. We’ll find another place.”

“And then what? Put someone else in danger too? No, thanks.” Her tone was as pointed as his stare.

Reid stepped between them. “You’re both too close to the situation.” He clamped a hand on Russ’s shoulder. “When Jessie was kidnapped, you kept me from doing something dumb. I’ll do the same thing for you. As of this

moment, I'm in charge."

"But—" Russ and Sydney both responded.

"No buts." Reid's tone was firm. "Give me a few minutes to confer with the team, and I'll get back to you with a plan."

He walked away, and Sydney helplessly watched. She didn't know what he would come up with, but no matter his plan, she'd move forward with hers. Even if Russ continued to watch her as if he'd like to lock her up and throw away the key.

"We need to talk." He directed her to the side of the room and out of the chaos. "You can't just go off on your own and bait this guy. He's proven how capable he is. Once he knows you don't have what he's looking for, he'll kill you."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But at least he won't hurt anyone else I care about."

"We're moving Nikki and Kate to Portland. They'll be safe there, and he can't hurt them," he reminded her.

Not good enough. "What about you? How are you going to stop him from hurting you?"

He blinked at her. "Are you saying you care about me?"

Suddenly feeling shy, she stared at her feet. "I would think after that kiss, it would be obvious."

"I feel the same way." He slipped a finger under her chin and lifted her head. "That's why I can't let you do this. You may think baiting the killer will keep him away from me, but it won't. I'll do everything within my power to protect you and that means not leaving your side. So if you do this, I'll be more exposed than if we were hunkered down in a safe house."

"I don't know, Russ..."

"I've been in law enforcement longer than you. Trust me to do the right thing."

Could she trust him? Everyone she'd ever cared about had let her down. She'd always had to take over. Be in control and take care of herself and

Nikki. So now what did she do?

He moved closer. “Syd?”

She could see the pain of her indecision lodged in his eyes, but she couldn’t blindly let someone take over caring for her and Nikki. Yet she didn’t want to hurt Russ.

Seeking answers, she looked around and caught Reid’s attention. He finished his conversation and crossed the room to them, buying her time from answering.

“We’re all set,” he said. “Nikki will go to Portland as planned. Russ and I’ll transport you to another safe house.”

“I won’t put anyone else in danger, Reid.”

He waved a hand. “No need to worry about it. We’re going to Claudia Umber’s house. She’s the former assistant special agent in charge of the Portland office. She retired a few years ago and moved out here. She might be retired, but she’s still sharper than any agent I know. No one, and I mean no one, can get the best of her.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Russ trained his focus on Sydney.

“Fine,” Sydney said. She’d go along with them. If the arrangements endangered anyone, then she could go to Plan B.

“Now, if you’ll bring Nikki up to speed.” Reid glanced at Nikki sitting on the sofa with her backpack under her knees. “We’ll get this transfer underway.”

“Do you want help telling her you won’t be going with her?” Russ asked. “She seems to trust me. I’ll do my best to make sure this doesn’t traumatize her.”

Sydney peered into his eyes. Eyes that were beginning to make her do things that she normally wouldn’t consider.

“I promise not to say a word unless you ask me to.” His sincere desire to help was written all over his face.

Who was she to say no if it could help Nikki? It wasn’t as if Sydney was

letting him into their lives or anything like that. Just accepting help for now.
“Okay, thank you.”

Sydney sat next to Nikki, and Russ squatted at the end of the sofa.

Sydney wrapped an arm around her sister’s shoulder. “Ready to go?”

Nikki nodded. “Where’s your stuff?”

“As much as I want to go with you, I won’t be able to.” Sydney squeezed Nikki’s shoulder.

She gaped at Sydney. “Why not?”

Sydney explained the logic, sticking to the facts and trying her best to sound optimistic about it.

“I don’t care.” Nikki grabbed Sydney’s hand. “I want you to come with me.”

Sydney patted her hand. “It’ll be better for you if I don’t.”

“No, it won’t!” Nikki jerked her hand free and jumped to her feet.

Hoping Nikki would process the info and come to realize it was the best decision, Sydney let her sister pace and fume as she sorted out her thoughts.

She suddenly spun on Sydney. “Don’t worry. I get it. You’d rather stay here and play cops. It’s always about your job. Or the neighbors. Or you. Anybody but me.” She crossed her arms. “It’s never about me.”

Sydney could barely stand the look of misery on her sister’s face. She wanted to comfort her. Desperately. But then she was afraid she’d give in and agree to go with her to the safe house.

To keep from reaching out to Nikki, Sydney clasped her hands together in her lap. “This *is* about you, Nikki. I’m doing what I think is best for you.”

“Right.” Nikki stared at her. “Abandoning me is best for me.”

At a loss of what to say next, Sydney looked to Russ for help.

He looked up at Nikki. “Sometimes it’s best for us to stay away from the people we care about.”

Sydney could hear pain in Russ’s tone, but Nikki shrugged. “I expected you to be on *her* side.”

“I’m not on anyone’s side. I’m telling you the truth.” He lifted her chin with his finger as he’d done with Sydney a few moments ago. She could still feel the imprint of that finger. Still wished she’d been able to look into his eyes and trust him, as Nikki seemed to be doing.

“I have a son,” Russ went on. “He’s five, but I haven’t lived with him for a few years.”

Nikki grimaced. “Seriously? That’s so lame.”

Russ cringed. “You’re right. It is lame. But at the time I left him, I was in no position to be a good father.”

“Seems like you’d be a good dad to me.”

Russ smiled. “I think I am. Today. But back then, I got into drinking and messed everything up.”

“Like my mom.”

“Yeah, like your mom.”

“But she didn’t ditch us.”

Russ flinched, but the resolve remained on his face. “I didn’t ditch Zach, either. I was drunk and feeling sorry for myself all the time. How could I stay around him when I didn’t want him to learn to do the same thing? I loved him too much for that. So I left.” He sighed. “Your sister is doing the same thing. She cares too much about you to let you stay in this dangerous situation.”

Nikki seemed to ponder his words. “You were really a drunk, huh?”

Sydney almost laughed with relief that Nikki was now more interested in Russ being an alcoholic instead of the safe-house assignments.

“One of the worst.” Russ let his eyes settle on Sydney’s face. “So bad my wife divorced me. For a while I didn’t get to see my son at all, and now I only get to see him every other week.”

Sydney waited for disgust to churn through her stomach. It didn’t come. He’d faced his problem and recovered from it. She respected him more.

Nikki shook her head. “Just can’t see you drinking. You’re so uptight and Mister Lawman now.” Her tone had lightened and was almost taunting.

His face didn't break in laughter. "I'd like to think I was too tough to let alcohol take over, but it can happen to anyone whose foundation is shaken badly enough and doesn't know how to deal with the problem the right way."

Willie's death had affected Russ so much that he'd drowned his pain in a bottle. The same thing had happened to her mother—her father leaving had cut her mother to the quick and she'd sunk into despair.

Had Sydney been fair to their mother? If she'd fallen into depression instead of a drunken state, would Sydney have been more sympathetic? Should she reconsider her stance on their mother if she'd truly quit drinking as Russ had?

Reid rejoined them. "So are we ready to go?"

Thoughts of anything other than the madman chasing her vanished. As cunning as their foe was turning out to be, she had to keep her head in the game or the consequences could be fatal.

Sydney peered out the living room window of Claudia's rustic log home. The one-story building sat secluded in a dense forest of tall trees at the end of a long gravel driveway. Heavy fog clung to the ground, refusing to clear and let the first fingers of morning sun break through.

Sydney had kept vigil at the window off and on, watching as dawn had come and gone along with the morning, ticking past in slow increments, her inability to sit and do nothing sending her stir-crazy. Not that Claudia hadn't been a gracious host. Quite the contrary. Sydney wished she'd met her under different circumstances and could talk with the older woman about her experience in law enforcement. And she wished she hadn't put her or the Maddox brothers in danger.

Reid seemed tense too as he paced at the end of the driveway, but Russ stood strong on the porch. The main drive was the only entrance onto the property, so Sydney felt confident that even if the killer figured out their new location, he wouldn't get past Reid. Problem was what he might do to Reid.

"You shouldn't be by the window," Claudia said, coming up behind her. Tall, nearly six feet, and thin with silvery hair styled in a buzz cut, the woman commanded respect simply by the way she carried herself.

"For some reason, I feel claustrophobic here." Sydney let the drapes fall over the picture window.

“Probably because you want to be out there hunting down the killer before he hurts someone you care about.”

“Did Russ tell you that?”

“Didn’t have to. I’ve seen it on your face all morning.”

Could she also see Sydney’s feelings for Russ, or was she hiding those well enough?

“Piece of advice?” Claudia offered.

“Sure.”

“Stop worrying. It won’t change anything.”

“Easy to say, so hard to do.” Sydney had tried to put her trust in God, but even with everyone safe for now, she’d failed.

“I hear you, but listen to an old chick like me. The older you get, the more you realize what a waste of time it is. Whatever’s going to happen, happens.” She went to the hook by the door and retrieved a sheepskin jacket. “I’m going out to spell Russ and then Reid so they can grab some lunch and shake off the cold. I left sandwiches for you all in the refrigerator.” She shrugged on the jacket. “I know you want this to end, and you think you’re putting us all in danger, but don’t do anything foolish while I’m gone.”

When the door closed behind her, Sydney went to a leather club chair in front of the tall fireplace. She purposefully positioned her back to the door. A real no-no in the police world—always face the door so you can see any threat coming your way—but the threat she feared right now would wound her heart, not kill her.

The door creaked open, and Russ’s booted feet thumped across the wood floor to the kitchen. After the kiss and her admission of caring about him, she didn’t know what to say if he came over. Whenever he looked at her with eyes all tender and warm, she wanted nothing more than to pursue a relationship with him. Not that she could give in to her feelings. She still had Nikki to think about.

At least her sister was safe for now. She’d arrived in Portland and gone

straight to bed last night.

And Kate was safe too. The killer hadn't gone after her. But during the night, she started seeing double, so the doctor was keeping her at the hospital to determine if the symptom was due to the head injury or an MS flare-up.

"Everything okay in here?" Russ asked from behind, startling her.

She twisted on her seat.

He held a steaming mug of coffee. He fixed his attention on her, and her resolve to stay away from him slipped.

"Everything's fine."

"Really? Claudia said you're feeling a little claustrophobic."

"It'll pass."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're not planning anything foolish, are you?"

"No. I'll sit tight for now."

His phone rang, and he set his mug on the table before lifting the phone. "What is it, Garber?" He listened intently. "When? Where?" A spark flared in his eyes as he cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. "We may have the murder weapon."

Excitement propelled Sydney to her feet as Russ discussed ballistics with Garber. He smiled at her, and she caught his enthusiasm. This could be the big break they needed.

"Are you sure?" Russ asked, his expression turning sour. "Fine. Get the weapon to ballistics. I'll be there as soon as I work the logistics out here." He shoved his phone into the belt holder with excessive force. "They found a gun down by the lake. Looks like the murder weapon." He ended with a scowl.

"That's good news." She smiled. "So why are you so mad?"

"Why?" His voice shot up an octave. "I'll tell you why. The weapon is registered to you. Your service weapon, to be exact."

"What?" The blood drained from her face, and her knees went weak. She laid a hand on the fireplace mantel to steady herself and process the news.

“Care to fill me in on how it ended up by the lake?” Russ continued to glare at her.

She didn’t like the look one bit. True, she’d sidestepped his questions about her weapon, but that had been under her boss’s direction. She’d worried it might be used in a crime, but never allowed herself to think someone would commit murder with it.

“I didn’t take it there, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said.

“How did it get down by the lake, then?” His voice was low, his eyes watchful.

“I don’t know.”

“I asked you twice if you’d lost your duty weapon. You blew me off. Now I find out it could be our murder weapon.” He assessed her coldly. “You better start talking and fast.”

The officer in her sent out a defiant stare, but the woman in her grieved over how the man she cared about could so easily believe the worst about her.

She let the officer win and pulled back her shoulders. “As I told you at the murder scene, I took off my duty belt and put it in my backpack.”

He held up a hand. “Let’s cut to the part you didn’t tell me.”

“Fine. When I got home, Nikki put the backpack on my bed. After she took off, I went to get the gun and discovered it was missing. I thought she’d taken it to get back at me.”

“That explains why you patted her down,” he clarified.

“Not my finest moment, but I couldn’t let her get caught carrying. Turns out someone must have broken into my car while I was at the lake.”

“And you didn’t think this was important to tell me when I asked about it?” He gaped at her.

“I had a responsibility to tell the chief first, so I couldn’t tell you then.”

