



The Sheriff's Baby

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Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: Some secrets are silent.

It began with a contract, with Channing Harvey being forced into marriage by the world's grumpiest billionaire. She hated every moment of her marriage to Win Halliday... until she didn't. It was hard to resist when he proved he valued her more than his massive fortune. Channing is having a hard time picturing her life without him, and if Win finds that out, he won't rest until he has all of her. Deep, dark secrets included.

Some secrets scream.

Win Halliday is so close to having everything he's ever secretly wanted. He's ready to do battle with Channing's demons, no matter what they are. Or who they might be. Someone from Channing's past wants to use her, and they'll go to desperate lengths to get what they want, including targeting an innocent teenager. But whatever lengths they go to, Win will go farther. He finally has the family he's dreamed of, and he will protect them at all costs.

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Chapter One

The sound instantly woke Deputy Joelle McCullough, but it took her a moment to realize it hadn't been part of the dream.

The nightmare.

There were no blasts of gunshots that had killed her father. No, this had been a clicking sound like that of someone shutting a vehicle door.

Rubbing her eyes to help her focus, Joelle checked her phone for the time. Just past 2:00 a.m., which meant it wasn't anywhere near a normal visiting hour. Added to that, she wasn't exactly on the beaten path since her house was a good mile outside of her hometown of Saddle Ridge with no other houses within sight of hers.

There were no texts from her three siblings or any of her friends. None either from anyone at the Saddle Ridge Sheriff's Office where she'd been a deputy for seven years now. So, no alerts from anyone she knew well enough to contact her before just showing up at her place, but it could be a neighbor coming to her for help.

Everyone in Saddle Ridge knew where she lived, knew that she was a cop. That meant this could be some kind of emergency that had warranted a face-to-face rather than a call or text.

She threw back the covers, immediately reaching for her Glock 22 that she kept on the nightstand. Grabbing her firearm when off duty hadn't always been her automatic response. Not until five months ago when her father had been gunned down at his

home. Since then, things had changed.

Everything had changed.

And Joelle no longer trusted that a neighbor's emergency—or whatever this was—wouldn't end in gunfire. Her father hadn't been armed when he'd answered his door that night. He obviously hadn't been alarmed that whoever had come calling was there to kill him.

She couldn't make the same mistake.

It was the reason she'd had a top-notch security system installed, and it was turned on and armed. If anyone attempted to get in through a door or window, the alarms would start blaring, and the security company and the sheriff's office would be alerted. Most importantly, she would be alerted, and she could use her cop's training to put a stop to a threat.

Despite the urgency and worry building inside her, Joelle took her time getting out of bed. She'd learned the hard way that standing too quickly would make her lightheaded.

One of the side effects of being five months pregnant.

She ran her hand over her stomach, trying to soothe the baby's sudden fluttering. Not hard kicks. Not yet, anyway. Just soft stirrings that reminded her of the precious cargo she was carrying. Reminding her again of why she couldn't risk what'd happened to her father.

Once her heartbeat had steadied enough so that it was no longer thrumming in her ears, Joelle listened for any other sounds. Nothing except for the hum of the air conditioner and the spring breeze rattling through some of the tree branches outside

her house.

She went to the front window and peered out, but it took her a moment to spot the vehicle. A black car that she didn't recognize. It was parked not in her driveway but off to the side beneath a pair of towering oaks. The headlights weren't on, and the door was indeed shut.

There was no sign of the driver.

Because of the angle of the parked car, Joelle couldn't see the license plates, and she didn't waste time figuring out what was going on. Not with every one of her cop's instincts now telling her that something was wrong. She stepped to the side of the window so that she wouldn't be seen or in the line of fire, and made a call to the Saddle Ridge dispatcher.

"This is Deputy Joelle McCullough," she said, keeping her voice at a whisper just in case the driver of that vehicle was close enough to hear her. "I need backup at my house."

She wasn't sure who was on night duty at the sheriff's office, but it wouldn't be her brother Slater. He was staying the night in San Antonio, a thirty-minute drive away, since he was on the schedule to testify at a trial. If Slater had been in town, she would have called him directly since he lived just up the road from her.

After she'd done a thorough visual sweep of the front exterior of her house, Joelle went to her kitchen window to check the backyard. Thankfully, there was a full moon to give her some visibility, but there were also plenty of trees and shrubs dotting the five acres she owned. Lots of places for someone to hide if that's what a person wanted to do to try to get back at a cop.

She wasn't aware of anyone specifically who wanted to end her life or get revenge on

her, but her father's killer was still unknown and at large. Since no one was certain of the reason her dad had been gunned down, she might be on the killer's hit list, too.

With her phone in her left hand and the Glock still gripped in her right, Joelle stayed positioned to the side of the kitchen window while she continued to watch and listen. Nothing.

And that in itself was troubling.

If this was someone she knew, they would have already come to the door or made themselves known. Added to that, the person would have parked in front of her house and not off to the side like that.

The minutes crawled by until Joelle saw the slash of headlights as they turned into her driveway. Backup, no doubt. She didn't breathe easier, though, because she needed to let the responding deputy know there was someone out there, maybe someone waiting to fire shots.

She hurried back to the front and silently cursed when she glanced out the front window and recognized the dark blue truck. Not a deputy but rather Sheriff Duncan Holder. Once, he'd been a fellow deputy but had been elected sheriff after her father's death.

Duncan was also the father of her unborn child.

As always, she got a serious jolt of conflicted feelings whenever she laid eyes on Duncan. Memories. Heat. Guilt. Grief. A bundle of raw nerves mixed with the old attraction that Joelle wished wasn't there.

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Because she didn't want Duncan or anyone else to be gunned down tonight, Joelle fired off a quick text to let him know about the unfamiliar black car and the out-of-sight driver. Duncan responded just seconds later with a thumbs-up emoji, and he pulled his truck into her yard and closer to her porch. He sat there for a few moments, still on his phone, and Joelle figured he was probably running the license plate on the visitor's vehicle since he'd likely have a good view of the one on the rear of the car.

Duncan finally put his phone away and stepped from his truck, keeping cover behind the door while he fired glances around the yard. He, too, had his Glock drawn and ready.

Her heart did that stupid little flutter it always did whenever she was around him, and for the umpteenth time, Joelle wished she could make herself immune to him. Hard to do, though, with those unforgettable, heart-fluttering looks. The dark brown hair, blue eyes and a face that had no doubt gotten him plenty of lustful looks.

More seconds passed. Her heart raced. Adrenaline pumped through her. Her stomach tightened.

The gusts of wind sure didn't help, either, with her raw, edgy nerves. Those gusts kicked up, stirring seemingly everything at once, including an owl that sounded agitated by the noise. It was bad timing since the owl's hoots and squawks could conceal any sounds her visitor might make.

Duncan finally moved away from his truck, coming up the porch steps, and that was her cue to use her phone app to disarm the security system and unlock the door. He stepped in and brought the scent of the fresh night air with him. His own scent, too,

one she wished wasn't so familiar to her.

"You're not on shift," she muttered, well aware that her tone wasn't exactly friendly.

"No. I couldn't sleep so I went into the office to do some paperwork. I was there when you called. Have you seen anyone around that car or the house?" he tacked onto that.

He met her gaze for just a fraction. She was betting that he was also trying to make himself immune to her.

Joelle shook her head, locked the door and reset the security system. "I heard the car door shut about fifteen minutes ago. It woke me, and when I got up and didn't see anyone, I called dispatch." She'd tried to make her voice steady, as if giving a report to her boss. Which she was. But it was hard to keep the emotion out of it.

Duncan glanced at her pale yellow gown that in no way concealed, well, anything. It was thin and snug enough to show the outline of her breasts and baby bump.

Yes, definitely hard to keep the emotion out of this.

"I ran the plates," he told her. "The vehicle belongs to Alton Martinez in San Antonio."

She repeated the name to see if it rang any bells. It didn't. "Does he have a record?"

"I'll know in the next couple of minutes." Duncan stepped around her and went to the kitchen window to look out as she'd done.

He'd been in her house before but not in a while. Not since that night her father had died. In fact, Duncan had been here in her bed while her dad was being gunned down.

Joelle knew she stood no chance of forgiving herself for that.

For years, Duncan and she had resisted the scalding attraction that'd been between them. They'd believed resisting was a necessity since they were fellow deputies, working side by side in sometimes dangerous situations. They hadn't wanted to risk a failed relationship that could have interfered with them doing their jobs. They'd resisted time after time, year after year. Until that night of her father's murder.

And it'd had disastrous consequences.

One good one, though, too.

Joelle hated she hadn't been with her father to try to stop his death, but she loved the baby she was carrying, and the pregnancy was the main reason she was managing to hold her life together. Duncan had helped some with the managing, too, by making sure they were on different shifts so she wouldn't have to see him that often. That's why it'd been such a jolt to have him respond to her call for help.

"Have you gotten any recent threats that I don't know about?" Duncan asked, the question yanking her out of her thoughts and forcing her to focus on the here and now.

"No. And I haven't made any recent arrests, either," she added, even though as sheriff, he would have already known that.

Of course, it wouldn't have to be anything recent to continue to be a threat. Sometimes, when criminals got out of jail, they went looking for anyone who'd had a part in their incarceration. No one immediately came to mind, though.

Duncan's phone dinged, and he tore his attention from the window to read the text he'd just gotten. "Martinez doesn't have a record, but about four hours ago, he

reported his car stolen.”

Joelle’s chest clenched, and another wave of adrenaline washed through her. She had steeled herself up for the worst, but she’d hoped this would turn out to be nothing. The fact it was a stolen vehicle meant it was almost certainly something bad.

Staying on the other side of the window, she peered out, searching again for whatever sort of threat this might be. Her mind was having no trouble coming up with some awful scenarios. Especially one.

“Before I went to bed, I accessed some internet newspaper articles on my father’s murder and my mother’s disappearance,” she told him.

No need for her to explain either of those incidents. Her father had been murdered, and on the same day, her mother, Sandra, had simply vanished. Both incidents had gutted her. Both had left her in desperate need of answers.

“I read any and every article connected to my parents,” Joelle added to let Duncan know that wasn’t anything out of the norm. “In one of them, a journalist mentioned that she was continuing to look into the murder and would post updates. I knew it was a long shot, that she probably didn’t know anything we didn’t, but in the comments, I asked if she’d found anything.”

Duncan looked at her, their gazes connecting, and even in the dim light, she could see the sympathy in his eyes. Could practically hear the sigh that Joelle was certain he wanted to make.

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“And you think...what...that your father’s killer saw the comment and believed that maybe he or she wanted to stop you from digging?” he asked. He still didn’t sigh. Nor did he dismiss it. “I saw the article. Saw the comment you posted.”

Joelle figured she shouldn’t have been surprised. Duncan felt guilty about her father’s murder, too, and he was a cop just as she was. This was a crime they both wanted solved, and that meant digging through any and all possible leads.

“It’s been five months,” Duncan went on a moment later. “If the killer had planned on coming after one of us, you’d think that would have happened before now.” He paused. “But the car was stolen, and the driver is nowhere in sight. So, I’m not writing anything off right now.”

Good. Joelle had wanted him to take this seriously because she certainly was.

“We can work this a couple of ways,” Duncan explained a moment later. “We can wait for the driver to show himself, or I can go ahead and call in every available deputy. We can flood the grounds with headlights and maybe spook the person enough for him or her to come out.”

Joelle knew that no one in law enforcement wanted to be woken up at this hour, but her fellow cops, including the reserve deputies, would gladly come if they thought it meant catching her father’s killer. Every member of the Saddle Ridge Sheriff’s Office wanted justice for their former boss.

“Bring in the deputies,” she advised. She glanced down at her gown again. “I’ll hurry and change and then will keep watch at the front of the house.”

Duncan made a sound of agreement, and while she hurried to her bedroom, she heard him call dispatch who in turn would contact the deputies. Since a few of them lived only a mile or so away, it shouldn't take long for them to start arriving.

Joelle wanted to believe that the extra help would mean a killer could be captured tonight. A capture that'd take place when she had plenty of backup so as to lessen the risk to her unborn child. But she had to stay grounded since this might not even be related to her father's death or her mother's disappearance.

Moving as fast as she could, Joelle pulled on a pair of maternity jeans, a loose top and her boots, and she hurried back into the living room. However, she came to a quick stop when she caught a whiff of something.

"Smoke," she heard Duncan say from the kitchen.

This time, the adrenaline came as a hard slam. Because Duncan was right. There was the faint scent of smoke in the air.

Duncan came barreling out of the kitchen and toward the front. "I don't see any signs of a fire in the back," he relayed to her as they both hurried to the living room window.

Joelle's heart was thudding now, and the fear came. A fire could be a ploy to get them out of the house. Or rather to getherout of the house. So she could be gunned down. But she didn't see flames anywhere.

"The scent's coming from here," Duncan muttered, glancing at the east wall of the living room.

The only windows on that particular side of the house were what was called clerestory, which meant they were above eye level and had been designed to let in

natural light. That didn't stop Duncan. He dragged over a chair, anchoring it against the wall and hefted himself up to look out.

He cursed.

"There's a fire right next to your house," he told her, causing her heart to race even more. "It's already at least four feet high."

The exterior was wood, and while Joelle hoped it wouldn't easily ignite, her visitor must have believed that would be the result. Either that, or he or she had wanted Duncan and her just to go running out.

Duncan made another call to dispatch, this time to alert the fire department. Something the person outside must have figured they would do. And that meant the seconds were ticking down. If Duncan and she waited until the firefighters arrived, the house could be engulfed in flames, putting them and the baby at risk. But the risk could be there if they ran, too.

"My car's in the garage," she let him know.

The vehicle wasn't bullet resistant but then neither was Duncan's truck, which was parked by her porch. Still, if they were in her car, at least they could try to drive out of there if the fire overtook the house.

Duncan made another of those sounds of agreement, and he took her keys from her when she scooped them up from the foyer table. That meant he was no doubt planning on being behind the wheel and that he would insist she get down. The cop part of her hated she had to make such concessions. However, the baby changed her priorities, and Joelle knew that both Duncan and she would do anything and everything possible to keep their child safe.

“I have to disarm the security system until we’re through the garage door,” she relayed to him, using her phone to do that. The moment they were inside her car, though, she reset the alarm.

In the distance, Joelle heard the welcome sound of a cruiser’s siren, but her relief over the backup was short-lived.

Because the next sound she heard was a blast.

Some kind of explosion roared through the house and garage, shaking the very foundation. Paint cans and gardening tools fell from the shelves and hooks, smashing onto the concrete floor. Each crash only escalated the urgency and fear.

So did the smoke.

The scent of it got much stronger, and Joelle could see whiffs of the smoke seeking beneath the mudroom door and into the garage. Thankfully, there was no smoke around the garage door itself, and that was likely the reason Duncan started the car and hit the remote on her visor to open the door.

“Stay down,” he ordered her.

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Joelle did. She strapped on her seat belt and sank down as low as she could. She also kept her gun ready in case she had to return fire.

Duncan threw the car into reverse and hit the accelerator, bolting out of the garage. Because of the way she was positioned, Joelle couldn't see the person responsible for the fire, but she had no doubts that Duncan was keeping watch.

The sirens got louder, and she saw the whirl of the blue lights slashing through the darkness. That would almost certainly get their attacker running. Or so she thought.

But she was wrong.

The bullet slammed into her windshield, crashing through the safety glass on the driver's side. For a heart-stopping second, she thought that Duncan had been hit, but he pressed even harder on the accelerator and got the car out of her driveway and onto the country road that fronted her house. He stopped just as the cruiser pulled in next to them.

"It's Luca," Duncan told her, referring to Deputy Luca Vanetti. "Text him and tell him to stay put until the others arrive. We have an active shooter. Tell him to let the other deputies know."

Joelle fired off a quick text, then braced herself for another shot. Or an explosion. Her house was burning, she was sure of that, but she couldn't deal with the sickening dread of losing her home and everything she owned. For now, she just had to focus on staying alive, and then she could figure out who was doing this.

And why.

She especially wanted to know the why in case that led her to her father's killer.

There was the sound of another siren. More whirling lights. Two more vehicles arriving on scene. What didn't happen was another round of gunfire, which meant the shooter was likely already on the run. Joelle prayed, though, that someone would spot the person.

Because she was so focused on listening for their attacker, Joelle gasped when the sound shot through the car. But it wasn't a bullet. It was her phone, and Joelle saw a familiar name on the screen. Molly Radel, a former deputy who'd transferred to working as a dispatcher after she got pregnant. Even though Molly was on leave, awaiting the birth of her baby, it was possible she'd been called in to assist in some way.

