



Tracking Down the Lawman's Son

Author: *Delores Fossen*

Category: Romance, Western

Description: A lawman will cross every line
To bring his missing baby home

When Bree McCullough narrowly escapes an attack on her life, Deputy Luca Vanetti rushes to his ex-lover's side. But the worst is yet to come. When their two-month-old son is kidnapped, Luca and Bree must put their painful history aside and work together to bring Gabriel home. The truth could lie in Bree's own past and her investigation into her father's unsolved murder. As the violence escalates, Luca vows to protect Bree and their baby against an unseen threat...and a plot to silence them forever.

Total Pages (Source): 68

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Chapter One

Deputy Luca Vanetti ran through the ER doors the moment they slid open, and he made a beeline to the reception desk. The nurse on duty saw him coming and got to her feet. Luca figured the concern on her face was a drop in the bucket compared to his.

He tried to tamp down the worry and fear that were firing through him. Tried not to jump to any bad conclusions, but Bree and his baby boy could be hurt.

Or worse.

No, Luca couldn't deal with worse right now.

He just needed to see Bree McCullough and his two-month-old son, Gabriel, and then try to get to the bottom of what'd happened. Bree and he might barely be on speaking terms, but they both loved Gabriel, and Bree would know what a gut punch it was for Luca to get a report that she'd been in a serious car accident.

"Where are they?" Luca demanded before he even reached the reception desk.

The nurse, Alisha Cameron, was someone he'd known his whole life. Something that could be said about most people in their small hometown of Saddle Ridge, Texas, where there weren't many degrees of separation.

Alisha motioned toward the hall. "The exam room on the right. Slater's already here."

Slater McCullough was not only a fellow deputy at the Saddle Ridge Sheriff's Office, but he was also Bree's older brother. Luca had expected him to be here since Slater was the responding officer who'd arrived on the scene of the single car accident, only to learn his sister was the driver.

"Gabriel wasn't in the vehicle with Bree," Slater said the moment he spotted Luca. "I just got off the phone with the nanny, and Gabriel's with her."

Some of the tightness eased up in Luca's chest. Some. His baby boy wasn't hurt. "And Bree?" Luca managed to ask.

"She's in with the doctor now," Slater said after he swallowed hard. "She has a head injury, and they're examining her."

"How bad?" Luca wanted to know.

Slater shook his head. "I'm not sure. When I arrived on scene, she was trying to get out of the car, but her seat belt was jammed, and she couldn't reach her phone. There was blood," he added. "Some scrapes and cuts, too, on her face, but I think most of those came from the airbag when it deployed."

"What happened?" Luca wanted to know. "Why did she crash?"

"I'm not sure what caused the accident." He paused, his gaze meeting Luca's. "Her car went off the road right before the Saddle Ridge Creek bridge, and she slammed into a tree. If she hadn't hit the tree, her car would have plunged into the creek."

Hell. That was where his parents had been killed, so Luca knew firsthand that a collision like that could have been fatal because the creek was more than twenty feet deep in spots. But crashing into a tree could have killed her, too.

Luca studied Slater's eyes that were a genetic copy of not only Bree's but of Gabriel's. "Why did she go off the road?" he pressed.

Slater shook his head again. "I don't know. Like I said, she was woozy, and I arrived on scene only a minute or two before the ambulance got there. The EMTs loaded her right away and brought her here."

Because Luca knew Slater well, he could see that Slater was worried. And troubled. "You said Bree has a head injury. How bad?" Luca asked.

"I don't know," Slater repeated. He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Other than what I've told you, the only other thing I know is a delivery driver traveling on that road spotted Bree's car and called it in. There were tread marks nearby, but I have no idea if they were from her vehicle or not. The delivery driver didn't see any other vehicles around."

So, maybe she'd gotten distracted or something and had lost control of the car. That wasn't like Bree, though. She was usually ultra-focused. A skill set she needed for her job as legal consultant for the Texas Rangers. But she was also the mother of a two-month-old baby, and it was possible lack of sleep had played into this.

That possibility gave Luca another gut punch. Because he could see how this would have played out. Even if Bree had been exhausted, she wouldn't have asked him for help. In fact, he was probably the last person in Saddle Ridge she would have turned to. Ironical, since they had once been lovers.

Had.

That was definitely in the past, and as far as Bree was concerned, it wouldn't be repeated. Luca was learning to live with that even though they'd had an on-again, off-again thing since high school. The off had become permanent eleven months ago when

they'd landed in bed after Bree's father had been murdered.

That brought on gut punch number three of the day.

Because Bree's late father, Sheriff Cliff McCullough, hadn't only been Luca's boss, he'd been his surrogate father after Luca's parents had died in a car crash when Luca had been just sixteen. Luca had been grieving and on shaky emotional ground following Cliff's murder. Bree had been, too, and they'd spent the night together.

The night when she'd gotten pregnant with Gabriel.

Bree hadn't told him that though until four months ago when she'd moved back home. Only then had Luca learned he was going to be a father. Luca hadn't quite managed to forgive Bree for shutting him out like that, but she apparently didn't want his forgiveness.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

The door to the exam room opened, and Dr. Nathan Bagley stepped out. Another familiar face but not an especially friendly one. Well, not friendly toward Luca anyway. Luca knew Nathan had always seen him as a romantic rival. During Bree and Luca's off-again phases, Nathan and she had dated.

"How is she?" Luca immediately asked.

The doctor didn't get a chance to answer though. "I'm fine," Luca heard Bree say.

Nathan's sigh indicated he didn't quite agree with his patient, but he stepped back out of the doorway, and Luca saw another nurse who was in the process of washing her hands.

And Bree.

Her short dark brown hair was tangled and flecked with powder from the airbag. And she was pale. So pale. She was also getting up from the exam table. Not easily. She was wobbling a little, and Luca immediately went to her, took hold of her arm and steadied her.

There was blood on her cream-colored shirt. A few flecks of dried blood, too, on her right cheek by her ear. That had no doubt come from the cut on her head that was now stitched up.

Bree dodged his gaze, but that was the norm for them these days. "Thanks," she muttered, and stepped out of his grip. "I'm fine," she repeated, her gaze pinned to Slater.

“You’re sure about that?” Slater questioned. He went to her, gently cupped her chin, lifting it while he examined her.

“Sure,” she insisted at the same moment that Nathan added his own comment.

“She doesn’t appear to have a concussion, but I’d like to run some tests,” the doctor said. “I’d also like to admit her for observation for the head injury.”

All of that sounded reasonable to Luca, but Bree clearly wasn’t on board with it. “I’m fine. I want to go home and check on Gabriel.”

“Gabriel’s okay,” Slater assured her. “I called the nanny just a couple of minutes ago.”

Now it was Bree’s turn to study her brother’s face, and it seemed to Luca that she was making sure he was telling her the truth.

What the heck was going on?

Slater and Bree were close, and Slater wouldn’t have lied to her. Well, not under these circumstances anyway. And not about Gabriel. Slater might have downplayed the truth though if Bree had been in serious condition, but that wasn’t the case.

“I need to go home,” Bree repeated. “Can you give me a ride?” she asked, and then moved away from Slater. She went to the small counter where the nurse was now standing and picked up her purse.

“Hold on a second.” Slater stepped in front of her to stop her from heading for the door. “What happened? Why did you wreck?”

Her pause only lasted a couple of seconds, but it was enough to make Luca even

more concerned about her. “A deer ran out on the road in front of me,” Bree said. “I swerved to miss it and lost control.”

There were indeed plenty of deer and other wildlife in the woods around the creek, and drivers did hit them from time to time. But something about this still felt, well, off.

“Why were you on that road?” Luca asked. It wasn’t anywhere near Bree’s place. Her house was one she’d inherited from her grandparents when she’d turned twenty-one, and it was on the outskirts of the other side of town.

“I was going to Austin for a business meeting,” she said.

That didn’t seem off. Bree was a lawyer who did legal consultations for the Texas Rangers and some state agencies. Most days, she worked from home, but she sometimes had meetings in nearby San Antonio or Austin.

“I thought I was going to end up in the creek,” she added in a mutter.

Now she looked at Luca. Or rather glanced at him, and he saw the apology in her eyes. She no doubt knew it always hit him hard to be reminded of his parents’ deaths.

“A deer,” Slater muttered, a question in his tone.

“Yes,” she verified, and Bree suddenly sounded a whole lot stronger. She didn’t look it though. She still seemed plenty unsteady to Luca. “And now I need to go home and see my baby.”

This time, it was Nathan who maneuvered in front of her. “You hit your head. You really should stay here for observation. You need to have medical supervision.”

“I can get someone in my family to stay with me,” Bree insisted right back. “I need to check on Gabriel.”

Nathan huffed and turned to Slater to plead his case. “Head injuries can be dangerous. She shouldn’t be alone.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

A muscle flickered in Slater's jaw, and he volleyed glances at both his sister and the doctor. Slater must have seen the determination on Bree's face because he sighed.

"She won't be alone," Slater told Nathan. "I'll make sure someone is with her for the next twenty-four hours."

Nathan repeated his huff, but his obvious objection didn't stop Bree. "I'll phone in a script for pain meds," he called out as Bree headed for the door. Slater and Luca were right behind her.

"Where are you parked?" she asked without looking back at them.

"By the ambulances," Slater provided. It wasn't far, but Luca's cruiser was closer.

"I'm right by the ER door," Luca said. He'd left his cruiser there when he'd been in a near panic to check on Bree and their son.

"Your cruiser then," Bree said, and her glance was just long enough for Luca to confirm she was talking to him.

She was obviously shaken to the core so Luca understood her urgent need to see Gabriel. The baby would likely steady her nerves. Again though, it seemed like more than that.

"Slater, why don't you ride with us, and I can give you a statement about the accident?" Bree asked when they stepped outside. She fired glances around as if looking for something.

Or someone.

“Sure,” Slater said, sounding as concerned and skeptical as Luca was. He opened the passenger’s side door to help Bree in, and he slid into the back seat.

“Drive,” Bree insisted the moment Luca got behind the wheel.

Luca didn’t press her to explain what the heck was going on. He pulled out of the hospital parking lot while he, too, glanced around.

“All right, what’s wrong?” Slater demanded once they were on the way.

Bree dragged in a quick breath and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. “Someone ran me off the road.” Her voice cracked. “I think someone tried to kill me.”

Chapter Two

Bree knew she had plenty of explaining to do. No way could she just drop a bombshell like that on two cops and not tell them more.

Especially these two cops.

Slater, because he was her brother, and Luca, because of their history together. Of course, their history was playing into their present since she’d given birth to Luca’s son.

“Drive slow,” she instructed Luca since it would normally only take about five minutes to get to her house. She needed a bit more time than that. “I don’t want to talk about this in front of Coral.” Coral Saylor, the nanny. Bree trusted her, but she needed to keep this just between the three of them.

For now, anyway.

Because it was possible anyone she involved in this could end up being in danger.

She hated that. Hated that she had to bring them into this, but after today's attack, Bree didn't see a way around it.

"Who ran you off the road?" Slater asked. "Who tried to kill you and why?"

The first part was easy to answer. Well, the info was easy anyway. Reliving it sure as heck wasn't.

"I didn't see the driver," Bree admitted. "He came flying out from the dirt turnoff by the bridge and rammed into me. It was a large silver truck with heavily tinted windows." She shook her head and winced, which caused the fresh stitches to pull. "I didn't get a chance to dodge him or see the license plates."

"Had you ever seen the truck before?" Luca asked.

"I don't think so, but, uh, for the past couple of days, I've had the feeling that someone was watching me."

Both Slater and Luca cursed. "And you didn't think to tell one of us that?" Slater demanded.

"No." She stretched that out a few syllables, annoyed that he was using his big brother tone. "Because it was only a feeling. It happened twice when I was in town. First at the grocery store and late yesterday when I went to the post office. I glanced around, but I didn't see any unfamiliar faces."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Still, she should have trusted her gut. If she had, she would have been more careful. That had to stop. Careful had to be at the top of her priorities because of Gabriel.

“All right,” Slater said a few moments later. He was making a visible attempt to rein in the big brother stuff. “Tell us why you think this truck driver maybe followed you and then rammed into your car.”

Bree dragged in a long breath. Where to start? There were so many pieces to this so she decided to go back to the beginning.

“I’ve been investigating Dad’s murder,” she said, knowing that in itself wouldn’t be a bombshell. They were all investigating her father being gunned down by an unknown assailant eleven months ago.

A date that she had no trouble recalling.

Because it was also when she’d gotten pregnant with Gabriel.

She’d ended up at Luca’s that night, and they’d both been in shock and grief-stricken not just over her father’s murder but her mother’s disappearance. Her mother, Sandra, had simply vanished without a trace, and there was the worry that she, too, was dead. Or that she’d killed her husband and fled. That theory had some juice since her mother’s wallet, phone and car had gone missing as well. None of the items had yet been recovered.

Both of those possible scenarios had shaken Luca and her to the core, and with their defenses down, they’d fallen back into their old routine of landing in bed.

“What does Dad’s death have to do with what happened to you today?” Slater pressed.

