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MARY ALFORD



THE  
PHILANTHROPISTS



the CHAMPION

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# **THE CHAMPION**

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**THE PHILANTHROPISTS**

**BOOK 1**

**MARY ALFORD**

## The Champion

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# CONTENTS

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[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

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## CHAPTER ONE

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In the distance, lightning flashed across dark skies occasionally touching ground. The heat of the day had only slightly lessened with the approaching nightfall.

Today had been a gut-wrenching day. More than ever, Doctor Aaron Carson needed to be alone because what happened inside the walls of the clinic had sent him into a tailspin.

Aaron stood at the back of the adobe building that served as the clinic for the Jicarilla Apache Nation and gazed at the majestic northern New Mexico mountains and mesas that bordered Colorado.

Thunder rumbled the earth around him. A storm was coming soon. The storm building in his heart had been in the making for years. Against the darkness surrounding the reservation, lights dotted the rugged terrain from the handful of houses around the clinic. *Handful* was the key. The reservation, located in the upper reaches of the San Juan River Basin and the Rio Chama in north central New Mexico, straddled the Continental Divide. It was sparse and spread out. The perfect place to disappear.

He'd come here a little more than a year ago after he'd lost everything. Back then, all Aaron wanted was to be left alone with his misery. Only it hadn't worked out that way. He'd saved a shooting victim and wound up agreeing to act as the temporary doctor for the clinic until a replacement could be found. So far, there had been no takers for the position.

Aaron headed away from the adobe building until the lights of the clinic were behind him. “Why? Why did you let this happen?” He raised his fist to the sky demanding answers just as he had every night since the event in Afghanistan began his spiral into darkness.

“No.” He wouldn’t think about that now. Every time he closed his eyes, he relived those moments with excruciating clarity. The fear on his friend’s face right before he’d died.

Today, despite all his efforts, Aaron had lost his youngest patient. The eight-year-old boy had been brought in by his parents, the Rainwaters, after being struck by a vehicle.

With the boy’s death, all Aaron’s old doubts flooded back to taunt him that he’d failed once again. First in Afghanistan and then later with his wife. Was he even fit to call himself a doctor anymore?

In the distance, the lightning continued to shoot across the sunset sky. Not even the noise of thunder could drown out the mournful cries of the boy’s parents. Aaron would remember those sounds for the rest of his life. Not because he’d heard it coming from the distraught parents, but because that same animalistic sound had emanated from him many times during the past year.

A sound from behind caught his attention. Aaron turned as Tribal Police Chief Rachel Altaha headed his way.

“How are the parents?” he asked and then cringed. He knew how they were.

“Devastated.”

Aaron had first met Rachel when he’d brought the shooting victim into the clinic and realized they were in between physicians. Rachel had been called in to investigate the shooting. He’d liked her right away although he suspected she had her doubts about him, and he could certainly understand why. When a person suddenly shows up on “the res,” it usually meant they were running away from something.

“Caleb is their only child.” Rachel brushed strands of her raven hair away from her face while she studied the

approaching storm.

The crack in her voice had him studying her profile. Today had been a hard day for them all.

“You did everything you could, Aaron.”

But his best wasn't good enough, just like it hadn't been for Sam in Afghanistan, or for Miranda the night she died. He was the chief of surgery at one of the largest hospitals in New York City, and he hadn't been able to save his own wife because....

*All your fault...*

Rachel's piercing amber eyes searched his face leaving Aaron unsettled.

They'd finally gotten beyond the “Doctor and Chief” phase. Aaron was pretty sure she'd looked him up and knew most of his ugly truths.

“Any news on the driver of the truck?”

Rachel shook her head. “And no one saw anything.” Her lips thinned. “That the driver refused to stop and render aid leads me to believe Caleb was struck by someone who was drunk or doing something illegal.”

She'd told him once that one of the biggest deterrents to solving crimes on the reservation was convincing people to talk. They were more afraid of the criminals than the crime.

As the last rays of daylight faded to black, the wind picked up across the desert floor sweeping dust their way.

As Aaron shielded his eyes, a chill sped down his back. Something bad was coming. He could feel it. Just like he'd felt it the night Miranda had died. And the night he'd failed Sam.



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## CHAPTER TWO

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Headlights flashed across the front of the clinic. Chief Rachel Altaha turned away from the man who was as much a mystery to her as he'd been the first day he arrived. Why would the former chief of surgery at a well-known hospital choose to come to the res to live? He hadn't even intended to practice medicine. Aaron had been forced into it.

"That'll be the coroner out of Albuquerque." Rachel faced Aaron. "Are you coming?" She was still undecided about him. As handsome as he was, Aaron was hiding something. Would it affect her community?

While Aaron mostly kept to himself, she'd seen him occasionally at one of the handful of dining establishments around the res, and he attended the Tuesday AA at the rec hall. Aaron lived in a small adobe house that had to be a far cry from where she'd imagined him living in New York. He jogged every morning as she was heading into work.

What she did know about him was that Aaron was in his mid-thirties and in good shape. His dark blond hair had lightened through the summer months. He had emerald green eyes that held something in them that she'd connected with. Grief. Those who went through it recognized their fellow mourners. Kind of an unspoken bond. Though her husband, Alex, had been gone almost three years now, her own grief appeared to be part of her soul.

Aaron cast another look toward the approaching storm before heading her way. He stepped past her to open the door, then waited for her to go in first.

Dr. Amanda Lucera and her assistant had just entered the clinic when Rachel stepped inside.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” Rachel told the medical examiner.

“Of course.” Amanda shook her hand and nodded to Aaron. They’d had occasion to meet during the shooting incident. Amanda had been the ME for more than ten years.

“The boy is through there,” Rachel said quietly. She led the doctors to the exam room where Caleb’s parents wept over their child while nurse, Lenna Nascha, silently watched. Both parents turned. Caleb’s mother swiped at the tears flowing down her cheek at Amanda’s presence.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Amanda told the couple. “I have to take Caleb with me now, but I promise you, I will treat him as if he were my own son.”

Caleb’s dad slowly nodded and put his arm around his wife, drawing her close while Lenna escorted the parents out into the waiting room. Amanda and her assistant worked gently but professionally to place Caleb’s body into the body bag and onto the gurney and into the waiting room.

“As soon as we’re able to release Caleb to you, I will call,” Amanda told the parents before turning to Rachel. “I’ll send you as much information as I can soon.”

Caleb’s parents followed Amanda out into the evening.

While Lenna began cleaning the exam room, Rachel went to the window and watched as Amanda’s van rumbled down the dirt road. Caleb’s parents seemed rooted to the spot outside the clinic for the longest time. Slowly, they got into their battered old truck and left.

“I can’t even imagine what they’re going through.” Rachel rubbed her hand across her eyes. “This has been one of the worst days ever.” She turned in time to see Aaron flinch and remembered he’d lost his wife a little more than a year earlier when a driver had crossed lanes and crashed into the car his wife had been driving. None of the details came from Aaron. He never talked about his life.

Aaron quickly recovered. “It’s been one I’d like to forget.”

Rachel couldn’t imagine how he felt not being able to save the child. “This isn’t your fault, Aaron.”

Aaron slowly faced her. “It doesn’t make losing a child any easier, does it?”

She scanned his handsome face before fixing on those green eyes that held so much emotion. “I guess it doesn’t. We’ll find out who did this.” Yet all she and her team had to go on so far was a vague description of a white pickup truck with rust on its hood and a cracked windshield. Rachel had one of her officers run the description for any vehicles fitting it on the reservation. They’d come up empty. Was the driver simply passing through the area? If so, they might never find the perp.

The first drops of rain fell as gently as this horrible day had started. Rachel had been driving into work when the call came in of a hit and run.

Another flash of lightning preceded a clap of thunder that rumbled the building. Rachel jumped. She hated the thunderstorms that moved across the valley. The thought chased through her mind before a deluge of rain hit.

“Looks like you’re stuck here until the storm passes, Chief,” Lenna said from behind them. “I’ll put on some fresh coffee.”

Rachel had had too much already, but she wouldn’t say no. “Thanks, Lenna.” She and Lenna had gone to school together here on the res along with her friend, Jasmine. They’d been inseparable. Until that summer when everything changed. She shoved the memories of Jasmine down deep because the guilt was too much to bear.

As Rachel continued to watch the rain, something caught her attention. She stepped closer to the glass. “Is that... Someone’s coming.” Aaron leaned in behind her. The faint scent of his cologne drifted to her nose. She put a little space between them. Why did she have this reaction whenever he was close?

If he noticed, he didn't acknowledge it. Rachel's attention returned to the approaching vehicle. "They're chasing someone." The headlights picked up a figure running toward the clinic.

"Stay here and keep away from the window." Rachel grabbed Aaron's arm and shoved him toward the back. "Keep Lenna out of danger." She returned to the front and yanked the door open. With her weapon raised, she stepped out onto the porch.

The person silhouetted by the headlights was a woman, her long hair flying out behind her. The woman glanced over her shoulder as the vehicle drew closer.

Rachel flew from the porch and ran toward the advancing vehicle. "Stop. Police!"

She doubted if the driver heard her command, but he obviously spotted the weapon and braked hard.

The woman stumbled and fell to the ground. Rachel carefully approached the vehicle on the passenger side. The person behind the wheel was nothing but a shadow. She realized then that the interior lights weren't working. A deliberate attempt to keep anyone from being able to identify him.