"Molly," Joelle answered, and she was about to give the woman a quick explanation as to what was going on, but Molly spoke before Joelle could do that.

"You have to help me," Molly said, her voice trembling and frantic. "Someone's breaking into my house."

The words had no sooner left Molly's mouth when Joelle heard the woman scream.

Chapter Two

Even though Joelle hadn't put the call on speaker, Duncan heard the woman's scream loud and clear. Since Joelle had greeted Molly by name, he also had no trouble figuring out that something was seriously wrong.

"Put the phone on speaker," Duncan told Joelle, and the moment she'd done that, he

tried to figure out what the heck was going on. “Molly?” he asked.

He could hear what he thought were the sounds of a struggle, but the dispatcher didn’t answer. And that caused Duncan to curse. He had every available lawman responding to the situation here at Joelle’s. A situation that might escalate even more if the attacker continued to shoot at them. But Duncan knew he had to go to Molly, and he had to do that now.

“Use my phone to let the deputies know that I’m heading to Molly’s place,” Duncan relayed to Joelle. “I want Luca to follow us as backup.”

Of course, that meant he’d be taking Joelle with him since there wasn’t time for him to get her safely into a cruiser. He got confirmation of that when he heard Molly scream again. The woman was obviously fighting for her life, and there wasn’t a second to lose.

Duncan gunned the engine to get them out of there, and he kept watch around them as he headed for the road. Thankfully, no shots came their way. That was the good news. The bad news was that could mean the shooter had stopped firing so he could go in pursuit of them.

Joelle finished a quick call to Luca to request backup and then went back to her own phone. “Molly?” she tried again.

The sounds of the struggle had stopped. No more screams. Nothing. And that tightened every muscle in Duncan’s body. Hell. The sounds of her screams had been terrifying, but the silence was even worse. Because the screams meant she’d at least been alive.

He thought back to the petite, young brunette who’d been a dispatcher for about six months now. She was pregnant, and she wasn’t married but had instead opted for

artificial insemination to have a child. Molly's parents were dead, and since she had no siblings, she would almost certainly be alone. It was info that everyone in town knew, and it was possible that someone had used that particular info to go after her.

But why?

"This can't be a coincidence," Joelle muttered, taking the words right out of Duncan's mouth.

Yeah, Duncan was leaning that direction as well. Two pregnant women attacked on the same night in the same small town. That would, indeed, be one hell of a coincidence if the incidents weren't related. Still, it was possible that there were two forces at work here. Duncan just didn't know exactly what those two forces were right now, but he'd need to find out and fast.

When there was an attack or kidnapping involving a pregnant woman, it was usually connected to some kind of domestic dispute. In fact, the number one threat to a pregnant woman was being murdered or seriously injured by the woman's partner. But there were also those crimes that involved kidnapping or killing a pregnant woman so the baby could be taken. With Molly so close to giving birth, that was definitely a motive at the top of Duncan's list.

But that didn't explain the attack on Joelle.

She was in her fifth month of pregnancy. Still a long way from delivering their child. A kidnapper would have to hold her for months. Not exactly a comforting thought, but then none of this was anywhere near comfortable.

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Duncan cranked up the speed when he reached the road and headed toward town. Since he'd known Molly his whole life, he knew where she lived and didn't have to look up her address. He just drove and tried to figure out how to make this trip as safe as possible for Joelle.

A safety she likely wouldn't want if she was thinking like a cop.

But if necessary, he'd need to remind her that she was on desk duty until the baby arrived. That wasn't a personal preference on his part simply because she was carrying his child. It was standard practice in the sheriff's office, and it was something her father would have insisted on had he still been alive.

Beside him, Joelle continued to try to get some kind of response from Molly by calling out the woman's name into her phone. Molly didn't answer. But there was a response in the form of a dead line. When she tried to call again and got the same thing, Duncan knew that someone had switched off the phone.

"I'll call dispatch to have Molly's phone tracked," Joelle told him.

He could hear the fear and nerves in every word she'd spoken. Fear that was there for a reason because they both knew that whoever was attacking Molly could have also disabled the phone, making it untraceable. Duncan hoped like the devil that hadn't happened, though, because if Molly wasn't home, the phone would be their best bet in tracking her.

Thankfully, there was no other traffic on the rural road at this hour so Duncan continued to press on the accelerator, eating up the distance between Joelle's and

Molly's. Luca stayed right behind him in the cruiser.

Duncan's phone rang, and when he saw Deputy Ronnie Bishop's name on the screen, he took the call on speaker. "Is everyone all right?" Duncan immediately asked since he knew Ronnie was at Joelle's.

"So far," Ronnie quickly assured him. "No signs of the shooter, though, and there's been no gunfire since Joelle and you left. No one's attempted to get to the stolen black car, either."

If the gunman had, indeed, been coming after Joelle and him, that would mean he or she had a second vehicle. And likely a partner. Either that or the gunman had positioned a second vehicle earlier and then driven the stolen one to Joelle's. Duncan couldn't think of a good motive for a would-be killer to do that, but the reason could be a clue to who had attacked them and why.

"How many deputies are there?" Duncan asked Ronnie.

"Six, including me. The fire department is here, too, but they're holding off until they get the word from you that it's safe to try to put out the fire."

It wasn't safe. Not with a gunman, maybe two, in the area. Hell, there could be even more than that if this was some kind of coordinated attack. No way could Duncan risk the lives of his deputies and the firemen when Joelle wasn't even there. Yes, she might lose her house to the fire, but the goal was to get everyone out of this alive and then catch the SOB responsible.

"Everyone stays in their vehicles for now," Duncan instructed, "but have two of the deputies go to the end of Joelle's road and keep watch for anyone trying to sneak away from there. Two more should stay put in case the shooter isn't done. Send the other two to Molly's."

If Molly had been kidnapped, or worse, then Duncan figured he was going to need as much help as possible.

Ronnie gave a fast assurance that he'd do as Duncan asked, and they ended the call just as Duncan finally made it to the turn to Molly's. It wasn't a typical subdivision or neighborhood like in a city but rather a spattering of homes that had been built on multi-acre lots. With all the trees and natural landscape, it was more like living in the country, which made for a peaceful lifestyle.

It also meant Molly's neighbors might not have been able to see or hear what was going on.

Added to that, Duncan was well aware that her nearest neighbors were all senior citizens. That was the reason he hadn't called any of them to go check on Molly and try to stop whatever was happening. Duncan hadn't wanted to risk any of them being hurt or killed. This was definitely a situation for law enforcement.

"I want you to stay down," Duncan told Joelle, and he made sure it sounded like the order it was.

She didn't protest. Not with words, anyway. But he knew this was eating away at her. Especially since someone was threatening and maybe had already harmed someone she knew well.

Duncan sped into Molly's driveway, his gaze immediately firing all around. There were no vehicles in front of the house. Nor was there anyone in sight. Just the darkness and the milky yellow illumination coming from the porch light.

"The front door's open," Joelle murmured.

It was. Duncan had noticed that right away, but he aimed a quick scowl at Joelle to let

her know if she had seen that, then it meant she wasn't staying down. Joelle muttered some profanity and slipped lower into the seat.

With Luca's cruiser squealing to a stop behind him, Duncan hurried out of the car, and while keeping watch, he ran toward the porch. He couldn't risk sitting around, waiting to see if he could figure out what was going on because at this exact moment, Molly could be inside fighting for her life.

Duncan barreled up the porch steps, taking them two at a time, and pinned his focus to the open door. If Molly's attacker was still in there, he had to be prepared in case the guy shot at him. That's why Duncan tried to listen for any sounds of a struggle or movement.

He heard nothing.

And knew that wasn't a good sign. Ditto for what he spotted on the porch just to the right side of the welcome mat.

Drops of blood.

Duncan was sure that's what it was, and cursing, he stepped around the drops and went inside. Of course, just his mere presence could contaminate the scene, but again, Molly was the priority here. He had to hold out hope that the blood belonged to her attacker, that Molly had somehow managed to fight him off and sent the SOB running.

"Molly?" he called out.

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No need for him to stay quiet since there was no element of surprise here. If the attacker was still inside the house, he would have heard the car that Duncan had been driving and the cruiser. Molly would have, too, and that meant if she'd been capable of calling out for help, she likely would have already done it.

Trying to steel himself for the worst but praying for the best, Duncan went into the house, staying low and leading with his gun. His attention whipped to the right, then the left. He took in the toppled lamp on the floor, but it seemed to be the only sign of a struggle.

Room by room, he made his way through the place, recalling the time or two he'd been here with his folks when they'd visited Molly's parents. Years ago, even before Molly had been born. Duncan was thirty-seven and Molly just twenty-four so he'd been plenty old enough to recall coming here for her folks to show off their baby girl. Maybe that was one of the reasons Molly had wanted to raise her child here. Her home. A place where she'd no doubt felt safe.

That last thought twisted his gut into knots so Duncan kept moving, kept searching, all the while listening for, well, anything. In addition to being able to hear anything in the house, he also needed to make sure nothing was going on outside with Joelle and Luca. So far, he wasn't hearing or seeing anything. Nothing out of place except for that lamp.

Until he made it to one of the bedrooms.

Molly's no doubt, and there were plenty of signs of a struggle here. The bed was empty, but the covers had been dragged off, and the clock and lamp that'd almost

certainly been on the nightstand were now on the floor.

“Molly?” he called out again and still got no response.

The overhead light was off, but there was a nightlight plugged in the outlet near the door to the adjoining bath. It was enough for him to see more of those blood drops.

Hell.

Duncan moved faster now, checking out the bathroom for any signs of Molly. Nothing. So he kept moving, hurrying to the other rooms. They were all empty, but he got another jolt when he saw the nursery all decked out in shades of pink. Since Joelle’s and his baby was also a girl, it made the gut punch even harder.

Pushing that aside, he made his way back through the house and was careful not to touch anything. Whoever had taken Molly might have left prints or some kind of trace evidence in the struggle, and Duncan didn’t want to compromise that any more than he already had.

He went back to the porch and saw that Luca was out of the cruiser and near Joelle’s vehicle. The deputy immediately looked up at him, but Duncan had to shake his head.

“Molly’s not here,” Duncan relayed to them. “And there’s blood on the porch and in the master bedroom. I want a BOLO for Molly and a CSI team in here right away.”

That got Joelle coming out of the car. “There’s a garden shed in the back,” she said, already moving as if to head in that direction. “Molly could be in there.”

Duncan cursed and went after her. “I know about the shed and was about to check it out.” He was about to order her back to the car, but she spoke before he could manage to say it.

“I have to help,” she insisted.

Joelle wasn't crying. She was too much of a cop for that. But her voice was shaky, and he figured that applied to the rest of her as well. Along with the mother lode of adrenaline, she was also battling the overwhelming fear that a woman they both knew had been kidnapped or killed and that the same thing had nearly happened to her.

“Stay close to me,” Duncan finally agreed.

He'd make this search quick so he could get Joelle into at least some minimal cover. Then, he could take her to the sheriff's office while they regrouped and figured out their next move.

As he'd remembered, the shed was in the backyard, not far from the porch that wrapped around the entire house. Duncan made a cursory look of the area, then a quick glance into the shed just to see if by some miracle Molly was hiding there. She wasn't.

“Molly?” he called out one last time.

When he got no response, he hurried back to the car with Joelle and got her inside. “Start calling her neighbors,” Duncan instructed. “I want to know if anyone saw or heard anything.”

He doubted that'd been the case, though. If so, those neighbors would have already headed over. Still, it was possible that someone had heard something that would give them clues as to who had taken Molly.

There was the howl of sirens in the distance, and Duncan knew it wouldn't be long before more deputies arrived. Good. He'd have them check around the place while he got on the phone with the Texas Rangers and Highway Patrol. Both agencies would

get word of the BOLO, but Duncan wanted to emphasize that Molly was pregnant and she worked for law enforcement. Molly was one of them, and that would hopefully get her the highest priority.

Duncan took out his phone, ready to get started on those calls, but he stopped when he caught some movement from the corner of his eye. He pivoted in that direction, in the same motion taking aim with his Glock. Then, he stopped when he spotted something.

The woman walking toward them.

Correction: staggering toward them.

It wasn't Molly. No, this woman was older and had graying black hair that was tangled around her face. She was barefoot and wearing a ripped shirt over stained gray yoga pants.

Duncan's first thought was this was Sandra McCullough, Joelle's mother who'd deserted her family the day her husband had been murdered. No one had seen or heard from her since. But it wasn't Sandra, and Duncan had no idea who she was.

Joelle got out of the car, taking aim as well. So did Luca, but Duncan could see both of the woman's hands, and she wasn't armed. Still, this could be some kind of ploy so he approached her with caution.

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“Who are you?” Duncan demanded. “Are you hurt?” He didn’t see any signs of injury, but it was possible some of the stains on her clothes were dried blood.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said as she came even closer.

That put some ice in his veins. “Sorry for what?” And because it had to be asked, he added. “Are you the one who took Molly?”

She didn’t answer but rather just kept walking, her feet dragging through the yard. Her eyes looked vacant. Robotic, even. As if someone had forgotten to turn on a switch. Duncan was betting she’d either been drugged or was in shock.

“This is all my fault,” the woman muttered. Her voice was flat and barely a whisper. “Everything that’s happening is my fault.” She dropped to her knees, her gaze shifting to Joelle. “I’m so sorry, but he wants you dead.”

A hoarse sob tore from her throat, and the woman collapsed into a heap on the ground.

Chapter Three

While Joelle sat in the waiting room of the emergency room of Saddle Ridge Hospital, she tried to keep her breathing level and tamp down the worry that was threatening to cloud her mind. Worry wouldn’t help—not her baby, not Molly and not her. What she needed right now was for Molly to be found alive and well and for her to find answers as to what the heck was going on.

Duncan was clearly after those answers, too, and he had been on the phone nonstop since they'd arrived at the hospital with the mystery woman. The woman who'd delivered that sickening message.

I'm so sorry, but he wants you dead.

That was definitely something Joelle hadn't wanted to hear, and it'd left her with even more questions. Who was the woman and who was the she'd proclaimed wanted to kill her? Was he the person who'd driven that stolen car to her house and set the fire? It was hard for her to believe that it wasn't connected, but until the woman regained consciousness, all Joelle could do was speculate and deal with her own phone calls. So far, none of those calls had given her any good news.

Plenty of bad, though.

Her house was basically in ashes now because the fire department hadn't been able to move in to try to save it since there'd been the threat of an active shooter. There were no signs of the shooter now, though. No sign of Molly, either. And the now-unconscious mystery woman had had no ID on her so they didn't even know who she was.

However, Joelle had gotten some good news, not from a call but rather the checkup she'd had shortly after Duncan and she had arrived at the hospital. Despite the traumatic situation she'd experienced, the baby was fine. The monitors had shown a strong, steady heartbeat and lots of movement—signs that had fulfilled a lot of Joelle's prayers. Her baby was okay.

Now, Joelle had to make sure she stayed that way.

The only instructions the doctor had given her was to get some rest, and Duncan had been there to hear that part. Which meant he'd soon be trying to get her off her feet.

She was exhausted, no doubt about that, and exhaustion wasn't good for the baby, but neither was having shots fired at them. To make sure an attack like that didn't happen again, they needed answers fast.

Since Duncan was still on the phone, Joelle went after some of those answers by making a call to dispatch to check if there'd been any missing persons' reports in the area of someone matching their mystery woman's description. There hadn't been, but Joelle had known that was a long shot, that the woman could have come from anywhere and maybe wasn't missing at all. She could have arrived shortly before she'd staggered toward Joelle's house.

Emphasis on staggered.

She hadn't been steady on her feet at all and seemed dazed, perhaps even drugged. But it was also possible she had been experiencing some kind of medical emergency that had created those symptoms. If so, the woman might not have even been aware of what she was saying.

I'm so sorry, but he wants you dead.

Though she certainly hadn't seemed so dazed or drugged when she'd spoken those words. She'd seemed adamant about delivering a warning with a potential deadly outcome.

Joelle was about to text one of the deputies to see if there'd been any signs of a vehicle that the woman could have used to get to or near her place, but before she could press the number, she got an incoming call from one of her brothers, Ruston McCullough, a homicide detective with San Antonio PD.

It wasn't Ruston's first call of the morning. That initial one had come while Duncan and she were en route to the hospital. She had assured Ruston and her other brother,

Slater, and their kid sister, Bree, that she hadn't been harmed, but Joelle knew they were worried about her. Knew, too, that the calls to check on her would continue until they could see her face-to-face and make sure the baby and she were, indeed, okay.

"Anything?" Ruston immediately asked. His tone was brusque as it usually was, but Joelle was aware that the question covered a lot of bases, including her own state of mind.