“Getting there,” she muttered and returned to the beginning. “As you know, Dad called me the day before he was killed. I was a legal consultant for the state prosecuting attorney back then, and Dad wanted me to check through my resources to see if I could find any info on one of his cold cases.”

“Brighton Cooper,” Luca readily supplied. “The young woman who was murdered five and a half years ago.”

She made a sound of agreement. It didn’t surprise her that Luca would remember that. Or know how much the unsolved murder had troubled her father. Luca had been a deputy for over a decade and had been on duty when the twenty-three-year-old waitress had been found stabbed to death in her apartment in Saddle Ridge. The case had gone cold, but the sheriff’s office, and especially her father, had continued to investigate it.

Her mother, Sandra, had done some unofficial investigating as well since Brighton had been the daughter of Sandra’s late friend, and Sandra knew that Brighton was often impulsive and prone to getting into trouble. Brighton also had a track record of getting involved with the wrong men.

Something that Bree could definitely relate to.

“Dad was frustrated that he hadn’t been able to find anything new on Brighton,” Bree went on, “and he knew I had access to a lot of different databases and law enforcement resources. He wanted me to see if anything about Brighton popped. Anything,” she emphasized.

“Did you find something?” Luca asked.

“Not then. And maybe not now, either,” she added in a mutter. “After Dad was killed, I continued to dig though.”

It was hard for her to spell out, but the digging felt as if she was helping to fulfill her father’s last wish. Added to that, diving into work temporarily helped her set aside the grief and her worries about her missing mother. Well, it had when she wasn’t using those databases to hunt for her mom. Something she did at least weekly in case anything new turned up.

“For months, I did facial recognition searches, a lot of them, looking for any sign of Brighton,” Bree went on. “And yesterday, I saw a woman I believe could be her on security camera footage of a fight outside a bar in Austin. The footage was recorded two nights before she was murdered, and the only reason it hadn’t been erased was because the footage was used in a civil lawsuit.”

“Brighton was assaulted in this bar fight?” Luca immediately wanted to know.

“No, if it was indeed her, then she was a bystander, along with about a dozen or so people who were trying to break up the fight that started inside the bar and then moved out onto the sidewalk. It was one of the men involved in the fight who filed the lawsuit.”

A lawsuit he’d lost and then had posted the footage on social media.

“I contacted the officers who were called in,” Bree continued, “but neither of them took a witness statement from anyone matching Brighton’s description so I’m guessing she left before they arrived on scene. The man who filed the lawsuit didn’t remember her either.”

Bree’s phone rang, and she groaned when she saw her sister’s name on the screen. Joelle would have almost certainly heard about the accident by now and would want

to know how she was doing. And Bree would tell her. First though, she had to finish filling in Slater and Luca so she let the call go to voicemail.

“Using facial recognition, I matched another face in the bar crowd footage to a bartender and contacted her,” Bree went on, trying to hurry since they’d be at her house soon, and she had so much to tell them. “She didn’t recall seeing Brighton so I dropped by the bar and spoke to the owner to ask him to give me receipts for that night. He said it would take a while since it was years ago but that he’d get them for me.”

“We checked Brighton’s credit card,” Slater reminded her. “And she hadn’t recently charged anything at a bar.”

Bree made a sound of agreement. “I wanted to see if I recognized any names of customers who might link to Brighton.”

“Did you?” Luca asked.

“I don’t have the list yet. But this morning I got a call from the bar owner, and he said someone tried to run him off the road.”

Both Slater and Luca cursed. “I want his name,” Slater demanded.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“Manny Vickery,” she quickly provided. “He owns the Hush, Hush bar in downtown Austin. It’s one of those not-so-secret trendy gin joints. Not seedy though, and I didn’t uncover anything illegal going on there.”

“But someone tried to kill both him and you,” Slater was equally quick to point out.

Hearing it spelled out like that gave her a new jolt of fear and worry. Bree wanted to believe it was all a really bad coincidence. Or an accident. If it’d only been Manny’s incident, she could have believed that, but coupled with hers, both attempts had to be intentional.

But who had done this?

It was something she needed to find out and soon.

“What did Manny say when he called you this morning?” Slater asked.

It wasn’t hard for her to recall it since she’d mentally gone over the conversation several times. “Manny told me he was driving to the bar from his house, which is apparently in a rural area about twenty miles outside of Austin. He was on an isolated road when a silver truck rammed into his car from behind. The truck had one of those rhino bumpers and tried to push him off the road. Manny said he managed to keep control, and the driver of the truck sped off when another car came along.”

“Did he get the license plate?” Luca wanted to know.

She shook her head. “He said he was too shocked by what’d happened to even think

of looking at the plate.”

“Was he hurt?” Luca pressed.

Bree shook her head again. “And his car only had some minor damage. He reported it to the local cops,” she added since Bree knew that would be Luca’s or her brother’s next question. “Manny said he’d spoken to the cops right before he called me. He wanted to know if someone was after him because he was gathering those receipts for me. I said I wasn’t sure. And I’m not,” she quickly tacked on to that. “I’m not sure of a lot of things.”

“You were on your way to see this Manny Vickery when someone tried to run you off the road?” Luca pressed.

Bree nodded. “And, yes, I’ve considered that Manny knew I was coming so he could have said something to someone who was waiting for me. Or he could have done it himself if he lied about being attacked and wants me to back off the investigation.”

They sat in silence for a moment, all of them obviously processing this. “I’ll need to check your car,” Slater finally said. “If the silver truck broadsided you, there could be some paint flecks we can use to try to trace the vehicle. I’ll need to check the bar owner’s vehicle as well.”

Luca stopped the cruiser at the end of her driveway, and he turned in the seat to face her. “I’ll also make some calls and see if anyone’s brought in a vehicle like that for repair. I could ask around, too, to see if anyone spotted it in the area.” He paused. “You didn’t want to say anything about this in front of Dr. Bagley. Why?”

She had so hoped not to get into this, but Bree doubted Luca was just going to drop it, and if she tried to stonewall him, it might make him dig for the answer on his own.

“Because Nathan has been pressuring me to go out with him, and I didn’t want to give him any excuse to...insinuate himself into my life.”

She stopped, groaned, and knew she obviously had to spell that out a little better.

“As you know, Nathan and I briefly dated a couple of years ago when I was home for the summer, and when I broke things off, he didn’t take it well. He kept calling and texting, kept sending me flowers. When I went back to Dallas, he showed up at my office there, and I had my version of a showdown with him. I made it clear he’d better back off.”

As expected, Luca and Slater cursed. It was Luca who responded though. “And you didn’t tell us he was stalking you?”

“No, because it stopped.” Bree locked gazes with Luca’s intense brown eyes and went ahead with her explanation. “Added to that, I wouldn’t have felt comfortable blabbing to you because of our history together.”

Luca’s jaw tightened. “It’s not blabbing. It’s reporting a stalker to a cop.” He stopped, muttered more profanity. “If you didn’t want to tell me, you could have gone to one of the other deputies. Or to the Dallas PD. You should have said something both back then and today. By that, I mean, you could have asked for another doctor instead of being treated by a man who stalked you.”

She’d considered doing that. Mercy, had she, but Bree had just wanted to get the stitches and get out of there. She certainly hadn’t wanted to dish up any of what’d happened since it would have ended up being juicy gossip. Even though she had no idea what was going on, Bree figured it was best to work this quietly behind the scenes.

“There’s more,” Bree went on, and this part was not going to be easy. “After I saw

the woman I believe was Brighton on the video, I expanded the search to other cameras in the vicinity. Of course, most had been erased since it was over five years ago, but I found this.”

She pulled up a picture on her phone and realized her hand was shaking when she held it up for Slater and Luca to see.

“It’s footage of that same fight outside the Hush, Hush, but it was filmed by another customer who also posted it on social media.” She paused. Had to. “I examined the footage frame by frame and saw this.” She used her fingers to enlarge the still image she’d culled from the video.

“Hell,” Slater said, and he not only moved in even closer, he took the phone from her, repeated his single word of profanity and then handed it to Luca.

Luca shook his head. “That’s your mother.”

Yes, it was, and when Luca handed her back her phone, she took yet another look at it. Because she was in the mix of the other bystanders, only her face was visible, but it was enough for Bree to see the familiar short brown hair, and the eyes and mouth that were so much like Bree’s own features.

Either her mother had a doppelgänger, or that was indeed Sandra McCullough.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“I don’t recall Mom ever mentioning going to a bar in Austin,” Slater muttered.

Nor had Bree. And their mother hadn’t seemed to be the bar-going type. Then again, maybe she hadn’t actually been in the Hush, Hush. It was possible she had just been walking by and had been filmed.

But it didn’t feel like that.

This felt like some kind of important clue. But what? This had happened five and a half years ago, long before Bree’s father had been murdered and her mother had disappeared.

“This morning, I went back through Mom’s old credit card statements,” Bree added. “No charges to the bar or anywhere else in Austin. And since Mom’s not around, I obviously can’t ask her about it.”

“You’re not thinking Mom had something to do with Brighton’s death?” Slater questioned.

“I can’t think that,” Bree admitted in a whisper.

She couldn’t wrap her head around her mother committing a crime of any kind. But then, Bree knew she wasn’t impartial about this.

“I’d like to check on Gabriel now,” she murmured.

Luca stared at her. And stared. She wasn’t immune to that look. Nor to him. And that

caused her to silently curse. She couldn't handle another on-off with Luca. No bandwidth for it. Even though she couldn't deny that the heat would always be there between them.

"You two can go in and see Gabriel," Slater suggested. "I'll drive the cruiser to the crash site and look around. And I want to check out Bree's car. After I get back, we can figure out how to handle the rest of this."

Yes, handling was indeed required, and it wouldn't be just the three of them for long. They'd need to brief Joelle and her husband, Sheriff Duncan Holder. And Bree's other brother, Ruston, who was a San Antonio cop. All of them would want to know what'd happened and if it was connected to Brighton's and her father's murders.

Luca drove along the driveway to the house and parked near the porch. A reminder that he didn't want her to be out in the open any longer than necessary. And that was a reminder that she could be in danger. Bree wanted to hang on to that "could be," but she didn't plan on taking any unnecessary risks either. That's why she hurried into the house after she used her phone to unlock the front door.

"It's me," Bree immediately called out to let Coral know she was there.

As soon as Luca and she stepped in, Bree closed and relocked the door. Moments later, Bree heard footsteps coming from the laundry room.

"Didn't figure you'd be back this soon," Coral said, coming into the entry. She was carrying a clothes basket, and the baby monitor was on top of the folded pile of laundry.

As usual, Coral was wearing loose sweatpants and a T-shirt that was equally loose, and she'd pulled up her dark blonde hair into a messy ponytail. She had one of those faces that made her look a good decade younger than her thirty-eight years.

“Oh, hi, Luca,” Coral greeted. “Gabriel’s still napping,” she said, smiling. At least she was smiling until she saw Bree’s face.

Coral gasped. “You’re hurt.”

“A minor car accident,” Bree was quick to say. “I’m fine, really.”

But she would need to say plenty more because she wanted Coral included in that better-safe-than-sorry mode. It sickened her to think of that truck driver coming here, but it was too risky not to prepare for it. That meant locked doors and using the security system. The house was rigged with one, but normally Bree only turned it on at night. That would change.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Coral pressed.

“Yes. It’s just a few stitches.” Which were starting to sting now that the numbing meds were wearing off.

Bree glanced at the baby monitor and checked the time. Since she’d put Gabriel down for his morning nap before she’d left, that meant he’d been asleep for nearly three hours. That was slightly longer than his usual, but then his sleep pattern was nowhere near consistent.

“I was going to put this laundry away and go take a peek at him,” Coral explained, and she handed Bree the camera monitor.

Gabriel was indeed still asleep in his crib, and just seeing that precious face performed some magic. Bree felt some of her nerves start to melt away.

“He’ll probably want a bottle soon,” Coral remarked. “You want me to go ahead and fix that so Luca can feed him?”

That had more or less become their routine. Luca had been coming over daily to give Gabriel at least one bottle, sometimes two. Bree hadn't been able to nurse because of a nasty bout of mastitis when Gabriel had only been a week old, so that meant she hadn't needed to be in the nursery during those feedings.

A good thing.

She'd learned the hard way that too much time with Luca triggered the memories of their last night together, which in turn triggered memories of her father's murder. It was ironic that her son didn't have that same effect on her despite Gabriel being the spitting image of Luca.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“Yes, please make the bottle,” Bree instructed, and she was about to head to the nursery when Luca touched her.

She jolted when his fingers brushed over hers, but then she realized he wasn’t actually touching her. He was taking the monitor, and he had his attention pinned to it and not her.

Her nerves returned in full force. “Is something wrong?”

Luca shook his head, but the gesture didn’t seem very convincing. “Look,” he said, pointing to the screen. She saw a bird zoom past one of the nursery windows.

“A blue jay,” she muttered and was about to dismiss it. Then, a few seconds later, a bird flew past again.

No. Not “a” bird. It appeared to be the same bird, flying at the exact speed and angle. This wasn’t live feed but rather a recorded loop.