He leveled his gaze at her. “And did you report it to Krueger?”

She nodded. “That’s why I had to stop at the office first thing the morning after the shooting.”

“So when I asked you about it again, why didn’t you tell me then?”

“Chief Krueger ordered me to keep it quiet,” she admitted. “He didn’t want my careless actions to damage our department’s good name.”

Russ shook his head and marched toward the door where he paused. “You better hope the ballistics don’t come back as a match. Even I can’t stop the fallout that will cause.”

She leaned against the mantel and watched him leave. She’d disappointed him again. More than disappointed. His final look told her he might never trust her again. Maybe never want to see her again, either.

A knife of pain, much like the one she’d felt when her father had left, stabbed her stomach. This pain only came from hurting someone you cared about or them hurting you. Flashes of her time together with Russ flitted through her brain. Flashes of all the wonderful, caring things Russ had done for her brought tears to her eyes.

He’d demonstrated his dependability. Shown how fiercely he protected those in need. How much he cared about doing the right thing and behaving honorably. How tough, yet gentle he could be.

How had she let a man who clearly didn’t want the responsibility of raising a teenager get to her when she’d sworn not to?

Did it matter? Not really. Not in the long run. He was so mad at her now for not telling him about the loss of her weapon that she doubted she’d see him again unless he came back to arrest her. She’d simply followed the chief’s orders.

Now it looked as if she could take the fall for killing Dixon.



Russ swiveled his chair away from his desk. He hated to leave Sydney behind, especially when he’d told her he wouldn’t. But he had a job to do—a sworn job to protect an entire county of residents—and that meant coming

into the office.

As the sheriff, he was in a precarious position. He owed it to the people in his county to keep an eye on Sydney in case she took off, but personally, he was more concerned for her safety. As mad as he was at her for not telling him about her weapon, when she fixed her pain-filled gaze on him, it was all he could do to keep walking away from her.

She didn't kill Dixon. Russ knew that, and he shouldn't have been so rough on her. The only thing she was guilty of was leaving her weapon in the car. Not something worthy of arrest.

Oh, but he knew from experience it *was* something she could catch blame for. Blame that could ruin her life if she let it. Like he had his. Instead of helping her deal with the gut-wrenching pain he'd yelled at her, making things worse.

He slammed a fist on the arm of his chair. What he should've done was shout at himself for daring to care about a woman again. After all, that was why he was so mad, wasn't it? He'd opened his heart to her only to find out it didn't pay off.

What he wouldn't give right now to go back to the way things were before he'd dared to hope. Maybe she was thinking the same thing. Wishing she'd never run into him again. Feeling the same turmoil.

At least she had God to turn to. He did too, if he would only try.

He closed his eyes and fought for the words he needed to convey his thoughts to God, but they tangled. He couldn't think clearly. The pressure to ask for the right thing was nearly palpable. Then he remembered what Reid had once taught him when Russ was just entering recovery. When you don't know what to pray for, God still knows your needs.

Well, then, God. If Reid is right, You know what I need. Please bring it to pass. I'm at the end of my rope and the killer is inching closer to Sydney.

"Ah, Sheriff?" Garber said from the door of the office, drawing Russ's head up.

“What is it?” Russ couldn’t believe the heavy level of fatigue in his own voice.

“Got the info back from the building inspector. He says the invoices on Dixon’s computer don’t match the materials in the photos. Looks like Johnson installed substandard products and turned in invoices to the construction company for higher-grade items, then pocketed the difference.”

Maybe they finally had a real suspect. “We need to get Johnson’s bank statements.”

“Way ahead of you. He’s been making regular cash deposits well above his salary. A few months ago, he also started taking hefty withdrawals. I figure that money was paying off Dixon.”

“And then he got tired of being blackmailed and killed him.”

Garber nodded. “He probably knew Officer Tucker stopped at the townhouses every night and had heard she’d threatened Dixon. He swiped her weapon and killed Dixon, then was going to kill her, making it look like a murder-suicide, but you showed up.”

“Makes sense.”

Garber’s eyebrow went up. “But how does that explain the texts?”

“Could be Plan B, I suppose,” Russ said. “When he didn’t take Tucker out, he decided to make it look like she took this mystery item to make us question if she was involved with Dixon. Then all he had to do was leave her weapon for us to find and hope circumstantial evidence convicted her.”

“Yeah, yeah. That makes sense.”

“Let’s bring Johnson in,” Russ said. “And start tracking down his whereabouts at the time of the murder and the other incidents.”

Baker poked his head in the door and handed Russ a sheet of paper. “Ballistics.”

Russ took the page, but before looking at it he dismissed his men. No way he’d let them see his reaction to the report’s contents.

When both deputies exited, Russ laid the paper on top of his desk.

Though he believed with all his heart in Sydney's innocence, he couldn't bring himself to look at the results. He sat staring, but unseeing as time passed.

"Sheriff," Garber said from the door. "We've located Johnson. Should have him here within thirty minutes."

"Let me know when he gets here."

"You okay, boss?"

"Fine," he answered.

"Was it Officer Tucker's weapon?"

Russ couldn't put off looking any longer or Garber would start to question his tactics. He peered at the report. What he'd dreaded had come to pass. Sydney's weapon killed Dixon.

"Yeah, it's hers."

"Want me to bring her in?"

Should he? If the report confirmed a weapon belonging to anyone other than Sydney or maybe other than another law-enforcement officer, he would obtain an arrest warrant and be out the door and on his way to haul them in. But this was Sydney. A fellow officer of the law and the woman who had stolen his heart.

So how did he handle this? He could call Reid for advice, but this was Russ's responsibility. He needed to step up and decide what to do on his own.

"Sheriff?"

Fine. He had to get off the fence. "I'm really not liking her for this, Garber. Let's wait to do anything until after we talk with Johnson."

"I'll let you know when Johnson arrives." Garber departed.

Russ grabbed his phone and dialed Sierra.

"Glad you called," she said. "I just finished examining the fabric with paint."

"And?"

"And the fabric is eighty percent wool and twenty percent nylon."

“Wool? Who wears wool these days?”

“We often find this combination in athletic bomber jackets. Blue could mean a local team perhaps.”

“No. The high school colors here are green and white.”

“What about the Seattle Mariners? Could be blue for them.”

“Could be.” Russ had hoped this would narrow things down, but there were plenty of Mariner baseball fans in the area. “What about the paint?”

“That’s more interesting. It’s a heavy pigment paint used most often for painting models or miniatures.”

“Models as in cars, planes, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, and miniatures like gaming figurines.”

“So I could be looking for a baseball enthusiast who paints models or miniatures?” Russ clarified.

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t sound like the drug crowd Dixon might’ve hung with.”

“No, it doesn’t. But forensics don’t lie. I’d say your shooter might have just brushed against wet paint, but the concentration was more like the tip of a brush stroke.”

“So he stabbed his own jacket or someone poked him with a brush.” Russ let the thought settle. “We’ll go back through our files and see if there’s any hint of painting or baseball in them.”

“I’ve swabbed the knife for DNA and sent it off to Emory to process. We should have the results tomorrow afternoon. And I lifted a single print from the knife. No match on the database.”

“So not a convicted felon then.”

“No.”

“Okay, thanks. You’ve given us something to go on here. Appreciate it.”

“I’ll call when DNA is in or if other evidence produces any leads.” She ended the call.

Russ yelled into the bullpen for Garber and relayed the information.

“Review the files. Look for anything that might be a match.”

“On it.” Garber marched away.

Russ had to decide what to do with Sydney but was too antsy to sit. He went to the window.

The overcast sky blocked the sunlight and reflected his mood. Was he doing the right thing in not bringing her in? Or was he letting feelings obscure his judgment just like the thick clouds blocking the sun?

“I’m surprised to find you standing here when there’s an arrest to be made,” Windsor said from behind.

Russ held back his groan and turned, spotting the commissioner leaning on the doorjamb, his thick arms crossed. How Windsor had heard about the gun so fast was beyond Russ. The commissioner had to have a source in the forensics department, something Russ would deal with when this was all over.

He swallowed to keep his tone civil. “We just got the report. Give me time to process the news.”

“Why? Because she’s an officer and law-enforcement officers stick together?” Windsor pushed off the door and stomped into the room.

“No, because I think we have another strong suspect to consider first.”

“That may be the case, but there’s sufficient evidence to arrest her until you pin something on this other suspect.” Windsor’s upper lip curled. “We don’t want her fleeing while you dawdle.”

“I’m not sure a judge will issue a warrant for just this report.”

“You do the paperwork. I’ll make sure it gets signed.”

Russ clamped his hand on his weapon and looked at Windsor. “No one is going to push me into this.”

“You like your job, don’t you?” A haughty look tightened his features.

“You know I do.”

“Then I suggest you make the arrest or you’ll find an effort to recall you and you’ll be hard-pressed to find another job.” He walked to the door and

paused to look at his watch. "I'll give you until ten o'clock to bring me the paperwork. If you don't want to comply, you'll want to start packing your things."

Russ fumed inside but kept his expression blank so Windsor didn't get any satisfaction over riling Russ. When the commissioner was out of sight, Russ dropped onto his chair. He wouldn't let anyone push him around. He was an officer of the law. He would abide by the oath he'd sworn to uphold. That and that alone.

Trouble was, he didn't know if he could make the right move here. This job was everything to him. If he disobeyed this direct order from Windsor, with his past problem with alcohol, he would never find another job in law enforcement. But that wasn't reason enough to arrest Sydney. Not if he wasn't convinced of her guilt.

For the first time in his professional career, he was paralyzed. His head might explode from indecision. Something he had to change. If he didn't find a way to work through it, the paralysis could cost someone their life.

Sydney didn't think she could handle another person disappointed in her, but she didn't want the chief to hear the news about her weapon from someone else so she'd phoned him. He exploded, his voice traveling through the line and reverberating around the cabin. She stood by, letting him get it all out. She deserved every bit of his wrath.

"I'm coming out there," he said, his tone calm and measured. "We need to figure out a way to spin this before your carelessness tarnishes every member of our department. I'm not far away and will be there in a few minutes." He disconnected before she could argue.

She started to stow her phone, but it rang. Expecting a return call from the chief saying something had come up and he couldn't make it, she dug out the phone and glanced at caller ID.

Not the chief, but Reid.

Was there a security breach? Or maybe this was about Nikki.

Sydney clicked talk. "What's wrong?"

"I hate to tell you this." He paused, the silence long and painful. "Nikki's missing."

"Missing? What do you mean missing?" Distress brought a lump to Sydney's throat.

"Before you panic, there's no sign of forced entry or a struggle, so we

don't think she's been abducted. Our guys thought she was sleeping, but when she didn't come out, they were worried and checked on her. Found the window unlocked and she was gone. Looks like she simply decided to split."

"She doesn't know anyone in Portland. Where would she go?"

"Maybe she met someone online."

"Possible, I suppose. I have a family app on my phone, so I can check her location. If she didn't turn her phone off, which she has been known to do when she doesn't want me to track her. Hold on while I check."

She thumbed to the app and looked for a signal. None.

"No signal for her. Her phone must be off." Sydney tried to get inside Nikki's head, a challenge to do with a teenager. "Since it's Saturday, she might've called her friend Emily to give her a ride back home."

"Can you check with the friend and get back to me?"

"On it." Sydney disconnected and made a quick call to Nikki first, just in case she answered, which was highly improbable.

Instant redirection to voice mail.

Sydney left a message to call ASAP, then dialed Emily. No answer. Sydney located Emily's home number in her phone book.

When Emily's mother answered, Sydney explained her problem, minus all of the details about the killer. Ann went to see if Emily was in her room. As Sydney waited for her to return, she tapped her foot on the floor.

If Nikki wasn't with Emily, Sydney would need to go look for her. But where did she start? She didn't have a clue where her sister would go in Portland. But the killer might. He could've followed her. Or Reid could be wrong and the killer had already abducted Nikki.

In that case, baiting the killer to draw him away from Nikki was Sydney's best option. Actually, the best option in either case. The very thing Russ and Reid warned her not to do. Too bad, because Nikki came first. She always came first.

"Sydney." Ann's soft voice came over the phone. "Emily's here like I

thought. She says she hasn't heard from Nikki since that dreadful party the other night."

"Thanks, Ann."

"Can I—"

Sydney clicked off before Ann asked for details Sydney wasn't willing or able to share.

Trying to come up with a plan, she paced the room until she heard Claudia's phone ring from the porch. Maybe something else was going down. Something Reid didn't want to tell her about. Could be news on Nikki.

Sydney went to the door and stepped into the cold. Her breath fanned out in airy wisps as she crossed the porch to Claudia.