"No. We're still in limbo when it comes to any info that'll help." She paused, had to because of the sudden lump in her throat. "Still nothing on Molly. Someone took her, and she has to be terrified."

Joelle refused to believe it could be worse than that. She wouldn't accept that Molly could be hurt or dead. She had to cling to the hope they would somehow find her and bring her safely home.

"Any ransom demand?" Ruston questioned.

Joelle had to repeat her "no." But in a way, a ransom demand would be a positive sign. It meant she'd been taken for money and would presumably be released unharmed if the money was paid.

Ruston sighed and paused a long time. "I'm sorry about your house. You've got the keys and security code to stay at my place, but I don't want you there alone. Just hang with Duncan until I can get there. I want to keep coordinating with the Rangers to try to locate Molly."

"Keep on that," she insisted. She would have also told him she would come up with a safe place to stay, however, when Duncan ended his latest call and started her way, she put the rest of this conversation on hold. "I have to go," she told Ruston. "I'll let you know if I get any updates."

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She ended the call and stood to face Duncan. He definitely didn't look to be the bearer of good news, and that caused her heart to sink again. She prayed he wasn't about to tell her Molly was dead.

"We haven't found Molly yet," Duncan immediately said, probably picking up the worst-case-scenario vibe from her expression. "Some of the reserve deputies are canvassing the area around her house to find out if anyone saw anything."

The late hour wouldn't help with that, but maybe Molly had managed to scream or something. If so, that would have already been reported, but Joelle had to hang on to the hope that they'd get a viable lead.

"The CSIs are going through Molly's house and the stolen car left at your place," Duncan continued. "They're still looking for her vehicle, too." Even though it wasn't necessary for him to identify what he was referring to, he tipped his head to the exam room where the medical staff had taken the mystery woman. "She didn't have any ID on her."

"And there's no missing person's report matching her description," Joelle provided.

Duncan nodded. "Apparently, she drifted in and out of consciousness when she was in the ambulance so when we're able to speak to her, she might be able to tell us who she is. And why she issued that warning," he tacked onto that.

Yes, that was vital for the safety of their baby, and Joelle reminded herself that there were a lot of people working to get answers and make sure that safety happened.

“Do you think this woman and the warning are directly connected to Molly?” Joelle came out and asked.

Duncan’s gaze locked with hers. Something they usually avoided because of the heat that was always there between them. Heat that came despite any and everything going on. There’d always be an intimate connection, especially now that she was carrying his child, but because she was so worried about Molly, it was easier for Joelle to shove that heat aside.

“Yes,” he admitted. The sigh he added was long, heavy and weary. “That’s why I made a call to the FBI. I wanted to see if they were aware of any black market baby rings or perpetrators in the area who could be targeting pregnant women. Nothing like that is on their radar, but they’re checking to see if this is someone from out of state.”

Joelle had tried to maintain a stoic expression, her cop face. She tried not to let the possibility of something like that give her this jolt of fear. But it did. Mercy, it did.

Duncan muttered some profanity and took hold of her arm. Probably because she looked ready to collapse. Joelle was almost certain that wouldn’t happen, almost, but she allowed him to help her back into one of the chairs, and he sank down on the one beside her.

“Deep breaths,” he advised her. “Count to ten. Tell me the latest names you’re considering for the baby.”

Part of her resented Duncan for seeing the weakness in her and knowing she needed help. Part of her also resented that such measures might be necessary to keep herself from spiraling. But the resentment was really for herself, for feeling this clawing terror all the way to the bone. Those sort of emotions didn’t help. In fact, they could hurt, and she didn’t want anything else that could hinder them in this investigation.

“I’ll be all right,” she muttered, hoping it was true.

The sound Duncan made let her know that he wasn’t so sure of that at all, and she might have launched into more attempts at convincing him if her phone hadn’t rang. “It’s my sister again,” she muttered, and even though Joelle wasn’t in the mood to talk to her, she had to answer it or it would cause Bree to worry even more than she was already was.

“Bree,” Joelle greeted. “I’m all right.”

“So you say.” Her sister’s sigh was plenty loud enough for Joelle to hear. “I’ll believe it when I see it. I’m coming home, but I can’t get there for at least a couple of days.”

Joelle groaned. Bree was a lawyer working on a special task force in Dallas, six hours away, and she knew Bree had used all her vacation time and then some when she’d come home after their father’s murder and disappearance. Since Joelle figured she stood no chance whatsoever of convincing Bree she was fine and didn’t need her sister to be there, she went with a different tactic.

“Everyone in the sheriff’s office is tied up with the investigation,” Joelle spelled out. “And right now Saddle Ridge isn’t the safest place to be.”

“I’m coming home,” Bree insisted, and then she paused. Sighed again. “I need to see you. There are things I want to talk to you about.”

Joelle didn’t like the sound of that, especially since she and her sister communicated at least weekly either by phone call or text. “Is something wrong?” Joelle came out and asked.

It was a valid question. Like her, Bree had been devastated with what had happened to their parents. Added to that, Bree had broken up with her longtime boyfriend,

Luca. Then again, Luca and Bree had had an on-again, off-again thing going on since high school. Since Bree was often involved in high-profile legal cases for the state and was gone a lot, both Luca and she had had other relationships. But something had happened between Luca and Bree to make her sister pull the plug and now things were permanently off.

Or so Bree had said.

Luca wasn't offering up anything so Joelle wasn't sure what had happened. Maybe it was something similar to what had gone on between Duncan and her. Too much pain and grief. Too much guilt. Too much, period.

"I should be home by early next week," Bree added a moment later. "In the meantime, you stay safe. I love you, Joelle."

"I'll certainly try," Joelle assured her. "And I love you, too," she said, ending the call just as the door to the exam room finally opened.

It wasn't the mystery woman who came out, of course, but it was a familiar face. Dr. Chase Benton, one of the doctors who worked at Saddle Ridge General Hospital.

Dr. Benton spotted them and walked their way as Duncan and she headed to him. "Is she awake?" Duncan immediately asked.

"She is, for the moment anyway," the doctor said, but there was caution in his voice. He stepped in front of Duncan when he started toward the exam room. "I'm well aware that you need to see her," he quickly added. "I've heard what's going on, and I understand you have to question her, but you should know that she's still unable to stay awake for more than a couple of seconds. Unable to tell me her name as well. I suspect she's been drugged, and that the drugs combined with a head injury are the reasons she's lapsing in and out of consciousness."

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That wasn't a surprise to either Duncan or her, and that led them to more questions. Who'd drugged her and why? Hopefully, they'd know the answers to that soon.

"Her blood pressure is high as well," the doctor continued. "And that means when you question her, you can't push too hard. I can't give her anything right now for the blood pressure until I find out what other drugs are in her system."

Duncan groaned. "I have to push," he insisted. "Molly Radel and her baby's life could depend on it."

Dr. Benton's eyes widened. "You believe the patient had something to do with that?"

"I think the likelihood is high that there's a connection. It's possible the woman can tell us who took Molly."

Despite Duncan's use of likelihood and possible, the doctor nodded and stepped to the side. "All right, you can question her, but I have to be there. And trust me, I will pull the plug on the interview if I feel she can't handle it."

Duncan nodded, too, while he was already on the move. With Dr. Benton and Joelle right behind him, Duncan stepped into the ER room where the woman was lying on the bed. She was hooked up to a monitor and had an IV in the back of her hand. Joelle also spotted some injuries. There was a gash on the side of her head, some bruising as well and her feet were covered with cuts and scrapes.

"She obviously walked barefoot through some rough terrain," the doctor pointed out. "There was also powder on her clothes. The kind of powder you'd get from a

deployed airbag.”

So maybe she’d been involved in a car accident. However, that didn’t explain what had happened to her shoes or why she’d ended up walking to Molly’s. Or the ominous message she’d delivered.

The woman’s eyes were open, and when she lifted her head, her attention went straight to them. Joelle didn’t see any recognition in her expression, only wariness and confusion. Added to that, her gaze still had that dazed look she’d had when she arrived at Molly’s.

“I’m Sheriff Duncan Holder,” he said, stepping closer to her. He tipped his head to Joelle. “And this is Deputy Joelle McCullough. Could you tell us your name?”

The woman looked at the doctor and then shifted her attention to Joelle. “I came to see you,” she muttered, her voice a ragged whisper.

That gave Joelle some hope. If the woman remembered that, then she might recall other things, too.

“You did,” Joelle verified. She started to remind her of what she’d said before she collapsed but decided to press for an ID instead. “Who are you?”

She shook her head as if trying to figure that out, and then murmured. “Kate Moreland.”

Duncan got out his phone as she spoke the last syllable, and he fired off a quick text, no doubt to get someone at the sheriff’s office to run a background check on her.

“Kate Moreland,” Joelle repeated, mentally testing out the name, but it didn’t ring any bells. “You know me?”

Kate shook her head. "I know of you." Her voice broke into a hoarse groan. She eased back onto the bed and closed her eyes. "I had to warn you."

Another positive sign that she'd remembered that. Of course, the warning she'd delivered hadn't been positive at all.

"You said someone wanted me dead," Joelle reminded her. "Who?"

She didn't open her eyes, and it was at least fifteen seconds before she answered. "My son," she finally said, and she broke down into a heaving sob. A reaction that caused the numbers on the monitor to spike.

"You need to leave," Dr. Benton insisted. "Her blood pressure's too high. Step out while I try to get her stabilized." It wasn't a request, and the doctor practically muscled them out of the room.

Duncan cursed and took out his phone. "Slater's running the background check on her. I'll see if he's got anything yet." However, Duncan's phone rang before he could call her brother.

"It's Ronnie," he relayed to her, and he put the deputy's call on speaker.

"We found a car, a dark blue Audi," Ronnie said right off. "It looks as if the driver hit the east side of the bridge and lost control. It was off the road and all the way down on the banks of the creek."

The creek was only about a half mile from Molly's, and if it did, indeed, belong to Kate, then the woman had likely been traveling from the interstate. If she'd been coming from town, then the collision would have probably happened on the west side of the bridge. Also, if she'd been coming from town, Duncan or one of the responding deputies would have spotted her on the road before she'd made it to

Molly's.

"I'm running the plates now," Ronnie continued. "But there was a purse and a phone in the vehicle. According to the driver's license, the purse's owner is Kate Moreland. She has a San Antonio address."

San Antonio was a half hour away, which meant Ruston could no doubt help with getting them any info they needed on her. And her son. Joelle wanted to know his name and why Kate had believed he might want to kill her.

"When you do a thorough search of the car," Duncan said, "check her GPS to confirm if she was heading to Molly's or Joelle's. And let me know if you find anything we can use."

Ronnie assured him that he would, and Duncan ended the call to make one to Slater. Her brother answered on the first ring.

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“Kate Moreland,” Slater immediately said, and he rattled off an address in San Antonio. “Age fifty-three. Divorced. No criminal record. She’s a very wealthy businesswoman who owns a half dozen martial arts and workout gyms.”

“You have the name of her son?” Duncan pressed.

“Yeah. Brad. Age twenty-eight, and I’m just scratching the surface on him. Why? Is he part of this?”

“Kate seems to think so,” Duncan quickly verified. “She believes her son might be out to kill Joelle.”

Slater cursed. “He’s got a record for assault during a bar fight, but I don’t see any connection to Joelle or Saddle Ridge...” His words trailed off, and he cursed again. “But his ex-wife, Shanda Cantrell, does. My dad and you arrested her nearly two years ago for reckless driving and resisting arrest. Either of you remember that?”

“I do,” Duncan said.

“So do I,” Joelle murmured, trying to zoom in on any info that was lingering around in her memory. The info had plenty of gaps in it so she took out her phone and started searching while she continued. “I recall Dad and Duncan bringing in a woman for those charges. They had me search her for weapons, and because she was being so combative, Dad put her in a holding cell.”

“A definite yes to her being combative,” Duncan agreed. “She tried to take a punch at me. And she cursed and spat at Joelle. Cursed the sheriff, too.”

Slater must have pulled up the file right before she did because he was the one to add more. “She ended up pleading guilty, paid a fine and did some community service. Dad worked it out so she could do that service in San Antonio so she wouldn’t miss any work at her job as a florist.” Slater paused a moment. “Had she been drinking?” he asked. “Was that the reason for the reckless driving?”

“No alcohol,” Joelle was able to provide. “She admitted to having been in a heated argument with someone on her phone. She was also speeding when she rammed into a mailbox, swerved and nearly hit another car.” Then, she paused. Had to. Because she spotted something in the file notes. “Shanda was three months pregnant.”

Both Duncan and Slater went silent, but she could hear Slater clicking away on a keyboard. “She has no children listed. Neither does Brad.”

So either Shanda had miscarried or the baby had died. Either way, that might play into motive. If there was motive for Shanda, that is. Kate hadn’t said a word about her ex-daughter-in-law, only her son. Maybe then, losing a child had something to do with why Kate had come here to issue that warning about Brad.

“I’ll obviously want a conversation with both Shanda and Brad,” Duncan insisted.

“I can arrange that,” Slater volunteered. “When I call him, how much do you want him to know about his mother?”

Duncan’s forehead bunched up while he gave that some thought. Joelle definitely wanted to hear how he was going to handle this, but her phone rang, and her chest tightened when she saw Unknown Caller on the screen.

“This could be the ransom demand,” Joelle muttered, answering the call on speaker and hitting the record function on her phone.

She steeled herself up to hear a snarled threat and demand from the kidnapper. But it wasn't.

"Help me," the woman said.

It was Molly.

Chapter Four

"I'll have to call you back," Duncan told Slater the moment he heard Molly's voice.

He didn't wait for Slater to respond. Duncan ended the call and went closer to Joelle.

"Where are you?" Joelle asked Molly. "Are you all right?"

Molly didn't answer, but Duncan could hear some kind of shuffling around, and several moments later, someone spoke. But this time, it wasn't Molly.

"Don't ask any questions," a man said. His voice was muffled and practically a growl. No doubt because he was trying to disguise it. Did that mean Duncan knew this person? "I made a mistake, and I'm trying to fix it."

Despite the man demanding no questions, Duncan had so many of them. Joelle no doubt did, too. But at the top of their list had to be if Molly had been harmed.

"We're listening," Duncan prompted so the man would continue.

"A big mistake," he muttered, adding some profanity. "I'll leave the woman somewhere you can find her."

Duncan jumped right on that. It wasn't the ransom demand—or any other kind of

demand—he'd been expecting. "Where?"

"I'll call you once I've dropped her off, tell you where she is, and you can come and get her," the man was quick to say.

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Of course, that meant the guy would probably be long gone by the time they arrived to get Molly. But this could also be a trap to draw Joelle and him out.

“Is Molly all right?” Duncan asked, hoping that Molly would be able to answer that for herself.

“She’s shaken up but fine. Like I said, taking her was a mistake.”

Duncan wanted to press for more. He wanted to know why kidnapping Molly had been a mistake. Had this been a case of the wrong person being taken? Had Joelle been the target? He needed answers to all of that, but he especially wanted to know whose blood was in the house and on Molly’s porch. If it was Molly’s, then she was more than just shaken up.

“Leave Molly somewhere now,” Duncan bargained. “She and her baby need to be checked by a doctor.”

Silence. For a long time. And Duncan hoped like the devil that the guy was considering that. The sooner they got Molly, the better.

“I’ll call you when I call you,” the man finally snarled, and he ended the conversation before Duncan could say anything else.

Duncan immediately cursed and tried to call the kidnapper back. It wasn’t a surprise, though, when the guy didn’t answer. Still, Duncan reminded himself that the call was a positive sign. Molly was alive, and the man who’d taken her wanted to return her.

Supposedly.

He cursed again and looked at Joelle. “He could be using Molly and her baby as bait,” she muttered.

“Yeah.” But Duncan didn’t need to spell out the rest. He’d have to go to Molly even if a trap was a high probability. Which it was. He’d have to go even if there was only a slim chance they’d get Molly back.

“You’ll take backup,” Joelle said, proving that they were thinking the same thing. “And you’ll be careful.”

Duncan shouldn’t have felt good about her adding that last part. But he did. There’d been so many weeks of tension between Joelle and him. So much guilt. Now, though, they were on the same side again, and he realized just how much he’d missed this. He’d had a thing for her for years, that wasn’t going away, but he missed working with her almost as much as he missed being with her.

Almost.

He glanced up the hall when he saw someone approaching, and his body braced. But it wasn’t a threat. It was Luca who’d gone back to Joelle’s after he’d escorted Duncan and her to the hospital.

“No sign of the gunman yet,” Luca reported. “No other shots fired after you left the scene. How are you two? Were either of you hurt?”