Bree bolted toward the nursery. Luca was right behind her, and he actually passed her before she reached the nursery door. He threw it open, and together they rushed into the room.

And her heart stopped. Just stopped.

Because the crib was empty.

Chapter Three

Everything inside Luca froze. At first, his mind couldn't register what he was seeing, and then the reality slammed into him.

The baby was gone.

"Where is he?" Bree asked, the panic rising in her voice. "Where's Gabriel?" She ran to the crib, and since there were no toys, pillows or blankets, it was easy to see it was empty. Still, Bree felt around the sheet as if she expected him to be there.

The cop in Luca kicked in, and he took hold of Bree to pull her back. If someone had taken Gabriel, then he needed to try to preserve any evidence.

If someone had taken Gabriel.

Those words knifed into him, robbing him of his breath and nearly sending him to his knees. But none of those reactions were going to help this situation, and he tried to focus on fixing this. On finding his precious son.

"What happened?" Coral asked as she ran into the room. She gasped and put her fingers to her mouth when she saw the empty crib.

"Where's Gabriel?" Bree demanded. "Why isn't he here?"

Coral frantically shook her head. "He has to be here. You put him in the crib and left for your meeting."

Luca fired glances around the room, taking it all in, but other than the missing baby, he didn't see anything out of place. There were no signs of a break-in, and the windows were all closed.

While Coral and Bree ran to search the closet, Luca looked at the baby monitor again.

On the screen, Gabriel was exactly where he was supposed to be, and the sickening realization hit him. This was a loop, a repeated recording of when Gabriel had actually been sleeping in the crib.

And that meant someone had hacked the monitor.

“We need to search the rest of the house and the grounds,” Luca insisted, taking out his phone to call the dispatcher. “This is Deputy Vanetti. I need backup.” He rattled off Bree’s address. The next part wasn’t nearly as easy to say. “Issue an Amber Alert.”

He heard the sound, not footsteps, but a heart-crushing moan, and he knew it had come from Bree. She wasn’t crying, not yet anyway, but that would no doubt soon happen.

“Search the other bedrooms,” he told her and then shifted to Coral. “You look through the rest of the house. Check to see if any windows are open.” Since it wasn’t a huge place, that wouldn’t take much time.

The grounds though were another matter.

This wasn’t a small city lot by any means. The house that had once belonged to Bree’s grandparents was situated on about a dozen acres with a barn and pastures for horses. He would need backup to cover the entire area, and every minute counted right now. Especially since there were two country roads within a quarter of a mile of the place.

“Coral, were the doors all locked?” Luca called out as he headed toward the kitchen so he could access the back porch.

Coral hurried into the kitchen with him, but she was clearly still in shock, and it took

her several seconds to answer. “I think so. I don’t know,” she amended with a sob. “Where is he? Did someone take him?”

Someone clearly had, but Luca didn’t voice that. Wasn’t sure he could. He definitely didn’t want to think of his son in the hands of someone who might hurt him.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“What about keys?” Luca pressed, trying to tamp down his own building panic. He drew his gun but prayed he didn’t need it. “Who has keys to the place?”

Coral shook her head again, and their conversation must have gotten Bree’s attention because she, too, hurried into the kitchen. “Me and my family,” Bree said. “Coral, too, of course.”

Since her family members were all cops, they’d likely kept the keys secure. He’d need to make sure Coral had done the same. For now though, Luca checked the back door for himself. His gut clenched, and he cursed under his breath.

Because it was not only unlocked, it was slightly ajar.

“Did you leave this open?” he asked.

“I didn’t,” Coral said.

“Neither did I,” Bree insisted, “but I can’t swear it was locked either. I had my coffee out there this morning, and I got distracted by the phone call from Manny.”

Now, the tears came, flooding her eyes, and Luca wished he had time to comfort her, to try to reassure her that they would find their baby. But time was critical now so he used his elbow to open the door wider in the hopes he wouldn’t destroy any prints that might have been left there. Then, he hurried out onto the porch.

He understood why Bree would want to have her coffee out here. The October temps weren’t scorching hot as they could sometimes be in this part of Texas, and there was

a picture-postcard view of the still green pastures, a pond and two grazing horses. But there was nothing picturesque about it for Luca at the moment. He took it in like a crime scene.

And he cursed again when he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He needed clues. Evidence. He needed anything that would point him in the right direction to where his son had been taken. Then, he could catch up with the kidnapper and get Gabriel back.

“Don’t go in that part of the yard,” he instructed when Bree headed down the porch steps. “There might be footprints.”

Since it probably wasn’t a route a kidnapper would have used, Luca ran to the side of the porch and checked the yard below. As expected, there were no indications anyone had recently walked here so he vaulted over the railing, dropping down the three or so feet to the soft ground.

“Did you get any visitors this morning?” he asked while he searched that side of the house. Nothing visible there either, but there were shrubs so he had a close look around those.

“No,” Bree answered. Luca heard the sound of footsteps behind him and saw that she, too, had jumped over the porch railing. “I only got that phone call from Manny.”

Yes, that. Luca certainly hadn’t forgotten about it. Or about Bree’s, and possibly Manny’s, run-ins with a truck driver who might or might not have wanted them dead. It was probably all connected.

But how?

If those attempts had been some kind of threat to ward them off, then why hadn't they gotten a lesser warning? A back off or else. Maybe because their attackers and the kidnapper hadn't wanted to alert them as to why this was happening. As a cop though, he had to believe this was connected to Brighton's murder. It didn't seem like a coincidence that all of this had started shortly after Bree had come across that video.

"Coral, did you see any vehicles near the house after Bree left?" he called out while he ran to the front porch so he could check it. Bree was right behind him.

"No," the nanny was quick to say. "I swear, nothing happened, and I didn't see or hear anything."

He believed her, but she had obviously been in the laundry room, and it was on the other side of the house from the nursery. If the washer or dryer had been going while she was in there, Coral might not have heard someone come in through the back door and take the baby.

There was a problem with that theory though.

A stranger would have had to search through the house for Gabriel. Of course, that search could have happened by peering through the windows, but Luca wasn't seeing any signs of footprints to indicate that. There was also the question of where a kidnapper would have parked so that Coral wouldn't have noticed.

Luca immediately shifted his attention to the barn.

"You think Gabriel's in there?" Bree asked, obviously following Luca's gaze.

"I can't rule it out," he settled for saying. "I want to check the other side of the house first," he added and headed in that direction just as his phone rang.

Because his mind was narrowed in on Gabriel, his first thought was that this was the kidnapper with a ransom or some other demand. But it was Slater's name on the screen.

"What the hell's going on?" Slater immediately demanded. "There's an Amber Alert?"

"Gabriel's missing. I don't know who, why or how," he added while he combed the side of the house for any potential clues. "When Bree and I went inside her house, he was gone, and it's possible he was taken as long as three hours ago."

Bree made another of those ragged sobs, and Luca knew she was thinking the same thing as he was. If it'd been that long, if the kidnapper had taken Gabriel within minutes of Bree leaving the house, then their baby could be anywhere. Three hours was a lifetime when it came to something like this.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“I’m on my way,” Slater insisted. “I’ll call Duncan, Joelle and Ruston and fill them in.”

That meant the four of them would also soon be on their way here, too. Well, maybe not Joelle since she was on maternity leave and had a baby of her own. Still, she would likely find a way to join the others. So would any available deputy. And Luca had to believe that would be enough help for them to find and recover Gabriel.

“Uh, how’s Bree?” Slater asked. “Never mind. She’s a wreck. I’ll be there soon,” he added before he ended the call.

Bree was indeed a wreck. She was strong and had survived going through hell and back, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t break. This was enough to break even the strongest person. That’s why he needed to help her focus on the things that could be done rather than letting the fear take over. Luca tried to do the same for himself.

“Look for any signs of footprints,” he instructed. “Especially beneath the windows.”

She did, pinning her gaze to the ground as they hurried along the side of the house, but there was nothing to indicate the kidnapper had been here.

“Stay right behind me as we go through the backyard,” he told her. Because there was a strong possibility of footprints being there.

“We’re going to the barn,” she muttered.

They were, and Luca knew it wouldn’t do any good to ask Bree to stay in the house

while he did that. If their situations had been reversed, he sure as hell wouldn't have stayed put and neither would she.

But it could be dangerous.

If they cornered a kidnapper, then Gabriel's captor might do anything and everything to escape. Still, there was no other option, not even waiting for backup. Luca intended to do everything possible to find his son now, and then he'd have to deal with whatever they were about to face.

"Look for tracks," he reminded her.

Luca did the same, but he didn't take the direct route across the yard. He stayed on the perimeter, hurrying, while he made his way through the flower beds and shrubs and toward the barn. They reached the wide metal gate, and Luca slowed down to check for footprints.

And he saw something.

Of course, that something could be Bree's own tracks since he knew she tended her two horses. Still, Luca skirted around them, climbing over the fence and approaching the barn from the side.

"Are the barn doors usually shut like this?" he asked Bree in a whisper.

"Yes. I open them if bad weather is coming."

Since there was no such weather in the forecast, then this was the norm, but Luca hoped Gabriel's abductor had ducked in and shut them. That way, his son would be nearby, and he'd be within seconds of finding him.

The horses whickered and lifted their heads, but they must have picked up Bree's scent because they went back to grazing. Luca and Bree went past them and ran to the barn. There were no footprints on the side of it. None that Luca could see anyway, but there were also enough patches of grass that anyone could have used them like stepping stones.

When he reached the door, Luca lifted the latch to ease it open, and he winced at the creaking sound it made. No way to sneak it with that noise. Then again, the spears of sunlight would have alerted anyone inside, too.

They stepped in, and Luca paused so his eyes could adjust to the dim light and so he could listen for any sounds. Nothing.

Not at first anyway.

Then, he heard something or someone rustling. It came from the far corner of the barn where there were some stacks of hay bales. Bree must have heard it as well because her attention zoomed in that direction while she took hold of a muck fork rake that was propped against the wall. It wasn't a gun, but it could be an effective weapon if it came down to it.

Luca was praying it didn't.

Keeping his footsteps as light as possible, he made his way toward those bales. Not approaching them directly where Bree and he would be easy targets. Again, he kept them to the side of the barn so he could approach from the side.

Of course, there might not be a kidnapper. The sound could have come from a mouse or some other critter that had gotten inside. Still, Luca moved as if their lives depended on it.

Since they could.

Luca stopped when he heard another sound. More rustling. Followed by what could be a whimper. That got Bree and him moving even faster, and he had his gun aimed and ready when they reached the stack of hay bales. Bree moved to his side, the muck fork raised.

And then they both froze.

There, seated on the floor was a woman, and she had Gabriel cradled in her arms. Not a stranger. Far from it.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Because the woman was someone who'd been missing and presumed dead for nearly a year.

Bree's mother.

Chapter Four

Bree's breath stalled in her throat, and the only sound she managed to make was a strangled gasp of raw shock. That shock anchored her feet in place. Her mind, too. She just couldn't grasp what she was seeing.

Her mother.

With Gabriel.

What the heck was her mother doing here in the barn, and why had she stolen Gabriel?

Her mother didn't say anything. She just stared at Bree with her own stunned silence. She was pale. No color except for some red scratches on her right cheek. Her hair looked as if it hadn't been combed in a very long time.

Gabriel made a sound, a soft whimper that yanked Bree right out of her stupor. Her maternal instincts kicked in. Mercy, did they. The boiling anger and urgent need to protect her baby slammed through her, and despite who was holding him—a woman she'd once loved and trusted—everything inside her screamed for her to get to her son.

Bree flung the muck fork aside to hurry to Gabriel. She didn't even acknowledge the woman holding him. Bree just reached down and took him.

Her mother didn't resist. Just the opposite. Her grip on Gabriel melted away as Bree's own grip gathered him into her arms. Cradling Gabriel against her chest, Bree stepped back.

Luca moved in front of Gabriel and her. Protecting them. And giving Bree a jolt of a different kind. Luca and she were a unit. Parents. Together. For this nightmare anyway. Even though she was holding their son, the fear of him being kidnapped was causing adrenaline to fire through her, and the only person who could understand what she was feeling right now was Luca.

Or rather, he could understand what she was feeling about finding their son.

He probably couldn't grasp what she was going through over seeing her mother. Then again, Bree couldn't quite grasp it either.

"You're hurt," her mother said. "Were you attacked?"

Bree had forgotten about her fresh stitches and the nicks on her face, and it definitely wasn't a high priority for discussion right now. "You took my son," Bree managed to say.

Her mother nodded, and tears spilled from her already red eyes. "Yes. To protect him."

Nothing about this felt like protection. But Bree immediately rethought that. Just an hour or so ago, someone had run her off the road and had possibly tried to kill her. Was that connected to her mother?

“To protect him,” Luca repeated. “Explain that,” he snapped, and it was obvious from his tone that he was still getting some adrenaline jolts of his own. Equally obvious, too, was that he wasn’t just going to dole out a welcome home to the woman who’d stolen their child.