"Kill the engine and get your hands in the air."

A smatter of terrifying seconds ticked by. Instead of complying, the driver whipped the vehicle around—a light-colored truck. Through the light coming from the headlights, she saw the dent in the side that sent chills down her spine. This was the vehicle that hit Caleb Rainwater.

"I said get out of the vehicle with your hands in the air. Now."

The driver ducked down and brought something up. He pointed it at her. A weapon. Rachel dove for the ground seconds before a string of shots flew past where she'd been standing. She flipped on her side and opened fire. The shots tinged off the side of the vehicle. The driver floored the truck

and spun out, spewing mud everywhere as he barreled down the road at breakneck speed.

Rachel hit the radio mic on her shoulder. “Dispatch, come in.”

“I’m here, Chief.” Priddy Sala, the dispatcher who had worked for three previous tribal chiefs, picked up right away.

“The driver of the vehicle who hit Caleb Rainwater was just at the clinic.” Rachel squinted but made out only a partial plate number. “Have AJ and Harley head him off.” She explained about the woman.

“Oh, my dear word. Is she okay, Chief?”

“I don’t know.” After what happened to Caleb, nothing about the high-speed getaway was a surprise, with the exception of the woman. Who was she, and how did she fit into what happened here today?

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Aaron reached Rachel's side and knelt next to the young woman's crumpled body was covered in blood.

"She's in bad shape. Let's get her inside." Aaron gathered the young woman into his arms and carried her to the clinic.

"What on earth happened out there?" Lenna must have seen them coming and opened the door.

"We're not sure," Rachel told her while Aaron carried the injured woman into the exam room and placed her on the table. She'd lost consciousness.

The woman's face was swollen and bloody as if someone had used it as a punching bag. Ligature marks on her wrists and ankles indicated she'd been bound at one time.

Aaron did a careful examination of her ribs. "I don't think anything's broken. Let's see if we can treat her wounds." With the injuries it was hard to determine her exact age, but she appeared to be quite young.

The young woman's eyes shot open. The terror in them told a story all its own.

"You're safe. No one's going to hurt you," Aaron tried to assure her as she shrank away. Her frantic gaze scanned the room.

Rachel stepped close and identified herself. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Her eyes became as big as saucers. She frantically shook her head. "He said he'd kill me if I told anyone."

“That’s not going to happen.” Rachel’s confident response came swiftly. “What’s your name?”

The young woman stared at Rachel with frightened eyes.

When Aaron attempted to clean her wound, she jerked away.

“He’s a doctor. You’ve been hurt. Let him help you. We can talk more once the doctor is finished.”

The young woman latched onto Rachel’s hand before she could step away. “Don’t leave me.”

Rachel shot Aaron a startled look before answering. “I’m not going anywhere.”

With Lenna’s help, they gently cleaned the woman’s facial injuries while she clutched Rachel’s hand and didn’t look at Aaron.

“I’d like to do a more thorough exam with your permission,” Aaron said once they’d treated the surface wounds.

The words had barely cleared his lips when she pushed back. “No. I don’t want you to touch me anymore.”

Aaron couldn’t imagine what she’d gone through. “Okay, but you’ll tell me if you’re in pain?”

She slowly nodded.

Rachel placed her free hand over the young woman’s. “You’re safe here, but I need your name so that I can contact your family. They must be worried about you.” She didn’t appear old enough to be on her own.

“No one is looking for me,” she whispered with tears glistening in her eyes.

She was either a runaway or abandoned.

“Please trust me,” Rachel said softly. Her voice held so much sincerity that the young woman finally opened up.

“It’s Sage. Sage Chino. I lived in Albuquerque once... before—”

“Before what?” Rachel asked but Sage didn’t answer.

“How old are you?” The question slipped out before Aaron could stop it. Rachel tossed him a look reminding him this was her interview. “Sorry,” he murmured.

“Chief, are you there?” The dispatcher’s voice came through Rachel’s radio.

“I have to take this, Sage, but I’ll be right back.” She stepped away.

“I’m fifteen.”

Aaron almost didn’t catch Sage’s whispered response.

“But I don’t even remember being a kid.” Her voice caught over a sob. Aaron touched her shoulder and she flinched away. What had this girl gone through in her young life?

Rachel returned. He could tell from her grim expression that the truck got away.

“Sage was just telling me she’s fifteen,” Aaron offered.

Rachel’s intense amber eyes shifted to the young woman. “Do you know the man who hurt you?”

Sage immediately grew fearful. “Please, I can’t talk about him. He told me he’d kill me if I did.”

Rachel clasped her hand once more. “He won’t. I can protect you, Sage. I won’t let him near you again, but we need your help if we’re going to keep him from hurting anyone else.”

Sage swallowed several times. “He already has.” The words were little more than a whisper, but the meaning behind them was clear. This was no isolated incident. The man who had taken Sage was probably part of a human trafficking ring.

“He has other girls?” Rachel asked.

Sage nodded.

“How many?”

“I’m not sure. Several.” Tears pooled down her face.

“Do you know his name?” Rachel asked gently.



Sage shook her head. "I only know him as Zorro."

"She needs rest, Chief," Aaron warned.

Rachel pulled in a breath and slowly let it go. "You're right. Of course, you're right." She faced the young woman. "Try and get some rest now. I'll just be in the other room."

Sage slowly let her hand go.

"Lenna, can you keep an eye on Sage for us?" Rachel asked.

"Sure thing." Lenna smiled down at the young woman. "I'll sit with you."

Sage closed her eyes. Rachel and Aaron stepped into the waiting room.

Rachel sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "We need a description from Sage if we have a prayer of finding this man. No doubt he's only a small part of a larger human trafficking organization."

Aaron had seen and heard things during his time here on the res. Girls disappeared, never to be found again. Some ran away while others...

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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Rachel scraped her hand across her eyes. “This is horrible. That poor young woman. Who knows how many others just like Sage are out there terrified and thinking no one cares about them.”

Aaron touched her arm. “I know you’re worried.”

“That’s an understatement. Aaron, girls go missing around here all the time. I know firsthand...” She stopped because she’d said too much.

“You were a victim of human trafficking?” His full attention was on her.

“Not me,” she said quietly. “My best friend.”

As always, the pain broke free from its hiding place, and she struggled to hold onto her composure. “It was the summer before our high school graduation. Jasmine and I were hanging out by the lake like most teenagers did in the summer. There were lots of kids around.” She remembered the day as if it were yesterday.

“It was getting late and close to my curfew. I tried to persuade Jasmine to leave with me, but she wanted to stay.” Her gaze found his. “I never saw her again. The chief at the time searched everywhere. They interviewed as many kids from that night as they could find. He even dragged the lake, but no Jasmine.” She swallowed deeply.

“I’m so sorry,” Aaron mumbled.

“That was the first time I’d ever become aware there was such a thing as human trafficking. It was eye opening to learn that dozens of girls went missing every year. Most never recovered.”

“Is that why you became a police officer?”

She slowly nodded. “I bugged the former chief all the time because I wasn’t about to let Jasmine’s case disappear. Even now I spend hours searching through databases for her. I owe her so much.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Rachel. You can’t blame yourself.”

How could she not. She should never have left Jasmine.

“The rain’s letting up,” Rachel murmured because the room had suddenly become crowded. Memories of Jasmine had escaped from her head and were everywhere around her reminding Rachel that she’d failed her best friend. How could she help Sage?

“I’m going to check in with my people and see what we have.” Talking about Jasmine always brought up the guilt she harbored in her heart.

She stuck her head in to check on Sage.

Lenna smiled. “She’s sleeping. The best thing for her now.”

“Take care of her.” She returned to the clinic’s waiting room and stepped out onto the porch where a light rain fell. Rachel radioed Priddy and gave her the details of what they had so far. “Sage said she’s from Albuquerque. See if you can find any family members.”

“I’ll get right on it, Chief.”

“Have AJ meet me here with his evidence kit.” She hated having to do it, but they would have to run a rape kit on Sage to see if they could collect any DNA left behind as well as document her injuries and gather whatever evidence the rain hadn’t destroyed from Sage’s clothing.

“You got it, Chief.” Priddy paused. “How is she?”

Rachel stared out at the rain-soaked world around her. “Terrified. She has no idea how lucky she is to be alive.”

“You think this is about human trafficking?”

That had been foremost in Rachel’s thoughts, and yet she wasn’t sure. “Possibly, but normally they wouldn’t try to kill one of their girls.” The driver of the truck had definitely been trying to run Sage over. Rachel shuddered.

“Unless she saw something she wasn’t supposed to see.”

Priddy’s words sped through Rachel’s head. It was obvious Sage had been held for some time. Had she unintentionally witnessed something that made her captor want to get rid of her before she could be a threat?

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Aaron had serious doubts about moving Sage. She'd been through so much and was clearly traumatized. He had no idea if she had any internal injuries or not.

Since the evidence-collection process, Sage hadn't voiced a single word.

"She's in danger here," Rachel reiterated. "I'm going to take her to my house where she'll be safe."

Aaron understood everything she was saying was true, but he felt responsible for Sage. He wasn't about to let her out of his sight. "I'd like to go with you to keep an eye on her."

Rachel's brows shot up.

Before she could argue against it, he said, "That she was able to escape a killer in her condition is amazing, but there could be injuries that we're not aware of."