“We’re fine,” Joelle assured him. “We just got a call from the kidnapper.” She handed him her phone. “The recording of the conversation is on there, but the kidnapper claims he intends to return Molly.”

That put some hope in Luca's intense brown eyes. Hope that disappeared as fast as it'd come. "You believe him?"

"Too soon to tell," Duncan muttered.

Luca's phone rang. "It's the fire department," he explained. "I'd better take this." He stepped away to do that, and Duncan turned back to Joelle.

"When the kidnapper does call back, you won't be going with me to pick up Molly," he told her.

Her mouth tightened, but she didn't argue. She had to know if this was a trap, then she was likely the intended target.

Well, maybe she was.

"You don't resemble Molly," he said, thinking out loud. "You live miles from each other. Yes, you're both pregnant, and she's a former cop, but that's about it."

Joelle nodded. "Maybe it wasn't about mistaking Molly for me but he could possibly see the kidnapping as a mistake. It's possible he didn't know she was pregnant." She paused. "Or he could have just changed his mind."

That was true, but it still didn't explain the attack on Joelle. Or maybe it did. "If someone wanted to kidnap pregnant women, there could have been two teams operating. The one that hit your place and the one that went after Molly."

Joelle made a sound of agreement but wasn't able to add anything else because the door to Kate Moreland's room opened, and Dr. Benton came out.

Benton was quick to shake his head. "You won't be able to speak to Ms. Moreland

for at least a couple of hours. Maybe longer. Her blood pressure isn't stable, and she's at risk for a hypertension crisis, which could lead to a stroke or heart attack. I'll give you a call when it's safe for her to have visitors."

Duncan couldn't press to continue the interview, not when it could put the woman's life in danger. But there were also more pressing dangers than Ms. Moreland's health.

"Ms. Moreland was worried about her son, Brad," Duncan told the doctor. "She thought he might want to harm Joelle in some way. That's why she was heading to Joelle's place, but she was near Molly's when she was involved in a car crash."

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A crash that might or might not have been an accident. That was yet something else Duncan would need to find out about.

“If she’s right about her son, he could be dangerous,” Duncan went on. “I’ll keep Deputy Vanetti standing guard outside her room now,” he added, motioning to Luca who was only a few feet away and still on the phone. “And I’ll get a reserve deputy in to replace him.” That’s because Duncan needed all his best trained deputies on the investigation.

The doctor nodded and gave an uneasy glance around. “I’ll alert security, too, that there could be a potential problem.”

Security was basically one guard who monitored the cameras positioned in and around the hospital. Duncan didn’t know who was on duty tonight, but a deputy would be the best bet to keep Kate safe.

“I’ll contact a reserve deputy,” Luca volunteered after the doctor had walked away, already on his phone. No doubt to call security. “And I’ll get the hospital guard a photo of Brad Moreland so he can keep an eye out for him.”

“Good idea,” Duncan told him and added a thanks before he got Joelle moving.

“You want me to walk with you to the exit?” Luca asked.

It was tempting, but he had to shake his head. “Best to stay on Kate’s door. But I will use your cruiser.”

It was bullet-resistant and parked right outside the ER. A safer way to get Joelle to the sheriff's office than using her car.

Luca immediately handed over the keys, and while Joelle and Duncan started down the hall, she typed out a text. "To Slater," she explained. "I want to fill him in about what's going on."

Good idea because Slater and all the other deputies needed to know about Kate and her son. About Shanda as well. Even though they didn't have any direct proof, the attacks on Joelle and Molly might, indeed, be related to Shanda's arrest two years ago. That was a long time to wait to act out on a grudge, and that's why they had to learn everything they could about the woman.

Duncan stopped at the ER doors and peered out into the parking lot. He didn't see any immediate threat. In fact, because of the early hour, there wasn't anyone around.

No one visible, anyway.

Of course, there was always the threat that a gunman had positioned himself to wait for them to come out. And that's why Duncan had to test the waters. Something Joelle wasn't going to like. The cruiser was close, but he wanted it as close to the ER doors as possible. That would minimize Joelle's time for being out in the open where she'd be an easy target.

"Wait here," he instructed.

Nope, she didn't like it, but she didn't voice her objection. However, she did take out her gun and started glancing around to make sure he wasn't about to be ambushed.

Duncan also took out his weapon and hurried to the cruiser. He kept an eye on Joelle as well because if she was a target, then an attacker could use this opportunity to go

after her. But he held out hope that Molly's kidnapper believed her abduction to be a mistake. If so, then maybe going after Joelle had been, too, and it could mean she was no longer in danger. Duncan had to hope for the best and prepare for the worst, though, and that meant making this trip to the sheriff's office as safe as possible for her and their baby.

Thankfully, no one fired at him when he raced outside and to the cruiser, and he moved fast to bring the vehicle closer to Joelle. Duncan lifted his hand in a wait gesture, though, and didn't give her the go-ahead to move until he'd gotten back out of the cruiser first to open the passenger's side door for her and also so he could shield her as best he could.

All of these security measures had to be both a blessing and a curse for her. After all, Joelle was a good cop, as good as they came, and she was normally in the role of the protector. Added to that, it was probably especially uncomfortable for her since he was the one doing the protecting. But like him, she needed to take all available precautions for their child.

The moment Joelle was inside the cruiser, Duncan hurried back to the driver's seat, and he got them out of there fast. Again, though, he had to keep watch since it was possible for a sniper to be perched on top of one of the buildings that lined Main Street. Thankfully, they made it the six blocks without anyone trying for round two of an attack.

Duncan parked right out front, and they both hurried into the building. Which was practically empty. No surprise there since he had the deputies working the crime scenes at Molly's and Joelle's and others out looking for the gunman. The sole occupant was Carmen Gonzales, a reserve deputy who'd retired several years earlier but still made herself available for emergencies. This was definitely an emergency.

"Any word about Molly?" Carmen immediately asked.

“Nothing confirmed, but her kidnapper called and claims he’ll release her,” Duncan explained, and he tacked on a question of his own to that. “Are there any reports from the deputies in the field?”

Carmen shook her head. “Nothing that I didn’t forward to Luca and you.” She glanced down at the laptop she’d been using when Joelle and he had come in. “I’m doing the background checks on Kate Moreland, her son and his ex-wife, Shanda.”

“Good. Keep on that,” Duncan instructed, though he wanted to do some digging in those areas as well. “Do you have the son’s contact info?”

Carmen checked the computer screen again and nodded. “I’ll forward it to you. The phone number for his ex as well.”

Duncan muttered a thanks and put his hand on the small of Joelle’s back to get her moving first toward her desk in the bullpen where he grabbed her laptop. Then, he picked up his from his office before heading to the break room at the back of the building.

“The doctor said you should rest,” he reminded her.

“I can rest and work at the same time,” she was quick to respond.

Duncan had expected that and already come up with a compromise. He took her to the break room with him where there was a fairly comfortable sofa, had her sit and then handed over the laptop.

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“I want you to contact the techs at the crime lab and see if they can get anything from the number Molly’s kidnapper used to call us,” Duncan instructed. “That’s priority.”

Even though both of them knew that was a long shot. The kidnapper had probably used a burner that couldn’t be traced. Still, they might get lucky.

“After that, if you’re not ready to get some actual sleep, I need any and all preliminary reports from the CSIs and fire department,” he continued.

“I won’t be ready to sleep,” she assured him. “Not with the adrenaline still burning through me.”

Yeah, he knew all about adrenaline overload. Hard to come down from that, and when you did, it was a crash. Joelle would no doubt soon be exhausted. Maybe enough that she’d actually grab a nap.

He went to the small fridge in the corner and took out two bottles of water and one of Joelle’s yogurt cups she kept stocked. He set one of the waters, the yogurt and a spoon on the end table next to her.

“Also, if you still have any bandwidth left after dealing with the techs and getting the reports, go through the file of Shanda’s arrest. See if there are any red flags that could have predicted something like this.”

It wasn’t busy work, and Joelle knew that because she got started on it right away. All were necessary steps in the investigation. So was what Duncan had to do next. Despite the fact it was barely five in the morning, he used the contact info Carmen

had just emailed him and called Brad Moreland. There was no answer for four rings, and just as Duncan thought the call might go to voice mail, someone finally answered.

“What?” a man snarled, and judging from the grogginess in his voice, Duncan had woken him up.

“I’m Sheriff Duncan Holder from Saddle Ridge. FYI, this call is on speaker, and I have a deputy listening. Are you Brad Moreland?”

The man cursed. “Saddle Ridge,” he spat out like venom. “Yeah, this is Brad Moreland, and anything you want to say to me should go through my lawyer. We’re going through with the lawsuit for what you did to my wife.”

“Your ex-wife,” Duncan corrected. “And what lawsuit?” He figured he’d get that out of the way before bringing up the reason for this call.

“My wife,” Brad snapped. “Shanda and I are reconciling. And as for the lawsuit, you’ll soon know all about that because we’re filing a civil suit for my wife’s unlawful arrest and detainment. An arrest and detainment that was so traumatic she ended up miscarrying.”

Bingo. There it was. The motive all spelled out. Though it did seem odd that they’d file a civil suit, which would draw attention to themselves. That could mean they weren’t behind the attack and Molly’s kidnapping. Or else they wanted to use the civil suit as a sort of reverse psychology. Why go after them physically when they were already going the legal route?

“We’re going to sue you and your department into the ground,” Brad threatened. “And then we’ll go after your personal assets. You and your deputies aren’t above the law, Sheriff.” Again, he used that venomous tone for the last word.

Since Shanda's arrest had been justified, Duncan seriously doubted there'd be a payout of any kind, but a civil suit was an annoyance since he would still have to defend the actions the former sheriff had taken. That would in turn stir up bad memories for Joelle.

One look at her face confirmed it was already doing that.

"You and the deputies are going to pay for—"

"I'm calling about your mother, Kate Moreland," Duncan interrupted.

Brad clearly hadn't expected him to say that because it stopped his tirade, and after a few seconds of silence, the man muttered, "What about her?" There was concern, but then the anger returned. "Did you come up with some reason to arrest her?"

"No." Duncan took a moment to consider what he intended, and didn't intend, to say. "She was involved in a car accident and was taken to the hospital."

Brad cursed. "Is she alive?"

"She is." And he waited to see how Brad would react to that. If Brad did, indeed, have criminal intentions as his mother claimed, then the man might have wanted the news that the car crash had been fatal.

"I need to see her," Brad insisted. "Where is she?"

"She's in the hospital and in protective custody."

There was some more cursing. "Your protective custody. This from the sheriff's office that killed my child and wrecked my life—"

“It’s odd that you’d mention someone being killed because that’s what your mother claimed you wanted to do.”

That brought on the silence. “You’re lying.”

“I have witnesses,” Duncan pointed out.

Brad huffed. “Witnesses who you coached no doubt because you want to get ahead of the lawsuit and try to defame me.”

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“I didn’t know about the lawsuit before I called you. Now, explain why your mother would accuse you of plotting to kill a cop.” Duncan made sure that wasn’t a suggestion but rather an order from a sheriff.

“I have no idea.” Now there was plenty of defensiveness in Brad’s voice. “You said she was in a car accident so maybe she got a head injury and was confused.”

Duncan hadn’t missed the fact that Brad hadn’t asked about his mother’s injuries right from the start. Most people did once they understood their loved one was alive. Brad had demanded to see her, but he hadn’t pressed about her condition.

“Is my mother in the hospital there in Saddle Ridge?” Brad finally said after a long silence. “If so, I can be there in under an hour.”

“She can’t have visitors. Doctor’s orders. But even if she could, I won’t let you in to see her unless I’m convinced your mother was wrong about you wanting to kill one of my deputies.”

“Deputy Joelle McCullough.” Brad said her name like profanity. “She was one of the cops who arrested my wife. Oh, her dad was the head honcho in that, but he’s dead so the lawsuit will be aimed mainly at his daughter and the other cops involved. Molly Radel and Ronnie Bishop.”

Everything inside Duncan went on alert, and he mouthed for Joelle to send Ronnie a heads-up about being a possible target.

“It’s interesting that out of the three people you just named,” Duncan continued with

Brad, “one was kidnapped and the other attacked. According to your mom, she specifically came to Saddle Ridge to warn Deputy McCullough.”

Brad’s next round of profanity was quick and raw. “Like I said, my mother was mistaken. Sure, I’ve talked about Deputy McCullough and Deputy Radel but I’ll go after them in the courts for what they did. I’m not on some vendetta.”

“So, you have an alibi for the past five hours?” Duncan fired back.

“I was in bed at my house. Alone,” Brad tacked onto that in a mutter. “That doesn’t mean I did those things.”

Maybe. But it didn’t look good, not with his mother accusing him and with no alibi. “I want you here at the Saddle Ridge Sheriff’s Office in three hours. That’ll give you time to arrange for your lawyer to come with you.”

“You better believe I’ll have a lawyer. And I’ll expect to see my mother when I’m there.”

“You can expect it, but you might not get it,” Duncan snarled right back. “Be here in three hours,” he repeated, and he ended the call.

Duncan immediately fixed his gaze on Joelle, prompting her to give her take on the phone call.

“Brad’s angry enough to come after Molly and me. And he has plenty of money to hire someone to orchestrate the attacks,” she amended and then paused. “But if he hired that gunman and the kidnapper, then why didn’t he establish an alibi for himself?”

Yeah, that was the thing that stood out for Duncan, too. “Maybe Brad didn’t know his

mom was going to rat him out. He also might not have thought we'd connect the kidnapping and attack to what happened to his ex-wife nearly two years ago."

Still, a guilty person should have thought of those angles and covered his butt. Brad hadn't. Was that cockiness, sloppy work or was he actually innocent?

Joelle's phone dinged with a text, and she sighed when she read it. "While you were talking to Brad, I texted the tech guys with the kidnapper's phone number. They obviously took me at my word when I said it was high priority because they checked it right away. It's a burner, and it's no longer in service."

Duncan went with a sigh of his own, even though it was expected news.

"Of course, the tech guys will keep searching to see if they can link it back to anyone," she added.

That was standard operating procedure, but it was a rarity when they found those links. Still, it was all they had at the moment.

"I'm hoping the kidnapper will arrange for us to pick up Molly before Brad comes in for his interview," Duncan said, and he checked the time. "Why don't you try to get some rest—" He stopped when his phone rang. Unknown caller. And his heart raced at the possibility of this being the kidnapper who was using a different phone.

"Sheriff Holder," Duncan answered. He hit record and put the call on speaker. But it wasn't a man's voice who greeted him.

"Sheriff," a woman said. It definitely wasn't Molly, either. "I'm Shanda Cantrell. I just got off the phone with Brad, and he was very upset."

Duncan would have preferred for this call to be about Molly and her release, but he'd

intended to call Shanda so this saved him the step of having to get her number.

“A lot of people are upset right now,” Duncan verified. “And by the way, I have you on speaker, and one of my deputies is listening. I’m also recording this conversation.”

That brought on a couple of moments of silence. “All right,” Shanda finally said. “I’m calling because Brad told me his mother was delusional and talking out of her head,” Shanda went on. “Kate accused Brad of intending to commit a crime.”

“Did he?” Duncan asked, figuring that was the fastest way to cut to the heart of this conversation.

Shanda didn’t gasp or make a sharp sound of surprise. Instead, she sighed. “No. Not that I know of,” she tacked onto that.

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Interesting. Those weren't the words of a woman jumping to defend her ex-husband. "But it's possible he committed a crime," Duncan pressed.

"Not that I know of," she repeated, and this time there was an admonishment to her tone. "I can tell you that the relationship between Kate and Brad is strained right now, so if Kate sustained a head injury or something, that might have caused her to say what she did."

Duncan disregarded the last part of that and went for the meat of the remark. "Strained how? Why?"

Shanda sighed again. "It's because of me. Brad wants to get back together and Kate loathes me."

When Shanda didn't add more, Duncan went with a prompt. "Brad wants to get back together. How about you? How do you feel about that?"

"It's complicated." Shanda groaned. "I know that's a cliché, but in our case, it's true. Brad and I share a very painful past."

Duncan could relate, what with Joelle and him blaming themselves for not stopping her father's murder. So the cliché of complicated fit them, too.

"I'm not sure if Brad and I will be getting back together or not," Shanda finally admitted. "It won't happen unless he's willing to get the counseling he needs. So far, Brad hasn't shown up at any of the appointments I've scheduled for him."

Maybe because the man didn't want to forget the past but rather get revenge for it.

"Counseling has really helped me," Shanda went on. "I had a difficult childhood, and according to my therapist, that created some anger issues. Issues, too, with using people. And, yes, I used Brad. Or rather I used his money. Don't get me wrong. I loved him, and that's why I married him, but I wasn't careful with his money."