Her mother opened her mouth but didn’t get a chance to answer before there was the sound of running footsteps. “Bree?” Slater called out. “Luca? Where the hell are you?”

“Here,” Luca said.

That brought on more running footsteps, and he wasn’t alone. Coral was with him.

“Did you find...” Slater’s words trailed off when he saw them. He, too, had his weapon drawn, and his gaze swept from Gabriel to Luca and Bree.

And then to his mother.

Slater shook his head, clearly not able to process what he was seeing. Coral was having a similar reaction. The nanny didn’t know Sandra well, but it was obvious she recognized her.

“What are you doing here?” Slater asked Sandra.

“Sandra’s the one who took Gabriel,” Luca supplied.

“I did it to protect him,” her mother insisted. She moved to get to her feet, a gesture that caused Luca and Slater to take aim at her.

“Are you armed?” Luca demanded.

Luca and Slater were clearly treating her mother like a kidnapper, and Bree didn't object. Too many things weren't clear right now, and she didn't want Gabriel in any more danger than he might already be.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Her mother shook her head, and she lifted her hands while she stood. She staggered a little but kept her hands raised.

“I don’t have a gun, and I wasn’t going to hurt Gabriel,” her mother said. Her face was a mix of shock and fear. “I’d never hurt him or any of you.” She added that last part when she shifted her attention to Slater.

Slater swallowed hard. “What are you doing here? Where have you been all this time?”

Those were both very good questions, but Bree had another question of her own. “Why did you feel the need to kidnap my son to protect him?” She didn’t ask it nicely either, not with the terror of nearly losing her son still coursing through her.

The sigh that left her mother’s mouth was long and weary. “Because someone else was going to take him.”

“Who?” Luca and Bree asked in unison.

Sandra shook her head. “I don’t know.” She repeated that while she shook her head again and continued to cry. She took a step toward them, staggered a little and caught onto the barn wall.

“Are you hurt?” Slater asked. He lowered his gun but didn’t holster it.

“Just my ankle.” Sandra squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. “I twisted it when I escaped.”

Bree was trying to grasp each word her mother said. Trying to examine her body language, too. But escaped flashed like a neon sign in her head. Luca picked right up on it, too.

“Escaped from who and from what?” Luca still sounded like a cop interrogating a suspect.

Again, her mother didn’t get a chance to answer because there was a shout from outside the barn. “Bree?” someone called out.

Joelle.

And judging from the sound of more footsteps, her sister wasn’t alone. Bree was betting Duncan was with her. Moments later, she got confirmation of that when Joelle and Duncan hurried in. Since they didn’t have their baby with them, Bree figured they’d left Izzie at home with the nanny.

“We came to help look for Gabriel,” Joelle said.

Bree looked back at her sister. Their gazes connecting, for a couple of seconds anyway, before Joelle saw Gabriel in her arms. Relief flooded her face, but it, too, passed quickly when Joelle’s attention landed on Sandra.

“Mom,” Joelle muttered on a rise of breath. Unlike the rest of them, Joelle didn’t stand back. Just the opposite. She hurried to their mother and pulled her into her arms.

“She could have a gun,” Bree was quick to point out.

Joelle’s shoulders went stiff, and she shifted from worried daughter to cop in a blink. She stepped back, way back, volleying glances at Slater and Bree. “What’s going

on?” Joelle asked.

Bree wanted to know the same thing. Clearly, so did Duncan, Luca and Slater, but Slater obviously wanted to make sure they weren't about to be attacked.

“I'll check her for weapons,” Slater volunteered, stepping forward.

Joelle's mouth dropped open, and it seemed as if she was about to object to their mother being frisked. She didn't though. It must have occurred to her that they needed a whole lot of answers before they could trust the woman who'd given birth to them.

“She's not armed,” Slater relayed. “She doesn't have a phone or a wallet. Just some keys.” Slater lifted out the keys and held them in the air. “There's one here marked with a B.”

Bree was pretty sure that was the key to her house. Her mother had had one like that anyway. But Bree didn't recognize the rest of the keys. Or the clothes her mother was wearing. Loose jogging pants and a baggy T-shirt. Definitely not her mom's usual fashion choices, especially since she was barefoot. And she'd clearly lost some weight. All possible signs of, well, Bree couldn't be certain, but she wanted to know.

“What happened?” Duncan demanded. “Is Sandra the one who kidnapped Gabriel?”

Luca nodded. “She hacked into the baby monitor—”

“No,” her mother interrupted. “I didn't do that. The kidnapper did.”

That got their attention, and all of them pinned their attention on Sandra. She sighed again. “Eleven and a half months ago, I was kidnapped, and I've been held all this time.”

Bree had to admit that fit with her mom's appearance. Well, maybe it did. But it could also fit with someone who'd been on the run.

"Did you kill Dad?" Bree came out and asked.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Her mother's eyes widened. "No." She sounded stunned but adamant. "Of course not." The tears began to spill again, and a hoarse sob tore from her throat. "I think the person who took me killed him."

"And who would that be?" Slater demanded.

Sandra shook her head. "I don't know."

Bree and Slater both groaned, but Duncan cursed. Maybe because of Sandra's answer but also because his phone dinged with a text.

"Someone reported seeing a silver truck that matches the description of the one we're looking for," Duncan relayed. "It was near here."

Bree automatically pulled Gabriel even closer to her. Oh, mercy. Had the hit-and-run driver come back for another attack?

"I drove a silver truck here," her mother volunteered.

Again, that got their attention. Not that it had strayed too far from her mother. "You're the one who ran me off the road?" Bree asked.

Her mother flinched. "No." She used that same adamant tone. "I drove the truck here, that's all, and I parked it on a ranch trail." She pressed trembling fingers to her mouth for a moment. "Did someone try to hurt you?"

"Someone did hurt me by running me off the road so I'd crash into a tree," Bree

clarified. "And that someone was driving a silver truck."

Sandra staggered back and sank down onto the floor. "I didn't do that. I wouldn't do that," she amended. "But my kidnapper would."

"I'll want to hear all about the kidnapper," Duncan stated. "For now, tell me where you parked the silver truck."

Sandra fluttered her fingers toward the pasture. "It's on the old ranch trail just on the other side of the fence. I left it there and walked to the house."

"Because you didn't want the nanny or Bree to spot you?" Duncan pressed.

"No, because I didn't want the real kidnapper to see me," her mother was quick to say. "I wanted to get Gabriel away from the house before she had a chance to show up and take him." She stopped, her forehead bunching up. "I should have figured out another way. I shouldn't have scared you like this."

Bree glared at her. "Yes, you should have figured out another way. If you thought Gabriel was in danger, you should have called me."

Sandra shook her head. "I didn't have a phone, and when I didn't see your car in the driveway, I figured you weren't home."

"I wasn't here, but Coral the nanny was," Bree was equally quick to point out.

"Coral," she repeated, and her gaze drifted to the nanny. "The woman in the laundry room. I only saw her back so I didn't know who she was. I wasn't sure I could trust her so I decided better safe than sorry. I took Gabriel, sneaked out the back door and waited in the barn, hoping you'd show up and start looking for him."

Bree mentally went back through that. “You said you’d been held all this time so how did you even know about Gabriel?”

“From her. From the woman who held me,” Sandra clarified. “I overheard her talking to someone about Bree and her baby. I don’t know who she was talking to, but it was clear they were planning on kidnapping Gabriel.”

“Who is this woman?” Duncan pressed.

“I don’t know. I don’t,” Sandra insisted when Duncan groaned. “She always wore a mask whenever she was around. I didn’t even know where I was until I escaped.”

Now it was Bree’s turn to groan when her phone rang, and she yanked it from her pocket and answered it without taking her attention off her mother. She instantly regretted not looking at the screen for the caller’s ID though when she heard the man’s voice.

Nathan.

“Bree,” he said, and there was a frantic edge to that single word. “I just heard about your son being missing. I can come and help look for him.”

“No,” she couldn’t say fast enough. She definitely didn’t want to have to deal with the clingy Nathan right now. “We found him. He’s safe.”

And she hoped that was the truth. Hoped that her little boy wasn’t still in danger. But if what her mother was saying was true, then he possibly could be.

“Oh, thank God,” Nathan said, punctuating that with what sounded like a breath of relief. “Are you all right? You must have been shaken to the core when you realized he was missing.”

“I was. And I’m fine,” Bree added, ready to hang up.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Nathan spoke before she could. “I can come over and give the baby a checkup. You know, just to make sure he’s really okay.”

That gave her another jolt of fear. She hadn’t checked Gabriel after she’d taken him from her mother, but she intended to do that now.

“I have to go,” she told Nathan, and she ended the call so she could put her phone away and open Gabriel’s onesie.

Her movements must have been frantic because Luca holstered his gun and moved closer to help her with the onesie zipper. Gabriel objected to that by frowning and whimpering, but other than that, there appeared to be nothing wrong with him. She wanted to do a more thorough check soon. First though, she needed to deal with her mother.

“I didn’t hurt him,” her mother insisted. “I wouldn’t. I stopped him from being hurt. If the kidnapper had taken him...” She stopped, dragged in a few clipped breaths. “I don’t know what would have happened. And I couldn’t risk it.” Sandra paused. “We should take the baby inside the house and I can tell you how I ended up here. I can tell you what happened to me.”

Bree very much wanted to know that, but she didn’t budge. Neither did the rest of them.

Duncan’s phone dinged again, breaking the silence. “The CSIs are going with one of the deputies to locate the silver truck. If it’s where Sandra says it is, then we should know within the hour if there are paint flecks on the truck that match Bree’s and

Manny's vehicles.”

“Do you mean Manny Vickery?” Sandra asked. “The owner of the Hush, Hush bar in Austin?”

Once again, they all turned toward her mother. She had managed to surprise them once again. “You know him?” Luca asked.

Sandra nodded. “I talked to him when I was helping your dad investigate Brighton's murder.” She stopped, gathered her breath and opened her mouth to continue.

The sound stopped Sandra cold. A loud blast. And Bree instantly knew what it was.

A gunshot.

Gabriel jolted from the sound and began to cry. Bree instinctively pulled him back to her body while she stooped to go to the floor.

Luca helped her with that. He got her down in a blink, positioned himself over them and drew his gun. Joelle, Slater and Duncan did the same, and they took cover behind the hay bales.

“Move away from the wall,” Duncan told Sandra, and the woman scrambled closer to Joelle. Duncan then called for backup. “Carmen and Woodrow were already on their way out here to look for Gabriel,” Duncan relayed to them a moment later. “They'll be here in less than five minutes.”

Carmen Gonzales and Woodrow Leonard, both veteran deputies. Good. Bree wanted all the help they could get.

There was another blast, but it didn't seem to hit anything. At least Bree hoped it

hadn't.

"I think both shots came from the direction of the road," Luca muttered. His gaze met Bree's for a split second, and she saw the renewed fear that was there. Fear for their son's safety.

She doubted the shots had come from a hunter who'd strayed too close to her place. Not with everything else that had gone on. Someone was after her, and that someone didn't care if they put her baby at risk. That both sickened her and terrified her. Bree could deal with someone coming after her. She was a cop's daughter after all. But she didn't want her baby involved in this.

Keeping low, Slater made his way to the barn door that was still open, and staying to the side, he peered out. "I don't see anyone, but if the shots are coming from the road, the shooter could be hiding in the trees."

There were certainly plenty of those by the country road. So many places for a gunman to hide. But maybe Carmen and Woodrow would be able to see the shooter when they arrived. Maybe they'd even be able to arrest him, and Bree might be able to get those answers she so desperately needed.

The seconds ticked by, and her heartbeat and breathing had just started to level when there was another gunshot. This one blasted through the wall of the barn, creating a hole where light speared through it.

Another shot.

This one tore through the barn as well and smacked into the wall on the opposite side. The shots weren't low but rather at the height if the target had been standing. That changed though because the next shot came in low. It ripped through yet more wood, sending splinters flying.

Bree ducked her head, putting her face right against Gabriel's to shelter him. He continued to cry, loud wails now because he was obviously afraid.

In the distance, she heard another sound. A police siren. Obviously, Carmen and Woodrow weren't going with a silent approach. Part of her was thankful for that because it might cause the shooter to stop. But it might also cause him to run.

Duncan's phone rang, and he answered it while he ran to the barn door next to Slater. "The deputies don't see a shooter or a vehicle on the road."

The vehicle could be on the ranch trail. Perhaps even the one where her mother had left the silver truck. But there were trails that threaded all through this area. What likely hadn't happened though was the shooter had come on foot. Her place was too far off the beaten path for that.

The wailing of the sirens got closer. But there were no more gunshots.

"Luca and Joelle, wait here with the others," Duncan instructed. "Slater will come with me. Stay put," he added to Bree.

She didn't ask what Duncan and her brother were doing. Because Bree knew. They were going to go in pursuit of the person who'd just tried to kill them.

Chapter Five

Luca set the bag of baby supplies on the floor next to the sofa in the break room of the sheriff's office where Coral was feeding Gabriel a bottle. Bree was right there, clearly not wanting to take her eyes off their son, but Luca also knew she would soon have to do that. Because there was no way she would miss her mother's interview.