"Everything okay?" the other woman asked.

"Was that call about Nikki?"

"It was Reid telling me your chief is on his way up here." She tipped her head toward his patrol car creeping up the far end of the driveway. "You're not planning on leaving with him, are you?"

"What?"

"I know you're itching to get out of here, but I wouldn't recommend leaving," she said, her expression concerned. "In fact, I'm dead set against it."

Claudia's warning gave Sydney an idea. She would convince the chief to let her go with him and help her find Nikki.

"I don't like that look, Officer," Claudia said. "Don't do something stupid, or I'll have to come after you." She smiled as if this was a joke, but her serious tone said if Sydney left, the woman would indeed track her down. But that couldn't stop Sydney.

Trying to figure out how to get Krueger on her side, she waited for him to join them, then introduced him to Claudia.

He gave the former agent a clipped nod and jerked his head at the door. "Inside, Tucker. Now!"

“Remember what I said, Officer,” Claudia called after them.

Krueger raised an eyebrow in her direction but didn't stop his long strides into the house. Sydney followed him into the living room, where he jabbed a finger at the club chair. She sat. He paced. He always paced.

She didn't wait for him to launch into his tirade, but preempted it. “Before we talk about my gun, I have a pressing issue that I need your help with.” She explained Nikki's disappearance to Krueger, filling her voice with the urgency pressing on her. “I was hoping you'd take me out of here so I can find her.”

“Now why would I do that, Tucker?” He appraised her, his dark eyes settling on her face. “Doesn't seem like such a good idea.”

“What if one of your family members was missing and a killer was on the loose? What would you do?”

“I'd bust outta here.” His lips tipped in a half smile.

“And you'd want some help if it was available, right?”

“I would, but...”

“Please, sir. If we want to resolve who really used my gun to kill Dixon and not tarnish our reputation, I need to find Nikki. She could have knowledge we need.” Sydney was exaggerating how Nikki could help, but Krueger wouldn't do anything that didn't benefit him.

He blew out an exasperated breath. “What do you want me to do?”

“I need to hide in your vehicle when you leave.”

“Don't know if that'll work. Maddox is a suspicious sort. He wanted to search my vehicle on the way in and might on the way out.”

“So what if he does? I'm not a prisoner. I can leave. If Reid follows us, with your stellar driving, you can easily lose him.” She really didn't think Krueger could outmaneuver Reid, but Krueger also acted based on his ego, so she shamelessly fed it.

“You got that right.” He clamped a hand on his jaw and looked up in his thinking pose. “Okay, this is what we do. I'll go out and offer to spell the

agent on the porch.”

“Claudia. Her name’s Claudia.”

“We’ll both go outside to talk to *Claudia*. You act all upset, like I really let you have it over your gun—which, by the way, I’m going to do when this is all over.” He pierced her with a hard stare. “Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Tell Claudia you’re going to lie down. Go to your room, lock the door. Turn on a TV, radio, whatever’s in there to make noise. When Claudia goes inside, I’ll keep an eye on her. If she doesn’t follow you, I’ll call you and you can slip out the window.”

“Perfect. Thanks, sir. I’ll owe you big-time for this.”

“Yeah, you will.” He went to the door.

She followed and almost called things off when Claudia’s gaze expressed continued concern for her safety. Sydney hated to do something underhanded to the woman, but Nikki needed her, so she moved forward.

Together she and Krueger worked their plan and even though Claudia seemed suspicious, it went off without a hitch. Reid allowed them to pass, and she relaxed as much as one could in the trunk of a car as the tires spun over the highway. They traveled for miles, damp cold seeping into her bones, before Krueger stopped and let her out. She hurried into the passenger seat and turned on the heat.

“Where to?” Krueger asked.

“My house to get my car.”

“Then let’s move.” He flipped on the lights and siren and shot down the road.

She’d ridden with him before and felt comfortable with his high-speed driving, but today the sun sent blinding rays through the windshield. She offered a quick prayer for their safety and kept her eyes on the surroundings, making sure the killer wasn’t following them.

“Would you mind parking in the alley a few doors down in case the killer

is staking out my house?" she asked.

"Not likely he's anywhere around here. He has to know this is the last place you'll come."

"Humor me, okay?"

"Fine." He turned the corner and eased into the alley.

With the sun rapidly descending, deep shadows reflected into the tight space, sending chills over Sydney's arms. Maybe the alley wasn't such a good idea after all.

"So do you have a plan, or are you going to run off half-cocked?" Krueger asked, shifting into park.

"I have a plan."

"Want to run it by me?" he asked. "I might be able to help."

"You won't try to stop me?"

"No. I want to know who really used your weapon as much as you do or maybe more than you." He turned off the ignition and frowned at her. "No way I want Maddox to lord this over me. He'll be insufferable."

She opened her door. "I'll tell you once we get inside, so I don't waste time."

They climbed out and quickly walked to her back stoop. Her car was in the garage so when she left she wouldn't be exposed like now. Even as she unlocked the door, she kept a vigilant eye on the surroundings, and Krueger followed suit.

She stepped inside first. The mess left behind from the invasion cut her to the quick. But the mess wasn't worth thinking about with her sister missing. She continued picking her way through her belongings to get to Nikki's room, where she went straight to her sister's computer.

She woke it up. "My gut says the killer doesn't know the new safe-house location, and he doesn't have Nikki. After I find her and make sure she's safe, I'll send a text to the killer. Lure him out and away from Nikki."

Krueger stopped next to her. "Okay, first, how are you going to find her?"

“I’m logging on to our phone provider to see if she made any calls.” Sydney clicked away on the keyboard. “Nikki isn’t supposed to use her phone right now, but if I know my sister, she called someone. The listing won’t include the name or address, but hopefully, I can use reverse phone lookup to find it.”

“If not, I’ll pull a few strings and get the name for you.”

The screen opened.

“She only made one call. Here.” She pointed at the listing. “It’s a Medford number. I think I’ve seen it before, but I don’t know who it belongs to.”

Needing to see who lived in the nearest big city that Nikki might have called, Sydney surfed to a reverse-lookup site and typed in the number. Her heart dropped at the response. “Unlisted.”

“Let me see what I can do.” Krueger took out his phone and went into the other room.

He probably didn’t want her to hear how he was circumventing procedure to get the number, and she couldn’t ever duplicate it on the job.

She took the time to open Nikki’s email. Until a few months ago, she’d trusted Nikki and never invaded her privacy. But after the problems of late, she’d insisted Nikki remove her screen password, allowing Sydney to access her computer if she wanted. She’d never done it, but counted on the fact that her access might keep Nikki from doing something dumb.

Sydney scrolled down the listings. Nothing since before their trip to the lodge. So it was just the one phone call.

Krueger returned. “Number belongs to a Toni Vincent. Know her?”

Sydney’s mouth dropped open. Of course. That’s why the number was familiar. The city too. Other than just a nearby city. Her mother had recently left Portland to be able to reconnect with them.

“Guess that means you know this Toni chick,” Krueger said.

Sydney worked hard to curb her emotions before answering. “Our

mother. She took her maiden name after she divorced our dad.”

Krueger held out a small notebook. “I have her address. If you want, I’ll go with you to check things out.”

Did she want him to accompany her? Might be good to have the company, but Krueger? Nah. Seeing her mother again for the first time in nearly fifteen years wasn’t something Sydney wanted to do. Not now. Not ever. And especially with her boss in tow. But leaving Nikki in her mother’s clutches wasn’t an option.

She would fill her water bottle, grab some snacks in case Nikki was hungry when she found her, and then make the hour-long drive to pick her up. Hopefully, an hour would prepare Sydney to see the woman who’d discarded her and Nikki.

Sydney doubted it. Doubted even an eternity would prepare her for what she’d always thought would be the worst day of her adult life if it ever came to pass.



Russ sat on a bench in the courtyard outside his office. The late afternoon sun slipped behind heavy gray clouds, leaving the area as shadowed as his thoughts. He still hadn’t come to a decision about Sydney, and his deadline was fast ticking down. To top it all off, his interview with Johnson was a bust. The guy had an air-tight alibi for the time of the murder. Couple that with his build being all off for the suspect Russ and Sydney had seen, and he’d ruled Johnson out. That left Sydney due to her gun being the murder weapon.

Only Sydney.

Russ lifted his face to the sky, peppered with twinkling stars. *If You’re there, please show me what to do.*

He propped his elbows on his knees, resting his chin on his hands. A

Bible verse came to his mind, as if God were whispering the words in his ear. *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.*

The same thing Sydney had said to him in the delivery truck. Bad things happen—like losing the job you thrive on or not having a chance with the woman you’ve come to love—but whatever happened, God could work it for good. And, as Sydney said, he could use what he learned in the hard times to help others. Much like he’d helped Nikki.

So, he could play it safe—arrest Sydney and keep his job—or do what his gut told him was the right thing to do here—find the real killer. Sure, he might lose his job, which in turn could jeopardize his future with Zach, but God would see him through whatever occurred. All he had to do was remember that. To call upon God’s strength when he felt weak, and he could do anything.

Thank You for being here. Thank You for bringing Sydney into my life. Please help me put aside my desire to keep my job. Help me do what’s right for her.

His phone rang, the call from Colin. “What do you have for me?”

“I finished reviewing the electronics. Nothing of interest except I’ve isolated the phone number for the guy Dixon labeled as *Big Cheese*. I’ll text the info to you, but I’ve already tracked it down with one of my phone company sources. Turns out to be an unregistered burner bought at 7-Eleven. I have the location and date the phone went into service. Unfortunately, it’s been nearly a year so I doubt they’ll still have video from that far back.”

“You could be right. But now we know *Big Cheese* and Dixon have worked together for that long. Not sure that will help, but I’ll have my detective check it out anyway. Thanks, man.”

“Let me know if you need anything else.” Colin ended the call.

Russ waited for the text to arrive from Colin then forwarded the information to Baker to follow up. Baker promised to get right on it.

“There you are.” Reid entered the courtyard. “I’ve been trying to call

you.”

“I had some thinking to do, so I turned off my phone.” Russ pulled his phone out and powered it up. “Wait. What’re you doing here? Who’s watching Sydney?”

“She took off.”

“What?” Russ’s voice reverberated off the walls surrounding them, and all the trust he’d just placed in God threatened to evaporate.

“I think she’s with Krueger,” Reid said.

“You think?”

“I’m nearly positive.”

“Explain,” Russ demanded.

“Earlier this afternoon I called Sydney to tell her Nikki took off.”

“Seriously?” Russ jumped to his feet. A few hours away and everything had fallen apart. “What happened?”

“She was hanging out in her room at the safe house. After a while the guys got worried when she didn’t come out, so they went to check on her. The window was unlocked but there was no sign of foul play. We believe she chose to split.”

“Just like she did the other night. So what happened with Sydney?”

“She was supposed to check with Nikki’s friend to see if Nikki was with her and call me back. When Sydney didn’t call back, I followed up. She didn’t answer her phone.” Reid cleared his throat. “Claudia went in search of Sydney and she was missing. This was minutes after Krueger came by to talk to Sydney about her gun, so the only logical explanation is she got Krueger to give her a ride.”

Russ clamped a hand on his neck and paced. “This is my fault. I yelled at her for not telling me about her gun. Now she probably thinks I won’t help her clear her name, and she has to do it on her own.”

“I think it has more to do with Nikki taking off.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Russ searched for an idea of what to do next. “We

need to get into her head and figure out what she's up to."

"Seems like there're two choices here. She went to find Nikki or she's trying to lure out the killer."

"Our best bet is to get the phone company to give us her location by triangulating her phone." Reid dug out his phone. "I'll call my buds at the FBI to get that started."

"That's good, but cutting through the red tape could take hours. I won't sit here and wait."

"You got a better idea?"

"Not really, but if I was going after a killer I'd want to be prepared. First thing I'd do is head home to get items I'd need to carry out my mission."

"Me too." Reid stood. "So let's scope out her house."

"We need to move fast." Russ jumped up. "This killer is too good. No way a rookie can handle him."

Tossing up a prayer for Sydney's safety, Russ charged toward his vehicle and fired up the siren and lights. Reid climbed in next to him, and they raced through the streets of Shadow Lake.

Reid called Colin and put him on speaker. "Glad I caught you."

"I was just about to call you anyway. I figured out how your killer is tracking Sydney."

Russ fired a questioning look at Reid.

"How?" Reid asked.

"The family app they use on the phone. The one that allows them to track each other has some glaring vulnerabilities that were just discovered in a research project by grad students. She needs to immediately delete the app from her phone."

"Sydney and Nikki are both missing, and we can't tell them," Reid said. "We need help in tracking them. Can you use that app to do it?"