"All right," she said at last. "I'm going to have my people meet me over at my house so we can go over the details of the case. AJ should be back from the crime lab soon. Hopefully, we'll get a hit on the DNA."

Aaron realized this was going to be one of the biggest crimes of Rachel's career.

"I keep a sleeping bag in my car. From time to time, I end up staying here when I have a lot of paperwork to handle. It's just easier," he said to her curious look.

She accepted his answer. "I'm going to radio Harley and have her meet us at my place." Rachel stepped away to speak

with her officer.

Aaron went back to the exam room to where Sage waited. Lenna had helped the young woman change into a set of green scrubs, and Sage was now sitting up, her arms wrapped around her body in a defensive gesture.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

Sage didn't look at him.

Lenna gave him a sympathetic smile as he tried again. “We're going to move you to a safe place really soon.”

The terror on Sage's face was all-consuming.

Before he could reassure her, Rachel came into the room.

“Everything's set up.” Rachel told him before addressing Sage. “You're coming home with me where I can watch over you until we catch this person. Dr. Carson is coming as well.”

Sage's fear gave way and she finally spoke up. “You won't catch him. He's a ghost. He doesn't exist in the real world.”

Rachel exchanged another look with Aaron before adding, “There's no such thing as ghosts. And I promise you we will arrest him and make him pay for what he did to you and to others.”

Aaron believed Rachel would do everything in her power to fulfill her promise to Sage, but he of all people knew ghosts were real. His had haunted him every day.

“Let's get you outside. I've moved my cruiser behind the clinic.”

“I don't need help,” Sage said before Aaron could assist.

Rachel stepped from the clinic and hurried to the SUV's passenger door, her gaze sweeping the countryside. Sage moved at a slower pace. Once she was safely inside the cruiser, Rachel closed the door and came back to where both Aaron and Lenna stood.

“I want you to close the clinic,” she told Lenna. “Until we catch this guy, it's too dangerous for you to stay here alone.” She held up her hand when Lenna started to protest. “Have the

calls routed to your cell phone. You can do what you can to assist by phone. The more serious cases will have to go to the next town or Albuquerque.”

Lenna slowly agreed and Rachel smiled. “Good.” She faced Aaron. “Do you know my address?”

“I do. I’ll be right behind you, but I just want to help Lenna close the clinic first.”

Rachel nodded and returned to her vehicle. Soon, the taillights of her cruiser disappeared.

Aaron followed Lenna inside and locked the door. He waited while she gathered her things and forwarded the clinic’s phone to her cell.

Together, they walked out.

“Be careful,” Aaron told her. For some reason, he couldn’t get over the feeling that what happened today was just the beginning of something dreadful.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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Headlights appeared in the distance behind her cruiser. Rachel squinted into her rearview mirror. It was probably Aaron.

She noticed Sage watching the lights in the mirror as well.

“I’m sure it’s the doctor.”

As much as she was trying to reassure Sage, that niggling at the back of her head told her to be on guard. She called Harley’s cell phone. “Where are you?”

“Almost to your house. I have the mug books for our victim to look through.” Harley hesitated. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Rachel did her best to give Harley information without alerting Sage further to what her gut was warning was trouble.

“I’ll reroute to your location and call AJ for backup. I’m five minutes out.”

Rachel ended the call and realized the vehicle behind her had closed the space in the time she’d been on the phone.

She picked up her speed. The driver did the same, its headlights on bright in an attempt to disorient her enough to where she couldn’t see the make of the vehicle.

“Hang on.” Rachel spotted a road to her left and whipped the cruiser onto it. The vehicle tailing her did the same. She was able to see the make of the type of vehicle. A white pickup truck. Dread settled around her shoulders.



“Oh, no,” Sage whispered, her terrified eyes searching Rachel’s. “It’s him.”

“Get down as low as you can in the seat.” Rachel gently pushed Sage down. A heartbeat later, the truck rammed her from behind.

Rachel’s head flew forward. She was grateful for the seatbelt that prevented her from slamming into the steering wheel as she struggled to keep the cruiser on the road.

Sage screamed, then moaned. Another blow had Rachel careening across the road down through the ditch and out across the desert.

Rachel fought the trajectory of the cruiser with all her strength as a group of trees came up quickly. She stomped on the brakes and clutched the steering wheel in a death grip, but it was useless. The cruiser struck one tree hard. This time Rachel’s head slammed into the steering wheel. She blacked out briefly. When she came to, her hands still clutched the steering wheel. Rachel let out a shaky sigh and shook her head to clear away the cobwebs. The truck had stopped in the middle of the road.

Rachel quickly radioed her location and told Harley what happened.

“I’m close,” Harley assured her. “Are you or the passenger hurt?”

Rachel looked into Sage’s frightened face. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” Sage whispered. In a state of shock, she tried to sit up.

“Stay down,” Rachel told Sage and then returned to the radio. “The truck that ran us off the road is still here..” Rachel craned her head around. So far, she didn’t see her people.

“I see your lights,” Harley told her. “AJ’s with me. Stay put. We’re almost there.”

But she couldn’t hide in the cruiser when the killer was so close. She couldn’t let him get away.

“Stay here.” Rachel told Sage and unholstered her weapon.

Sage grabbed her arm. “He’ll kill you.”

“I’ll be okay. Stay out of sight.” Rachel climbed out and headed toward the truck at a fast pace. The driver must have seen her coming or perhaps heard the approaching sirens because he peeled out before Rachel could reach him.

She fired at the rear tires. Bullets tinged off the back bumper of the truck. She’d missed her target. Rachel tapped the radio on her shoulder. “AJ, I need you to go after the perp. He’s getting away.”

“Copy that.”

Two sets of strobing lights appeared through the darkness. AJ flew past Rachel’s location while Harley pulled over and quickly exited the cruiser. “Are you sure you’re okay? You’re bleeding.” She pointed to Rachel’s forehead. The worry on Harley’s face snapped Rachel out of her fog.

“I’m fine. I hit the steering wheel a little hard.” She touched the spot on her forehead and brought back blood.

“We need to get you to the hospital, Chief.”

Rachel shook her head. “I’ll be fine. We have to get Sage out of here.” After what just happened, the person who tried to kill them would know where Rachel lived. “My cruiser isn’t drivable. We’ll have to use yours.” She went over to the passenger side of her disabled vehicle and helped Sage out.

“I’m scared. What if he comes back?” Sage whimpered.

Rachel did her best to calm the young woman. “He won’t.” She helped Sage into Harley’s cruiser. “I’m calling Aaron. Hopefully, we can use his house instead.” She stepped away and made the call.

“We just left the clinic. I’m heading to your place now.”

“Don’t go there.” She told him what happened. “Can we use your house?”

“Of course. I’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you, Aaron.” She ended the call as the radio squawked to life.

“Chief, come in.” AJ.

She hit the mic. “I’m here, AJ. What’s happening?”

“The truck was abandoned not too far from your location. The perp’s on foot. I’ll start looking for him.”

Not the news she’d wanted. “Copy that. I’ll call in assistance from Hartson PD. Be careful, AJ.” As much as she wanted to send Harley to assist, with what happened, she’d need the extra manpower to keep Sage safe.

Rachel returned to Harley. “Let’s get going. Since we don’t know where this guy is, or how many others are working with him, I don’t want Sage out in the open like this for long. It’s too risky.” Rachel climbed into the passenger seat and turned to Sage. “How are you feeling?”

Sage hugged her arms around her body. “He’s going to kill me. You know that, don’t you?”

“I’m not going to let that happen. It’s going to be okay.” Rachel squeezed her arm before facing forward. Harley turned the cruiser around and they left the area. So far, they knew Sage had been kidnapped six weeks ago and taken to an unknown location. She’d told Rachel there were other girls there. But if Sage had managed to escape, then the house where the women were being held had to be close to the clinic. She glanced into the backseat where Sage watched the darkness outside the cruiser. Rachel had lots of questions that needed answering before the trafficker moved the girls out of the area. “Sage, I know you’re scared, but I need you to tell me whatever you remember about the location in which you were being held so that I can help the others.”

“I don’t know where they are,” Sage said so softly that Rachel almost didn’t hear.

“But you escaped.”

Sage shook her head. “That’s not where the rest of the girls are. That’s where *he* took me to....” Her voice broke in a sob.

Rachel glanced at Harley briefly. “Zorro isn’t the person who kidnapped you?”

Sage shook her head. “Zorro is the man who tried to kill me. He bought me from my boyfriend. I heard them talking. They sounded like friends, and I think he bought other girls.”

The knot in Rachel’s stomach tightened. Sage had been wooed by a man who claimed to be her boyfriend. Once he had her interest, he pimped her out to someone who had tried to kill her. A universal story of grooming young girls. “What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

Sage hesitated. “He called himself Wolf. I never knew his real name.”

Realty hit hard. This went much deeper than human trafficking.

“Zorro held me in this terrible place for days.” Sage swallowed several times. “It smelled horrid and there were rats, but he didn’t seem to care. He hurt me so bad. I was certain he would kill me. When I heard his truck leave, I managed to get my restraints free, and I ran. Only he came home and saw me running away.”

Rachel tried to wrap her head around what Sage had said. The person responsible for trying to kill her wasn’t a part of the human trafficking ring that had taken her. She’d said he bought other girls... What had happened to them?

“Can you describe the man who tried to kill you?”