Bree, her siblings and every cop in the building—including Luca—wanted to hear what Sandra had to say. It could be critical for not only the events of the past eleven months but also for what'd happened today. Bree being run off the road, Sandra taking Gabriel.

And the shooting.

That was at the top of Luca's list of things he needed to know. Since Duncan and Slater hadn't been able to find the shooter, it meant there was a possibility it could happen again. This time, they might not get so lucky, and someone could be hurt. Luca didn't intend to let that happen, and it was the reason he hadn't let Bree and Gabriel out of his sight since those shots had been fired into the barn.

Of course, he'd have to allow it eventually because he didn't want the baby in the interview room where tempers might flare, but Coral would stay just up the hall with Gabriel. No baby monitor, not after what'd happened to the one at Bree's. But if there was any trouble, Luca would be able to get to Gabriel in a matter of seconds.

“It’s time?” Bree asked him.

Luca nodded. After they’d all arrived at the sheriff’s office, Duncan had told them to take thirty minutes so they could get Coral and the baby settled. So they could settle their own nerves, too. That would also give Duncan time for an EMT to come in and give Sandra a quick exam. Other than some cuts and bruises and the sore ankle, Bree’s mother hadn’t seemed injured, but if she was telling the truth about being held captive for eleven months, then she needed at least a cursory exam that would no doubt be followed by a complete physical once she’d given her statement.

“Your mother, Slater, Joelle and Duncan are already in the interview room,” Luca added. He knew that because he’d glanced in the room after he’d retrieved the baby supplies from Carmen, who’d picked them up from Bree’s place. Everyone was sitting and waiting for the EMT to finish. “Ruston is on his way from San Antonio, but he said for us not to wait for him.”

Since Ruston was a San Antonio detective, he understood the urgency of getting any and all info. In this case though, there were plenty of emotions mixed with that urgency. Yes, Sandra could possibly give them answers, but she was still Joelle, Bree, Slater and Ruston’s mother. A woman who’d been missing for almost a year.

A woman who, despite her denial, could have murdered their father or at least have knowledge of that murder.

Yeah, no way to take the emotions out of that.

Bree brushed a kiss on the top of Gabriel’s head. Luca did the same. And after giving their son one last look, they left to go to the interview room. Luca stopped just outside the closed door and looked at Bree to gauge how worried he should be about her.

Worried, he decided.

She looked exhausted and no doubt was. Spent adrenaline was a bear to deal with and sapped plenty of energy. Added to that, she still had those stitches from her car crash. There'd been way too little time for her to process that before they'd realized Gabriel was missing. Then, the gunshots had added to the hellish day.

And it wasn't over.

Bree still had to deal with her mother, and the nightmarish memories the woman's reappearance would stir up for her. Then, there was the part he'd go ahead and tell her now.

"I'm staying with Gabriel and you," Luca spelled out. "You can consider it protective custody, but I'm staying." He steeled himself for an argument where she could point out that one of her siblings could provide that protection.

But no argument came.

"Good," she muttered. "No one will protect Gabriel better than you."

"I feel the same way about you," he assured her.

Their gazes connected. Held. He saw the faith she had in him about this. And he hoped she saw the same in him. They would indeed do whatever it took to keep their son safe. But like a hit of adrenaline, there'd be a price to pay. The close quarters were going to test barriers that Bree likely didn't want tested. Still, no price was too high to pay for their little boy.

The door opened, breaking their connected gazes, and Luca and she stepped back so the EMT, Shaun Gafford, could come out. Luca knew him well since they'd been in

the same grade at school.

“She’s got some bruises on her arms, hands and legs,” Shaun explained, “but other than that, she’s good.” He paused, looked at Bree. “How about you? You got meds in case those stitches start to throb?”

Bree nodded. “Dr. Bagley phoned in a script.”

At the mention of Nathan’s name, Luca remembered the call Bree had gotten from him shortly after they’d found Gabriel and her mother in the barn. Maybe Nathan had just been concerned about Bree and Gabriel, but after what Bree had revealed about the doctor’s stalking, Luca made a mental note to keep tabs on Nathan to make sure he didn’t resume those stalking attempts.

They stepped into the interview room that was a decent size, but usually there weren’t this many people present. Duncan, Slater, Joelle, Sandra, Bree and him. Then again, there was nothing “usual” about this situation. Sandra was seated with Joelle by her side, but Duncan and Slater were standing. Bree and Luca stayed on their feet as well.

“I just got a call about the silver truck,” Duncan said. “Woodrow and Carmen found it where Sandra said it would be. And they saw paint flecks on the bumper. It’s being taken in now for processing. According to the plates, the vehicle belonged to a man named Alan Smith, but Woodrow says the guy’s been dead for nearly a year now, and that his son sold the truck to a woman who paid cash for it. Woodrow has the buyer’s name. But it’s Ann Wilson so it’s probably bogus.”

Probably. But it was something Luca would check for himself.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“Still no sign of the shooter?” Bree wanted to know.

Duncan shook his head, and the frustration of that was all over his face. “But there were other tire tracks on the trail so it’s possible the shooter parked there and then escaped after he or she fled.” He made eye contact with Luca. “There were some indications that someone had tried to set fire to the silver truck.”

Hell. Luca hoped no evidence had been destroyed. They needed anything and everything in that vehicle to help them make sense of what’d happened. He was hoping though that the making sense would start right now with Sandra.

“I’m going to Mirandize you,” Duncan said, shifting his attention to Sandra.

Sandra didn’t object. She only sighed as Duncan recited the warning. He followed that up by stating his name, the time and the names of others who were present. All very official, but it didn’t mean Duncan was anticipating that he might have to arrest Sandra for anything. This was just a legal formality and a way of covering themselves.

“I didn’t kill my husband,” Sandra said the moment that Duncan had finished. Her voice cracked, and more tears filled her eyes. Joelle handed her mother a box of tissues that she took from the table. “Cliff was alive the last time I saw him,” Sandra insisted.

“Start from the beginning,” Duncan instructed as he took the seat across from her. “You said you were kidnapped. When and how were you taken?”

Sandra gathered her breath. “It was November first of last year. Cliff had already left for work, and I went to my home office to try to do more searches on Brighton. She’d been dead for four years by then, and Cliff was frustrated that he hadn’t been able to find her killer. He wanted me to search through old social media posts to see if I could come up with something.”

Cliff had asked Bree to dig as well. And Luca. So, Luca could attest to his former boss being frustrated. It was understandable, too, that he would ask his wife to help since Sandra and Brighton’s late mom had been best friends.

“Someone knocked at the door while I was working,” Sandra went on. “At first, I thought it was Cliff, that maybe he’d locked himself out or forgotten something since he’d only been gone about twenty minutes so I opened the door without looking. A woman wearing a ski mask jabbed me with a stun gun. She dragged me out of the house and into a car, and then she gave me some kind of injection in my arm that knocked me out.”

Luca thought back to the scene of Cliff’s murder. There’d been no signs of a struggle. No signs of Sandra either, and her purse and phone had been missing.

“Describe the woman and the car,” Duncan said.

Sandra nodded, but then paused for a couple of seconds. “Like I said, she wore a mask so I never saw her face. But she was tall, maybe five foot ten, and she had an athletic build. She didn’t have any trouble dragging me to the car. She just put me in and drove off.”

“But she took your purse, keys and phone?” Luca questioned.

“Yes. I had my phone in my pocket, and she got that right away and took out the SIM card. But she also grabbed my purse, and it had my keys in it.” She paused again.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about that, and I think she took my purse to make it look as if I’d voluntarily left. I didn’t,” she insisted. She repeated that while she made direct eye contact with Joelle, Bree and Slater.

“What happened after this woman kidnapped you?” Duncan pressed, clearly anxious to get some answers.

“I’m not sure how long I was unconscious,” Sandra admitted. “When I woke up, I was in a bedroom with log walls, and it was attached to a small bathroom. There was a window in the bedroom, but it’d been boarded up.” She stopped, shook her head. “Believe me when I say I tried to tear off those boards, but I was never able to do that.”

“Where was this place?” Duncan asked.

Sandra pulled in another of those long breaths. “I didn’t know at the time, but after I escaped in the silver truck, I realized the cabin was only about twenty-five miles from here. It’s off an old farm road between Bulverde and the Guadalupe River.” Her eyes went wide. “It’ll be in the GPS. I didn’t know where I was, but the GPS was working so I told it to navigate to Bree’s address.”

Duncan took out his phone and made a quick call to Woodrow, instructing him to check the truck’s GPS right away and then to have local cops go out to the scene immediately.

“Okay,” Duncan said to Sandra when he’d finished with the call. “Go back to the kidnapper. You’re sure you never saw her face, never got any indications as to who she was?”

“I’m sure,” Sandra insisted. She stopped, and it seemed as if for several moments, she got lost in the memories of what’d happened. “She only came in every three days or

so, and one time she brought me a newspaper with the article about Cliff. That's how I learned my husband was dead." Her voice broke. "I read about in a newspaper that horrible woman brought me. Did she kill him?" Sandra asked.

Most of them shook their heads. Bree went with a verbal response. "We don't know. We're all investigating it. Did the woman ever say anything about Dad?"

"Nothing. Just that article. I asked...no, I begged her for more information. I begged her to let me go, to tell me why she was holding me. She never answered." There was a world of genuine heartbreak in her words, and Luca didn't think any part of it was fake.

"Did your captor stay there with you the whole time?" Duncan asked, obviously shifting the interview back to the abduction.

Sandra shook her head. "No, she wasn't around that much. Like I said, she'd come every two to three days and always had on a mask. She'd put a bag of groceries in my room. Sandwich stuff and chips mainly. Toiletries, sometimes." She wiped away more tears. "A couple of times, I tried to jump her when she came in, but she always had the stun gun with her and would hit me with it."

"Not this last time though," Luca reminded her.

"No," Sandra murmured. She stopped when Duncan's phone dinged with a text.

"Woodrow called the county sheriff's office, and they're sending out deputies now to check the cabin," Duncan relayed after he read the message.

Good. The sooner they got there, the better, and with any luck, the kidnapper would still be there so they could arrest her.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“You were telling us about how today’s encounter with your captor was different from other times,” Duncan prompted.

“Yes,” Sandra verified. “A couple of times before today, I’d heard her talking on the phone to someone. It sounded as if she was getting instructions or orders because she said things like, ‘I can do that’ and ‘Understood.’ The call I heard today though was different.” Her voice cracked again.

“How?” Duncan pressed.

“She said she was worried about someone noticing the damage to the truck, that she didn’t want to be pulled over by some local yokel when she went after the kid. Then, I heard her say Bree’s address, like she was repeating it to make sure she had it right.” A bite of anger trickled into her voice. “She said she’d get out there and get the kid before Bree was back from the hospital.” Sandra shifted her gaze to Bree. “I didn’t even know you’d had a baby.”

Bree nodded. “Gabriel. He’s two months old, and Luca’s his father.” She didn’t add more, but Luca could see for himself that Sandra was working this out in her head. Especially the fact that Gabriel had been conceived shortly after Cliff’s murder.

“Duncan and I have a daughter,” Joelle said. “Elizabeth Grace. We call her Izzie. You can meet her after, well, after,” she settled for saying. “For now, we need to know how you ended up at Bree’s and anything else you can tell us about what happened to you.”

Sandra stared at Joelle for a moment, and there was another flood of emotions. One

that looked as if it might cause Sandra to lose it, but she reined herself in and continued. “When I overheard the woman saying she was going to take Bree’s baby, I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t let my grandbaby be taken and locked up like I was.”

Now the rage flared in Sandra’s eyes. Luca had rarely seen any show of temper from her over the years, but it was there now.

“I crammed everything I could into the last plastic grocery bag she’d dropped off two days earlier,” Sandra explained. “My shoes, toothpaste, even the bar of soap, and when she came in, I bashed her upside the head with it. She fell, the stun gun clattering to the floor so I used it on her. While she was jittering and flopping around, I ran. The truck was parked out front, and the keys were in the ignition so I got in and drove away as fast as I could.”

“You didn’t think to take off her mask and see who she was?” Duncan asked.

“No. I just ran. I had to get to Bree’s. I had to save her baby.”

Duncan shook his head. “But if you took your captor’s truck, then why did you believe she would still come after Gabriel?”

“I thought once she was able to move, she’d call her boss or partner and that he or she would rush to Bree’s and take Gabriel. I couldn’t risk that.” Sandra stopped again to wipe away more tears. “If she killed Cliff, I didn’t want to think what she could do to a baby.”

Neither did Luca, and if all of this was the truth, then Sandra had stopped something horrible from happening. Luca was beyond thankful for his son’s safety. But without the identity of the kidnapper, there could possibly be another attempt to take him.

But why?

Did someone want to use Gabriel for leverage? If so, that brought Luca right back to another why? It was possible someone wanted to use him to sway the outcome of an investigation, but at the moment, there were only two unsolved murders on the books. Cliff's and Brighton's. So, did that mean one of them was connected to this?