Shanda sounded a lot different than she had from the night she'd been arrested. Maybe the counseling had worked. Or maybe this was all an act.

"Why does Kate loathe you?" Duncan asked, circling back to what Shanda had said earlier.

"This is all very personal," Shanda muttered.

"You bet it is," Duncan snarled. "Someone tried to kill one of my deputies and kidnapped a former deputy who's now a dispatcher. For me, that's as personal as it gets, and if you have any information that can help me find the person responsible, then spill it."

"Yes," the woman said, her voice heavy with emotion now. "Brad told me about that, and he thinks because of what Kate said, he's now a suspect in those crimes."

"He is a suspect," Duncan verified. "And you're a person of interest. In fact, I'll need you to come into the Saddle Ridge Sheriff's Office for an official interview. When we're done talking, go ahead and arrange for that. Bring your lawyer if you want, but I expect you in this morning. The earlier, the better."

"I see," Shanda said in a whisper. "You believe the attack and the kidnapping are connected to what happened to me nearly two years ago."

“Are they?” Duncan was quick to ask.

“No, I don’t think so.” She paused. “Look, I understand you have a job to do, but that incident was very painful for me. I had a miscarriage, and since I couldn’t deal with the grief of losing my child, I fell apart. It ruined my marriage.”

Duncan listened for any signs of bitterness and rage, but he didn’t pick up on anything. What was there was the pain and grief of trauma. Then again, maybe that’s what Shanda wanted him to hear.

“As I said, I’ve gone through counseling,” Shanda went on. “Lots and lots of it. It’s helped, but Brad seems stalled in that deep rut of loss over our baby. You see, I’d had a hard time getting pregnant and gone through many fertility treatments. The pregnancy was a miracle, and it was snatched away.”

Now there was some bitterness, but Duncan figured it was a drop in the bucket to what Brad had revealed.

“I understand Brad has filed a civil lawsuit over what happened,” Shanda went on. “I’m trying to talk him out of that because I don’t think that will help with his healing. He needs to heal,” she emphasized.

Duncan had to wonder just how “broken” Brad was. Maybe Kate was dead-on when she’d accused her son of going after Joelle.

“Any idea why Brad would wait two years to file the lawsuit?” he pressed.

Shanda sighed. “He’s talked about it for a while, months. And I know he interviewed several lawyers before he finally found one who actually encouraged him to go through with it.”

So, Brad had shopped around to find someone who had told him what he wanted to hear. And once Brad had that approval, maybe he did more than just start a legal battle. Maybe he decided to get full on revenge.

“Could Brad have been responsible for the attack and kidnapping?” Duncan came out and asked.

“I don’t want to believe he is,” Shanda admitted. Then, she stopped and muttered something Duncan didn’t catch. “I’ll contact my lawyer and see if he can meet me right away so we can go to the sheriff’s office together. As soon as I have a time for our arrival, I’ll let you know.”

“I want you in before ten o’clock,” Duncan insisted.

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“I’ll let you know,” Shanda repeated, and then she ended the call.

Duncan put his phone away and began to process everything he’d just heard. Judging from the way Joelle’s forehead had bunched up, she was doing the same.

“Shanda believes Brad could be guilty,” Joelle concluded. “Along with Kate’s statement, maybe that’s enough for us to get access to Brad’s financial records to see if he hired the gunman and the kidnapper?”

“Maybe,” Duncan muttered, but he could already hear Brad’s lawyer putting up an argument about that. An argument he might win since Kate’s own mental state couldn’t be verified right now. Still, it was worth a try.

Duncan texted the assistant district attorney to put in the request. He’d have to follow that up with some paperwork, but he might be able to get enough out of Kate and Shanda to justify the warrant.

“You want to try to get some rest now?” Duncan asked her after he’d finished his text.

Joelle opened her mouth, no doubt to argue, but was cut off by the sound of footsteps. Moments later, Carmen appeared in the doorway.

“There’s a PI here to see you,” Carmen said. “Al Hamlin.”

Duncan repeated the name, but it didn’t ring any bells. Joelle shook her head to indicate she didn’t recognize it, either.

“Did he say what he wants?” Duncan asked.

Carmen nodded. “He claims he knows who kidnapped Molly and tried to kill Joelle. And he says he has proof.”

Chapter Five

Joelle slowly got to her feet, her attention fixed on Carmen. She immediately had a bad thought, that this was one of the gunmen using this visit as a ploy to come after Duncan and her again. The concern must have shown on her face, too, because Carmen spoke right up.

“Hamlin didn’t set off the metal detector,” Carmen pointed out, “but Luca’s back, and he frisked him. He was armed with a Glock that he’s licensed to carry, but Luca is holding onto that and keeping an eye on him.” She shifted her gaze to Duncan. “Do you want to see him, or should Luca interview him?”

“Oh, I want to see him,” Duncan assured her. “Take him to interview room one. Joelle and I will be in there in a minute or two.”

Carmen nodded, stepped away and then backtracked. “While Luca was frisking him, I ran a quick background on Hamlin. He is a PI from San Antonio but currently living in Austin, and he’s twenty-three. That’s all I have on him right now, and I’ll dig for more, and if anything comes up while you’re talking to him, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” Duncan said. “Dig, but finding Molly is the top priority, and I want you to sit on the lab to get the results on the blood that we found at Molly’s place. So, don’t spend much energy on Hamlin because this visit might turn out to be nothing,” he added in a mutter.

Joelle knew Duncan was right about both things. Molly being the priority and this

turning out to be nothing. Crackpots surfaced all the time during investigations, and even though there hadn't been that much time between this PI showing up and the attack and Molly's kidnapping, word of it would have already gotten out. Still, Joelle felt herself clinging to the hope that this Allen Hamlin could give Duncan and her some much-needed answers.

"I won't insult you by asking if you're up for doing this interview," Duncan told her once Carmen had left. "But if you want to keep on the searches you're doing, I can handle Hamlin solo."

"I want to hear what he has to say," Joelle was quick to let him know. Oh, yes. That hope was burning bright and hot in her.

Duncan studied her a couple of seconds, not with the heat that was sometimes in his eyes when he looked at her. All right, there was some heat. Always was, but Joelle was certain he was trying to make sure she was holding up okay. She was barely holding on and now battling the dreaded adrenaline crash, but there was no way she would sit this one out.

He finally nodded and tipped his head toward the interview room just down the hall. Judging from the sounds of footsteps and voices, Carmen was already escorting the PI there.

Because Joelle was behind Duncan, she didn't get her first glimpse of Hamlin until they were in the room with him. He looked even younger than twenty-three and was wearing khakis and a white button-down shirt. His short cropped hair was a pale blond. Actually, pale described the rest of him, too, what with his light skin tone and gray eyes. He had a thick envelope tucked under his arm.

"Let me know if you need anything," Carmen muttered to Duncan before she left them.

“Sheriff Holder,” the man immediately said, and he extended his hand for Duncan to shake. Duncan did, but before Hamlin had released his grip, he looked at Joelle. “Deputy McCullough. I’m Al Hamlin.”

Joelle was a little uneasy that Hamlin could identify them when she was reasonably sure she’d never seen him before. “Have we met?” Joelle came out and asked.

Hamlin shook his head. “I followed news of your father’s murder so that’s how I knew who you were. Both of you and the other deputies were mentioned in the press a lot.”

Father’s murder. No way for her not to react to that, but Joelle tried to mask the quick punch of grief. But Hamlin was right about the press. No one in her family or the sheriff’s office had escaped the publicity.

“Thanks for seeing me so early,” Hamlin said, glancing at both Duncan and Joelle. “You’re going to want to hear what I have to say.”

Duncan motioned for Hamlin to take a seat, and when he did, Duncan and she sat across from him. “You told my deputy that you had information about two crimes that were committed a few hours ago.”

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“I do.” Hamlin handed Duncan the envelope. “There’s a lot of information in there so I’ll try to summarize and hit the high points. Five months ago when Sheriff McCullough was murdered, he was investigating a missing pregnant teenager.”

“Mandy Vernon,” Duncan automatically supplied while he opened the envelope. He took out what appeared to be police reports.

“Yes,” Hamlin agreed. “Some thought Mandy had just run away because she wasn’t getting along with her folks or her boyfriend, but Sheriff McCullough thought she might have been kidnapped or lured into the hands of someone who wanted her for the baby she was carrying.”

Joelle knew that was also true. Her father had been insistent that something bad had happened to Mandy.

“I believe Sheriff McCullough was right,” Hamlin went on, and then he stopped and took a long breath as if steeling himself up. “A month ago, my own sister, Isla, went missing. She’s seventeen and was seven months pregnant at the time she disappeared. I swear on my life that Isla wouldn’t have just left. Like Mandy, I believe someone took her for the baby.”

Joelle glanced at the reports again. “Do you have proof?”

“Circumstantial but yes, there’s proof,” Hamlin insisted. “Over the past year, eight pregnant teenage girls have gone missing in the state, and none has been seen or heard from since.” He leaned in, putting his arms on the table, and he looked straight at Joelle. “I believe there’s a black market baby ring operating, and that your father

found something that could have gotten him killed.”

This wasn't a total news flash. Joelle, Duncan and everyone in law enforcement in Saddle Ridge had looked at that connection since it was a case that had occupied a lot of her father's time. But if her dad had actually found anything big related to the investigation, he hadn't put it in his reports. Nor had he mentioned it to anyone. Since three of his kids were cops, Joelle thought he would have told them.

If he'd gotten the chance, that is.

It was possible he'd been murdered before he could reveal something he'd learned.

“Bottom-line this,” Duncan said, holding up the one-inch thick stack of papers he'd taken from the envelope. “Is there proof of any kind for who killed Sheriff McCullough? And for the attack on Deputy McCullough and the kidnapping of the dispatcher?”

Joelle expected the PI to hedge and repeat his circumstantial. But he didn't.

“Yes,” Hamlin stated, and he gathered his breath again. “Since Isla went missing, I've been digging, and talking to every informant I could. One name kept popping up when people would whisper about a black market baby ring.” He paused a heartbeat. “Kate Moreland.”

Of all the names Joelle had thought he might say, that wasn't one of them. “Kate?” she questioned.

Hamlin gave a firm nod. “Don't ask me how I got access to her financial records, but something doesn't add up. The woman's bringing in a lot more money than her businesses.”

Joelle scowled, and she was certain Duncan was doing the same. “I will ask how you got her financials,” Duncan stated, “because if you obtained them illegally, then you don’t have proof.”

The PI muttered some profanity and shook his head. “The proof is there for someone who can get it through legal channels. I took some shortcuts because I wanted to see if there were any red flags, if this woman could possibly be the person responsible for the disappearance of my sister and other teenage girls. I believe she is,” he added with what sounded to be absolute certainty.

“Spell it out for me,” Duncan ordered.

Joelle figured Duncan wasn’t forgetting about those short cuts that Hamlin had admitted to taking. He’d no doubt get back to those, but if Kate did have some part in Molly’s kidnapping, then that was the priority here.

“I have a statement from two women who say that Kate Moreland brokered the sale of their babies,” Hamlin went on.

“Their names and details are in here?” Duncan asked, motioning toward the papers again.

“They are.” Now Hamlin paused, and some of his enthusiasm waned. “But those incidents happened over ten years ago. There are some more recent,” he was quick to add. “However, those women wouldn’t go on record.”

Playing devil’s advocate, Joelle tried to see how this all might have played out. “Isn’t it possible that Kate didn’t broker the sale of the babies but rather just put the teenagers in contact with prospective adoptive parents?”

Though, so far, Joelle hadn’t come across any reference to Kate having done that sort

of thing. Still, info like that didn't usually turn up in background checks unless there had been something illegal about it.

"Kate might try to say that," Hamlin answered, "but she'd be lying. The girls said Kate paid them five thousand for the babies."

"Is there any kind of concrete proof of that?" Duncan asked.

"The statements from the girls." Hamlin's voice turned hard, and he huffed. "I figure Kate's been doing this for years, and that she then sells the babies for a whole lot more than five grand." He paused, looked Joelle straight in the eyes. "I also believe when she couldn't find a readily available teenager to give up their kid, then Kate had pregnant adults kidnapped. And I think that's what your father uncovered."

Part of Joelle wanted to latch on to this since it would be a lead not only in Molly's kidnapping but also her father's murder. But as working theories went, it wasn't nearly as strong as Brad's and maybe Shanda's motive. Or what had happened to her father. Because maybe Brad or Shanda had had her dad killed because of the arrest and miscarriage.

Maybe Kate had the same motive as her son.

But then why would the woman have shown up proclaiming Brad was behind the attacks? That didn't make sense, unless...

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Joelle's mind followed that through. If Kate was, indeed, guilty of everything that Hamlin was saying, she might want to set up her son to take the blame. But certainly, there'd be someone else, someone not in the woman's gene pool, to try to frame.

"Read the files," Hamlin said after another huff. "You'll see the connections, and you'll see that Kate is guilty."

Duncan made a sound that could have meant anything. He certainly didn't jump on the "Kate did this" bandwagon.

"I'll definitely read through all of this," Duncan assured him, "and I'll want to talk to the two women who gave you their statements about selling their babies to Kate."

Duncan stood, signaling an end to the meeting, and Hamlin clearly didn't approve of what he obviously thought was a brush-off.

"Kate did this," Hamlin snarled. His gaze fired to Joelle. "Arrest her if you want your father's killer behind bars."

"If Kate did it, trust me, she'll be arrested," Joelle confirmed.

That brought on another huff from Hamlin, and he stood and stormed out. They followed him to make sure he did leave the building. After all, everything Hamlin had just told them could have been done to get closer to them, to get them to let down their guard.

Because Hamlin could be one of the gunmen who'd attacked her earlier.

They went into the bullpen, and Hamlin didn't linger. He went straight past Carmen and Luca and out the door.

"Did he actually have proof of anything?" Luca immediately wanted to know.

Duncan lifted the papers. "To be determined. Until we know for sure, though, call the deputy who's guarding Kate Moreland and tell him or her to keep a very close eye on the woman. I doubt Kate's in any shape to leave, but I want to make sure she stays put." His gaze slid to Hamlin who was now on the sidewalk. "And tell the deputy to make sure that guy doesn't get into her room."

Luca glanced at Hamlin, too, and took out his phone to make the call.

Duncan shifted his attention to Carmen. "Get me anything you can find on Hamlin and Kate Moreland. Use the techs to help with that, but I need thorough background checks on both of them."

Carmen nodded and hurried back to her desk.

Joelle looked at the papers. "I can start going through those."

Duncan hesitated, and she knew why. There was probably a lot in there about her father's murder. A lot that would take jabs at some still raw, painful memories.

"It needs to be done," was all Joelle said, and Duncan handed over half the papers to her. He'd almost certainly be poring through the other half.

They went back to the break room but had barely made it inside when Joelle's phone rang. Her heart jolted when she saw Unknown Caller on the screen, and she nearly dropped the papers when she fumbled to answer it.

“Joelle,” a woman said.

Molly.

Joelle fumbled the papers again to put the call on speaker. “Molly.”

Since her voice had way too much breath and hardly any sound, Joelle repeated the woman’s name. Duncan sprang into action, taking out his phone and contacting tech so they could try and trace the call.

“Are you okay?” Joelle asked Molly. “Where are you?”

Molly didn’t answer right away, but Joelle could hear someone muttering in the background. Even though she couldn’t make out the words, she guessed it was the kidnapper giving Molly instructions about what not to say.

“I’m not hurt,” Molly finally answered. “And the baby’s moving and kicking so I think she’s fine, too.”

Joelle had so many things she wanted to ask, but she blurted out the first thing that popped into her head. “There was blood at your house.”

“It’s not mine,” Molly said, but then stopped when there was more muttering in the background.

Duncan’s gaze flashed to Joelle, and then he fired off a text. And she knew why. If the blood wasn’t Molly’s, then it likely belonged to the kidnapper, and they could use it to identify him.

“I’m to tell you that he’s releasing me in a couple of hours,” Molly went on several moments later. “But you’re to send him ten thousand dollars to this account.” She

read off a series of numbers, and Duncan typed them into the notes on his phone. “You can get the money from my savings. I have an inheritance from my grandmother, and once the money’s in the account, he’ll call you with the location where he’s dropping me off.”

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Ten thousand. That wasn't a huge ransom so maybe the kidnapper just wanted some cash to get away. Joelle was betting that the account would be offshore and not traceable. But they still had the blood.

"He also said I was to tell you not to look for him," Molly added. "Please don't look for him," she said, her voice breaking into a sob. "I just need this to be over, and it won't be if he gets spooked. I need to come home."