"Not without having access to one of their phones first."

"So you're saying our killer had to have accessed Sydney's phone?"

“One of the ones in their network anyway. Let me try some other things and get back to you.”

“Hurry,” Russ said.

Reid ended the call. “I only hope the killer hasn’t gotten to Sydney first.”

His brother’s tone upped Russ’s anxiety level. If that was possible. He hadn’t been this frazzled since Willie died.

Okay. I’m failing here. I need Your strength to get through this.

There. That should help. He waited for the easing of the knot in his stomach. Didn’t happen. He needed to keep his focus on trusting God. Maybe the pain would diminish. The only good news was he had no desire to take a drink. Not one little bit.

They pulled up to her house.

“I don’t see her car.” Russ shifted into park and searched the area.

“Her car could be in the garage.” Reid withdrew his weapon.

Russ followed suit and grabbed his door handle. Got out.

An explosion rocked the car.

Her duplex disappeared in orange-and-blue flames shooting into the air. Debris rained down on them, pinging off the roof. The windshield cracked like thin ice on a pond.

“No! Sydney!” Russ, heart torn and frazzled, ducked and covered his head. Saw Reid do the same thing. The fallout continued to pepper them. Burned debris. Bits of wood. Shingles. Metal. Glass.

“You think she’s in there?” Russ got the words out over a closing throat.

“Don’t know,” Reid said. “But it’s too engulfed to check.”

“I have to.” Russ raised his head. The entire building sizzled and snapped with vivid orange flames, the structure not even visible under the fire.

Russ had no time to lose. He bolted from the car. Raced for the house. Heat seared his face and thick smoke clouded his vision. He held his hands up against the flaming heat. He took a few steps closer.

Reid dragged him back.

A neighbor rushed up to them. “What happened?”

“Call 911.” Reid’s tone brooked no argument or questions.

Russ stood, staring. Shock taking hold of his body, his legs going weak.

“We have no proof she’s in there,” Reid said from behind.

“I know. My gut even says I’d know if she was home, but still...” His words fell off as he imagined a life without Sydney.

Reid turned Russ to face him. “Don’t go there, bro. Unless we have confirmation, it’s a waste of time.”

“You’re right but...” Russ shrugged but could barely get his shoulders to move as it was taking all the strength he could muster not to drop to the ground.

Reid looked past him. “There’s a crowd forming. As sheriff, you need to take control of the situation. Keep them at bay, so when the fire department arrives they can do their job.”

Russ heard Reid speaking, but didn’t want to let his words register. He was the sheriff, all right. It was the job he’d lived for. Until right now. At the moment, the job meant nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was just a job and wasn’t enough for him. Not since Sydney came into his life again. She was so much more than the job. But Reid was right. They had no evidence that she was inside that growing inferno, and there was no use letting fear paralyze him, making the situation worse.

Russ turned to the growing crowd and dug to his core to find the strength to do his job. “Okay, people, you need to back up so we can make room for the fire truck.”

“Is Sydney okay?” a woman shouted.

“We aren’t sure she was home,” Russ answered.

“I saw her come home a little while ago, but I didn’t see her lea—” The words were torn away on a sob.

“Doesn’t look like her car is here, “ Reid said quickly. “So that’s a good sign.”

“She didn’t drive up in her car,” the neighbor said. “She was walking.”

Russ looked at Reid. He couldn’t hide his sorrow even if he tried, which he didn’t. If anyone understood Russ’s emotions right now, it was his brother. He knew all about losing the woman he loved.

No. Stop it. Don’t think that way. No point in it. Not until a firefighter confirmed her presence.

Until then, Russ had to keep hoping. Something in his gut told him she was alive. He’d hang on to that for now and do his job.

Russ wanted to do something, anything, except wait to hear the firefighters had located a body in the rubble. He couldn't think. Act. Nothing but watch the firefighters battle the blaze roaring into the night and lighting the sky for miles around.

Ryan, a volunteer firefighter for the past few years, looked back at Russ, but his face shield hid his expression. Ryan had arrived, taken one look at the fully engulfed structure, and his face declared if Sydney was in the house, there was no hope for her. Not that Russ needed Ryan to confirm it.

Russ was doing a great job of imagining the bomb exploding. The flash of surprise on Sydney's face. He couldn't imagine what happened next. That would be too terrible. Horrible.

"Hey, bro," Reid called out as he crossed the street. "Sydney's phone is transmitting a signal."

A glimmer of hope flickered to life, but phone companies could be wrong, and he wouldn't believe she was alive until he talked to her or saw her in person. "A phone wouldn't operate in that house."

"Exactly." Reid smiled. "The triangulated location shows the signal near Medford. We have the phone company on standby. They're pinging her phone. We can tail her if the phone moves."

"Let's go. We'll run with lights and sirens. Get to her in record time."

Russ took off for his car, winding through the spectators. Not stopping to apologize when he bumped into them.

At the car, Reid jerked him to a stop. “Let’s think this through before racing off. Sydney may not have her phone with her. The killer could’ve abducted her and taken it to stop her from calling for help.”

“Either way, we need to follow this lead. If she’s in possession of the phone, she could need our help.” Russ’s voice trembled. “If he took her phone, we need to bring him in.”

Reid planted his feet. “You’re too emotionally involved to make that arrest.”

Russ got that. Understood it even. But... “You’re probably right, but I won’t stand around here and wait for Ryan to tell me they found a body in the house. That I couldn’t bear.”



Uncertain what to do, Sydney hung inside the door of her mother’s small bungalow. Nikki held their mother’s hand and Sydney let it sink in that after many long years, she was facing the woman who hadn’t wanted them. The woman who’d been verbally abusive. The woman who’d ended Sydney’s childhood and forced her to take on responsibilities she wasn’t ready to assume. Responsibilities that still weighed her down.

Sydney stared at the wrinkled hand holding Nikki’s soft one. She glanced at the aged face, making sure not to linger in her eyes filled with hope. Alcohol abuse had aged their mother beyond her years. She claimed she’d quit drinking. Been sober for a few years now, she said. That’s why she’d contacted them. Wanted their forgiveness. But a ten-minute conversation wasn’t enough to let Sydney forgive years of hurt.

“Sydney,” her mother said. “Please don’t go. Sit down. Let’s talk.”

“I can’t. C’mon, Nikki. We’re leaving.”

“But it’s not safe out there,” Nikki said.

“And it’s not safe here. It won’t take long for someone to find this address and come looking for us.”

“Then she should come with us too,” Nikki insisted.

“I’ll arrange for her to go to the safe house.”

“I’ll go with her.”

“No!” Sydney regretted her outburst the moment it happened. “I’m sorry, Nikki, but I need you to come with me. When this is all over, we’ll all sit down and have a talk.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, I promise,” she said, giving her sister a look that ensured she would keep her word.

“Okay.” Nikki got up, hugged their mother and then crossed the room.

Sydney looked at her mother. “Pack a bag. I’ll arrange for someone to move you someplace safe.”

She nodded. “It was good to see you, Sydney. I look forward to seeing you again.”

Sydney didn’t let her hopefulness get to her as it was still the voice of a stranger.

Sydney left the house and surveyed the street before easing Nikki out the door behind her. She opened the passenger door and waited for Nikki to settle, then ran around the front of the car and got in.

Distracted by seeing her mother, Sydney was lucky she navigated safely through the streets. At the first stop sign, she ran her hands through her hair, stopping to massage a tight muscle at the base of her skull.

“How odd,” a male voice said from the backseat. “I have a headache too.”

Nikki screamed and scrunched against her door. Sydney spun around to find a gun pointed at them through the metal grille separating the seats.

“Hello, Officer Tucker.” The large man grinned. “Pull into a parking space.”

She gave Nikki a reassuring look and then did as told. She patted Nikki's knee and shifted in her seat to get a good look at the man. A man she'd never seen before. He had a long face, covered with stubble that matched salt-and-pepper hair cut short. Powerfully built, his arm raised with the gun sported a large snake tattoo.

He let out a coarse laugh. "If you're finished studying me, I suggest we proceed."

"What do you want?"

His expression sobered. "We want the flash drive you took from Dixon's house."

Who? So there was more than one person involved in this. "Who are you working with?"

"You'll find that out in due time. But first, the flash drive."

"I didn't take a flash drive."

He tsked. "I'd so hoped you'd cooperate with me, but I guess we'll have to do this the hard way. Now do be a good girl, turn around and place your hands on the wheel where I can see them."

Frantically searching for a way out of the situation, she turned and laid her hands on the wheel. Maybe if she kept this man talking they could escape. Complimenting him on his prowess was a good place to start.

"You know, I'm impressed. Despite all of our precautions, you always managed to find me. How do you do it?"

He chuckled. "While you were up on the hill, I took advantage of a little-known flaw to become a hidden member in the family app you share."

"That when you took my gun, too?" she asked.

"Yes, of course. You really should be more careful with your weapons. Now enough of this chatter. It's time to go." His forceful tone sent chills up her spine. "I'm going to slide a blindfold through the grille, Nikki. Tie it tightly in place, then put your hands on the dashboard."

Nikki shot Sydney a plea to help her but complied. Sydney wanted to rip

her hands from the wheel, spin and slam the weapon into this man's face. But she knew better. Knew he'd fire a shot at Nikki before she could do anything.

"Good," he said. "Now your turn, Officer."

She felt the cloth of the blindfold brush against her neck and over her shoulder. She resisted the urge to grab it and toss it to the floor. As much as she didn't want to, she had to comply with the thug's demands until she could gain the upper hand.

Something she had to do—and soon.

He'd let them see his face. That meant only one thing. No matter what happened, he planned to kill them both.



The miles had rolled under Russ's vehicle, his mind filled with what he might do when they reached the location Sydney's phone continued to ping from. If he found the killer in possession of Sydney's phone and not Sydney, who knew what he would do. Russ didn't. He would like to think he could keep it together, but he wasn't positive of that right now. Sure, Reid sat at his side and would stop him from killing the guy, but would Russ do it if Reid weren't there? A scary thought.

Russ's phone rang from the dash holder. "It's Ryan."

Russ accepted the call on speaker, his gut cramped so hard he thought he might hurl. He tightened his hold on the wheel. "Just go ahead and tell me what you discovered."

"No one perished in the duplex fire."

"You're sure?" Russ asked, needing to confirm before he believed it.

"I personally searched the place," Ryan said. "It was too important to leave to anyone else."

"Hey, man, thanks." Russ let out a long breath and had never been so thankful for sitting down in his life. He couldn't lose Sydney. Hadn't lost her.

Or had he? He didn't know where she was or who she was with.

His phone beeped another call. "I have another call coming in. Have to go. Thanks again, bro."

Russ switched over to the call from Colin, who was on the line with the phone company rep. "Sydney's on the move. Coming back our direction. You might be able to intercept her."

"Give me the name of the road she's on, and I'm all over it." A burst of optimism washed out some of Russ's anxiety.

Colin shared the road name.

"Got it," Reid said. "Putting in GPS now."

Russ kept his foot on the gas, praying she was close enough to get to on time.

"Road's about a mile ahead." Reid looked up from his phone. "Left turn."

"Hold up!" Colin said. "Signal stopped moving. Let me get the satellite image up of her location." The clicking of his fingers carried over the phone. "Looks like a residence. Long drive on a heavily treed property. Hilly terrain. No street view."

"That turn is coming up," Reid said. "Do we still take it?"

"Yes, and I'll text the address so you can map it. I'll start looking for property owners and details and will call with what I find out or if the signal moves." Colin disconnected.

Reid looked at Russ. "I'll get the directions for you."

Russ slowed and made the hard turn.

"Got it up on my phone," Reid said. "There's a hill overlooking the property coming up in about thirty miles. We can pull over and do better recon than the sat photo provides."

"Tell me when." Russ pressed the gas. "Until then, hold on for your life."



The trunk of Sydney's car smelled like rubber and maybe her own fearful sweat. She shifted into a more comfortable position, if such a position existed with her hands zip tied behind her back and a gag in her mouth.

The guy had dragged her and Nikki out of the car and zip tied their wrists. He'd searched them both for weapons and phones, patting her down so thoroughly she almost kned him. Thankfully, she'd dropped a backup gun into her backpack, which she'd tossed on the backseat of the car. If only she could get to it, she would be armed.

If only.

The car slowed and rumbled over ruts, likely navigating a rough driveway. The vehicle wound sharply down a hill. She rolled toward the back of the trunk. Nikki's shoulders slammed into hers. She reached for her sister's hands and gave them a squeeze.

The car came to a sudden stop. The engine cut off. A door opened. Footsteps pounded on gravel their direction.