"Why do you think this woman kidnapped you? Why did she want Gabriel?" Bree asked, taking the questions right out of Luca's mouth.

"I don't know," Sandra said through a hoarse sob. "I've obviously had plenty of time to think about it. To think about losing my husband, too. Did he suffer?" she asked Slater. "Did your dad suffer when he was killed?"

Slater shook his head. "The ME said death was almost instantaneous after he was shot."

Almost. Like Slater and the rest of his family, Luca had read the ME's report countless times, looking for anything that would lead them to his killer. So far, all they had was that someone had gunned down the sheriff, and he'd bled out.

"If the woman kidnapped me," Sandra went on, "she must have had something to do with Cliff's murder. Did she try to frame me? Did she do something to make me look guilty?"

"With you missing, you became a suspect," Duncan admitted. "But we also had to consider that the killer had murdered you as well."

Sandra flinched a little. "But she didn't kill me. Why?"

Again, the big question. Too bad they didn't have a good answer. But maybe there'd

be clues in the cabin where she'd been held. Maybe in the silver truck, too.

"You said you used the stun gun on the woman who kidnapped you," Duncan continued. "So, she would have been incapacitated for a while. For at least five minutes. Was there another vehicle at the cabin that she could have used to come to Bree's and fire those shots?"

Sandra's forehead bunched up. "Maybe. I didn't look behind the cabin. I guess a car or motorcycle could have been parked back there. You think she's the one who tried to kill us?"

Duncan shrugged. "I'm considering it." He glanced down at a notepad. "Tell me about Manny Vickery," Duncan threw out there, obviously trying a different angle. "How well did you know him?"

"Not well at all. In fact, I've never met him. I just knew the name because I talked to Brighton a couple of weeks before she was killed, and she mentioned she'd been going to the Hush, Hush. She was upset, but the only thing she'd say about it was that things weren't going well with some man she'd been seeing. She was very upset," Sandra emphasized. "So, I went to the bar to see if I could find out what was going on."

"That's how you ended up on the video outside the Hush, Hush," Luca commented.

"Video?" Sandra questioned.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“Several people posted recordings of a fight, and I saw you on one of them,” Bree explained. “I saw Brighton on another. It’s possible though you weren’t there at the same time, that Brighton left before you showed up.” She stopped, gathered her breath. “Did you find out what was going on with Brighton when you went there?”

Sandra shook her head. “No. I talked to a couple of people, just to get a sense if anyone there knew Brighton. I talked to a bartender, Tara...”

“Tara Adler,” Bree provided. “I spoke to her, too,” she added when her mother gave her a questioning look. “She said she didn’t know Brighton.”

“She told me the same. I tried to talk to Manny, but he had Tara tell me he was too busy to see me. And there was that fight. A regular brawl, and it scared me so I left.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “If I hadn’t, if I’d stayed and found out what was going on with Brighton, she might still be alive.”

“Wait,” Sandra said a moment later. “You think Manny’s the one who had me kidnapped? You think he had something to do with your father’s murder?”

“We’re looking into that,” Duncan assured her. “We’re looking into a lot of things. But in light of what happened to Bree and to you, I want you in protective custody. I could arrange for a safehouse.” Now it was Duncan who paused, and he looked at Joelle as if maybe confirming—or questioning—something they’d discuss.

Joelle nodded and turned to her mother. “You can go home if you’d like. Duncan, Izzie and I live there now.”

What Joelle didn't spell out was that it was the place where her father had been killed. If Sandra had read the article about his death, she would know that, and it might not be easy for her to deal with it.

There was another side to this situation though. Luca believed Sandra was telling the truth about her abduction, but there were still plenty of blank spots as to what had happened. And why.

Especially why.

Sandra apparently wondered that as well, and she came up with the same concern that Luca and Duncan had. "I want to be there with you. All of you," she amended, glancing at Slater, Duncan, Bree and Luca. "But what if that woman comes after me again? It'd put you in danger."

No one could dispute that. As long as her captor was at large, the threat was there. And not solely for a kidnapping either. Those shots were proof that this person could and would kill. If the woman hadn't been the shooter, then the likely suspect was the person she'd been talking to on the phone. So, two people who could come at them anytime, anyplace.

"We'd have to take precautions," Duncan said. "Lots of them."

"One possibility is that Slater and I could be at the ranch with you," Joelle explained. She glanced at Slater, and he nodded, indicating this was something they'd already discussed. No doubt when Bree had been in the break room with Coral, Gabriel and him. "We could also ask one of the reserve deputies to stay with us as backup."

Duncan's attention shifted to Bree. "But you're in danger, too. Which means so is Gabriel."

Yeah, Luca had already gone there. Obviously, so had Bree because she made a quick sound of agreement.

“We could all be at the ranch,” Joelle spelled out. “All,” she emphasized, glancing at Luca. “We could conduct the investigation from there while putting security measures in place.”

Luca thought of the McCullough ranch and the house. It was big, with five bedrooms, but there were a lot of adults and two babies. Added to that mix would be Sandra, a woman he wanted to trust but wasn’t sure he could.

Bree turned to Luca, and she lifted her eyebrow. “Well?”

“I’ll be wherever Gabriel and you are,” he assured her.

Bree nodded. “All right. Then, we’ll all go to the ranch.”

He heard the worry in her voice. Saw it even more on her face. And he knew something else. Bree hadn’t been back there since her father’s murder so this was going to be an emotional avalanche. Then again, the same could be true for Sandra.

Slater took out his phone. “I’ll make arrangements for Gabriel’s baby things to be moved to the ranch.”

Luca would need to pack a few things as well, but before he could even consider a mental list, the door opened, and Ruston came in. His gaze fired around the room and landed on his mother. Unlike Joelle though, he didn’t rush to pull her into his arms.

“Does she know anything about Dad’s murder?” Ruston immediately wanted to know.

“No,” Sandra said at the same moment Bree, Duncan and Joelle indicated with headshakes that she didn’t.

The disappointment seemed to wash over Ruston. Obviously, he’d hoped his mother would be able to give them that closure.

“We have a lot to fill you in on,” Bree said, going to Ruston and giving him a quick hug. Their gazes met. “There’s trouble.”

“Yeah, I heard. Are you all right?” Ruston asked.

“I’ve been better,” Bree muttered. She took in a breath through her mouth. “I’m going to check on Gabriel.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Luca moved to go with her, but before they made it to the door, Duncan's phone rang. "It's Woodrow," he relayed, taking the call. He didn't put it on Speaker, but after just a couple of seconds, Luca knew Duncan was getting bad news.

"What?" Duncan asked the caller. "You're sure?" He paused and a moment later muttered, "Hell." Duncan scrubbed his hand over his face and repeated the single word of profanity when he ended the call.

"The local cops went to the cabin," Duncan explained, "but it was on fire. The fire department's on the way, but they won't get there in time."

Luca groaned, and it blended with the other negative reactions in the room. With the cabin gone, they'd lose any critical evidence that might have been inside.

"There's more," Duncan added a moment later. "Woodrow checked, and the cabin was on a two-year lease to someone local." His gaze met Bree's. "Dr. Nathan Bagley."

Chapter Six

Bree watched from the back seat of the cruiser as the house came into view. She'd never thought of her childhood home as cramped quarters, but it certainly felt like that now. Still, she knew this was their best chance at keeping everyone safe.

Well, hopefully it was.

Until they had answers about her mother's kidnapper and the shooter, they'd never

actually be safe. And some of those answers might come from Nathan.

It twisted at her to think of her former boyfriend having a part in this. Or rather may be having a part in it. Woodrow had verified that Nathan's name was indeed on the lease for the cabin, but so far, they hadn't been able to question Nathan about that since he was tied up with a patient in the ICU. Once that was finished though, he'd be given the message to contact Duncan right away.

Rather than wait at the sheriff's office for Nathan's response, Duncan had proceeded with the move to the ranch. No easy feat with plenty of moving parts. Literally. She watched as Duncan's cruiser stopped in front of the house, and Joelle, Slater, their mother and Duncan all got out. Izzie's nanny, Beatrice Walker, opened the door for them.

Luca pulled up behind Duncan's cruiser, and as Ruston and he had both done on the drive over, they glanced around, looking for threats. Bree did as well, but she didn't see anyone other than some ranch hands milling about.

Luca's gaze met hers in the rearview mirror, and she saw the concern in his eyes. She was no doubt sporting plenty of concern of her own, but somehow they had to make this situation work. They had to do whatever it took to keep Gabriel safe.

Even share a bedroom.

Yes, that was the plan. The house had five bedrooms, but one was being used as a nursery and another had been converted to the live-in nanny's quarters. Joelle and Duncan had the main bedroom attached to the nursery. That left two rooms, and since her mother would need one of them, Luca and Bree would be roommates along with Gabriel.

That way, they wouldn't have to be far from Gabriel.

Thankfully, Luca and she wouldn't actually have to share a bed. Ruston had come ahead of them to set up a cot for Luca and a portable crib for Gabriel. Since Ruston was recently married and had an adopted daughter, he wouldn't be staying at the ranch but rather at his own house on the outskirts of San Antonio. Slater, however, would and had claimed the sofa in the family room. Coral had offered to use a cot or sofa as well, but since the nanny hadn't actually been threatened, Bree had decided to give her some time off.

"Go ahead and get Gabriel out of the car seat," Luca instructed while they were still in the cruiser, and Bree understood why he wanted that. It would minimize their time outside.

She unbuckled a sleeping Gabriel who stirred when she picked him up. It was at least another hour before he would normally want another bottle, but with his schedule thrown off, Bree wasn't counting on much of anything being normal today.

Ruston and Luca gathered up the diaper bag and baby supplies they'd brought with them and got out of the cruiser. Bree steeled herself for the punch of grief from seeing the spot where her father had died. And it came. It came with a vengeance and momentarily robbed her of her breath. She didn't give in to it, though. Couldn't. Because even a slightest hesitation could turn out to be a deadly mistake. Gathering Gabriel close to her, she hurried inside.

Joelle and Duncan had kept the furniture. In this part of the house anyway. But for the time being, they'd turned the large formal living and dining areas into a makeshift squad room. Someone had moved in small tables that were serving as desks, and there was even an incident board, and Slater was in the process of pinning up three photos.

Brighton's, Sandra's and Bree's.

There'd no doubt soon be other photos and notes, and the visuals might help them better connect all of this. Duncan was already in work mode, too. He was talking on the phone while he gathered up papers that were churning out from a printer. Luca set down the diaper bag to go help him with that while Ruston carried their things upstairs.

"I've put Luca, Gabriel and you in your old bedroom," Joelle explained to Bree. She was holding her infant daughter who was fussing and clearly ready to eat because she kept turning her mouth to Joelle's breast. "And Mom will be in Ruston's old room. Beatrice is up there now, getting everything ready."

Her mother actually seemed relieved about that. Maybe because Sandra had thought she might end up having to sleep in the room she'd shared with her husband.

"You holding up okay?" Joelle asked their mother.

Sandra's nod was shaky and not very convincing. "So much happening," she muttered.

Yes, and Bree figured this was just the start of it. There were five veteran cops in the house, and she knew Duncan was thorough. This would be a leave no stones unturned kind of investigation.

"I could cook if anyone's hungry," her mother volunteered.

"Food is on the way from the diner. Lots of it," Joelle clarified. She studied her mom's face for a moment. "But if you could put out paper plates and cups in the kitchen, that'd be great. Also, maybe make a fresh pot of coffee."

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Sandra nodded and seemed eager for something to do. Or maybe she was just eager to get a moment to herself to try to wrap her mind around all of this. She certainly didn't waste any time heading toward the kitchen that had once been hers.

Though technically it still was.

Even though the ranch and the house had belonged to their father, Sandra was his primary beneficiary. Bree knew that since she'd been the one to prepare his will. There'd be legalities and such to work out later about that, but Bree didn't want to deal with it now.

"Once Duncan finishes with his latest call to Woodrow, he wants to do a briefing," Joelle added to Bree. The baby's fussing became more insistent. "But I might be late for that since I need to feed Izzie."

Joelle hurried upstairs, and Bree glanced down at Gabriel to see if she would need to feed him as well, but he'd gone back to sleep. So, she made her way to the sofa and watched Slater as he added Nathan's picture to the board. Slater looked back at her.

"You know him fairly well," Slater remarked. "Is Nathan capable of something like this?"

Bree took a couple of seconds, trying to picture Nathan orchestrating her mother's kidnapping and the shooting. Also arranging for Manny and her to be run off the road. She couldn't quite make herself see that.

"Nathan might have the means and opportunity," she said, "but I can't figure out a

motive...unless maybe it all goes back to Brighton.”

She realized Duncan had finished his call, and along with Slater, both of them were listening to her.

“As far as I know, Nathan has no connection to Brighton,” Bree said. “But this is a small town so he likely knew her.”

“Trust me, I’ll be asking him about that when he’s available,” Duncan assured her. He walked to the board, and sighing, he put up a picture of what she realized was the burned-out cabin. “There’s good news and bad news. I’ll start with the good. Two people came forward and said they’d seen a woman driving a silver truck in the area of the cabin over the past couple of months. They’re working with sketch artists right now.”