"We'll get you home," Duncan promised, but he was talking to the air because the call had already ended.

Duncan took her phone and immediately tried to call Molly back. There was no answer, and Joelle suspected in a minute or two the burner phone would be disabled.

A flood of emotions slammed through Joelle. The relief, the fear, all mixed together with the adrenaline crash. It was a bad combination because she started to shake. She headed toward the sofa so she could drop down onto it, but Duncan pulled her into his arms.

"We will get her home," he repeated, and he eased her even closer to him. Until they were right against each other.

Joelle knew she should move away. But she couldn't. She needed this. Needed Duncan. Even though there'd be a high price to pay for it. This kind of closeness could lead to dangerous feelings. Ones that would drown her in guilt because Duncan was the ultimate reminder that she hadn't saved her father. That she might have been able to stop him from dying or her mother from vanishing if she hadn't been with

Duncan.

“I’m okay,” she managed to say.

It wasn’t anywhere close to the truth, but when the heat came, swirling in with the other emotions, Joelle forced herself to move. Not far. Just one step back, and she made the mistake of looking up and into Duncan’s eyes.

Yes, the heat was there. But there was so much more. He was worried about her. Heck, she was worried about herself, about what the stress of this was doing to their baby. The best way to minimize that worry, though, was to try and forget the heat and focus on getting Molly safely home.

“I can transfer the money into that account,” she said. Her voice was still shaky. So was the rest of her, but Duncan must have realized, too, that the work was what they both needed now. “I can get it from my savings so we don’t have to go through the bank to get it from Molly’s.”

“Use the sheriff’s office funds and instruct the bank to delay releasing the money,” Duncan told her. “The kidnapper will see the funds deposited and maybe go ahead and release Molly. Once we have her, we can try to trace the kidnapper’s location when he or she attempts to withdraw or transfer the money.”

Like her, he didn’t seem hopeful of that happening, but they had to check and double check. Even if Molly was safely returned, a serious crime had been committed. The kidnapper, and anyone who hired him, should pay and pay hard.

Since Joelle had never done a transfer like this, it took her several minutes to work through the process of it. While she did that, Duncan called the tech who’d been trying to trace the call. They were both still busy with their tasks when Carmen appeared in the door. She had her laptop balanced in the crook of her arm and

continued to read whatever was on the screen until Joelle and Duncan finished.

“The kidnapper was using another burner,” Duncan said. “Couldn’t be traced, and like the other, it’s already been disconnected.” He glanced at Joelle. “Did the transfer go through?”

Joelle nodded, and she looked at Carmen. “The kidnapper called again and had Molly tell us that he wanted ten grand.”

“Is Molly okay?” Carmen immediately asked.

“She said she was,” Joelle relayed. “I hope that’s true.”

“So do I,” the other deputy muttered, and she turned her attention back to her laptop.

“Please tell me you have something on the blood that was found at Molly’s,” Duncan said to Carmen.

“No. Luca’s calling about that now. But I got a preliminary report on Hamlin. Since his sister went missing, he’s focused only on that. No other clients.”

Duncan huffed and put his hands on his hips. “It’s hard to earn an income when you don’t have clients.”

“He inherited life insurance money from his parents who died in a car accident three years ago. It was about half a million, so I’m guessing he lives off that and apparently devotes all his time to finding his sister. There’s no sign of her, by the way,” Carmen added. “But Austin PD believes she ran away with her then boyfriend since he went missing, too.”

“Is there anything in that prelim report to indicate that Hamlin could have been

behind the kidnapping and attack on Joelle?” Duncan asked.

“No criminal record or anything like that, but I’ll keep digging. I should be able to get access to the background that would have been done on him to get his PI license. That would give us a bigger picture of him.”

“Do that,” Duncan said just as his phone rang.

Joelle immediately got to her feet, and everything inside her went tight again until she remembered the kidnapper would likely be calling her number, not Duncan’s.

“It’s Dr. Benton,” Duncan relayed, answering the call. “I’m putting you on speaker so my deputies can hear. I hope you’re about to tell me we have the green light to question Kate.”

“Not yet. She’s sedated, and I want her to stay that way for at least another hour or two,” the doctor explained. “I’m calling because I got back her tox results, and I thought you’d want to know.”

“I do,” Duncan verified. “She was drugged?”

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“There were traces of a prescription sleep aid in her system. Doxepin. Traces,” the doctor emphasized. “There certainly wasn’t enough of it to cause unconsciousness.”

Joelle frowned, and she waited for Duncan to ask the question she knew had to be on his mind. “Do you think she faked her symptoms?”

“Hard to say, but it’s possible she had some kind of allergic reaction. I’ll be checking for that. When I checked her online medical records, there weren’t any allergies listed. Not only that, she’s been prescribed this particular sleep aid for years. Still, it’s possible the drug in combination with something else caused the disorientation and the unconsciousness. As I mentioned earlier, that something else could have caused the car accident.”

Yes, that could explain it. Joelle recalled seeing the cut on the woman’s head.

“How serious is that injury to the head?” Duncan wanted to know.

“We ran a CT scan, and there was no obvious signs of brain damage or even a concussion,” Dr. Benton was quick to say. “Once the patient is out of sedation for her blood pressure, I’ll do some neuropsychological evals since a CT scan doesn’t always confirm a concussion. It’s possible, too, that the trauma of the car accident is playing into her reactions.”

Duncan’s expression let Joelle know he was skeptical about that. But why would Kate have pretended to be drugged? The woman had literally staggered onto Molly’s property and then collapsed. Why do that?

Unfortunately, Joelle immediately came up with an answer. A bad one. If Hamlin was right about Kate being a criminal, then maybe her behavior was meant to make her look innocent while also pointing the blame at Brad. But Kate could have also done this to get closer to them. So she could try to do to Joelle what was done to Molly. Still, that seemed an extreme ploy especially since the woman hadn't been on their radar before she'd shown up at Joelle's.

"I still want to talk to Kate once she's awake," Duncan stressed. "I'll also want the results of those tests you mentioned."

"Is she a suspect in the attacks?" the doctor asked.

"A person of interest, but some information has come to light that I need to question her about. It could be related to the murder of Sheriff McCullough."

"I see," the doctor muttered after a long pause. "I'll let you know the moment you can talk to her," he assured Duncan.

When the call ended, Duncan stared at his phone for a moment before his gaze shifted to Joelle. "We really need to dig into Kate's background."

She couldn't agree more. "I'll do that and check for any updates from the CSIs, techs and lab." They had a lot of cogs going in this particular investigative wheel, and any one of them could provide them with answers.

Maybe, finally, answers about her father.

Joelle couldn't fully process that. Couldn't deal with the emotions that would bring. She had to rely on the work not only bringing a closure to the case but to help her find the mental healing that had so far eluded her.

Of course, the healing would only be partial. She would still need to know what had happened to her mother.

“I’ll get that PI background report on Hamlin,” Carmen said, and she headed back toward the bullpen.

Joelle forced her hands to steady on the laptop keyboard while she checked for those updates. There was one which had come a little too late to say that the blood at Molly’s hadn’t been hers. That comparison had been fairly simple because her DNA was on file. Now that Molly had been ruled out, the sample would have to make its way through the database to see if there was a match.

Since Duncan was already at work on his laptop, Joelle didn’t relay the blood news. She just moved on to the next task—finding out if Kate Moreland had something to hide. The basics about the woman meshed with what they had already learned. She owned a lot of businesses she had inherited from her father who’d died a decade earlier.

Joelle continued looking into the woman’s personal life. Divorced, ex-husband deceased and only one child. Brad. There were plenty of social media posts about Kate’s fundraisers, parties and such, but there were no recent mentions about Brad. Joelle had to go back five months to find them, and she immediately saw a pattern. Before five months ago, Kate had posted many photos of her and her son together. Then, nothing.

Joelle had to wonder about the timing since her father had been murdered five months ago.

From across the room, Duncan’s phone rang, immediately getting her attention since it could be news about Molly. “It’s Ruston,” he said.

She automatically sighed. Her brother was no doubt checking on her again and probably thought she'd try to gloss over how she was doing. Which she would have done. No way did she want her brothers worrying about her any more than they already were.

"Ruston," Duncan greeted, and unlike the other calls he'd been getting, he didn't put this one on speaker.

Joelle couldn't hear what her brother said, but whatever it was had Duncan slowly getting to his feet. "Hell," he spat out.

That caused Joelle to stand as well, and she went to Duncan. "What's wrong? What happened?" And too many worst-case scenarios started flying through her head.

Duncan lifted his finger in a "wait a second" gesture. "You're sure it's her?" Duncan asked Ruston.

The answer he got caused Duncan to curse again, and then he added, "Yeah, call me the moment you know anything." He pressed end call, and he looked at her.

"Is it Molly?" she managed to ask, even though Joelle's throat had seemingly clamped shut.

Duncan shook his head. “It’s Shanda Cantrell. She’s been murdered.”

Chapter Six

Duncan drank more coffee and paced with his phone anchored between his shoulder and ear while he waited for Joelle’s brother, Detective Ruston McCullough, to take him off hold and give him the update on Shanda’s murder.

It’d been over an hour since Ruston’s initial call to deliver the shocking news that Shanda had been found dead just outside her house in San Antonio, and Ruston had only been able to provide the basics. Apparently, Shanda’s lawyer had found her dead when he’d gone to her place. Cause of death had likely been a gunshot wound to the chest.

“Sorry about the wait,” Ruston said when he came back on the line. “I just got another call from the CSIs out at Shanda’s house, and I wanted to hear what they had to say so I could pass it along to you. And Joelle. She’s there, right?”

“I am,” Joelle verified. She looked too exhausted to pace, the way Duncan was in an effort to burn up some of this adrenaline and nerves. She was on the sofa, watching and waiting.

“How are you holding up?” Ruston asked, and Duncan knew that question was for Joelle.

“We need answers,” she replied, clearly dodging her brother’s question.

Ruston sighed because that dodge had given him the answer. His sister was exhausted and worried about everything that had gone on not just since the attack but the events of the last five months. All of this could be linked, and that was a connection that wasn't going to allow Joelle, or the rest of them, to get much rest anytime soon.

"All right," Ruston continued, "here's what I have. At approximately 6:45 this morning, Shanda's lawyer, Frank Salvetti, arrived at her residence in San Antonio. She had called him about a half hour before that and instructed him that she needed him to accompany her to Saddle Ridge right away."

Hell. A lot had gone on in these hours following Joelle's attack. It was barely six in the morning, but it felt as if they'd been at this for days.

"That's a fast, and very early, response for a lawyer," Duncan pointed out.

"Yeah," Ruston agreed. "I'm guessing it's because Shanda either pays him well or else they have a personal relationship that made him react so fast. Not lovers. I've found no proof of that but maybe just friends. Anyway, he found her lying partway inside her door and on her porch, and he called 911. The ME just confirmed that cause of death was the gunshot wound to the chest. No surprise there. I was one of the first on scene, and it was obvious that she'd been shot and bled out."

"Any witnesses?" Joelle asked.

"None, and there were no security cameras. But it's definitely not suicide. No other weapons around, and even though I don't have the report back on it yet, it'll turn out that she was shot at point-blank range. What it looked like to me was that she opened her door to someone, maybe thinking it was her lawyer or possibly because she knew the person, and then she was shot."

Duncan groaned. Ruston was a good cop so his account was almost certainly what

had happened. But with no witnesses and Shanda dead, they didn't have an ID on the shooter.

"Shanda called me about an hour before she was killed," Duncan explained. "I was going to question her about the attack on Joelle and Molly's kidnapping."

Ruston made a sound of acknowledgment. "Joelle had messaged me about that." He paused. "Shanda's arrest could be linked to Dad's murder. Who else knew that?"

"My three suspects," Duncan was quick to say. Technically, he should be using the "persons of interest" label, but in his mind, they were solid suspects. "Shanda's former mother-in-law, Kate Moreland, who's still hospitalized. Shanda's ex-husband, Brad. A hothead who blames your dad, Joelle and a few others for Shanda's miscarriage following her arrest. The third suspect is Al Hamlin, a PI who showed up out of the blue to point the finger at Kate."

Duncan paused to give Ruston some time to consider all of that.

"Who's your top suspect?" Ruston asked several moments later.

"Well, it would have been Shanda before she was murdered," Duncan admitted. "After all, she's the one who lost the baby, and she's got the funds to hire a gunman and a kidnapper." He stopped again, cursed. "And she could have done just that. Hell, maybe one of her hired thugs wasn't pleased with her and killed her. Molly's kidnapper said what he'd done was a mistake so maybe this is the way he dealt with it."

"You have a name for the kidnapper?" Ruston wanted to know.

"Working on it. We collected some of his blood from Molly's house, and it's being processed now."

If the kidnapper had a record, then they might get a quick match. Rarely did he hope someone was a criminal, but in this case, it would make getting the ID much easier.

“Kate Moreland is in the hospital with a deputy guard on her door,” Duncan added to Ruston. “I’ve been trying to call Brad, but he’s not answering.”

“He’s not answering my calls, either,” Ruston supplied. “I’ve sent two uniforms out to his place to check on him. Brad didn’t answer the door and didn’t appear to be home. Of course, he could be on his way to see his mother before he’s due to come in for his interview.”

True, and he might not answer his phone if he was on the road. But it occurred to Duncan that Brad could be dead as well, and if so, he wasn’t sure how that would have played out. Maybe Kate had gotten fed up with both Shanda and Brad and hired someone to kill them? Or maybe Brad was very much alive and just dodging cops. If so, that moved him to the top spot of suspects.

Duncan heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and he expected to see either Luca or Carmen step into the doorway. But it was Joelle’s other brother, Slater, who was the senior deputy in the sheriff’s office. He was definitely a welcome sight since there was plenty to do.

Like Ruston, Slater was the spitting image of a younger version of their late father. Tall and lanky with black hair and green eyes. Joelle had gotten the black hair, but she had her mother’s misty gray eyes.

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“Let me know if you get any updates,” Duncan said to Ruston. “I’ll do the same for you.”

He ended the call and watched as Slater gave both Duncan and his sister long examining looks. Slater sighed because he could no doubt see the exhaustion on Joelle’s face.

“I just did a report with the case updates,” Joelle said, maybe to cut off her brother’s insistence that she get some rest. “I’ll fill in what Ruston just told us and forward copies to you and the other deputies.”

Slater didn’t address that. He went to Joelle, eased her off the sofa and into his arms. He brushed a kiss on the top of her head and touched his hand to her baby bump. “How’s my niece?”

The argument that had been in Joelle’s eyes instantly faded, and she returned her brother’s hug. “I think she’s swimming around in there.”

“Good.” Slater leaned down and put his mouth to Joelle’s stomach. “Hang in there, kid. I just ordered your mom a huge breakfast to be delivered from the diner. Get ready for all kinds of goodies.”

“Thank you,” Joelle muttered.

Duncan sent him a look of thanks, too, and wished he’d thought of it. Of course, Joelle might not eat. She hadn’t touched the yogurt he’d given her earlier, but maybe Slater could give her a brotherly reminder that eating would be good for the baby.

“I managed to postpone my testimony in the trial,” Slater explained, going toward Duncan now. “I figured you could use me back here.”

“I can,” Duncan verified. “We’re hoping the kidnapper will be contacting us soon about releasing Molly, and we need a lot of research done on our suspects.”

“Brad Moreland, his mother, Al Hamlin,” Slater named off. “I saw the report Joelle did about Shanda’s murder so she’s off the list. As soon as I had Hamlin’s name, I contacted a PI friend who lives in San Antonio, and I asked her about him. This particular PI is a Girl with the Dragon Tattoosort of computer whiz, and she’s created all these programs to mine data from old internet articles and social media posts.” He paused. “And yeah, she sometimes hacks to find what she wants.”

Duncan didn’t approve of doing something illegal since they wouldn’t be able to use the info in court. But at the moment he was for any and everything that helped them solve this so they could get Molly back.

“Did this PI find something?” Duncan prompted.

Slater nodded. “On the drive back here, she called me with what she’d dug up. Six years ago when Hamlin was seventeen, he and his then pregnant girlfriend were accused of trying to extort money from a couple who wanted to adopt the baby. They were convicted as juveniles so that’s why the record didn’t pop in a normal background check.”

Joelle went closer to them. “Of course, Hamlin didn’t mention that to us. What happened to the baby?”

“Unknown. The baby’s mother, Erica Corley, was only in juvie lockup for two months, and she was released when she was eight months pregnant. She disappeared shortly thereafter, but my PI friend is trying to track her down.”