Sage shook her head. “He wore a mask over his face. His breath smelled like garlic and beer.” Tears filled her eyes. “He told me when he was finished with me, he’d bury me in the desert like he had all the others.”

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Rachel winced. Aaron had tried to be as gentle as possible while examining the goose egg on her forehead.

“Sorry. It doesn’t look too bad. Any trouble seeing? Double vision?” Aaron looked into her eyes and was reminded again how beautiful she truly was.

Rachel moved her head in answer and then winced again. “Only a nasty headache,” she managed with a smile.

“I can give you something.” He still couldn’t believe what happened. Whoever this guy was, he’d stop at nothing to keep Sage from exposing his identity. Aaron grabbed a bottle of aspirin and handed her a couple along with a bottle of water.

“Thank you for letting us stay here.” Rachel glanced over to where Sage was thumbing through the mug books Harley had set up at the kitchen table. “I’m worried about her.” She lowered her voice and told him what Sage had said about the man who tried to kill her.

Aaron sat beside Rachel on the sofa. “So, the man who tried to kill Sage wasn’t the one who kidnapped her?”

Rachel shifted his way. “No, which means we’re not only dealing with a human trafficking ring, but quite possibly a serial killer if what he said to Sage can be believed.” Rachel’s attention returned to Sage. “I’ve asked two officers from Hartson to assist in watching your house. Harley will help me search some of the abandoned houses near the clinic to see if we can find the house where Sage was being held.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it?”

She smiled at his concern. “I’ve been through far worse. This is important.” She studied Sage’s profile hunched over the current book. “According to AJ, the person who ran us off the road has escaped despite our manhunt. We’re searching the truck for any fingerprints or DNA evidence he might have left behind.”

“Was it stolen? Any luck identifying the original owner?”

“Yeah, it was stolen from the next town over. The owner didn’t have any idea it was even missing.” Her phone rang. “Excuse me.”

Aaron leaned his head against the sofa and tried to make sense of what had happened. A serial killer hunting for new victims. What better place than where human trafficked girls were kept? There would be no one to report the girls missing.

Rachel returned. “The Hartson officers are in place. I’ve asked Lenna to come and stay with you and Sage. I thought it might be easier for her to have a woman here.” She headed over to Sage and explained. “Aaron will be here as well as the nurse from earlier. And there are two officers outside. You’re safe.” She pointed to the books. “Any luck?”

Sage shook her head.

The doorbell rang. Aaron started to answer it, but Rachel stopped him. “Let me.” She kept her hand on her holstered weapon as she approached the door and peeked through the peephole. “It’s Lenna.” Rachel opened the door. “Thanks for coming.” Lenna came inside and greeted Aaron before heading over to Sage.

“Lenna was a police officer until she decided to become a nurse,” Rachel told him.

Aaron had no idea. “Well, then I definitely feel much safer.”

Rachel smiled. “I’m sure you can handle yourself just fine.”

He wondered if she knew about his military service. Aaron tried not to think about that time and Sam.

“Chief, I’m outside.” Harley’s voice came through the radio on Rachel’s shoulder.

“I’m on my way.” She faced Aaron again. “You know how to reach me if anything comes up.”

He nodded and watched as she headed out to have a word with the two officers. Aaron slowly closed the door. He found himself attracted to Rachel in a way he’d thought was over and done with following Miranda’s death. Yet Aaron refused to entertain any thoughts of a relationship. He didn’t deserve to be happy.

“Anyone hungry?” he asked Sage. When was the last time she’d eaten anything?

Sage didn’t respond. She was cautious around Aaron. He could understand why.

Lenna answered for them. “Sure. I’ll help.” In the time he’d worked with Lenna, Aaron’s respect for her had grown.

Aaron dismissed her offer. “I’ve got it. Everybody okay with breakfast?” He opened the fridge and examined its contents. “I have eggs and bacon. I can make some toast.”

“Sounds perfect,” Lenna responded.

“All righty.” Aaron took out the eggs and bacon along with a frying pan. He started with the bacon. While he worked, he listened as Lenna carried most of the conversation with the exception of an occasional one-word answer from Sage.

The young woman’s injuries spoke of the horror she’d survived at the hands of a sadistic person, but the real torture had begun months earlier when she’d been forced into a lifestyle that was enough to break any human.

Aaron heard a gasp and turned in time to see Sage staring at the mugshots. He removed the bacon from the fire and went over. “Did you find him?”

Sage had lost all color. She slowly nodded.

“Which one?” Lenna asked and Sage pointed to one person in particular.

“Is this the person who tried to kill you?” Aaron asked and stared into the dead eyes of a man who had a long rap sheet.

Sage shook her head. “No, he’s my boyfriend...I mean the one who kidnapped me. This is Wolf.”

Aaron grabbed his phone. “I’m going to let the chief know.” The call rang twice before Rachel answered.

“Is everything okay there?”

He quickly assured her it was. “Sage was able to identify the man who kidnapped her.”

“Really? That’s great. What’s his name?”

“Joseph Biggs.”

Rachel repeated the name. “I think I’ve arrested him before. I’ll get his name out to law enforcement. We’ll check his normal hangouts. If he’s still around the area, we’ll pick him up.”

Aaron hesitated. “Be careful. I don’t know how the guy who hurt Sage fits into the human trafficking ring, but I have a feeling he uses unsavory types like Biggs to provide him with victims.” Aaron didn’t like their chances. When dealing with the underbelly of humanity, everyone looked after their own interests. Which meant the person Sage had just identified wouldn’t be willing to cooperate.



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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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“This place gives me the creeps.” Harley stared up at the run-down shell of a house. “Of course, the last ones did as well.” She turned her head to Rachel who suppressed a shudder. When the day had started, Rachel had no idea it would end up in the death of a child and an attempted murder. Or that she and their only witness would almost die at the hands of the unknown killer.

So far, they had very little to go on to solve the deaths of Caleb Rainwater and the attempted murder of Sage Chino except the ID of the man who had lured Sage into the world of human trafficking.

Rachel had asked Priddy to gather everything she could on Joseph Biggs, the man who had been associated with several human trafficking rings operating in New Mexico. Rachel had arrested Biggs for petty crimes many times since she’d become chief.

As soon as she and Harley finished searching abandoned houses, they’d return to the station and meet up with AJ to begin looking for Biggs at his usual hangouts. But so far, it felt as if a noose were slowly tightening around Rachel’s neck.

“Let’s hope this is the one.” Rachel opened the cruiser door and got out. The clouds that had produced rain earlier still obscured the moon and stars. She shivered at the remoteness of the area where the house was located.

Rachel unholstered her weapon as they neared the entrance. She and Harley had searched three places so far, and

all they'd found was evidence that kids had probably been using the places as party spots.

She clicked on her Maglite and tried the door handle. It turned freely in her hand. No big surprise. The house had sat vacant for years. Rachel nodded to Harley and opened the door. It let out a low squeal that grated along her nerves.

The light picked up a hallway that led to the living room and kitchen area. She motioned for Harley to continue down the hall to what she supposed would be a bedroom or two and a bathroom.

Rachel entered the living room. The place was devoid of any furniture. There was graffiti on the walls and trash lying around. Certainly, no sign anyone had been held here. According to Sage, she'd been held captive by the man who intended to kill her for several days.

She moved to the kitchen where all of the appliances had been ripped from the walls and shoved out into the middle of the room—most vandalized beyond ever being useful.

Rachel shook her head. The kids on the res had few opportunities. Only a handful actually graduated from high school. Those who did went away to college, and few returned to try and make a difference.

Against the far wall, there was another door. Rachel moved to it. As she neared, a dark rusty spot near the handle grabbed her attention. It looked like...blood.

“You okay, Chief?”

Rachel spun around. She hadn't realized Harley had entered the room until she spoke.

“Sorry,” Harley frowned. “Is that...?”

“It looks like it.” Rachel used her gloved hand to open the closed door. A fissure of fear sped up her spine. Something was wrong here. She trained the flashlight on a small landing at the top of a set of stairs leading down. With her heart hammering her chest, Rachel started down the steps while her light sliced the intense darkness all around. On the final step, Rachel faced a large room with a concrete floor. She picked up

several drops on the floor. “More blood,” She alerted Harley. “Stay close.”

Harley nodded.

To their right, there was an outside wall with a door that stood open. To the left a large empty space. Something lay crumpled on the floor.

“I see it,” Harley whispered.

As they neared, there was more blood splatter everywhere.

“Oh, no.” The flashlight struck the crumpled pile on the floor. It was actually someone.

“Call an ambulance.” Rachel knelt beside a young woman and felt for a pulse. “She’s alive.”

The woman’s hands and feet were bound. She’d been beaten, her face swollen and bloody. Her clothes ripped.

“Ambulance is on its way,” Harley confirmed.

The young woman’s eyes snapped open and latched onto Rachel’s.

Rachel bit back a scream. “I’m a police officer. Help is on the way. Try not to move.”

The young woman struggled to speak. “He was just here. He heard you coming.”

There had been no other vehicle near the place. Rachel turned to Harley. “Stay with her. I’m going after him.”

“Wait for AJ,” Harley warned as Rachel stepped to the basement’s open door.

“I’ll be fine. Protect her.”

Outside, the darkness of the night was unsettling. Rachel shined the light around. There was no sign of the perp. On the ground, the beam picked up a single step of footsteps. Rachel hit the radio on her shoulder. “Priddy, what’s AJ’s ETA?”