That was indeed good news. Even if they didn’t recognize the woman from the sketch, they could put it out to the media and maybe get some hits.

“Now, for the bad,” Duncan went on. “The cabin’s owner never met Nathan or the person posing as Nathan. The rental agreement was all done online and secured with a credit card that has Nathan’s name on it, but it can’t be traced to him. It’s linked to an offshore account under the name of a dummy company.”

Bree groaned. Not only was that sort of account hard to unravel, it also meant Nathan probably hadn’t actually been involved. If he had, he wouldn’t have used his real name. Well, unless this was some kind of reverse psychology deal.

“So, someone wanted to set Nathan up?” Bree asked.

Duncan shrugged. “Maybe. Or it’s possible the kidnapper just used his name. Maybe because the owner of the cabin wouldn’t think twice about renting the place to a

doctor.”

Yes, that made sense as well. Then, if things fell apart—like the victim escaping—there’d be nothing to point back to the real culprit. Yes, they’d interview Nathan, but with no actual proof to link him to the crime, he wouldn’t be arrested.

Duncan shifted his attention to Bree. “I need to interview Manny, but since the incident with his vehicle didn’t happen in my jurisdiction, I can’t force him to come here, not without a warrant. I thought maybe since he already knows you, you could talk to him.”

“Of course,” Bree readily agreed, already taking out her phone. Though she wasn’t sure Manny would actually be willing to come to Saddle Ridge. Still, he might if he thought it would prevent him from being attacked again.

“See if Manny will agree to having the call on Speaker,” Duncan added. “That way, I can hear if he has anything to say about his attack.”

She nodded and made the call. However, it wasn’t Manny who answered with a “Yeah?” It was a woman.

“Tara Adler?” Bree questioned.

“Yes,” she verified, and she paused. “Who is this?”

“Bree McCullough. I spoke to you, remember? I asked you about Brighton Cooper.”

“I remember.” There was plenty of uneasiness in her voice. “Like I told you, I didn’t actually know her. You’re calling for Manny?” she quickly tacked onto that. “Because I can get him for you. He left his phone out here on the bar so that’s why I answered it.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were open this early,” she commented.

“We’re not. I’m training some new waitstaff. Let me get Manny,” she insisted.

Tara hadn’t been exactly friendly when Bree had spoken to her before, but the woman seemed on edge now. Maybe because of Manny’s attack? Tara might be worried she could be at risk, too. And she might be if this was indeed connected to Brighton’s murder.

“It’s that lawyer who asked about the dead woman,” Bree heard Tara say, and several moments later, Manny came on the line.

“Bree,” he said, sounding just as uneasy as Tara. “Did they catch the guy who tried to kill us?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“No, not yet. Manny, I want to put this call on Speaker. Is that okay? I’m with Sheriff Duncan Holder and some of the other deputies from Saddle Ridge. They’re all looking for the person who attacked us, and anything you can tell them might help find him or her.”

“Sure,” Manny said after a brief hesitation. “But I’ve already told the Austin cops everything I know.”

“Yes, and they’re looking, too,” Bree assured him, switching to Speaker. “But the more people searching, the better.”

Manny made a sound of agreement. “All right. But I don’t know what more I can say. Someone in a silver truck rammed into me, that’s it.”

“This is Sheriff Holder,” Duncan said. “And we believe we’ve found the truck. It’s being examined now by CSIs to see if there are any paint flecks on it that match your vehicle.”

“You have the driver?” Manny quickly asked. “You know who tried to kill me?”

“No, we don’t have the driver, but we might have a description soon that’ll help with that,” Duncan explained. “What will help, too, is if we know why the attack happened.”

“I don’t know why.” Manny’s voice took on an agitated edge. “But since the same thing happened to Bree, I have to figure it’s got something to do with all the questions she was asking about the dead woman.”

Duncan didn't confirm that. "Who else knew Bree was asking questions about Brighton Cooper?"

Manny muttered some profanity. "Well, I didn't exactly keep it a secret. Anyone who works for me knew. And my financial guy, too, since I asked him to get the old credit card statements Bree wanted."

Bree sighed. She'd hoped that Manny and Tara had kept this close to the vest, which would have significantly narrowed their pool of suspects. But when Bree had spoken to them, she hadn't known there'd be attacks. If this was all connected, then someone had gotten spooked and wanted to silence Manny and her.

That, however, still didn't explain her mother's kidnapping.

"It's possible I'll soon have sketches of your attacker," Duncan told Manny. "I was hoping you'd be willing to come to Saddle Ridge and have a look at them and so I can get a statement about what happened to you. Then I'll compare it to Bree's statement to see if it can help with an arrest."

Manny certainly didn't jump to agree to that. "I guess," he finally said. "I can't get there today though, but I can come in the morning, maybe around ten. I should have those old credit card statements by then and can bring them with me."

"Good," Duncan said just as his phone dinged with a text. "We'll see you at the sheriff's office in the morning."

Bree thanked Manny, ended the call and kept her attention on Duncan while he read the text he'd just gotten.

"The CSIs have found no prints other than Sandra's in the silver truck," Duncan explained. "There was a box of plastic disposable gloves on the passenger seat."

So, the kidnapper had gloved up. That shouldn't have surprised her, but Bree had hoped the woman had left some part of herself behind. And maybe she had. It would likely take the CSIs a while to go through the entire truck and then process whatever they found. Including those paint flecks that Woodrow and Carmen had seen.

Luca walked toward her and sank down on the sofa next to Bree. "It's been a hellish long day," he pointed out. "If you want to try to get some rest, I can watch Gabriel." He brushed his fingers over Gabriel's hair.

It had indeed been hellish, and since she was exhausted, Bree didn't want to turn down his offer, but she figured Luca was worn-out as well. Plus, she didn't want to pull him away from the investigation.

"I'll put Gabriel in his crib for the rest of his nap, and then I'll lie down," she said to offer a compromise, though both knew Gabriel might wake up the second she tried to put him down.

Luca sighed and went with her out of the room and toward the stairs. "Are you okay about being here with your mother?" he asked, keeping his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes." That was the truth. Mostly, anyway.

"You believe everything she said about what happened to her?" he pressed.

She considered her answer while they went up the stairs. "I want to believe her. That's not the same thing."

His quick sound of agreement told her they were of a like mind on this. "Sandra had no obvious motive to kill her husband. No reported marital problems. No history of violent tendencies."

“All true. But that doesn’t mean the unthinkable hadn’t happened. An argument that went horribly wrong. An affair that none of us knew about.” She stopped. “But that doesn’t feel right.”

Luca made another sound of agreement. “This is a wild what-if, but what if your dad learned your mother had something to do with Brighton’s death? That could have spurred a violent confrontation.”

She considered it and dismissed it just as Luca added, “But that doesn’t feel right either. Your mother was looking out for Brighton. She was almost like another of her children.”

Again, that was true, and hearing it spelled out like that helped convince Bree that her mom had been a victim in all of this. Just as her father. And it was connected. It had to be. She just didn’t know how yet.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Luca and she were halfway up the stairs when she heard a flurry of movement on the ground floor. She turned to see Duncan and Slater moving fast toward the front door.

“What’s wrong?” Luca asked.

“One of the hands alerted me that Nathan just drove up,” Duncan explained.

Bree’s first reaction was to groan. Or curse. She was beyond exhausted, but Duncan needed to question Nathan about the lease on the burned-out cabin. She hadn’t figured though that the interview would happen here but rather over the phone or at the sheriff’s office. Still, since he was here, she’d be able to listen while he gave his statement.

The nanny, Beatrice, appeared at the top of the stairs, and she’d obviously heard they had a visitor. “Joelle and your mom are with Izzie so I can take Gabriel if you like,” she offered.

Bree glanced down at her sleeping baby and then over her shoulder out the sidelight windows of the front door. Nathan was pulling his car to a stop in the driveway.

“Yes, thank you,” Bree said, and she eased Gabriel into the nanny’s arms.

“You don’t have to deal with Nathan,” Luca let Bree know after Beatrice had taken Gabriel upstairs.

Bree nodded. “But I might be able to tell if he’s lying.” Of course, that was a long shot. She certainly hadn’t picked up on any overly possessive behavior until it’d

started to happen.

“Still,” Luca said, “you don’t have to put yourself through this.”

“I never had sex with him,” she blurted out and then immediately wanted to take it back. Good grief. Luca didn’t need to know that.

Luca didn’t seem pleased. Or surprised. Then again, Luca and she had dated for nearly four months before they’d had sex the first time. Nathan and she had only gone out for a couple of weeks.

“I think that’s why his possessiveness was such a shock,” she went on. Since she’d launched into this uncomfortable subject, she might as well get some things clear. “We weren’t lovers, and I certainly hadn’t made any kind of commitment to him. I never mentioned anything about being exclusive. I was just testing the waters, that’s all.”

He nodded. “That happened when I was dating Shona Sullivan. And, yes, I know your dating Nathan had nothing to do with that,” he was quick to add. Maybe because he saw the flash of annoyance in her eyes. “I mentioned it because of the timing. Nathan might have thought Shona and I were in a ‘together forever’ kind of deal, so that could have been why he thought he had a clear path to a long-term relationship with you.”

The annoyance vanished because Luca was right. Everyone knew Luca and she were an item. Heck, they even thought it now. Bree could see the aha look in people’s eyes now that Luca and she had a child together.

She pushed all that aside for now when Nathan knocked at the door, and Duncan opened it. “I got your message that you needed to talk to me right away,” Nathan said. “I went by the sheriff’s office, but the dispatcher told me you were home.”

Nathan looked past Duncan, his gaze settling on Bree as she came down the stairs.

“Are you hurting?” Nathan asked her. “Is that why Duncan called me?”

“This isn’t about anything medical,” Duncan was quick to say. “Come in.” He stepped back, his cop’s gaze focused on Nathan as he came in. Like Luca and Slater, Duncan was probably checking to see if there were any signs Nathan was about to try to attack them.

Bree certainly didn’t see anything like that. If she had to put a label on his expression and body language, it’d be moony-eyed. Nathan always managed to seem as if she held his heart in her hands. She definitely didn’t want that or the look he was giving her.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Nathan asked her. “I called the pharmacy on the way over, and they said you hadn’t filled the prescription I wrote you for the pain meds.”

She certainly hadn’t forgotten about the pain but didn’t intend to fill the prescription. She didn’t want her mind to be numbed. “I’ll take something ‘over the counter,’” she settled for saying.

Nathan opened his mouth, probably to advise her to get the prescription, but Duncan motioned toward the living room. “In here. Slater, will you turn the board around while we talk to Nathan?”

Slater nodded, hurried ahead of them, and she heard the movement as Slater did as Duncan asked. There wasn’t a lot on the board at the moment, but Duncan still probably didn’t want to display an investigative road map to someone who was still technically a suspect.

“Is this about Bree’s accident?” Nathan asked, looking and sounding very concerned.

“Not exactly,” Duncan said once they were in the living room. “I need to ask you some questions, but I’m going to read you your rights first. It’s just a formality,” he insisted when Nathan snapped back his shoulders. He didn’t give Nathan a chance to voice his defensiveness. Duncan just proceeded to Mirandize him.

“You can’t possibly think I’d have something to do with Bree’s car accident,” Nathan said when Duncan had finished.

“Are you familiar with a hunting cabin about twenty-five miles from here?” Duncan asked, obviously not addressing Nathan’s comment. Duncan then provided the exact address.

Nathan’s forehead bunched up. “No. I don’t hunt, so I don’t usually go to places like that. Why?”

“Because it was leased in your name,” Duncan supplied while he watched for Nathan’s reaction. Bree, Luca and Slater did the same.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“What?” Nathan snapped. He reached into his pocket, causing Duncan, Luca and Slater to all put their hands over their weapons.

Nathan froze, and his eyes widened. “Obviously, you think I’ve done something wrong. I haven’t,” he assured them. “If someone used my name to lease the cabin, then my bank account has been hacked or something. I was just going to take out my phone and see if any money was missing.”

“Do that,” Duncan instructed, but he didn’t take his hand from his gun until he saw for certain that Nathan was pulling out a phone.

Nathan muttered something under his breath and started typing in something on the app he pulled up. It took him at least a minute before he shook his head. “No. There are no missing funds, no fraudulent charges on my credit card. Who said I leased that cabin?”

“The owner,” Duncan answered. “Someone used a credit card in your name to secure it and paid for the lease.”

Nathan cursed. “Well, it sure as hell wasn’t me. Someone must have stolen my identity.” He groaned, cursed again. “I need to report that. Do you investigate it or is that something my bank does?”

“We’ll be investigating it,” Duncan said, tipping his head to Slater and then Luca.

Judging from the sudden tight set of his mouth, Nathan wasn’t a fan of having Luca dig into his financials. “I’m guessing something illegal happened at this cabin?”

Nathan snarled.

“We’re investigating that, too, but yes, something happened there,” Duncan verified. He didn’t add any specifics though. “We’re also looking at a Ford F-150 silver truck that was involved in several incidents. Have you ever owned or driven a vehicle like that?”