“Good,” Duncan muttered. “Because it’d be interesting to find out if Hamlin and she did sell the baby. It also makes me wonder if Hamlin’s missing sister left because he was pressuring her to sell the child.”

“Since I was wondering the same thing, the PI will be looking into that as well,” Slater said. “People put all sorts of stuff on social media so she might be able to find something that’ll clue us in to Isla Hamlin’s disappearance.”

Duncan made a quick sound of agreement just as he heard a shout coming from the bullpen. And the shout came from a voice he instantly recognized from the phone conversation he’d had with him.

“Sheriff Holder?” Brad called out.

So Brad had surfaced after all, and Duncan was a little surprised that he’d actually come in as scheduled without being further prodded. Surprised and very much interested in what the man had to say. With Slater and Joelle following him, Duncan went into the bullpen to find the sandy-haired man struggling to get past Luca who was trying to frisk him. Carmen had stepped in to help, but Slater moved toward the trio, too.

“Settle down,” Slater snapped to Brad. “You don’t get past this point until we’re sure you’re not armed.”

“I’m not armed,” Brad snarled, and he aimed a venomous glare at Duncan. “Shanda’s dead. Dead,” he repeated, his voice breaking on the word. “You should have stopped that from happening. You shouldn’t have allowed her to die.”

Brad’s voice didn’t just break that time. He began to sob, tears spilling down his face. He also stopped struggling with the search.

“He’s not armed,” Luca told Duncan. “What do you want me to do with him?”

“Interview room one,” Duncan said. Because one way or another, he intended to get answers from Brad.

Since Brad wasn’t steady on his feet, Slater took one side of him and Luca took the other. They maneuvered him to the interview room, sat him in the chair, and Joelle got a box of tissues and a bottle of water. What none of them did was give Brad any sympathetic looks because they all knew this could be an act.

That they could be looking at a killer.

“Let me know if you need me,” Luca muttered, heading back toward the bullpen.

“Same here,” Slater said. “I’ll do some more of that digging we were talking about.”

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That no doubt meant Slater was going to try to find Hamlin's old girlfriend, Erica. Duncan hoped he could manage it since Erica, who'd now be in her mid-twenties might be able to provide them with some insight into Hamlin.

Duncan and Joelle sat across from Brad and didn't say anything for several minutes. They just waited for Brad to cry it out. When he finally reached for a tissue to dry his eyes, that was Duncan's cue to get started. However, Brad beat him to it.

"Who killed Shanda?" Brad asked. The anger was back in his voice now. "Was it my mother?"

Duncan didn't respond to that. Well, not a direct answer, anyway. Instead, he read Brad his rights, and he didn't think it was his imagination that Brad became more incensed with each line of the Miranda warning.

"Do you understand your rights?" Duncan asked when he'd finished.

"Of course, I do," Brad snapped. "You're covering your butt, but there's no need. I didn't kill my wife."

"Do you understand the part about your right to have your lawyer present?"

"I do, and he'll be coming in soon, but I don't want to wait for him to get answers. I need to know now. Did my mother do this?"

"Your mother is under guard at the hospital," Duncan reminded him. Of course, that didn't mean Kate hadn't hired someone to do it. He leaned in and stared at Brad. "Did

you kill Shanda?”

Outrage bloomed across his face, and his mouth dropped open. “No, I did not.” Brad snapped out each word. “I loved her, and we were getting back together.”

“Maybe,” Duncan concluded. “I talked to Shanda right before she was killed, and she didn’t confirm a reconciliation. Just the opposite.”

No trace of Brad’s tears remained, and his eyes narrowed. “I don’t believe you. You’re lying to provoke me.”

“I’m repeating to you what she told me.”

Duncan withheld anything else about that conversation he’d had with Shanda, and he let the silence roll through the room. In his experience, most people being interrogated or interviewed were uncomfortable enough with the silence that they started talking.

It worked.

“Shanda wanted me to see a shrink,” Brad finally admitted. “She wanted me to rehash the past.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing with the civil suit?” Joelle asked.

Now Brad turned those narrowed eyes on her. “No. That’s retribution. That’s payment for a wrong that you and your father did.” He stopped and visibly reined in some of the anger. “I thought the best way for Shanda and me to move on was to get back together and start that family she’s always wanted.”

Interesting. Not the family we’d always wanted. “You wanted to have a child with

Shanda?” Duncan came out and asked.

“Of course.” Brad had gone back to snapping. “And now that won’t happen because she’s dead.”

Brad made the sound of a sob, but Duncan saw no fresh tears in his eyes. Being the cynic that he was, Duncan wondered if the man had tapped his supply of fake drama.

“I understand you called Shanda after you and I had our phone conversation,” Duncan said, shifting the conversation a little.

Brad nodded, attempted another sob, and he must have given up on that because he pressed a tissue to his eyes. “I told her what was going on, and I said I wanted to see her. She said we could meet for lunch after I was done with my interview.” He stopped again. “If I’d gone over to her place then and there, she might not be dead. I could have stopped her from being killed.”

Maybe that was true. But not the truth if Brad had been the one who’d pulled the trigger.

“Where were you from the time you got off the phone with me and Shanda’s murder?” Duncan pressed.

“Home,” Brad was quick to say.

Duncan was just as quick with a response. “Can anyone verify that?”

“I was alone,” the man snapped. “But I tried to make some calls to my mother so it’s possible those can be pinpointed to my house.”

Yeah, it was possible. But it wasn’t proof. Someone could have used Brad’s phone to

make it look as if he were home. And even if Brad had personally made the calls, it didn't mean his hired gun hadn't been doing his bidding. Still...

"I want permission to get access to your phone records," Duncan insisted. "If you don't agree, I'll assume you have something to hide, and I'll get a search warrant."

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Brad didn't seem especially bothered by that. "I'll give you permission," he said, making Duncan silently groan. It meant any communication Brad might have had with hired guns had likely been done through a burner. Maybe one like the ones Molly's kidnapper had been using.

Next, Duncan went with an outright lie, something he was allowed during questioning. "We have footage from security cameras up the street from Shanda's. It's being analyzed as we speak, but I already know there was a vehicle in the area. A vehicle matching the description of one registered to you."

Brad sprang to his feet. "It wasn't mine. I wasn't anywhere near Shanda's this morning."

That might be true. Might be. But Brad could have hired someone to kill her. And that led Duncan to motive.

"Here's my theory," Duncan started. "You arranged to have Deputy McCullough killed or kidnapped. Ditto for the dispatcher who was also a deputy during Shanda's arrest two years ago. Shanda either found out what you'd done or you told her, and when she said she was going to the cops, you made sure she wouldn't be talking to anyone."

If looks could have killed, Brad would have finished off Duncan and Joelle on the spot. He sank back down into his chair. "This interview is over," he insisted, taking out his phone. "I'm not saying another word until I have my lawyer here."

Duncan didn't press, and he figured he could use the time before the lawyer arrived to

assemble as much of a case as he could against Brad. What he needed was some physical evidence, something that would get him an arrest warrant so he could take Brad off the streets. Of course, if Brad was the killer, it was possible he'd already set hired guns in motion for another attack.

Joelle and Duncan stepped outside the interview room, closing the door behind them, and they looked at each other. "You believe him?" Joelle whispered, taking the question right out of Duncan's mouth.

Duncan had to shrug. Then, he groaned and scrubbed his hand over his face in frustration. "I want to believe he's the killer, but I'm not sure."

Since he didn't want Brad to overhear any part of this conversation, he motioned for Joelle to follow him back to the break room.

"Everything we have on Brad is circumstantial." He took out his phone. "I'll have Carmen get Brad to sign the agreement to get his phone records. If he's still willing to do it, that is. And there might be something in his call history that could help us get a warrant for his financials."

Duncan fired off a quick text to Carmen, but before he got a reply, his phone rang with an incoming call from Dr. Benton. Duncan couldn't answer it fast enough.

"Kate is awake, and she's insisting on seeing Joelle and you," the doctor said without a greeting. "Obviously, I'd like for her to hold off on that for another hour or two, but she got agitated when I suggested it. Can the two of you come to the hospital now?"

"Absolutely," Duncan readily agreed. "We'll be there in about ten minutes."

Joelle and he hurried back to the bullpen, and Duncan saw the instant alarm on the three deputies' faces. "Brad decided to wait for his lawyer," Duncan explained

because the deputies had obviously thought Brad had done something to provoke them. “Joelle and I need to get to the hospital to question Kate Moreland.”

“I can go with you for backup,” Slater immediately volunteered.

Duncan nodded and got them moving toward the door. After he’d checked to make sure there were no threats lurking around, they got into the cruiser with Joelle in the back seat, Duncan in shotgun and Slater behind the wheel.

As expected, it was not a peaceful, relaxing ride. They were all very aware that the hired guns could be nearby, ready and waiting to strike. It was the reason Duncan had considered asking Joelle to stay behind. But not only wouldn’t she have agreed to that, Kate had asked specifically to see her. It was possible the woman would say something to Joelle that she wouldn’t to Duncan.

When they reach the hospital, Slater parked by the ER doors so that Joelle and he could hurry inside. Slater got out as well, and Duncan knew he would stand guard, watching for any kind of danger. Simply put, if any hired guns came into the hospital after Joelle and him, Slater would be the first line of defense against that.

Also as expected, there was a reserve deputy outside Kate’s room. Anita Denny. Since she obviously recognized Duncan and Joelle, she opened the door and motioned them inside.

“She’s waiting for you,” Anita, the reserve deputy, informed them.

They stepped into the room and saw that Anita was right. Kate was, indeed, sitting up and clearly expecting them. She didn’t look drowsy but rather alert and very worried.

“A friend of mine called the hospital and left a message to tell me that Shanda had been murdered,” Kate immediately said. “Is it true?”

Later, Duncan would want to know the name of that friend. For now, though, he basically did a death notification.

“I regret to inform you that Shanda was murdered earlier this morning,” he told her while he carefully watched her reaction.

A reaction that included widened eyes and a shudder of her breath. Kate touched her fingers to her mouth that trembled. “I’d hoped it wasn’t true. I didn’t want it to be true,” she amended.

Duncan didn’t have time to treat this like a normal death notification. He needed to jump right into questions that had to be asked. And he had to start with the basics.

“I’m going to Mirandize you,” Duncan stated. “It’s to cover the legal bases and make sure you’re aware of what your rights are.”

Kate didn’t ask why he was doing this. She merely sat and listened while he finished, and then she nodded when he asked if she understood everything he’d just spelled out.

Since Kate didn’t voice any kind of objections, Duncan continued, “From what I’ve heard, Shanda and you didn’t have a good relationship. You were at odds. In fact, when I spoke to Shanda before she died, she claimed that you loathed her.”

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Kate didn't show any flares of temper as Brad had done. The woman sighed and shook her head. "I did loathe her," she admitted. "I thought she didn't handle her miscarriage and divorce nearly as well as she could have, and I believe she never actually loved Brad."

Duncan lifted an eyebrow. "I didn't pick up on that last part from either Brad or Shanda."

"You wouldn't have." Kate glanced away, groaned softly. "Brad was blindly in love with her, and he couldn't see Shanda for what she was. A gold digger. That big house she lives in? That was part of her divorce settlement. She took half of Brad's money when she divorced him."

Now there was some anger, but she kept her gaze pinned downward while she picked at the sheets covering her. Duncan had to wonder if she was looking down so he wouldn't be able to see some truth that she couldn't conceal in her eyes.

Truth that she was glad Shanda was dead. And that she was the one who'd made that happen.

"I should tell you something in case it comes up later," Kate said. "I don't want you to think I'm withholding anything."

"I'm listening," Duncan assured her.

"On the night Shanda was arrested, she and I were arguing on the phone. A very heated argument," Kate emphasized. "I'd called her about some charges I saw on

Brad's credit card. Shanda had gone to a high-end boutique and treated herself to the best the place had to offer. I'm talking nearly ten grand. Shanda said that Brad had given her the shopping trip as a surprise gift, and I told her that Brad wasn't paying the bills, that I was." She stopped. "Anyway, Shanda was yelling at me and that's probably why she was driving erratically."

Duncan had known about this. It'd been in the statement Shanda had given. Well, she'd given a thumbnail of it, anyway. She'd told Sheriff McCullough that she'd been having a dispute with her mother-in-law.

"You must have been very upset when you found out that Brad and Shanda were getting back together," Joelle threw out there. All sympathy. Fake, of course. But Duncan knew she was going for the "good cop" angle here. That gave Duncan the leeway to go badass.

"I was," Kate muttered. "I thought it would only lead to Brad being crushed all over again." Now she finally looked up, her attention going to Joelle. "Crushed," she emphasized. "Brad was never the same after the miscarriage and his marriage breaking up."

That was Duncan's cue to jump in. "Is that why you went to Molly's to accuse Brad of trying to kill Joelle?"

On a heavy sigh, Kate closed her eyes. But she nodded. She took in a few shallow breaths, opened her eyes and looked at Joelle again. "I'm sorry, but Brad blamed you and your father for what happened to Shanda. He should have blamed Shanda herself. She's the one who got herself arrested. Instead, Brad decided she wasn't at fault and that the cops involved needed to pay."

"Pay by killing me and kidnapping a former deputy?" Joelle supplied.

Kate nodded again and repeated her apology. "I think my son has had some kind of mental breakdown. I blame Shanda for that. She led him on, making him believe she'd get back together with him, but there were always new conditions for a reconciliation. One day, she'd say he had to go to counseling. The next, she'd tell him he had to cut me out of his life." She paused. "And he did."

Neither Brad nor Shanda had mentioned that so Duncan had no idea if it was true. However, it was something he would definitely ask Brad about.

"It must have hurt when Brad did that," Joelle murmured.

"It did." There was another flash of anger in her eyes, but Kate seemed to quickly shut that down. "It cut me to the core."

"And that cut made it easier for you to go to Joelle and tell her that Brad wanted her dead," Duncan pointed out.

Kate's mouth tightened for a couple of seconds. "Yes, it did make it easier," she confessed. "If my son hadn't basically disowned me, I might not have been willing to believe the worst about him. But I do believe it. I think Shanda convinced him to go after the people who arrested her. I think this was all her doing."

That was possible, but there was a big question mark in that theory. "Then, why is Shanda dead?"

"Maybe she hired the wrong people to do her bidding, and it backfired." Kate offered that up so quickly that it was obvious she'd given it some thought. "If you play with fire, sometimes you get burned."

"So, you don't think Brad would have killed her?" Joelle asked.

Kate stayed quiet a while. “I don’t want to believe he would, but it’s possible. Shanda broke him, so anything is possible.”

Duncan wasn’t sure about the broken part, but it was obvious that Brad had some serious issues. Obvious, too, that he could have certainly murdered his ex-wife.

“I saw your tox results,” Duncan said, and he noted the flash of surprise in Kate’s eyes. She hadn’t been prepared for a quick shift in topics. “There didn’t seem to be enough of the sleeping aid in your system for you to behave the way you did when you arrived at Molly’s.”

Kate stared at him and touched her fingers to the bruise on her forehead. “This must have caused the wooziness,” she said. “That and maybe my blood pressure.” She paused again. “But I don’t recall taking any of my sleeping pills that night. In fact, I’m sure I wouldn’t have since I’d planned on driving to Saddle Ridge to see Joelle.”

Duncan and Joelle exchanged a glance, and it was Joelle who voiced what they were thinking. “You believe someone might have drugged you with them?”

“Yes,” Kate muttered. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. “Brad came to see me as I was getting ready to leave. He was furious because I’d shut off his accounts and canceled his credit cards. I was paying him a hefty salary to manage some of my businesses,” she added. “I figured since he’d disowned me, then he shouldn’t have access to that money.” Her mouth tightened again. “He’d planned on buying Shanda another big engagement ring and was enraged when his credit card was declined.”

“You two argued?” Duncan prompted when Kate went quiet.

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“Yes. A loud ugly argument. I poured myself a shot of scotch, and it’s possible Brad could have put one of my sleeping pills in it.”

Now Duncan was the one to shake his head. “Why would he have done that?”

“I don’t know. To get back at me,” Kate suggested. “Maybe because he realized I was going to see Joelle. I didn’t tell him that, but it’s possible he guessed since just the day before he’d been ranting about how much Joelle needed to pay for what’d happened to his precious Shanda.”

Duncan still wasn’t convinced. “If Brad wanted to drug you so you couldn’t drive to Saddle Ridge, why not put more than one pill in the drink?”

“Because he might not have wanted to risk me tasting it,” Kate answered without hesitation. “And I probably would have. I did notice a funny taste after I drank the scotch in a big gulp, but I didn’t think anything about it. Not until later, when I was here at the hospital.”