“He should be there any minute. Are you and Harley safe?”

“Harley’s with the victim who said the killer was just here. I believe he’s on foot. Have AJ cut back across Lawson Street to see if he can cut the perp off. Tell him I’ll meet him there on foot.”

“Roger that, Chief.”

Rachel followed the footprints across the desert area behind the house while her heart beat a crazy rhythm. They’d missed the killer by a matter of seconds. If he got away now, how long before he claimed another victim?

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## CHAPTER NINE

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“Why don’t you try and get some sleep, Sage,” Aaron said gently because he was worried about her.

“No. I’m fine,” she mumbled without looking at him. But she wasn’t. Far from it. She hadn’t stopped watching the windows as if she expected her attacker to appear at any time.

“I’ll sit with you, hon.” Lenna told her and patted the gun in her holster. “You’ll be safe.”

Sage eventually agreed, and she and Lenna left the room.

Aaron made coffee. For him, sleep was a challenge most nights. After what took place today, well, he didn’t see it happening. He glanced out front. The officers’ vehicle was parked there. Having the two police officers close sure made him feel better.

He poured two cups of coffee and took them out to the officers. As he neared the cruiser something seemed strange. The window on the passenger side was down. The officer didn’t react to Aaron’s approach. He stopped walking. “Hello, is everything okay?” There was no response. Aaron dropped the cups and grabbed the handgun he’d tucked into his waist. Slowly, he eased toward the cruiser. Within a few feet, he froze. Both officers had been shot in the head, their lifeless eyes staring into space.

Aaron swung toward the house. The killer was here, and he’d left the door open. With his heart racing, he ran inside and locked the door.

Lenna stepped from the bedroom. “What’s going on?”

“He’s here. Go back inside and lock the door. Take Sage and go into the closet.”

Lenna backed into the room. A second later, the lock slid into place.

Aaron grabbed his cell phone and called Rachel and barely waited for her to answer. “He’s here. He killed the two officers.”

“I’m on my way. Are you all safe?”

Aaron had no idea. “I’m not sure. I went out to check on the two officers, and I left the door open. Hurry, Rachel.”

Aaron tucked the phone into his pocket and did a systematic search of the house. When he’d finished the final room, there was no sign the killer had gotten inside. “Thank you, God.” The awkward prayer slipped from his lips. He hadn’t prayed in years. He’d stopped believing long before Miranda had died. That night in Afghanistan, the moments he’d wavered out of fear for his own safety when Sam had begged for his help, had cost his high school friend his life. Aaron blamed himself for Sam’s death, but he also blamed God. That was the beginning of his spiral into self-destruction.

Every time Miranda tried to persuade him to attend church with her, he’d had other things to do. Mostly, he didn’t want to feel convicted about his drinking. Miranda had tried to get him help, but he’d refused. He didn’t have a drinking problem. Only he did, and that truth had been driven home to him the night of the car accident.

A noise at the back of the house grabbed his attention. Aaron eased toward it. In the distance, sirens screamed through the night as they headed his way.

Aaron reached the kitchen once more. Nothing but darkness appeared through the windows. He pulled in a breath and flipped on the outside light.

Standing near the window was a man wearing a mask like Zorro. He held a weapon in front of him.

Aaron hit the floor. A second later, the window shattered with a single gunshot. Glass flew everywhere, covering him

and the floor. Aaron aimed toward the broken window and fired several times. He expected the masked assailant to come into the kitchen, but nothing happened.

The sirens were now right outside the house.

He crept over to the window and peeked out. No one was there. Aaron jumped to his feet as a pounding came from the front of the house. He hurried to it and verified it was Rachel before he opened the door.

“I heard shots.” She rushed inside along with Harley.

“He shot at me.” Aaron pointed to the destroyed window. “I looked out and he was there pointing a gun at me.”

Sage and Lenna had left their hiding place and were now standing outside the room. “Both of you, stay here,” Rachel warned and then stepped out back with Harley. Aaron followed.

She spun toward him. “What are you doing?”

“Coming with you.”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t send him back. Rachel radioed what Aaron had said about the perp to her officers. “Get backup here right away. He’s on foot, but he may have a vehicle stashed somewhere.”

“Copy that,” AJ responded. “I just arrived. Ambo is right behind me. ME as well.”

“Thanks, AJ.” Rachel moved to the back fence, careful not to destroy any evidence. “Did you see which way he went?”

Aaron shook his head. “No, I was too busy trying to keep from being hit.”

She glanced back at him with a smile. “I’m sure that was frightening. Where does this lead?” She stood next to the open gate.

“Out to the desert and then the mountains. There aren’t any houses past mine.”

AJ caught up with them.

“We fan out. I’m guessing he headed up to the mountains, but we can’t be sure. Keep your eyes open,” Rachel warned. “Aaron, you’re with me.”

Once they cleared the gate, AJ and Harley spread out across the desert. In the distance, more sirens headed their way.

“Footprints.” Rachel pointed to the ground where a single set of footsteps heading toward the mountain. “He definitely went up high. Let’s be careful.”

Aaron’s hands actually shook on his weapon as he kept close to Rachel. They reached the beginning of the mountains and started up. “I can’t believe he killed those officers. This guy will stop at nothing.”

Rachel looked his way. “I think he’s killed before. Many times.” She told him about the young woman they’d found in the abandoned house. “My guess is we’ll find a string of bodies.” She paused before delivering the worst news. “Aaron, we have a serial killer on our hands.”



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## CHAPTER TEN

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“Here you go.” Rachel handed him a cup of coffee and claimed the seat across from Aaron in the conference room.

“Thanks.” Aaron smiled his gratitude and took a sip.

His description of the shooter wearing a Zorro mask matched Sage’s. In Rachel’s opinion, they had a predator on their hands who was able to move in and out of the seedy world of prostitution without fear of being caught.

“How’s Sage?” Aaron asked.

Rachel looked into the face of the handsome doctor and tried to deny the stirrings in her heart. “She’s scared. Lenna’s with her still. They seem to have developed a connection.”

“Lenna’s good at putting people at ease. She sure made me feel right at home.”

She looked at him curiously. “Why did you choose to come here of all places?”

He inclined his head.

Would he finally tell her the truth? She knew some of his past, but there was something he kept hidden.

Aaron sighed deeply. “My wife was born here.”

Nothing prepared Rachel for this. “Your wife? I had no idea.” She’d found a picture online that announced the death of Miranda Carson. She had long dark hair and brown eyes. “She’s Apache?”

Aaron smiled at her surprise. “Yes. She lived here until she was ten when her mother passed away and her grandparents moved her to Santa Fe.”

“Miranda Ramirez.” Rachel remembered the young girl who had been a few years older than herself. Miranda had walked home from school and found her mother dead from an overdose. “I remember her. It was so sad about her mother.”

He took a slug of coffee. “She never forgot this place. Although it was hard for her to consider coming back here after what happened to her mother, Miranda wanted to do something to help her former community besides just donating money.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. “You’re the champion. You and Miranda were the ones who gave the funding to keep the clinic open for decades.” Rachel remembered hearing about the money that had been donated anonymously by someone who chose to remain unknown. It had been the talk on the res for weeks following the donation. The clinic was close to having to close its doors when the funds came in.

“She planned to come back eventually and volunteer her services for free legal aid to residents. Miranda was a lawyer.”

“I know,” Rachel said without thinking.

“You do?” His brows shot up. “You checked me out?”

“I did. It seemed strange that a former chief of surgery at one of the most prestigious hospitals in New York would choose to come here and live. Your reluctance to take the position of clinic physician had me curious.”

His jaw tightened. “I wanted to fulfill her wishes, but mostly I had to get away from the reminders of what I’d done.”

Rachel waited for him to continue.

“I’m sure you read about the car accident.”

She nodded. “The driver of the other car crossed over and hit your vehicle.” She sensed that he blamed himself for what happened.

“That’s what was reported, but I killed her,” he said so softly she almost didn’t hear.

Rachel reached across the table and clasped his hand. “You didn’t. It wasn’t your fault.”

His bitter laugh had her recoiling in her chair.

“I was drunk and unable to drive us home. Miranda was furious with me. She knew I had a problem and had been urging me to seek help, but I refused.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t even save my wife’s life because I was plastered.”

Rachel’s heart went out to him. She knew how destructive guilt could be. She’d blamed herself for her husband’s death.

“I haven’t had a drink since that night, and I attend AA religiously. I promised Miranda as she lay dying that I would stop, and I told her I’d come here and do what she wanted to do herself.” He scrubbed his hand over his eyes. “I may not be a lawyer, but I made sure the money helped the clinic.”

“She would be proud of you, Aaron. I am.”

Aaron didn’t look at her as he cleared his throat. “What do we do next to save Sage and the next victim from this predator?”

She couldn’t let him put his life in jeopardy any more than he had already. “We don’t. You almost died, Aaron.”

Aaron leaned forward. “Rachel, I can help. I was a marine once. Believe me, I know how to handle myself in battle.”

“I’m not putting you in the line of fire again.” She rose and paced the conference room.

“You’re stretched thin as it is. Let me help.”

“Aaron—” She stopped beside him. “This guy is ruthless. What if I can’t protect you?”

He rose and placed his hands on her shoulders. The strength she felt radiating from him made her want to edge forward just a little bit. Go into his arms and let the pressure of the past years melt away.

“I’m not going to let you put your life in danger because you have some misguided death wish.”