He was coming. Their captor was coming.

She tried to swallow, but the gag left her mouth too dry.

The trunk opened. She inhaled the fresh air through her nose and the warmth of the last gasp of the day's sun seeped through her blindfold, but she saw only darkness.

Their captor reached in and grabbed Nikki, who fought, but he manhandled her out of the trunk.

Sydney tried to stop him, but she couldn't grab hold of him. Then he slammed the trunk closed over the top of her.

No. Not Nikki. Please don't let him hurt her. Please.

Sydney's stomach churned, and her chest tightened.

Blood pounding in her ears as she strained to listen, hoping to hear footsteps returning for her. She counted. One. Two. Three. Four. Five...

She reached one-hundred-eighty before footfalls sounded in the gravel again. She steeled herself for the trunk to open. For the same manhandling.

The footsteps passed her by. Headed around the car. The car door opened. The vehicle sank.

Had he gotten back behind the wheel? Was he leaving Nikki behind?

No. Oh no. Please, no, no, no.

The engine rumbled to life. The car started forward.

He *was* separating her from Nikki. A smart move for the killer. Very smart. He could use Nikki as a bargaining chip. Not a good thing for Sydney—or Nikki.

The car turned around, and the tires hit the main road, running smoothly over them. Sydney would count. Would pay attention to turns. That way she would know the distance he was taking her from Nikki.

She relaxed. Counted. Concentrated. Two turns, both rights. Nearly fifteen minutes of driving, and he slowed. Pulled into another driveway.

Please let me stay safe so I can get to Nikki and free her.

She braced her body to fight if the opportunity presented itself.

The trunk popped open. She wished she could see what he planned. She couldn't even see to strike back with the blindfold.

Big, meaty hands grabbed her zip tie and jerked her out of the trunk. She hit her head. Wrenched an ankle. Still, she struggled. He clamped arms of steel around her chest. This maniac held her so tightly she struggled to breathe.

He hauled her a short distance and up a low flight of stairs. A door groaned open. He slammed her down onto a hard wooden chair and held fast to her shoulder. He secured something binding around her chest, then her legs, and finally her stomach.

He tugged the knots, pulling them tight.

She groaned. Too bad for her. Her pain-filled cries fell on deaf ears.

He jerked off her blindfold.

She blinked against the sudden light, catching the back of him as he marched outside. She continued to blink as her eyes adjusted to glaring light

from the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. She shifted, testing the ropes that bound her, trying to loosen them, but they were too tight to budge. Her only hope to get free was to find something to slice through them. She searched the small cabin undergoing renovation. A tiny kitchenette sat behind her and a combo family room and dining space to her side. A hallway led to bedrooms and a bathroom, she assumed. Two windows on the front wall ahead of her, her only connection to the outside world.

Her captor's footfalls came back up the steps. She stilled and waited, her heart racing.

He dropped her backpack on the floor near the door. "Wouldn't do to get caught with this in the car."

Get caught? Odd. Was he planning to leave her here and go somewhere people might see her backpack? But why?

He crossed the room, retrieved a tote bag from a worn plaid sofa, and gently set it on the floor next to her chair. He slid the long zipper back and reached into the bag with both hands.

As she waited to see what he withdrew, her heart rate kicked up higher. He lifted his hands, cautiously, extracting something from between the zippers.

She gasped.

A bomb. He was holding a bomb. It looked like the fake one tossed through the window at the lodge, only larger. He rose and looked down on her, a sick smile on his face. She squirmed. Screamed against the gag.

"I told you the next one would be real." He grinned, evil and sick. "I'm going to strap this to your chest. It has a motion sensor. Once I activate it if you move more than a few inches it'll be the last thing you do. Nod if you understand me."

She didn't want to acknowledge his sick plan, but she nodded. He strapped on the bomb using layer after layer of thick duct tape. He pushed a button. The device clicked and a light blinked on.

He'd activated it. He'd actually activated a bomb on her chest.

Her chest. A bomb.

She couldn't breathe. Think. Her heart nearly giving out.

He held up a small remote, that evil grin returning. "FYI, I can also detonate it with this."

Fear and panic beyond anything she'd ever known slithered over her skin and settled into her stomach. She tried to swallow. Once. Twice. Her mouth dry as stale crackers behind the gag. Still, she glared up at him and tried not to let the fear show in her eyes, though she doubted she'd controlled it.

"This will give you some time to think about turning over the drive." He spun on his heels. At the doorway, he stopped. "Unless, of course, you want to tell me where it is now."

She shook her head. Even if she did have what he wanted, the moment she gave it to him, he would detonate the bomb.

"You've proven to be very resourceful, Officer. In case you figure out a way to leave, I suggest you think twice." He paused, eyed her, his lips going flat into a grim line. "Your sister is wearing an identical device. Wouldn't want her to get hurt, now would we?" He gave her a lingering look, flipped off the lights, and closed the door.

Darkness descended in the space, surrounding her with terror. No one but Krueger knew she'd gone to her mother's house. Even if Russ or Reid got the chief to tell them her last known location, which she doubted Krueger would do, that information wouldn't lead them to this cabin. She and Nikki were on their own. Nothing short of a miracle could save them now.

A mile to the overlook, Russ silenced his lights and sirens. He ran the last quarter mile with headlights out before he drove off the road into the scrub to hide it from anyone who should pass by. Anyone like the killer.

He and Reid silently climbed out, and Russ rummaged through his go-bag for night-vision goggles and binoculars. He handed the binoculars to Reid then crossed to the hillside and knelt in the dirt.

Reid dropped down beside Russ.

Goggles on, Russ searched the area. Past the dense trees. Over the rocks. Down the valley. To a small cabin with construction scaffolding on the left side of a dilapidated porch.

No car. No lights. No movement.

If Sydney was in that cabin, there was no sign of her.

“I don’t know, bro,” Russ said, his law enforcement caution radar beeping at full alert. “Something isn’t right.”

“Agreed,” Reid said. “But these are the right coordinates. Maybe the killer does have her, and drove out here just to ditch her phone to lead us down a dead end.”

“Only one way to find out. I’m going down there.” Russ rose. “You maintain surveillance. Call me if there’s anything I need to know.”

Russ didn’t give Reid a chance to stop him but eased into the scrub

heading downhill. Normally Russ would call for backup, but he didn't want any vehicles in the area to scare off the killer should he come back.

He picked his way through dense brush. Even with goggles showing the way, branches clawed at his body, slapping his face. He didn't care. He had to find Sydney.

Alive.

He kept going, one foot in front of the other, until he broke into the open area.

He phoned Reid. "I'm near the cabin. Anything I need to know?"

"You're clear. I've got your six."

Confident his brother really would have his back, Russ stowed his phone and approached the old cabin. As quietly as possible, he jimmied the lock on a window and climbed in. He slipped through the house, searching the spaces through his goggles' colored lenses. In the front room, he spotted a person strapped to a chair, back to him. A woman from the size. He couldn't ID her, but he could make out the thick ropes securing her to the wooden chair.

Had to be Sydney. His stomach fluttered.

He wanted to race into the room, drag her into his arms.

No. This was exactly the kind of mistake Russ couldn't afford to make. The kind Reid warned him about. Russ couldn't let emotions usurp common sense.

He was a law enforcement officer and had to act like one. Protocol said, clear the entire place first. Make sure he was safe. He couldn't help her if this was a trap set by their foe to take him out.

Breath held, he made his way through the cabin. Room by room. Two bedrooms and one bathroom. Empty. No sign of anyone having been living here. All neat and tidy. Beds unmade. Linens folded on top of the mattresses.

Sydney was alone. Good for Russ. Not good for whoever tied her up. Not a very smart move on that creep's part to leave her without supervision.

Russ headed down the hall, not worried about making noise now, and

returned to the main room.

“Sydney,” he said, his voice low to keep from startling her. “Are you alone?”

She nodded, but said nothing.

Odd. Why not speak? Was she gagged?

He flipped on his flashlight and lifted the goggles as he rounded her chair.

He sucked in a deep breath, his heart skipping a beat. She was indeed gagged, but that wasn't what caught his attention. A bomb strapped to her chest rose and fell with her breathing. Her terrified eyes were wide, and a drab scarf circled her mouth.

He lifted a hand. Let it fall. Could he touch her or would that set off the bomb?

“You think it's safe to remove your gag?” he asked.

She gave a slight nod.

“Close your eyes. Going to turn on the light and you'll need to adjust.”

He went to the wall and switched on the light, returned and gently untied the scarf. She blinked up at him and gagged as he withdrew it.

“Thank God you found me.” Her voice was dry, raspy. “After our argument I didn't know if you would look for me.”

Her comment cut him to the core. He only hoped he could undo the damage his rash behavior had caused.

“I'm sorry for everything I said, Syd. You did the right thing listening to Krueger about the weapon. I was out of line.” He knelt on the floor and gently stroked her arm. “I care far too much about you to let a stupid argument come between us.”

“That's what I hoped for, prayed for even as I sat here in the dark listening to every sound, waiting to be blown apart.” Her face constricted as if reliving the experience.

He wanted to hold her, to promise she'd never be hurt again, but the bomb stood between them.

“Let’s get you out of here.” He reached out to untie her ropes.

“No! Don’t do anything else. The bomb has a motion sensor on it. It’ll go off if I move more than a few inches. Plus there’s a remote detonator.” Tears shone in her eyes. “And the killer has Nikki with another bomb. He split us up. Dropped me off here then took off.”

Russ fought to stay calm. To ask the right questions. “How did he manage to abduct both of you?”

“It’s my fault. When the chief came to Claudia’s, I convinced him to give me a ride home so I could find Nikki. I checked her phone log online. She’d called Mom. I figured that’s where she went. So I went there to bring her back to my office for safety.” Her voice shook. “When we got in the car, our abductor was waiting for us. He demanded I give him a flash drive he claimed I took from Dixon’s house.”

“All of this is about a flash drive?”

She nodded. “I’ve been thinking about what must be on it. My best guess says it has something that can lead us to Dixon’s superiors.”

“And that means very dangerous men are after you.” Russ exhaled and thought about what to do next. “Our best bet is to find the guy who took you. Can you identify him?”

“I don’t know him. I can give you a description, but he’s not the only one involved. He mentioned another man. Said I’d find out about him soon enough.”

“Let’s get Reid in on this. He’s up the hill.” Russ couldn’t use his phone. Not when signals could trigger a bomb with a remote detonator. He went to the door and whistled loud enough to get Reid’s attention.

He stood, and Russ waved him down the hill. He made his way through the scrub to the porch. He set down his binoculars. “What did you find?”

“You need to see this.” Russ went back inside.

Reid followed. “Whoa.”

Using a professional tone that wouldn’t amp up Sydney’s fear, Russ told

his brother about Nikki. “We need the bomb squad and a team to locate Nikki.”

Reid looked at Sydney. “Any idea of Nikki’s location?”

“Sort of. She’s about fifteen minutes away. Take a left out of the driveway, then drive for about ten minutes until you come to a big hill. Then take another left. I can’t tell you the speed we were going so I know this isn’t very accurate, but it’s the best I could do.”

“Sounds like the first coordinates Colin gave us,” Russ said. “I can get deputies out there.”

“What about issuing an APB for our suspect?” Reid asked. “He should be easy to spot in Sydney’s car.”

“No!” Sydney shouted.

“He has a remote detonator.” Russ kept his tone calm. “If we try to take him, he might use it. We’re better off waiting until this bomb is defused. Our closest munitions expert would be Chief Krueger.”

Reid gave a sharp nod. “I’ll take a stand on the porch to keep an eye on things. I don’t want to use my cell, but I’ll make one call to Ryan to get someone here. If Krueger’s not available, I’ll have him find someone who is and make sure he knows to just send an update text.”

Russ met his brother’s gaze. “Let’s pray he can find Krueger. The next closest squad is OSP in Salem.”

Sydney whimpered at Russ’s comment about the Oregon State Police. Of course she did. Salem was a good three hours away. Three more hours she would sit with a bomb strapped to her chest and know it could be remotely detonated at any time. So why had he said that? He would take it back if he could.

“I’ll keep you updated.” Reid stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Russ stowed his phone, keeping his eyes on Sydney. He couldn’t imagine how she felt with enough C4 strapped to her chest to take out this cabin and

the surrounding area. He was at risk too. He didn't care about himself, but he sure did care about the possibility of leaving Zach fatherless. The same helpless as he had when he'd approached her house and it exploded, weakened his knees.

Her house. He had to tell her about that.

"There's something else I need you to know." When he finished filling her in about the explosion, she didn't say anything but began to shiver.

"Don't, Syd." He softly stroked her knee.