Everything the woman was saying could be true. Or it could all be lies. Duncan knew he was going to have to compare Kate’s and Brad’s responses side by side and try to figure how this had actually all played out.

Joelle’s phone rang, the sound shooting through the silence that had fallen over the room, and he saw Unknown Caller when Joelle showed him the screen.

“We have to take this,” Joelle said, and Duncan and she went out into the hall. They moved away from Kate’s door before Joelle accepted the call.

“Thanks for wiring me the money,” the man said. “I’m taking Molly to the drop off now.”

It was the kidnapper, the same one who’d called earlier.

“Where?” Joelle asked.

“You’ll know soon enough,” the man said. “Keep your phone ready because in exactly twenty minutes, I’ll be calling you back to come and get Molly.”

Chapter Seven

Even though Joelle knew that Duncan still had plenty more questions for Kate, that would have to wait. Twenty minutes wasn’t a lot of time to get ready for the kidnapper to drop off Molly.

Or for the kidnapper to put the finishing touches on a ploy to draw Duncan and her out.

Joelle was well aware that might be the case. So was Duncan, and he would almost certainly insist that she stay at the sheriff’s office. That wasn’t what Joelle wanted to do, but she figured she would end up going along with it. There was no need to put the baby at even greater risk.

“I’ll have to come back to finish this interview,” Duncan told Kate, and he didn’t wait for the woman to respond. He motioned for Joelle to follow him, and they headed out the door.

“Keep a close watch on Kate,” Duncan muttered to Anita. “And if she makes any calls, I want to know about it.”

Yes, because Kate could be behind whatever was about to happen, and she might want to make a call to someone she'd hired to do her bidding.

They hurried back toward the ER doors where Slater was waiting for them. The moment they were back in the cruiser, Duncan took out his phone. "I need to assemble some backup," he muttered.

Yes, that was a must, and Joelle could see how this could play out. She'd man the sheriff's office, probably along with Luca and Carmen, and then every other available deputy would go with Duncan. Joelle prayed that would be enough protection if something went wrong.

Before Duncan could even make a call, her phone rang, and Joelle frowned when she saw the Unknown Caller on the screen. She showed it to Duncan, and the sudden alarm on his face no doubt mirrored hers. Joelle answered, put it on speaker, and the kidnapper's voice poured through the cruiser.

"Molly's at the former sheriff's house," the man snarled.

Oh, mercy. There. It would be there. The house where Joelle had been raised. But where her father had also been murdered. She hadn't been able to step inside the place since the initial investigation.

In the background, Joelle heard Molly call out, "Joelle." That was all Molly managed to say before the kidnapper issued an order for her to shut up.

"If you're not here in ten minutes, the deal is off," the man warned them.

"But you said twenty minutes," Duncan snarled right back.

"Ten," the kidnapper repeated.

Slater and Duncan both cursed. “I want proof of life,” Duncan demanded.

The kidnapper cursed, too. “You already got it. You heard her yell Joelle’s name.”

“That could have been a recording,” Duncan pointed out.

Joelle hadn’t considered that, but it was possible. Likely, even, if the kidnapper had already dropped off Molly somewhere else and was putting some distance between him and her. Added to that, Duncan didn’t really have any bargaining power since the money had already been transferred. They’d had no choice about that, though, since it had been the kidnapper’s only demand for Molly’s release. Now these new demands with the quick time restraints spelled trouble.

More cursing from the kidnapper. “Tell him you’re alive,” the man growled.

Seconds ticked off, and Joelle had to breathe because her lungs were starting to ache. “I’m alive,” Molly finally said.

“Where are you?” Duncan asked her.

“I’m not sure. I’m blindfolded, but it’s possible I’m at the McCullough ranch like he said.”

Possible. But maybe the kidnapper had her elsewhere. Still, Molly was alive, and Joelle was going to latch on to that.

“Don’t be late,” the kidnapper added. “You wasted one of your minutes with all this yakking. Be here in nine minutes, Sheriff.” He ended the call.

“This is a trap,” Slater spat out, and his gaze met Joelle’s in the rearview mirror.

She couldn't disagree. It had all the markings of a trap, but there was another factor here.

"He has Molly, and we have to get her back," Joelle stated. "The cruiser is bullet-resistant, and I'll stay inside. Yes, this might be a ruse so he can come after me, but he could do that at the sheriff's office, too. In fact, that might be what he has in mind. Get all of you hurrying there to the ranch while he's already right here in town."

Both Slater and Duncan knew that was true, and this was definitely a "damned if you did, damned if you didn't" situation. Duncan seemed to be having a very short mental debate about that.

"Go to your dad's house fast," Duncan instructed, and like Slater had done to her earlier, he looked at her, the worry in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be. Let's go get Molly," she said. "Who should I call for backup?"

A muscle flickered in Duncan's jaw when it tightened. "Have dispatch send all available deputies to the location."

Joelle made the call, already calculating how long it would take them to arrive. Too long probably, and the kidnapper would likely know that. Would likely know, too, the emotional punch that her father's house would have for her. She hated these sick mind games. Hated the person who'd set all of it into motion.

She checked the time. They'd already burned one of those nine minutes, and she didn't know the exact time it would take them to get to the ranch. At the speed Slater was going, though, they should make it with maybe a minute or two to spare. A minute or two they wouldn't have had if Duncan had insisted on taking her back to the sheriff's office.

The question was what would they face once they were there at the ranch?

“You want me to call my ranch hands and have them meet us there?” Slater asked Duncan.

“Do that. Have them stay back, though, until they get the word we need them.”

He was thinking this could turn into a gunfight. And it possibly could. Joelle tried not to think of the risk this would be to her baby. Especially since Molly and her child were in even greater danger.

While Slater threaded the cruiser around the curvy country roads, Joelle fixed the image of her family’s ranch in her head. Of course, she knew every inch of the house and grounds. Knew, too, that there were plenty of places for someone to lie in wait for them. It didn’t help, either, that there was no one working full-time at the ranch. Slater often sent over his own hands just to check on the place, but there likely wouldn’t have been anyone around when the kidnapper had set all this up. Which could have been hours ago. Heck, he could have been holding Molly here all along, though that would have been risky since eventually, when Duncan had had the manpower, he would have sent someone out to check the place.

“The second floor of the house will be a good place for a sniper,” Joelle said. “Not the roof, though, because of the steep pitch.”

“There are four front-facing windows on that second floor,” Slater added.

Duncan had been to the ranch many times so he no doubt knew all of this, but Joelle thought it wouldn’t hurt to spell out the potential points for an attack.

“From the barn loft,” she went on, “there’s a direct view of the road so anyone there would be able to see the moment we arrive.”

Duncan muttered a sound of agreement and took out his gun. “Try to call the kidnapper again and see if he’ll give us Molly’s exact location. Yeah, it’s a long shot,” he grumbled.

It was, but Joelle tried anyway. As expected, he didn’t answer. It rang out, and she figured he was already in the process of disabling it. Not that they would have the time to trace it. No. This was coming to some kind of showdown fast.

The minutes ticked away but so did the miles as Slater drove toward the ranch. He took the curves at a higher speed than he probably should have, the tires squealing in protest, but her brother kept control of the cruiser and ate up the miles.

Joelle had to force herself to breathe again when the ranch’s pastures came into view. She hadn’t needed proof that things weren’t the same as they had been five months ago, but she got that proof, anyway. There was no livestock in the pastures. None of the beautiful palomino horses her father had loved. Those had already been moved to Slater’s ranch.

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The sun was fully up now, but the morning mist was still hovering over the pasture grass, giving the place an eerie, otherworldly feel. The mist hung around the house, too, and while it wasn't dense enough to conceal a shooter, she couldn't help but think of the smoke. And the fire that had destroyed her house. It was possible the kidnapper would do that here, too.

Slater cursed again, and Joelle soon saw why. There was a man at the end of the long driveway that led to the house. He was standing next to a black truck.

Hamlin.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Duncan grumbled, taking the question right out of her mouth.

"He's armed," Slater was quick to point out.

Joelle had noticed that as well. Hamlin had a gun in his right hand, and he jerked as if about to aim it at them. He didn't, though. Nor did he relax the grip he had on the weapon.

Her first thought was he was the kidnapper, and this was that showdown they'd expected. But she was betting none of them had expected the man to be out in the open like this.

Slater pulled the cruiser to a jarring stop just a few feet away from Hamlin. "Do you see anyone else?" he asked, his gaze already combing the house and grounds.

Joelle and Duncan were doing the same thing. Looking for hired guns that Hamlin might have brought with him, but there was no one visible in any of the second-floor windows or the barn.

Duncan lowered his window a fraction. “Stay put, Hamlin,” he called out when the PI began to walk toward the cruiser. “And drop your weapon.”

Hamlin glanced at his gun and scowled. Then, he huffed. “What the hell is this? Did you set me up or something?”

“Drop your weapon,” Duncan repeated. His voice had a bite to it, but he added even more with the repeat.

On another huff, Hamlin tossed the gun on the ground and lifted his hands in the air. “I haven’t done anything wrong,” the PI protested.

“Then, why are you here?” Duncan demanded.

“Because you texted me and asked me to come.” Hamlin’s response was quick. Maybe rehearsed.

“I didn’t text you,” Duncan informed him, and Joelle noticed that Duncan was continuing to look for anyone else.

Hamlin shook his head. “But you did. My phone’s in my pocket. I can show you.”

Duncan didn’t take him up on that offer, probably because he knew the text had been sent by someone else to set this all up. But what was this? “We’re here looking for a kidnapped woman, and the kidnapper gave us this location.”

That put some alarm in Hamlin’s eyes, but since Joelle was plenty skeptical when it

came to the PI, she figured that, too, could have been rehearsed. “I don’t know anything about that, and I haven’t seen anyone else since I got here.”

“He could be telling the truth,” Slater whispered. “Brad, Kate or the kidnapper could have arranged for Hamlin to come here to muddy the waters. Of course, if it’s Brad or Kate, then it means they know all about Hamlin.”

Yes, which would mean they’d know he was investigating the sale of babies. And that he believed Kate was behind that. However, Brad could have arranged this, too, if he wanted the cops looking at someone else other than him for Shanda’s murder, the kidnapping and the earlier attack.

“There’s only a minute left on the kidnapper’s deadline,” Joelle reminded them. Though she wasn’t sure if that deadline applied any longer since they were, indeed, at the ranch.

Where there was seemingly no sign of Molly.

“Yeah,” Duncan muttered, and he seemed to take a breath of relief when there was the sound of sirens in the distance. Backup would be there soon. “Hamlin, get face down on the ground, and don’t block the road.”

Joelle looked at Duncan, but she already knew what he had in mind. He’d leave backup to deal with Hamlin, and the PI would no doubt be handcuffed so he wouldn’t be a threat. Good, because Joelle had the sickening feeling they already had enough threats to deal with.

And priority was finding Molly.

“Find out who’s in that cruiser and let them know what’s going on,” Duncan told her just as his phone dinged with a text. “Never mind. It’s Woodrow Leonard and Ronnie

Bishop. They were on their way back from your place.”

That explained how they’d gotten there so fast. It would have put them miles closer since her house was only an eight-minute or so drive from here. And that was a reminder they were already out of time for finding Molly. Of course, the deadline might not mean anything since it could have simply been part of the ruse to get them here, but Duncan apparently wasn’t going to take the risk that those ten minutes had been part of the ploy.

“Joelle, text Woodrow or Ronnie and tell them to cuff Hamlin and take his gun,” Duncan instructed. “Tell them to be careful and watch for gunmen. Slater, drive closer to the house.”

She typed out the text, but Joelle also continued to glance around at their surroundings. Specifically, looking for any signs they were about to be shot at. But no bullets came.

Not yet, anyway.

Slater went slow, no doubt doing his own checking, and he finally came to a stop in the circular drive in front of the house. He positioned the cruiser close to the porch steps but still had a good view of the barn. Of course, that meant any gunman would have a view of them, too.

“Woodrow and Ronnie will deal with Hamlin,” Joelle relayed after she got a response from Ronnie. “They’ll cuff Hamlin, put him in the back of the cruiser and drive closer to assist.”

“Good,” Duncan muttered, and he turned to her. “You’re staying put. I’m going inside the house to look around.”

Oh, that gave her a nasty jolt of fear. “You’re not going in there alone.”

Duncan’s mouth tightened, and she saw the debate in his eyes. “I want Slater to stay here with you in case you’re attacked again.”

She shook her head. “You’re just as likely to be attacked in the house. Slater can go with you, and I can crawl over the seat and get behind the wheel.” Her baby bump wasn’t so big, not yet anyway, to prevent her from doing that. “Then, I can move the cruiser if necessary.”

Joelle didn’t want to think of what might make that necessary, but it would almost certainly mean some kind of attack. Maybe a firebomb to the house. But if that happened, she wouldn’t be driving away unless Duncan and Slater were out of harm’s

way and with her.

The debate in Duncan's eyes continued a moment longer, and when he cursed, she knew he'd made his decision. So did Slater. They both reached for their doors.

"Don't get out of the cruiser," Duncan warned her one last time. He looked as if he wanted to add more, so much more, but thankfully he didn't. Now wasn't the time to bring up anything about "if the worst happens."

"Find Molly," Joelle said as they exited the cruiser.

The moment the doors were shut, she climbed over the seat and got behind the wheel while she continued to keep watch. Behind her, she saw Woodrow and Ronnie's cruiser pull to a stop, and in the distance, she heard yet more sirens. More vehicles, too, and Joelle spotted Slater's ranch hands as they arrived. Good. The more, the better.

But "more" didn't help Slater and Duncan right now.

Joelle quickly lost sight of them after Slater unlocked the front door and they hurried into the house. She could imagine, though, that they would immediately start the room-to-room search. It was a big house, and that meant there were plenty of places to check.

Plenty of places for a killer to hide, too.

Added to that, the house didn't have an open floor plan so Duncan and Slater wouldn't be able to do a quick visual sweep to determine if anyone was there. It'd be a slow process, searching through all eight rooms on the bottom floor before going to the second floor and then likely the attic if there was no sign of Molly before then.

She purposely didn't watch the time because she didn't want to mark off the seconds

and minutes of the search for Molly. That wouldn't help her stay focused. Just the opposite. She didn't want to think of the extreme danger Duncan and her brother were in. Molly, too.

The baby stirred, a reminder of why she had to stay safe. It was also a reminder of Duncan. For the past five months, she'd worked so hard to keep her distance from him. Worked hard not to feel anything. Because those kinds of feelings also deepened the guilt and grief. But it was impossible to keep him out of her thoughts when they were thrown together like this. The closeness and the danger were breaking down barriers she'd fought to keep in place.

She forced all of that aside for now and tried to get a glimpse of the upstairs windows, to see if Duncan and Slater had made it to the second floor. It was impossible, though, with the way Slater had parked. The eaves of the porch blocked her view.

Another cruiser pulled in behind the others, and her phone dinged with a text. From Luca. We're coming closer, he messaged.

Hamlin is cuffed in the cruiser. Woodrow, Ronnie and I are going to check the barns and the other outbuildings. David will be here any minute now to help.

Deputy David Morales who normally worked the swing shift. Obviously, he'd been called in, and he would probably have his usual partner with him, Deputy Sonya Grover. Since Sonya and Molly were also friends, the woman would have insisted on coming to help.

All possible help would be needed since in addition to the big barn adjacent to the house, there were two smaller barns farther away and four other smaller outbuildings scattered around the grounds. There was even a fishing cabin on the banks of the creek that snaked through the ranch.

Joelle responded to let Luca know that she understood the plan, and she watched as they sprang into action. Not just the two cruisers but the three ranch hands from Slater's ranch. They didn't park near her, though, but rather between the house and the barn, and soon the deputies and hands began to pour from their vehicles. That didn't make her breathe easier, though.

It just meant a gunman would have more targets.

Her phone dinged again, and the relief washed over her when she saw it was from Duncan.

First and second floors cleared. Molly's not there. Heading into the attic now.

That rid her of any relief she'd just gotten. Yes, Duncan and her brother were still safe, there was no gunfire, but Molly wasn't there. It sickened Joelle to think of where the woman could be. And if she'd been hurt or worse. Now Duncan and Slater would have to basically climb a ladder to get into the attic, and there could be a gunman waiting for them.

She caught some movement from the corner of her eye and turned to the side of the house that was on the opposite side of the barn. Joelle immediately saw the white rectangular spots on the ground. Not the lingering morning mist. These appeared to be sheets of paper.

Joelle didn't want to move too far from the front door in case Slater and Duncan had to come running out, but she backed up the cruiser, keeping close to the porch so she could have a better look. Definitely paper and not some kind of explosives. She inched the cruiser back even farther, and she looked down.