He flinched but didn’t deny it.

“Aaron, I don’t want anything to happen to you. Whatever happened in the past, you’re here for a reason. You have a purpose and I...I care about you.” The truth was out before she could stop it.

Surprise mingled with a look of awareness passed across his eyes before he tucked her into his arms and held her.

Rachel dragged in a weighty sigh and simply let him.

“I care about you, too,” he murmured against her ear. The words sent her heart soaring. When did this happen?

She pulled away slightly and looked into his eyes. The promise there made her smile. She and Aaron had both gone through something heart-wrenching. They’d need time. But that promise...well, it made facing down a serial killer a little easier.

Rachel touched his cheek. “Don’t give up on life, Aaron. There’s so much more waiting for you.”

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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“Chief, we have Joseph Biggs.” AJ stepped into the room, his voice full of excitement.

“You’re kidding? How?”

“We found him at his parents’ house, believe it or not.” AJ told them about how he and Harley had gone to Biggs’ parents’ home looking for information about his whereabouts, and Biggs had been there. “He’s in the interview room.”

“That’s great news, AJ. Thank you.” Rachel turned to Aaron. “You want to watch the interview?”

He did. Aaron had been part of this since he’d tried and failed to save Caleb.

“You can watch from the room next door. There’s a two-way mirror there. Biggs won’t be able to see you.”

Aaron followed her out into the hallway and down to one of the rooms. She opened the door. “Just punch that button next to the glass, and you’ll be able to hear what’s being discussed.”

He stepped inside and closed the door, then stood next to the mirror. The man in the mugshot was cuffed to the table. He appeared to have aged ten years since the photo was taken, even though it had only been a little over a year ago. The life this man had lived. The lives he’d destroyed all for greed. Anger boiled up inside of him.

Rachel and AJ stepped into the room. Right away Biggs’ demeanor changed. He sat up straighter and appeared cautious.

The door behind Aaron opened, and he turned. Harley came over to where he stood.

“I can’t believe we got so lucky to find him at his parents’ house. He didn’t even have time to run.”

Aaron glanced Harley’s way. Like him, she was an outsider. On occasion they’d spoken whenever Harley stopped by the clinic. She was from Chicago. Harley had come to the res for her own reasons, much like him.

“I just hope he can help identify the killer.” Aaron’s attention went to the interview. Rachel had just identified herself.

“Your people had no reason to arrest me,” Biggs spouted. “I wasn’t doing anything but visiting my family.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Rachel took the seat beside Biggs while AJ remained in the corner of the room observing.

“You see, Mr. Biggs, you have an outstanding warrant, so we had every right to bring you in.”

Biggs expression turned sullen while he remained silent.

“But you can help yourself.”

He watched Biggs’ reaction change. The man was curious. “I’m listening.”

“Do you remember this woman?” Rachel slid a photo across the table to Biggs. It was of Sage.

Biggs eyes widened. “What’s this about?”

“Do you know this young lady?” Rachel’s full attention was on Biggs.

Biggs shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not.”

“You know her,” Rachel confirmed. “She says you’re her boyfriend, but it’s more likely you’re her pimp. She’s fifteen. You pretended to be interested in her, and then you offered her a place to stay when she was on the streets. You gained her trust, and then you forced her into prostitution. She will be able to identify you, and we’re going to put you away for a

very long time. You won't be turning out any other young girls."

Biggs' eyebrows furrowed. "I thought you said I could help myself."

Rachel didn't hesitate. "I did. You have the opportunity to shave some years off your sentence and help others."

Biggs rolled his eyes. "And how am I supposed to do that?"

Rachel leaned forward while holding his gaze. "By telling us who you sold Sage to."

Biggs started to protest, but she held up her hand. "I know you sold her and probably others as well to the same man." She slid another photo over to Biggs. "Jennifer is only thirteen. She almost died at the hands of the same man. Now, start talking."

Biggs stared down at the killer's latest victim and swallowed several times. "I don't know his real name. He goes by the street name of Zorro. I have no idea why, other than he wears that stupid mask all the time, and I'm sure he's trying to keep his identity hidden."

Rachel glanced briefly to the mirror. "How did you meet him?"

Biggs snorted. "How do you think? He wanted a girl."

Rachel's expression turned impatient. "Where did you meet him? How did he know where to find you?"

Biggs shrugged. There was something he wasn't saying, Aaron could almost sense it. "Word gets around. We have a few locations we operate out of. He showed up. Did his thing and then came back for more."

"I'll need to know the locations, and I want to know where the girls are being held now."

"Hey, that's my livelihood."

"You're done trafficking young girls, Biggs. If you ever want the chance to have a life outside of prison, I want to

know where the girls are being held.”

“All right, all right. Give me a piece of paper and I’ll write the locations down.”

AJ brought over a small notebook and a pen.

“You gonna uncuff me?” Biggs rattled his cuffs.

“You can write just fine with them on. I also want as much information as you can give me on Zorro.”

“Like what?” Biggs asked, his head wagging.

“Color of hair and eyes. Height. Any distinguishable tattoos or birthmarks.”

“Fine.” Biggs started writing. “Here are the addresses.” He ripped the page from the notebook.

“AJ, stay with him.” Rachel left the room and came to where Aaron and Harley stood.

“Good job, Chief,” Harley said. “Where are the locations of the girls?”

Rachel gave it to her. “You can bet they’ll be heavily guarded.”

“I’m going with you,” Aaron told her.

Rachel immediately rejected the idea. “It’s too dangerous. You may have been in the marines, but you’re not in law enforcement.”

“I can handle myself just fine. Some of those girls are going to need medical attention. Let me help.”

She blew out a sigh. “Okay, but you stay with me at all times.”

“Got it.” He was just happy to be able to help someone in need. After the wreck he’d made of his life, he wanted to give back to those who couldn’t help themselves. Like he’d once done. Before he’d let Sam die.



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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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“Stay close,” Rachel repeated because she couldn’t shake the feeling, she was putting Aaron’s life in danger, and she didn’t want to lose him.

Aaron touched her arm. “Stop worrying about me. I can take care of myself.”

How could she not worry?

It was pitch black out. As soon as they were some distance from the house that Biggs claimed was where the women were being held, Rachel gave the command to stop. She and Aaron slid out and waited for AJ and Harley to catch up to them. “Harley, you and AJ take the rear entrance. Aaron and I will go in the front. Wait for my signal.”

With weapons drawn, they eased into position. Rachel gave Harley and AJ time to reach their position. She tapped her mic. “Go.” A second later, Rachel shouldered through the front door into a dark house. A beat later, Harley and AJ came through the back door.

The surprised occupants of the house froze for a second and then realized it was the police and tried to run.

“Police. Get your hands in the air.”

“Gun!” Aaron yelled and grabbed Rachel, tucking her behind a wall as one of the gunmen opened fire.

Rachel edged around the wall and fired off several rounds. “Drop your weapons. You’re not getting out of this.”

Her command was met with more gunshots. *Were there others in the house? Where were the girls hidden?*

Aaron tapped her on the shoulder. Rachel pivoted, her eyes peeled in front of her. He pointed to the entrance they'd come in. "If I can make it to the side of the house, I can deflect their attention off you and your people. It might give you the chance to disarm them."

Or he could be putting himself in the line of fire. Rachel hesitated. Her feelings for Aaron were growing deeper the closer they worked together. That he'd come to their reservation put him on her radar. Digging into his past had yielded superficial answers, but hearing the pain straight from Aaron had confirmed he was a good man who had suffered a lot of terrible things that had driven him away from everything he'd once loved.

Despite her better judgment, she slowly agreed. "Be careful," she mouthed.

He turned and eased toward the entrance.

Rachel made eye contact with AJ and mouthed what Aaron was doing. He confirmed he'd understood and passed the news to Harley. Rachel gave Aaron time to get into position before she edged away from the wall and was able to make out two men near the windows. They spotted her and opened fire. A second later, glass shattered followed by a scream. Aaron had hit his mark. She peeked past the wall. The second man had whipped toward the shots, preparing to return fire. Rachel aimed for the man's arm holding the weapon and shot. He screamed and dropped the weapon.

"Hold your fire, Aaron," she yelled and waited for his confirmation before she rushed to the injured men with Harley and AJ close. Rachel grabbed the man's weapon before he could reach it with his good hand.

"You shot me," he wailed. "And you killed Jeff."

AJ knelt beside the man Aaron had shot and felt for a pulse before shaking his head.

"Call for an ambulance," Rachel told Harley.

Aaron returned and tucked his weapon behind his back. “We need to clear the rest of the house. There could be others.”

Rachel nodded. “AJ and Harley, go with Aaron. I’ll take this guy out to the car. I’ll be right back.” She helped the injured man to his feet and cuffed him before doing a thorough search. Rachel took him out to her cruiser and put him in the backseat. Returning to the house, she met up with Aaron who stood in front of a basement door. Rachel gave the nod and Aaron eased it open.

“Let me take the lead,” she told him. Aaron might be former military, but he wasn’t part of the tribal police force, and if something were to happen to him, she would never forgive herself.

Aaron hesitated, then stepped back. Rachel eased down the stairs with her heart beating out an urgent pace. When they reached the bottom step, she flashed the light around. At first, nothing appeared out of the ordinary, but then she noticed a door off to the right.

She pointed to it. Before she and Aaron could make it to the door, a noise upstairs grabbed their attention. Both Harley and AJ hurried down the steps.