"I know I should be strong, but honestly, the academy didn't prepare me for any of this."

"Nothing could. But it'll be okay. I promise." He didn't know how he could make such a statement when so many things could still go wrong, but he couldn't stand to see her suffer any longer.

She took several deep breaths and sighed. "You need to leave in case this thing goes off."

"No way I'm leaving you alone."

"Please. I can't relax if you're in danger."

He scooted closer to her. "I'm pretty sure you won't relax even if I leave you alone."

"You know what I mean. I can get through this if it's just me, but it's almost like I can't breathe when someone I care about is threatened."

Their eyes met. Fear lodged in hers. Fear for him, if he could believe what she'd said, but did he deserve to have this fabulous woman care for him?

The bomb made a loud clicking noise, firing a shot of panic through his heart. Homemade bombs malfunctioned all the time. He had to get her out of here before the device went off.

He gave her hand a final squeeze and stood to pace and think.

Reid poked his head in the door. "Someone's turning into the drive. Has to be our suspect and we need to get out of here."

“I can’t leave Sydney.”

“If you don’t turn off that light and leave, you may spook this guy. He’ll trigger the remote. Get moving. I’ll take a stand in the scrub.”

Russ knew Reid was right, but he hated every bit of it. He jogged across the room and flipped off the light switch. He retrieved his goggles and made his way to her with his flashlight.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” he whispered and ran a hand over her soft hair. He bent lower and found her lips, letting his feelings for her transfer through his kiss.

She responded then pulled away. “You have to go.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“You have to. I’ll be fine.”

“I have to retie your gag so the killer doesn’t know I’ve been here.” He picked it up and twisted it into her mouth. “I’ll just be right outside. I love you, Syd.”

Hands shaking with frustration, he turned off his light, lowered the goggles, and exited the way he’d come in. He slipped around the side of the cabin. The approaching vehicle was a city patrol car, a male driving. Sydney said the killer had taken her car, so this guy was likely the killer. He’d pulled a mask down over his face before Russ could get a good look at him.

Odd. Sydney had seen this guy, so why hide his face now?

Russ watched as he climbed out and entered the cabin. He didn’t have Nikki with him, but she could be in the car. Russ silently made his way across the grass to the vehicle. He searched through the windows. No Nikki.

Sydney said more than one man was involved. Was this the same man who strapped the bomb on her? If not, it could explain why this guy had put on a mask. Maybe, just maybe, the other guy had the remote and this guy couldn’t trigger the bomb, and Russ could take him out.

Russ made his way to Reid.

“Let’s scope things out. See if we can take this guy.” Russ circled the

building until he could get a clear view through the family room window. The masked man leaned over Sydney. His mouth moved, and Russ could make out garbled conversation.

The good news was the creep didn't have his weapon drawn. Maybe the bomb made him overconfident. Or maybe his confidence came from being out in the boonies with no one around.

Russ made his way to the other side of the cabin and told Reid what he'd seen.

Russ drew his sidearm and checked the clip. "I know the interior layout. Best bet is for me to enter from the rear again and get into position with a clear shot at the suspect. Then you fling open the front door, drawing the guy's attention. I'll either charge him or shoot him, depending on how he reacts."

"Sounds like a plan." Reid adjusted his Kevlar vest.

Russ wore his too, or he would never attempt this maneuver. "Give me five minutes to get into place then rush the door and take cover."

Reid nodded. "Take care, bro."

"You too."

Russ moved into position. Quietly climbing over the windowsill and listening. The suspect had removed Sydney's gag and badgered her for the flash drive. Russ moved close, one silent step at a time until the suspect came into view. Russ didn't recognize the guy's voice, but he was speaking in the same creepy high-pitched tone he'd used at the townhouses and had the same wiry build as the killer.

Russ lifted his gun in readiness. His trigger finger itched to drop off the side of the barrel. Onto the trigger. Take out the killer and end this. Right here. Right now. But Russ wasn't a killer, and he would do his job. He had to work the plan.

The front door burst open. Slammed into the wall. Reid dove for cover. The suspect spun, drawing his weapon as he went. Russ charged from his

spot and tackled the guy. Surprisingly muscled for his build, he fought back. But Sydney's plight gave Russ superhuman strength.

"Enough," Reid called from above them.

His voice distracted the suspect. Russ overpowered and cuffed him.

Reid flipped on the light. Russ rolled the man over. Ripped off his mask.

Chief Krueger blinked up at them. A snarly, angry Krueger.

"Krueger? You're behind this?" Russ shook his head, though deep down inside if Russ had time to think about it, he might not be so surprised.

"We're in luck," Reid said. "Bomb squad was already on a call out about forty minutes from here and will be rerouted to us. I'll go wait for them at the road so they don't miss the place."

Russ nodded.

"Chief Krueger, why?" Sydney asked, her voice raspy. "Why are you doing all of this?"

Krueger opened his mouth, but before he said anything to compromise the case, Russ read him his Miranda rights. Krueger clamped his mouth shut. Fine. They'd get the details out of him later.

Russ searched the chief. He would have one or more backup guns. That was for sure.

Russ jerked the growling man to a sitting position. Krueger broke free and grabbed the leg of Sydney's chair. "Let me go, or I'll dump her to the floor."

"You don't want to end your own life," Russ said, though the imbalance and rage in Krueger's eyes told a different story.

"Would be better than going to jail. You know what they do to police officers there. Now remove these cuffs and back off."

"Then what? You escape. If my brother doesn't plug you when you step outside, I'll hunt you down, and you know I'll get you."

"Let me worry about that." He lifted his hands a fraction. "The cuffs."

Russ needed to stall. He would start Krueger talking about his role in this

fiasco as a distraction while Russ figured out how to end this.

Slowly, with his hands raised so Krueger didn't overreact and move Sydney, Russ eased toward the tainted cop. "I don't get it, man. Who got you involved in all of this anyway?"

"Involved? You think I'm merely involved?" His voice rose in disbelief before he laughed, a maniacal-crazed sound winding up and echoing through the room. "I'm the mastermind, you fool. I've run a drug operation in the county for six years. Right under the nose of every law enforcement officer."

Craziness. How had he pulled this off for so long? Made him a more dangerous foe than Russ thought. "But Dixon was your downfall."

"If I'd been in town that night Tucker arrested him, I would've made her cut him loose and none of this would've happened." He jerked his head toward the cuffs. "Off. Now, Maddox! I mean it."

Russ dropped to his knees and used his eyes to urge Sydney to keep Krueger talking.

"But you made a big mistake," she said, drawing up Krueger's head. "I don't have the flash drive you're looking for. Why would you think I'd take it, anyway?"

"Dixon said you did."

She snorted. "And you believed him?"

"He claimed it holds pictures of your sister buying and using drugs. That when you arrested him, you palmed it to keep her out of trouble."

"Not hardly," Sydney said.

"But that's not the reason you want the drive, is it?" Russ slipped the key into the lock.

"Dixon knew his...ah...usefulness to the organization had come to an end. He took pictures of my suppliers as an insurance policy. But one of them saw him. Ratted him out. When he couldn't produce the drive, he claimed you had it."

"*Big Cheese*, as Dixon called him," Russ said. "Otherwise known as Ace

Crockett.”

Krueger’s body stiffened. “Who gave you that name?”

Russ’s time to be vague. He shrugged. “All you need to know is we have his name and Portland police are bringing him in. He’ll likely give you up to save his own neck.”

“And you didn’t have to kill Dixon or come after me.” She looked at him with rage burning in her eyes. “Too bad you weren’t as smart as you thought you were and made mistakes. Dropped a knife at the murder scene.”

“You didn’t link it to me though, did you? My DNA or prints aren’t on file except in a military database, and my former high-level clearance prevented you from accessing that.”

“You forgot about the initials engraved on the handle,” Russ said. “They would eventually have led back to you.”

“Not likely. One of my old commanders gave it to me years ago. You would never make the connection.” He lifted his arms. “I’m losing patience. Cuffs off now or we all go out in a bang.”

Russ had no choice. He removed the cuffs.

“And now I’ll be leaving.” Krueger stood, keeping one foot hooked around a chair leg. “Give me your gun. Get mine, as well. And don’t forget your backup.”

Officer training dictated never to give up a weapon, but Russ couldn’t see a way out of this situation without complying. So he did.

“The mighty Maddox failing.” Krueger stared, his eyes hot and angry. “This is just icing on the cake.” One at a time he tucked the weapons in his belt with his free hand.

Russ spotted blue paint on his hand. “I didn’t know you liked to paint models.”

“Who said I did?”

“The paint on your hand. That’s what it’s from, right?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yeah. I paint models of military

vehicles in my spare time.”

Russ nodded but didn't explain why he'd asked. Let the guy wonder. “You know once you step out that door, I'll be on you. Or Reid or the bomb squad will. You can't go anywhere, so give it up.”

“I'm not going alone. I'm taking Tucker with me.” He wrapped his foot more snugly through a rung on the chair and opened the timing mechanism on the bomb. “With the motion sensor dismantled, she'll travel quite nicely.”

Sydney locked eyes with Russ. He expected to see fear or terror, but fury filled her eyes. *Good*. If Krueger somehow got away with her, this determination would keep her alive. But Russ would do his best to stop that from happening.

Krueger removed a wire from the post and drew his gun, to press it against Sydney's temple. He slipped his leg from the chair.

“You,” he said to Russ. “Untie her.”

Russ did as instructed. That was one thing he would gladly do.

Krueger used his free hand to lift Sydney to her feet. She wobbled, looking as if she might keel over. Russ wanted to reach out to her. But the last thing she needed was for Krueger to discover he had feelings for her. That would only incite the crooked cop more.

“We'll be leaving.” Krueger prodded Sydney out the door.

“Everyone back off or Tucker gets it,” Krueger yelled.

Russ had no intention of backing off. He followed the madman outside as he tugged Sydney down the stairs.

She glanced back and cut her eyes to the side at the construction scaffolding clinging to the porch. Krueger walked on that side. Russ took her signal to mean she would elbow him into the bars. Tangle him up and end this.

Not a good plan. Too risky.

He shook his head.

Too late. She'd turned back before seeing him warn her off.

She raised her arm and heaved her body into Krueger. A shot rang out. Krueger crashed into the pipes. The scaffolding shivered, groaning as it moved.

Russ raced forward. Dove for Sydney. Came up short.

Iron and wooden planks tumbled to the ground like a house made of cards raining down on Krueger and Sydney. The crash was deafening, robbing Russ of all sanity.

“No!” His keening voice cut through the inky blackness when he saw Sydney’s twisted body in the wreckage, blood gushing from her neck.

He got to his feet and searched for something to use to stem the bleeding. A prayer welled up in his heart. Exploded in his head. He ripped off his shirt and fell to his knees.

There was so much blood. Too much. He balled his shirt and pressed it against her neck. Panic turned his hands cold. His heart filled with icy fear.

Please, God, don't let Sydney die. Not now. Not after I just found her again.

A steady beeping drew Sydney from sleep. Listening to hushed voices, she opened her eyes and glanced around until pain threatened to split her head in half.

She'd gotten a good enough look though. A hospital room. Bandages circled her neck and head. What had happened? How did she get there?

"She's awake," she heard Russ say from above.

She blinked hard, trying to clear her vision, and felt the warmth of his hand cupping hers. She squeezed and attempted to sit up, but pain and a swirl of dizziness held her to the pillow. She closed her eyes. Felt sleep pulling her back.

"Syd." Russ bent close, his face filling her line of sight. "Don't go back to sleep. I've waited too long for you to wake up to let you leave me again." He turned, worry etching his forehead. "I think we should get the nurse."

"You got it," Reid said and leaned over her. "Welcome back, Sydney. You nearly scared this big dope to death." He leaned close to Sydney's ear and whispered, "Go easy on him. It's been a long time since he opened his heart."

He clapped Russ's back. "Be right back."

Sydney couldn't comprehend what Reid meant, so she took another look around the room. "How long have I been here?"

“We’re going on day three.”

“No wonder I feel so bad.” She smiled, but a stab of pain stopped it from widening. “My head hurts.”

“The scaffolding landed on your head, leaving you with brain swelling. You also suffered a gunshot wound to the neck. Nearly bled out.”

The terrifying events flashed back in her mind.

“I’ve been praying nonstop.” Russ squeezed his eyes closed then reopened them as if the same memories assaulted him. “God got us through this, Syd, and I now know I need Him in my life every day, not just when things are falling apart around me.” He squeezed her hand. “And you’ll never guess who prayed right along with me.”

“Who?”

“Nikki. Can you believe that?”

She shot forward. “Nikki? Oh my gosh, how could I forget to ask about her? You found her then. How is she?”

“She’s fine. Your directions led us to a property owned by Krueger’s mother where they had stashed Nikki.”

Sydney clutched Russ’s shirt to keep the dizziness at bay. “You’re not just saying that?”

“No. She’s in the lounge. Been here all three days. I’ll get her if you want.”

“Please.” Sydney slowly lowered her head to the pillow.

Russ left and Sydney closed her eyes, replaying the events of the chief’s betrayal. It was hard enough to have been the target of a maniac, but then to learn she’d worked alongside the man every day was nearly too much to handle.

The door whooshed open and hit the wall.

Sydney raised the motorized head of her bed. “Hey, kiddo.”

Her sister raced into the room, followed by Russ and someone dawdling behind that Sydney couldn’t make out.

Nikki sat on the side of the bed and grinned. “Wish I could get away with sleeping for three days.”

“I’m happy to see you too.” Sydney smiled. “Seriously, that guy didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“Nah. I’m fine.”

Russ approached the other side of her bed. “She was alone. Tied up like you were, but no bomb. Also nabbed the guy working with Krueger who abducted you. Mel Harwell, a lowlife thug who’s been in and out of prison his whole life. He helped Krueger steal your sidearm while Krueger hacked your phone. Found Harwell in possession of the red dirt bike. He stole it from Dixon and let Krueger use it when he killed Dixon. Harwell’s agreed to testify against Krueger. As did Ace Crockett when the flash drive revealed evidence of his crimes.”

“Guess that means the chief survived.”

“Yeah, but he’s going away for a long time.” Russ smiled with satisfaction. “One of the kids at the party swiped the flash drive and used it for his homework. He didn’t bother to erase the pictures and other data that Dixon had collected. His teacher saw it and called us. Several other of Krueger’s suppliers are behind bars too. And Dixon also lied about having pictures of Nikki on the drive.”

“Enough of the business talk.” Nikki stood. “Someone else’s here to see you. She’s been sitting with me since they brought you in.” She turned toward the door and held out her hand. “C’mon, Mom.”

Sydney’s stomach knotted. How could Nikki possibly think she’d want to see their mother at a time like this? Ever actually?

Nikki twined her fingers through their mother’s, drawing her forward. Love and acceptance that Nikki rarely offered to anyone lingered on her face. Why couldn’t Sydney accept their mother as easily? She tried. Hard. Only raw, aching pain surfaced.

She searched for Russ’s hand and held tight. Her time alone in the dark at

the cabin had given her a new sense of direction. Strengthened her faith and made her realize life was too short not to forgive and give someone a second chance. She should be able to forgive her mother—but even looking at her was proving more difficult than Sydney had thought.

She sent a quick, desperate plea to God for help.

“Sydney,” her mom said, “I’m glad you’re awake. We were worried about you.”

“Thank you.” Her words were formal. Like a stranger.

Their mother’s eyes displayed the hurt Sydney caused.

“I shouldn’t be here.” She backed away.

“No,” Nikki said. “You want to talk to Sydney. That’s all you could talk about while we were waiting for her to wake up. Well she’s awake, so do it.”

“Is it okay?” She nibbled on her lip. “Can we talk, or do you want me to leave?”

Having this conversation was really the last thing Sydney wanted to do. She didn’t want to do it. Not now. Not here. Not ever. But seeing Nikki gazing fondly at their mother reminded Sydney of the promise she’d made to her sister. She’d have to face this at some time or break her word to Nikki. That would destroy their relationship.

Sydney, might as well get it over with now. “What did you want to tell me, Mom?”

Their mother drew in a long breath and made solid eye contact. “I’m sorry. Plain and simple. I hurt you beyond measure, and I’m so sorry for what I did.” Tears glistened in her eyes. “I could give you all kinds of excuses for my behavior. I could say it was your father’s fault for leaving me. But I’m the one who turned to alcohol for comfort. I’m the one who said the horrible things to you. I’m the one who chose to drown my sorrows instead of being the mother you deserved.”

Nikki turned to Sydney. “She really is sorry, Syd. She’s been sober for two years now.”

Her mother nodded. “Two years, and I couldn’t get up the courage to face you.”

“So what’s changed?”

“I had a little health scare a month ago and came face-to-face with my mortality.”

“You’re okay, aren’t you?” Nikki asked.

“Fine.” Her mother looked lovingly at Nikki. “But it was the wake-up call I needed. I didn’t have forever to talk to you.” She started crying. “And I didn’t have forever to spend with you two, to make up for all the things I did wrong or to ask for your forgiveness.”

Nikki leaned forward and laid her head on their mother’s shoulder. “You know I forgive you.”

Searching her mother’s face for deceit, the pain Sydney found melted her heart. This was the same look Russ had when he had talked about how he hurt his family—the same sincere remorse mixed with the hope of forgiveness. Russ had messed up in the same way, and Sydney believed with every ounce of her being that he deserved a second chance. Could she do any less with her mother?

No, but the pain and heartache from the years of mistreatment didn’t ebb. Letting go of the pain and falling into her mother’s arms as easily as Nikki had would take time. But she could offer forgiveness.

“I forgive you.” Sydney’s voice cracked, and she swallowed before going on. “I’d like to spend time with you. See if we can repair our relationship.”

Her mother broke into full-out sobs.

Nikki patted her shoulder. “It’s okay, Mom. We’ll be okay.”

Her crying slowed. “Thank you, Sydney. And thank you for bringing Nikki up to be such a fine young woman. I am so proud of both of you.”

Nikki offered Sydney an apologetic look. “I’m sorry too, Syd. I’ve been making things hard on you. After what Mom told me, I know you were trying to protect me from hearing she wanted to give me away.”

Good. She had really told Nikki everything. No more secrets and Nikki seemed to accept the horrible thing their mother had done. That gave Sydney the courage to accept it too.

A contented sigh slipped out. For once in Sydney's life, she believed everything would be okay. Nikki would listen more and they would work out how their mother would fit in their lives.

Russ squeezed her hand. She turned to focus on him. Not everything was resolved. She still hadn't told Russ how much he meant to her, and if the anguish in his eyes told her anything, it said he had something to tell her as well.

She turned back to her mother. "Do you two mind if I talk to Russ for a few minutes?"

"We need to get some lunch." Her mom clearly understood what was going on.

"But I want to talk to Syd," Nikki whined.

"There's plenty of time for that later." Their mother took Nikki's hand and led her out of the room.

Russ perched on the side of the bed, his expression so warm and tender it stole her breath. She sat up, sliding into his arms and resting her head against the warmth of his chest.

He held her so tightly that breathing was a challenge, but she reveled in the closeness and didn't try to ease away. He moved back and leaned down for a kiss. His touch as soft as down and warm as the heat searing her heart.

He suddenly pulled back.

She peered up at him. "Wait, what? Why stop?"

He met her gaze. "I'm so sorry you wound up here. If I—"

"Oh, no, you don't, Russ." She pulled away. "You are not going to take responsibility for this. I was the one who took off on my own. I shoved Krueger. You had nothing to do with either of those things."

"Relax." He stroked her arms. "I'm not blaming myself for this. When I

heard you were gone, I did my best to find you and keep you safe. You got hurt. I wish it hadn't happened, but I'm through taking blame for things I can't control."

She sat, openmouthed, for a few moments. "Who are you and where is my Russ?"

His lips tipped in that crooked little grin she loved. "I went to see the Babcocks yesterday. They said if they blamed me for not doing the extra search then they'd have to blame themselves for every little thing that led up to being outside the station when Willie was shot. It helped me realize that although I made a mistake, there were so many other things that day that could've changed the course of events, and I couldn't continue to blame myself."

She laid a hand on his arm. "That makes me so happy. You're a terrific guy. You deserve nothing but happiness."

"About that. There's only one way I could be totally happy." He took her hands. "And that's with you by my side. But if you won't consider a future with me, then I have to know it now."

"What? I don't understand. Why wouldn't I consider it?"

He turned the full force of his startling blue eyes on her. "I'm an alcoholic. Recovering, but an alcoholic. I can't promise I'll never take another drink. I hope and pray that I won't. I've overcome it so far, but I have to take things as they come."

She squeezed his hand. "If this whole situation taught me anything, it's that *nothing* in our future is certain. We just need to live our lives one day at a time. I'm ready to see where that will take us. Together."

"You also realize I hope to regain partial custody of Zach. Are you prepared to take on a five-year-old boy?"

"Of course I am. I can't wait to meet your son and get to know him."

"What about Nikki?"

She should've known this was coming. She dropped his hand. "I won't

give her up to be with you, if that's what you're asking."

"What? No. I was going to ask how you think she'll react to us." His eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I'd want you to give her up?"

"Other men have in the past. And you told me that you couldn't raise a teen."

"No, I said I couldn't raise a teenage girl alone like you're doing, but that doesn't mean I would mind helping you with her." He smiled. "In fact, she's kinda growing on me."

"Sorry. I jumped to conclusions. Not that it's an excuse, but I've had to go this alone for so long, I'm a little defensive. I'll try to be more trusting."

"And I'll be more patient." He let out a long breath and drew her into his arms.

"You know," she whispered, "we are doing entirely too much talking, Sheriff Maddox."

"What did you have in mind, Officer Tucker?"

She tipped her head back and gave him a little pout. "You're the superior officer. I leave that up to you."

"About time you acknowledged my expertise." His mouth crashed down on hers.

She clung to him, reveling in the touch of his soft shirt under her fingers. His lips on hers. His strength she could lean on today and in the future. A man who wanted to be with her. With Nikki. Make a family.

She deepened the kiss, telling him everything in her actions.

He clutched her tightly, powerful arms pressing her against a rock wall of muscle.

Every part of her body under his grip ached from the accident. So what?

The past few days were worth everything she went through. A few days of pain for a lifetime of happiness—that was quite a bargain.

Russ swiped his sweaty palms down his pant leg. He didn't recall ever being this nervous in his life. Especially not on Thanksgiving Day when the many savory aromas coming from the kitchen should have his mouth watering. But this was no ordinary Thanksgiving. Today Zach would meet Sydney and Nikki for the first time, and Russ really wanted his son to like them. If he was honest, he *desperately* wanted that to happen.

In the past few weeks, Russ had succeeded with his former wife in working out every other weekend custody of Zach. Man, it made life so much richer for Russ. Almost perfect. He just needed Sydney, Zach, and Nikki to connect. He didn't want to force things, and due to the custody changes that threw Zach a curveball, Russ held off the meeting.

Russ told Zach he was dating Sydney and about Nikki, but not much more than that. Russ had purposely chosen a family get-together at Valley View where Zach would feel at home to meet them in a way that held less pressure.

The doorbell rang, and Russ nearly jumped off the couch.

"Chill, man," Ryan said from beside him. "It'll be fine. Sydney and Nikki are pretty likable."

"He's right." Ryan's fiancée, Mia, leaned forward from where she sat next to him, her arm entwined in the crook of Ryan's arm. "I can't wait until

you put a ring on her finger, and we can become sisters.”

Russ headed for the door, hoping to beat his mother there. She was a great person but also the speak-before-thinking kind, and she just might say something that would make things harder for Sydney and Nikki. Not intentionally. His mother loved and accepted everyone unconditionally. In fact, Russ wished he could be a bit more like her, but if he ever had been, his law enforcement days had eliminated that.

He let Ryan’s and Mia’s comments sink in on the way to the door. Did they make him any less nervous? No. This was just too important.

Russ pulled the door open and flashed his best smile at Sydney, Nikki, and their mother. His gaze traveled immediately to Sydney and lingered. She wore a simple rust-colored dress made of some sort of sweater material that clung to her every curve, leaving him gaping.

“Yeah,” Nikki said. “I told her the dress was too much for Gobble Gobble Day.”

“Nikki,” their mother swatted her hand at Nikki, “Sydney looks beautiful.”

“Agreed and not too much at all.” Russ broadened his smile for Sydney. “Perfect.”

Nikki mocked gagging. “You two are so mushy all the time, I can hardly stand it.”

Russ forced his attention to Nikki. “Then maybe you should come in and meet everyone else so you don’t have to hang with us.”

“Glad to.” Nikki gave his shoulder a playful punch and started past him.

He grabbed her wrist and gave her a quick hug. “Thanks for coming, kiddo. Go easy on my son.”

She squeezed him and stepped back. “I’m not a monster, you know?”

“I know. You’re pretty great for a teenager.”

She punched him again, but laughed and flounced into the room, drawing everyone’s attention.

Russ stepped back. “Come in. Please. And welcome, Toni. Glad you could come too.”

“I’m honored to be invited.” She smiled as she passed him, far less dramatically than her youngest daughter.