“The upstairs is clear,” AJ confirmed.

Rachel moved to the door with her officers and Aaron flanking her. She pulled in a breath and slowly turned the doorknob, then flung the door open and eased into the room. Her flashlight darted around the room and stopped. Ten girls huddled on mattresses that lined one wall, their eyes reflecting terror.

Rachel made sure there were no guards around to fire on them before she holstered her weapon. “It’s okay. You’re safe. We’re here to help.”

Aaron found a light switch and flipped it on, flooding the room with light.

“Biggs’ parents probably alerted the rest of his crew that we’d picked him up and they fled,” Rachel said in disgust.

Many of the girls shielded their frightened eyes from the light. Most looked barely old enough to be called teenagers.

*Oh, dear God, help them,* she silently prayed while her team spread out to speak to the young women. Rachel knelt in front of a frail young girl who shrank away. “You’re safe.” She did her best to assure her.

The young girl’s huge eyes held hers. There was something familiar about her.

“What’s your name?” Rachel noticed her wrists appeared to have rope burns where she’d been bound...just like Sage. Was it possible this young girl had been in contact with a killer and lived to tell of it?

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Aaron found her standing outside the station staring into space.

“Are you okay?” he asked when she turned.

Rachel shrugged. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Here.” He handed her a cup of coffee.

“Thank you.” She sipped it quietly and watched the burgeoning first lights of a new day make an appearance. “Ten girls. There were ten girls in there, and I have a feeling this is just the tip of the iceberg. How many more are out there being forced to do horrific things and feeling as if no one cares about them?” Her voice cracked.

Aaron took the cup from her and set it on the ground before he placed his hands on her shoulders. “You care, Rachel, and you’ve rescued ten girls today and probably saved their lives. I’m certain one of those women knows something that will help us identify the killer.”

“I sure hope you’re right.” She glanced up at him with eyes full of worry.

“We’ll get him, Rachel. I promise we will.” He touched her cheek, and she searched his eyes before she stepped closer and kissed him gently.

The sweet touch of her lips against his felt like a dam breaking deep inside, and he kissed her back. A soft sigh escaped, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. He

gathered her close and let the terrible things they'd both witnessed fade away.

Rachel eventually pulled away and he let her go. She'd made him feel again. He hadn't since he'd lost Miranda.

"I— " She was going to express regrets, and he didn't want her to say them aloud.

"Don't be. I think we both got caught up in the emotions of what happened."

Her dark gaze swept over his face. "Maybe, but it was nice. It's been a long time."

Aaron smiled at her. She hadn't mentioned her husband, but he'd done a little recon on her as well. He knew she'd lost him while he was serving in the marines in Afghanistan.

"I think we should head back inside. I want to interview each of the girls. Hopefully, we can find some way to identify the killer."

He hated that the sweet moment had to end because he felt as if he were finally getting to know the real Rachel, but he understood time was running out before the killer claimed another victim or moved on.

She reclaimed her coffee, and together they returned to the station, yet something had changed for him since he'd stepped out into the predawn. He had hope. For the first time since Afghanistan, the future didn't seem so dismal.

"Why don't you sit in with me? I'll have AJ and Harley interview half of the girls, and we'll take the rest." She stepped into the waiting area where Priddy manned the phones. Both Harley and AJ were there awaiting her orders.

"All the girls have been identified, and we ordered breakfast from the diner down the road for them. Carl wasn't happy about having to fix so many meals, though," AJ told his chief.

Rachel smiled. "Remind me to stop by and thank him later on." She explained about the interviews. "If any of the girls

mention the person who fits our description of the killer, I want to know immediately.”

“Copy that, Chief.” Harley handed her the list of names. “We’ll start at the bottom and work our way up.”

Rachel agreed. “Maisy?” She called out the name of the first girl on the list. It was the same young woman she’d spoken to at the house. She appeared even younger than Sage. Maisy padded behind her and Aaron with her head down.

“Don’t I know you?” Rachel turned and asked the young woman.

Maisy shook her head.

It took a second before Rachel remembered. “No, I do. Your grandmother died several months back. She was your only caregiver. You were placed with a foster family. What happened?” When Maisy remained silent, she said. “Take a seat. You may not remember me, but I’m Chief Altaha, and this is Aaron Carson. You are not in trouble. We’re here to help you.”

Maisy bit her nails and didn’t look at either of them as she slowly claimed the chair Aaron had pulled out for her.

“Is there someone we can call for you? Your foster parents must be worried.”

Terror filled the young girl’s eyes. “No, don’t call them.”

Aaron’s gut tightened. While there were many kind and loving foster families, it would be naïve to think they all were.

“Maisy, what happened with your foster family?” Rachel asked gently.

The young girl’s eyes filled with tears. “They were horrible. They hit me and...”

“And what?” Rachel waited through Maisy’s sullen silence. “We can talk about this later, okay? I promise you I won’t make you go back there if your allegations are true.”

The young girl ducked her head and wiped her eyes.

“How old are you?” Rachel asked.

The young girl continued to chew on a cuticle. “Sixteen,” she murmured without looking at them.

“I don’t believe that’s true,” Rachel said gently.

Tears filled Maisy’s eyes once more. “No,” she gulped out. “I’m thirteen.”

Rachel leaned across the table and clasped the girl’s hand. On Maisy’s wrists Aaron saw evidence she’d been bound at one time. At least Rachel knew this young girl, which meant she had a rapport with Maisy that might help her open up to them.

Anger swept through Aaron. It infuriated him that these innocent young girls had been forced into an unthinkable life of prostitution simply because of the twisted desires of some men.

Maisy looked like a wounded animal as she furtively watched Rachel as if expecting her to hurt her.

“Who did this to you, Maisy?” Aaron couldn’t stop the question even though he knew he was overstepping his position at this table.

The young girl refused to look at him. She swallowed several times. “I don’t know his name. But he goes by the name Zorro because he always wears a black mask over part of his face.”

Hope took life inside Aaron, and he tried to rein it in. “You’ve seen him before?”

Maisy looked as if she had been tossed into a nightmare and couldn’t find her way out. “Yes. He comes to where we are working often. He wanted to buy me, but Joseph wouldn’t let him.”

“Joseph?” Rachel asked, but they both knew who she was speaking about.

Maisy’s eyes darted between them. “Joseph Biggs. He’s my boyfriend...or at least, I thought he was until he forced me to—” She hung her head



“When did Zorro do this to you?” Rachel indicated her bruised wrists.

Maisy rubbed the bruises. “A few days ago. He tried to take me with him, but Joseph wouldn’t let him.” She frowned. “But there was something familiar about Zorro. Like maybe I’ve seen him in the past.”

Aaron’s eyes widened. “You’ve seen Zorro before?”

Rachel leaned forward. “Can you remember where?”

The young girl’s forehead wrinkled. “I-I don’t remember. He may have been at my grandmother’s funeral, or maybe I saw him somewhere around the community. I don’t know.”

Aaron could almost feel Rachel’s disappointment matching his. He sensed Maisy hadn’t told them the whole truth about how she knew Zorro.

Rachel pulled out the photo of the white pickup. “Do you recognize this truck?”

The young woman’s gasp said it all, but she shook her head.

“Maisy, please. We need your help. This man has already hurt two other women besides you, and there could be more victims we don’t know about.”

Maisy stared at the photo, her bottom lip trembling. “He stopped me one day. It was shortly after my grandmother died when I’d first gone to live with my foster family.” A shuddered breath followed. “He started talking and asking me all sorts of questions. Then he asked if I wanted a ride, but there was something about him that scared me, and so I ran away.”

“Did you get a good look at his face?”

Maisy shook her head. “Not really. He wore a hat pulled down low and sunglasses, but he had dark hair that was sort of short and a tattoo on his arm here.” She pointed to her left forearm. “I saw it because he had his arm on the door when he spoke to me.”

“You’re doing great.” Rachel squeezed her hand. “What type of tattoo was it?”

“A big Z.”

Z as in Zorro... “Is there anything else you remember about this Zorro?” Rachel asked.

Maisy’s gaze skipped between him and Rachel before she said something that floored Aaron. “I think he may have known my foster father because I saw the pickup parked outside the house once, and my foster father was talking to him.” Her eyes widened. “And I think my foster father knew Joseph as well. I saw him hanging around the house before—”

“Before what?” Rachel asked, but Maisy shook her head.

Was it possible the foster father had helped Joseph kidnap girls to use for his operation?

“I’m glad Joseph was there when Zorro tried to buy me.” Maisy’s statement held both his and Rachel’s attention.

“Why is that?” Aaron asked, unable to look away.

“Because Zorro has taken other girls with him. None of them ever came back.”

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“We’ll be right back, Maisy. You stay here and relax.”

Rachel barely contained her anger long enough to close the door so Maisy couldn’t hear. “I want to speak to her foster father right now.” She headed down the hall. Aaron rushed to keep up with her.

“Do you know what time it is?”

Rachel didn’t slow down. “I don’t care. I’m going to wake him up.” She stopped beside Priddy’s station. “Can you keep an eye on Maisy for me?”

“Sure thing, Chief. Where are you going?”

Rachel tossed the name of Maisy’s foster family over her shoulder.

“Do you need backup?” Priddy called after her.

Rachel stopped at the door. “No, I have Aaron.”