Sydney stepped in, and he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Had to get that in before anyone caught us.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I was kind of thinking of Zach. You know, until he meets and falls in love with you too.”

She rubbed her hands together. “My plan exactly.”

“Don’t keep your sweetheart standing there all day.” Wearing one of her long flowing dresses in wild colors, his mother inched up to them. “Bring her in and introduce her around.”

She linked arms with Sydney and marched into the large family room where Russ had spent most every Thanksgiving of his life. His mother made the introductions for Toni to those she hadn’t met of the group which was large. His dad was in the kitchen, but each of the Shadow Lake Survival team members were sprawled out around the room as was Reid and his daughter Jessie, who sat on his lap reading a book.

Zach looked up from playing with his Legos on the coffee table. Russ didn’t know how his son would react to Sydney and her family but his son’s gaze didn’t hold any animosity, just curiosity.

“Hey, little dude.” Nikki dropped down by him. “Mind if I help you build?”

Zach squinted at her. “I guess. You can help, but *I* tell you what to do.”

“I see,” she said and looked up at Russ. “You’re your dad’s mini-me.”

Russ arched an eyebrow.

“Always likes to be in charge,” she clarified.

Zach ignored the comment and pointed at a small car Russ had seen him build. “You can take that car apart. I made it last week, and I need the parts.”

“This is impressive.” Sydney knelt by the table and picked up another car. “You’re good at building.”

“I know,” Zach said, not looking up. “My dad tells me that all the time.”

“Well, he’s right.”

He looked at Sydney and arched an eyebrow. “You want to build too?”

Russ held his breath as this could be the point when things fell apart. Everything depended on Sydney’s answer.

“I will if you want me to, but otherwise I’d be happy to just watch.”

“Okay.” He turned his attention back to the structure he was working on.

Good. Things would be fine. Russ started breathing normally again. “Can I get you guys something to drink? Mom made a great punch.”

“I’ll take some, please,” Nikki said.

“That sounds nice.” Sydney flashed a warm smile up at him, and it was all he could do to walk away. But he did, stopping on the way to see if Toni wanted a glass of punch too.

In the kitchen, his dad was lifting the golden brown turkey from a large electric roaster.

“Give the bird a little rest,” Poppy, Reid’s cook and housekeeper, said. “Then we eat in about thirty minutes.”

Russ smiled at Poppy, whose wild red curls that had escaped her usual braids were damp with perspiration in the steaming kitchen. Her freckles covering high cheekbones were dusted with flour. She’d been employed as their family cook and housekeeper for as long as he could remember and was like family to them.

“Sydney and her family here yet?” his dad asked.

“Just getting some punch for them.” Russ grabbed the ladle in the rainbow-colored sherbet punch and poured it into three crystal glasses that had belonged to his grandparents.

“I’ll help you carry so I can meet Toni.” His dad picked up one of the glasses.

Russ grabbed the other two, but looked at Poppy before leaving. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Hah! Like you’ve ever been any help in the kitchen.” She waved her hands. “More burned things than a person can handle. But thanks for asking.”

Russ laughed. She was so right. He’d tried to learn cooking as a kid with Poppy but he’d failed. Just wasn’t his thing. He followed his dad out and introduced him to Toni then took the other glasses to the coffee table where Zach and Nikki were engaged in an animated discussion of dinosaurs.

Zach eyed Nikki. “How come you know so much about them?”

“Because I was little once and love them.” Nikki took a glass from Russ. “Sydney’s like the best sister ever and let me talk about them all the time.”

“You remember that?” Sydney took her glass too.

“Yeah, I must’ve bored you to death.”

“Not boring. Fascinating.”

“I like you,” Zach announced to Sydney.

“I like you too.” Sydney squeezed Zach’s hand. “You’re a great kid like your dad said.”

Zach beamed. “I get to spend the nights with him now, too. Will you live with us when you marry him?”

“Whoa, sport.” Russ held up his hands. “No one said we were getting married.”

Zach scrunched his eyes and looked at Russ. “Mom said you probably would, and I should be on my best behavior today so I didn’t ruin your chances, whatever that means.”

Russ almost burst out in laughter at the comment, but his son’s serious face said it would be a mistake to laugh. “I appreciate that, but Sydney was right. You’re a terrific little guy, and you just have to be you.”

Zach let out a long breath and turned back to his Legos. “Nikki knows dinosaurs so she’s pretty cool too. For a girl.”

“You don’t know the half of it, kid.” Nikki ruffled Zach’s hair. “You’ll

get to see my full awesomeness over time 'cause you're so right. They are totally going to get married."

"Is everyone okay with that if we do?" Sydney asked, surprising Russ by her blunt question.

"I am," Zach said matter-of-factly and not looking up from his Legos. "But I won't call you mom. I have a mom."

"A very nice one from what I've heard," Sydney said.

"Yeah, the best."

"And you, Nikki?" Russ asked. "You good with it?"

"Yeah, I mean if you get too mushy I can always go to Mom's place to get away from it."

Russ laughed and Sydney rolled her eyes.

Poppy came out of the kitchen and swiped a hand across her forehead. "If you all want to start making your way to the table, we'll get the food served soon."

"Oh, boy." Zach jumped up. "Poppy promised me a whole leg this year."

He raced for the table and took a seat.

Sydney stood and took Russ's hand. "He's adorable."

"I think so. I mean I might not use the word adorable, but he's a great kid, thanks to his mom."

"Don't sell yourself short." She looked him in the eyes. "You've done what you could since you've been sober."

He shook his head. "I still can't believe how understanding you're being about my past. I pray I never let you down."

"You won't."

He prayed she was right as he would never want to see the same revulsion in her eyes that he'd witnessed with Amy. "Zach can stay for a couple of hours after we eat, but then I have to take him to Amy's parents. And Nikki is going to your mom's for a while. I thought we could go to your place then and I can see the final result."

“Sure, if I can move. Everything smells so good I’m sure I’ll be in a food coma and might not be able to budge.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you. Haul you out in a wheelbarrow if I have to.” He grinned.

She raised her eyebrow. “You trying to get me alone, good sir?”

“You know I am.” He pulled out her chair at the table and for the first time ever was looking forward to the end of his Thanksgiving meal more than the food itself.



High on her successful meeting with Zach, Sydney took the water glasses to the family room but stopped to survey her townhouse filled with all new belongings. The open space, encompassing a kitchen, family room, and dining area with rich wood floors and muted walls, was exactly as she’d envisioned. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the moonlit lake, glistening much like the happiness sparkling inside her chest.

She might have lost everything in the explosion, but now she and Nikki were given a fresh start. Since the construction foreman had been fired for embezzling, it had taken another month to finish the project, but they were finally settled in.

Russ had helped every step of the way, choosing flooring, appliances, and colors, and the place felt like *their* home, which Sydney hoped it would be someday.

She glanced at Russ sitting on the sofa with her Bible in hand, and her heart flip-flopped. With Nikki in the picture, she didn’t often get Russ to herself, but they carved out time whenever they could.

She approached with the water.

He set down the Bible and patted the sofa cushion next to him, confusion wrinkling his brow. “I have another Bible question for you.”

“What?” She set the glasses on the table and took a seat close to him. She offered a quick prayer of thanks for the interest Russ had placed on his faith since her rescue.

“I just read the verse in Romans that says God works all things for good. Which I can see is true in our situation. Bad things happened to us, but if they hadn’t, we wouldn’t be together.” Russ reached over and lifted her hair over her shoulder. “And finding you is nothing but good.”

She shivered at his touch. “So what’s the problem?”

“Couldn’t God have brought us together in an easier way? Maybe without so much pain involved?”

She smiled. “Of course He could. But without the pain and suffering, you wouldn’t have found your way back to Him. Adversity is often a bridge to God.”

“Or away from Him.” Russ’s pain-filled gaze reminded her how he’d turned to alcohol in his last crisis.

“Yeah, that can happen too,” she said softly and took his hand. “But fortunately for us, this time you chose the route to God instead of away from Him.”

Russ drew her into his arms. “With you by my side, I’ll never head in that other direction again.”

Happy beyond belief, she snuggled closer.

“Mmm,” he whispered. “This is nice. I could really get used to it.”

“Why, Sheriff Maddox.” She faked a Southern drawl to lighten the mood and leaned back. “Are you asking me to join forces with you again?”

He smiled back. “Why, yes, I am, Officer Tucker. I hope this investigation will last for the rest of our lives.” He let his finger dip under her chin and slide up and over her lips.

She groaned. “I can’t think when you’re doing that.”

“Mmm,” he said and planted kisses on her cheek. “That’s the plan.”

She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back so she could see

his face again. “If I tell you that I love you, will you stop tormenting me like this?”

“Why don’t you try it and see?”

She laid a hand on the side of his face. “You are perfect for me in so many ways, Russ. I love you.” Their eyes connected. The same emotion was reflected back to her from Russ’s eyes, but he nudged her away.

He slid his hand into his pocket and drew out a shiny ring box. “I’ve already asked Nikki for your hand, and she’s given us her blessing. So all that’s left to do is for me to ask and for you to say yes.”

Sydney knew she was staring, but she really hadn’t expected him to ask her to marry him tonight.

He knelt down on one knee and opened the box. “I love you so much, Syd. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she said without even having to think about it.

He slipped the diamond solitaire glistening under the overhead light on her finger and drew her into his arms. He kissed her. Warm. Insistent. Infused with love.

She settled against him. Kissed him back. Him. The man she would marry. Her heart threatened to explode with happiness.

A key turning in the door grabbed her attention, spoiling the mood. Nikki. Had to be Nikki.

Sydney pulled back, disappointed that their perfect moment had to end. “Nikki.”

But Russ didn’t seem to mind. Smiling widely, he went to open the door.

Nikki gazed expectantly up at Russ. “You ask her yet?”

“Yeah, I asked her.”

“What did she say?” she demanded.

“I’m right here,” Sydney said. “You can ask me.”

Russ beamed. “She said yes.”

Nikki fist-bumped Russ. “See, I told you she loves you. And you were all

worried.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

“You so were.” Nikki smirked. “But I don’t know why. We both kinda like you.”

Russ rubbed his knuckles across Nikki’s head. “I love you too, kid. Now go to your room.”

Nikki shot a playful punch to Russ’s arm, then ran across the room and gave Sydney a quick hug.

“Thanks for making us a family,” she whispered and then shot out of the room.

Russ pulled Sydney close. She snuggled closer, letting her head rest against his chest.

She smiled. At first, she’d only thought of him as a lawman. A strong, capable man who’d committed his life to protecting others, but she’d found so much more. A warm heart, generous spirit, unfaltering devotion. A whole man. The perfect package.

She could ask for nothing more.



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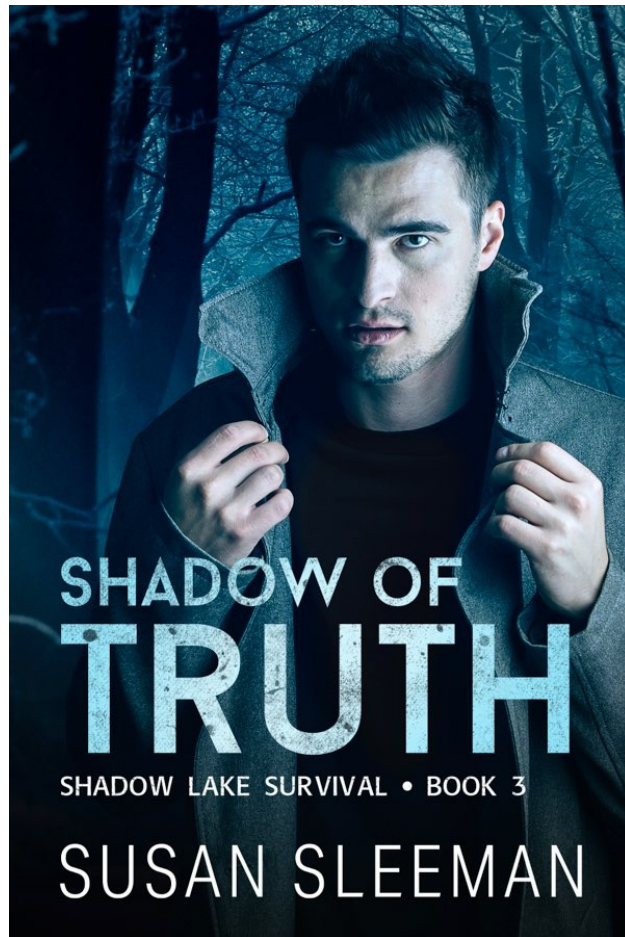
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