Together they stepped out into the early morning. Rachel glanced at the man next to her. How much she’d come to count on Aaron in just a short amount of time. She reached for the door of her cruiser but stopped to look over the top of it at Aaron. “I’m sorry. Guess I kind of volunteered you for the assignment.”

“I’m fine with going with you, Rachel. I’d do anything for you.” His voice roughened at the sentiment.

The tenderness written on his face made her chest grow tight. She was falling in love with Aaron. *Too soon*, her heart screamed. Alex had been the most important person in her life.

How could she simply move on as if he'd never existed? She lowered her gaze and climbed in. A second later, Aaron did the same. Rachel pulled away from the station and tried to shut out the distraction seated beside her. Lives were at stake. She had to keep a clear head.

“So where does this foster family live?”

Rachel glanced his way. Did he have to look so handsome? She cleared her throat. “Not too far from the station in one of the nicer sections on the res. I don't get it. How could Earl Dosela become involved in something so horrendous as trafficking young girls, and no one has said anything?” She made several turns before entering the neighborhood where the Doselas lived.

“These people are good at keeping secrets. They hide as regular people, only they aren't. If Dosela is involved, we'll get him.”

She reached for his hand and entangled her fingers with his. He didn't pull away. The touch of his hand in hers was all she needed for the moment. Maisy's sweet face kept appearing in her head. So young, and yet because of a simple twist of fate, she'd lost her grandmother and been forced into a life no one should ever have to be part of.

She rolled to a stop in front of the Dosela house. “This is it.” Rachel looked into Aaron's eyes and hated having to let him go. “Be ready. We don't know what we'll be facing. If Earl is part of this trafficking ring, he won't come willingly.” She slowly slipped her hand from his and opened the door, closing it quietly. “Stay behind me.” Rachel walked up to the front door and rang the bell. It took several times before someone came to answer the door.

A man that Rachel recognized as Earl Dosela glanced between them suspiciously.

“Can I help you, Chief?”

Rachel tried to control her disgust. “Yes, you can. First off, why haven't you reported your foster daughter missing?” Earl sputtered off something unintelligible. “And you can tell me

how you know the man who took her and the man who tried to kill her?”

Earl looked as if he'd seen a ghost. His mouth opened to deny it all, but Rachel stopped him.

“Maisy was rescued from a house where Joseph Biggs held her and other girls hostage and forced them into prostitution. She said you were talking with Biggs shortly before she was kidnapped. And she said the man who tried to kill her was seen near your house. We know you're involved, Earl. If you want to help yourself and your wife, you'd better start talking.”

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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It was as if all the fight left Earl, and he invited them inside.

“I’m actually glad you know the truth,” Earl said with a weary sigh. He sat down on the sofa and ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

A woman who appeared his age came into the room. “What’s going on, Earl?”

He hung his head. “They know, Sylvia.”

Sylvia dropped to the sofa beside her husband. “Oh, dear word...he’ll kill us.”

Aaron glanced at Rachel who stood close to him before asking, “Who are you talking about? Biggs is in jail. We can protect you if you talk.”

Sylvia’s wild eyes found his. “It’s not Biggs who we’re afraid of. It’s—”

“Hush up, Sylvia,” Earl hissed the words out.

“Be quiet, Earl. If you don’t want you and your wife to end up in prison for a long time, you’d better start talking. Who are you both so afraid of?” Rachel demanded.

Earl shrank back against the sofa.

“Tell her what she wants to know, Earl. This nightmare has gone on long enough, and I’m sick of it. Sick of him.”

Aaron waited for Earl to speak. Would he save himself, or would he take the fall?

“It’s Stephen Zamora,” Earl said at last.

“The developer who’s been doing so much good for the people on the res?” Rachel asked in shock. “Stephen Zamora is responsible for trying to kill Maisy?”

Earl slowly nodded. “Zamora isn’t the person he claims to be. He’s sick. The man tried to buy Maisy from us.”

“You’d better explain,” Rachel said quietly and glanced at Aaron. “How did you know Zamora and Biggs?”

“He’ll kill us,” Earl warned.

Sylvia didn’t appear to have the same trouble ratting out Zamora. “We met at the tribal council meeting. Zamora had been talking about all the good he planned to do for the res. He told us he admired what we were doing, asked a lot of questions, and then he wanted to know how many children we were fostering.” Sylvia shook her head. “I should have known something was wrong. We told him about Maisy, and he seemed especially interested. Zamora said he and his wife were looking to adopt an older child. We were going to arrange a meeting, only Biggs showed up and told us Zamora was lying. We’d heard the rumors about Biggs running girls, but he seemed genuine to us. He told us he’d look out for Maisy...” Her voice trailed off.

“Only he didn’t.” Aaron filled in the rest. “When did he take her?”

“Two weeks ago.” Earl hung his head.

Rachel started for the door. “Don’t try to alert Zamora we’re coming; otherwise, you’ll both be arrested.” She stepped outside with Aaron. “We need to call for backup. Zamora is clearly dangerous.”

They returned to the cruiser where Rachel radioed for her officers to meet them at Zamora’s home. She hit the lights and siren and flew down the road. “This makes me sick,” Rachel murmured, gripping the steering wheel. “How many others has Zamora hurt, or worse?”

They stopped in front of Zamora’s expensive home. Rachel started to leave the cruiser when Aaron caught her arm. “We

need to wait for backup.”

She shook her head. “I’m going in now.”

Aaron hustled after her. Rachel pounded on the door until a woman in her bathrobe opened the door.

“Can I help you?” she asked, clearly perturbed.

“I’m looking for Stephen Zamora,” Rachel told her. “Is he here?”

“That’s my husband. He’s in the kitchen...Excuse me!” the woman exclaimed when Rachel pushed past her and searched for the kitchen. Aaron slipped inside and followed her.

A man in his fifties sat at the table sipping coffee.

“On your feet, Zamora,” Rachel ordered.

Zamora remained seated. “What’s this about?” The smile on Zamora’s face gave Aaron the creeps.

“You are under arrest for the attempted murder of Sage Chino, Jennifer Harold, and Maisy Tessay for starters.”

“Murder?” Zamora’s wife exclaimed from the doorway.

“That’s right.” Rachel took Zamora by surprise and raised the sleeve of his shirt revealing the Z tattoo. “I said on your feet.” Rachel drew her weapon when he didn’t immediately comply.

Zamora didn’t appear worried. He held up his hands. “All right, Chief. It’s your job at stake not mine, so I’ll play along with you.” He rose slowly.

Outside sirens screamed toward their location.

“Get your hands behind your back,” Rachel demanded.

Zamora eventually complied.

“Have you got me covered?” Rachel asked, and Aaron nodded. She holstered her weapon and reached for her cuffs securing Zamora’s hands. “Let’s go.”

Zamora went along willingly. “Call the attorney, Becka.” Rachel led him out to the cruiser and placed him inside.



“Chief, we got a search warrant for Zamora’s house, business, and any property he owns to see if we can find evidence,” AJ told her.

“That’s great news.” Rachel glanced into the cruiser. “For now, I want to take Zamora back to the station and start the interrogation process before his attorney shows up and shuts it down. I want to wipe that smug look off his face for good.”

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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“Chief, we found something,” Harley came her way holding the mask they’d been looking for all day.

“You found it.” They’d searched Zamora’s house and his work location, and now were in the middle of searching his latest construction project.

“There’s something else,” Harley told her in a strained tone. “But you’re going to want to see this for yourself.”

Rachel glanced at Aaron before they both followed Harley.

“We found the white pickup here as well. It’s registered to one of Zamora’s workers,” Harley told them.

They approached a freshly dug portion of ground and Rachel knew what they’d found. there. “Oh, no.” Rachel looked over the mound of earth and covered her mouth.

“Looks like at least five girls so far,” Harley said quietly before peering around the construction site. “There’s probably more.”

Rachel strode away. Once she’d reached some distance from the others, she set her emotions free and sobbed for those young girls who had given up so much to a monster. And for her friend Jasmine who remained hidden out there somewhere waiting for Rachel to find her and bring her home. As much as she wished she could blame Zamora for Jasmine’s death, he wasn’t anywhere near the res when Jasmine disappeared.

“Are you okay?”

Aaron. He'd been a rock she found herself leaning on more and more. Rachel scrubbed her eyes. "I just needed a moment."

Aaron stepped close and turned her to face him. "It's okay to show your emotions, Rachel. It makes you human."

Her hands fisted at her side. "That smug jerk thought he'd gotten away with it."

"But he didn't. Thanks to you, and to Sage and Maisy, he's going to get what he deserves. And one day, we'll find your friend as well," he said gently. "I'll help you. We won't give up until we find out what happened to Jasmine."

Rachel stared up at him for the longest time before she went into his arms and held him. "Thank you, Aaron."

His arms tightened around her.

Surprised, she pulled away and looked into his eyes before she touched his face. "I love you, Aaron. I know you've been through some things, but I'm glad you're here with me."

He lowered his head and kissed her. And she matched his fervency, his angst. Amongst the horrific reminder of what human beings were capable of, Rachel held onto the beginning of hope. For the first time in a long time when she looked at the future, she didn't see death. She saw Aaron.

"I'm glad I'm here, too. I love you, Rachel. So much. And that's something I never thought I'd say again."

She smiled up at him and knew that no matter how difficult this day was going to be, or how many terrible things they'd uncover, she could get through all of them as long as she had Aaron, her champion, at her side.