“No. I drive an Audi.” Nathan looked at her again. “Bree, what’s going on?” he asked, but he didn’t wait for her to respond. “Certainly, you’ve told them I haven’t done anything wrong.”

She hadn’t meant to give him a flat look but it came away. After all, Nathan had stalked her. Nathan not only noticed her expression, he also responded. His mouth tightened. His eyes narrowed. And he aimed a glare at Luca.

“I don’t appreciate you trying to turn Bree against me,” Nathan said. “If you’re jealous of her and me—”

“I’m not,” Luca interrupted and stepped to Bree’s side. “And Bree can make up her mind for herself how she feels about you.”

Nathan’s scowl stayed in place, but it was obvious he didn’t have a good comeback for that. “All right,” Nathan said through clenched teeth, indicating that things were far from all right. His expression softened a bit when he shifted back to her. “Bree, if you need me for anything, you have my number. And remember, I care about you. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you.”

He reached out as if he might try to hug her, but Bree stepped back and landed right against Luca. The impact put her off balance just enough that Luca’s arms came around to steady her.

That intensified Nathan's glare. "Remember what I said," he muttered. "I care about you."

With that, Nathan walked out. Or rather, he stormed out. And Bree found herself releasing the breath that she'd been holding. She hated that Nathan could still annoy her like this. Hated, too, that it had felt so reassuring when she'd landed in Luca's arms. She eased away from him and stood on her own two feet.

"I swear, I've told Nathan many times that nothing will ever happen between him and me," she muttered. "And, no, I don't need to do a restraining order," she added to Slater. "Nathan hasn't called or texted me in months."

But she was worried that Nathan would use her injury and this interrogation to try to wheedle himself into her life again.

"I plan on doing a deep background check on Nathan," Luca said, going to the front door to lock it. "It's possible he has a history of stalking women. Maybe other things, too, that he doesn't want us to know about."

"You believe he could have been the one who leased that cabin?" Duncan asked.

Luca shrugged. "On the surface it wouldn't be the smartest move to use his own name. But criminals aren't always smart. And sometimes that sort of move might have us thinking he's not guilty."

That was true, and Bree tried to play out that scenario. "Even before I went out with Nathan, he was obsessed with me. I didn't see that until afterwards," she added. "But I know now, it's an obsession. It might be far-fetched, but maybe he kidnapped Mom to try to punish me."

"Or maybe he hoped you'd turn to him while you were vulnerable and grieving,"

Slater supplied.

That settled like a fist of ice in her stomach. Because it didn't seem so far-fetched at all.

"I'll do that deep background check," Luca repeated. He looked at her. "You want to try to get some rest now?"

She would have definitely agreed to that, but Duncan's phone dinged again. "It's Woodrow," he said, glancing at the screen. "The artist just finished with the first sketch of the woman seen driving the silver truck." He looked at it, shook his head and then turned his phone for them to see. "I don't know her."

Bree went closer. She didn't get an immediate jolt of recognition, but it came the longer she studied the image. "I think I might know who that is," she muttered. "She looks like the bartender at the Hush, Hush bar. I think that's Tara Adler."

Duncan, Slater and Luca all exchanged glances. "Do you have her number?" Duncan asked.

She shook her head. "I can call Manny and ask to speak to her."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

“Do that,” Duncan said. “I want to see if I can get Tara to come in with him tomorrow morning for an interview.”

Bree called Manny and put it on Speaker. She thought Tara might answer again, but this time it was Manny.

“This is Sheriff Holder again,” Duncan said. “I’d like to speak to Tara Adler.”

“Tara?” Manny questioned. “Why?”

“It’s routine,” Duncan answered, which, of course, wasn’t an actual answer at all. “May I speak to her?”

“You could if she was here,” Manny grumbled. “Right after I got off the phone with you, Tara claimed she was sick and had to leave.”

Bree couldn’t believe that it was a coincidence. Was Tara really the one behind her mother’s kidnapping and the attacks? If so, this had to be connected to Brighton’s murder. And maybe her father’s.

“She didn’t look sick to me,” Manny added in a snarl. “You want her number so you can talk to her?”

“Yes, I do,” Duncan verified.

Once Manny had given them the number, Bree ended the call with him, and Duncan used his own phone to call Tara. Or rather, to try to call her. Bree’s stomach sank

when she heard the recorded message that she didn't want to hear.

Tara's phone had been disconnected.

Chapter Seven

Luca hurried in the shower. Along with not wanting to hog the bathroom, he also didn't want to leave Bree and Gabriel alone for long. Added to that, there was plenty of work to do, and a long shower was a luxury he couldn't afford.

He turned off the water and listened to make sure everything was well in the adjoining bedroom. The bedroom he'd shared with Bree and their son the night before and would continue to share as long as there was a potential threat. He could hear Bree murmuring something to Gabriel, but that was it. No sounds of distress or phone conversations that might or might not deliver more bad news.

So far, the bad news was winning out over the good. There was no sign of the gunman who'd fired those shots into Bree's barn. No sign of Tara either, which meant they couldn't question her about the sketch that matched her description. Since Manny didn't have any idea where she was either, it could mean Tara had gone on the run. It was possible she was the one who'd held Sandra captive, but it could also point to Tara meeting with foul play.

When Duncan had shown Sandra a photo of Tara, Sandra had said she recognized her from the Hush, Hush, but that she had no idea if Tara had been the one who'd kidnapped her. That wasn't much of a surprise since Sandra had been adamant about not knowing who'd been responsible for taking her.

The bad news had continued on the forensic side of the investigation as well. Other than the gloves and Sandra's prints, the CSIs hadn't found anything in the silver truck. Manny might be able to help with that though during his interview if he

could tell them anything else about the truck or the driver. Especially if the driver could possibly be Tara.

There had been some good news though in the burned-out cabin. No DNA results yet, but there was evidence to support Sandra's account of the boarded-up window and multiple locks on the interior door where she'd been held. That was a huge validation for Bree's mother.

And a relief.

There were enough unknowns in this investigation without adding Sandra to the mix. Now, she could be ruled out as a suspect, and they could focus on Tara. Nathan, too, since Luca was keeping him on the list. Maybe that had more to do with Nathan's history with Bree, but Luca wasn't dismissing Nathan's possible involvement in all of this.

Luca dressed in the clean jeans and shirt he'd had brought to the ranch, and he went into the bedroom to find Bree sitting with a very alert Gabriel who'd obviously just finished a bottle. Bree had the baby against her chest and shoulder and was patting his back, no doubt to get him to burp.

Bree's gaze immediately went to Luca's, and he saw the tension in every bit of her expression. It was understandable and wouldn't be going away until they had a suspect in custody.

Or as long as they had to share such close quarters.

That was definitely causing her some stress. Him, too. They'd been on-and-off lovers for a long time now. Over a decade. His body couldn't forget that kind of history and neither could Luca. He still wanted Bree. Still cared deeply for her. And that must have shown on his face.

“It’s not you,” she muttered. Then, she shook her head. “I mean, you’re not the reason I get this slam of memories about my dad.”

He was glad to hear that, but there was a flip side to this particular coin. “You get them though,” he said.

She nodded. “So do you.”

Luca had to go with a nod as well and admit it was true. In fact, he’d had a dream about her father’s murder in the handful of hours he’d managed to sleep. Judging from some of the things Bree had muttered in the night, she’d done some dreaming as well.

He wanted to say more. A whole lot more about hoping that one day they could look at each other and not see the past. But the sound of an approaching vehicle had him going to the window.

“It’s Coral,” he relayed to her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Luca sighed. “If you’re still going to the sheriff’s office for Manny’s interview, we’ll have to leave soon.”

He already knew though that Bree hadn’t changed her mind about this. If she had, she would have already called Coral to cancel. But like him, Bree wanted to be at the sheriff’s office to hear what Manny had to say. Bree wouldn’t actually be in the interview room though. Duncan had made an exception when they’d questioned Sandra, but with Manny, they had to play by the rules.

Bree stood, giving Gabriel a kiss before she handed the baby to Luca so he could do the same. They made their way downstairs where Duncan was already letting Coral into the house. Coral immediately went to Bree and hugged her.

“I’ve been so worried about you,” Coral said, but she conjured up a smile when she looked at Gabriel. “And I’ve missed this little man. How is everything?” she asked.

“The investigation’s still in progress,” Bree said. It was the standard response cops often doled out, but in this case, it was the truth. And about all that could be said since they couldn’t voice suspicions about a local doctor. Not without proof anyway, and at the moment, they didn’t have that.

Joelle, Sandra, Slater and Ruston were all downstairs, and Sandra was holding Izzie. Woodrow was there, too, and he was no doubt waiting to make the drive with them to the sheriff’s office.

“I made Mom an appointment to see her doctor at the hospital clinic,” Joelle volunteered. “I talked to him, and he wants to run some labs on her just to make sure

she's okay."

Luca and Bree both made quick sounds of agreement. Not Sandra though. She was obviously reluctant.

"Woodrow can stay with Sandra at the hospital, and Carmen will meet them there," Duncan explained, glancing at Luca and Bree. "Then, the three of us can go to the sheriff's office."

It'd be a snug fit in the cruiser with five people, but it was better than making two trips. They were leaving backup at home with the babies, too, since Joelle, Slater and Ruston would be staying behind.

Luca wished they'd had a dozen cops available to guard his son and Izzie. Not enough manpower for that, but the ranch hands had been put on alert to keep an eye out for anything suspicious.

Sandra handed Izzie back to Joelle and kissed Gabriel as Luca was passing the baby to Coral. Bree's mother patted Luca's arm in a gesture she had done many times before she went missing. He muttered a thanks. Then silently said a prayer that they'd make this trip without incident. That included nothing going wrong at the ranch, either.

Duncan said his goodbyes to Joelle and his daughter, and he quickly got them out of the house and into the cruiser parked at the foot of the porch steps. Sandra, Luca and Bree went in the back seat with Bree in the middle. Duncan took the wheel with Woodrow at shotgun.

"I asked Austin PD to go ahead and put out an APB for Tara," Duncan explained once they were on the road. "They'll check with her family and friends, too."

If the woman had truly gone on the run, she might not go to places where she'd readily be found. But what had spooked her? Had it simply been Bree's phone call, or had something else alerted her? Luca was hoping Manny might be able to provide some insight.

All five of them kept watch as Duncan made the short drive to the hospital where Carmen was indeed waiting for them, so Woodrow and Sandra got out. Then, Duncan continued up the street to the sheriff's office. They breathed a whole lot easier once they had made it to the private entrance outside Duncan's office.

The moment they stepped in, Luca saw the man in the small waiting area. When he immediately stood, Luca slid his hand over his gun until he got a good look at the guy's face and realized it was Manny. Luca recognized him from his driver's license photo and the background info he'd accessed.

Tall and with a lanky build, Manny was only thirty-three which made him the same age as Luca. He'd owned the Hush, Hush for seven years, since the death of his father. He didn't exactly look the part of a business owner though, more of a rocker with his blond hair that fell past his shoulders. His faded, ripped jeans and plain black tee had that rocker vibe as well.

There were two deputies in the squad room, Sonya Grover and Ronnie Bishop, and even though they were both on their computers, Luca could tell they were also keeping an eye on Manny.

"He's already gone through the metal detector," Ronnie volunteered. "And he consented to a search. He's not armed."

Good. Though it wouldn't have been very smart for Manny to come in here armed.

"I'm early," Manny muttered. He also seemed nervous and was rubbing his hands

down the sides of his jeans. “Bree,” he greeted. “Please tell me you’ve found Tara and the person who tried to kill us.”

She muttered an “I’m sorry” and shook her head. Luca noticed her wince a little from the movement. She hadn’t said anything about being in pain, but he figured the stitches had to hurt.

“This is Sheriff Holder and Deputy Vanetti,” she explained. “They’ll be conducting the interview.”

“And you’ll be there, too, right?” Manny asked.

“No—” she started.

“But I want you there,” Manny insisted, glancing at Luca and Duncan to plead his case. “Bree’s the only one who knows what I’m going through right now. Someone tried to kill us,” he spelled out.

“Yes, but I’m not a cop,” she reminded him.

“You’re a lawyer,” Manny argued. “And I can have a lawyer with me, right?”

Bree sighed. “I can’t be your lawyer.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Because it would possibly be a conflict of interest, but she didn't spell that out. No need to make Manny defensive when they brought up the possibility that he could have faked his attack and could be the person responsible for this current nightmare. That was a long shot, but it was still on the radar.

Manny glanced around as if trying to figure out what to do. His nerves seemed to be building.

"Tell you what," Duncan said. "Why don't we talk here in my office for now and Bree can stay with us. I'll still Mirandize you," Duncan tacked onto that. "It's procedure," he said when Manny's eyes widened, and he started shaking his head. "When we catch the person who tried to run you off the road, we want to be able to use anything you say to help with the prosecution. If your statement's official, then it makes things easier."

That was all true, but Luca knew there was another reason for the Miranda. If Manny said anything incriminating, Duncan would be able to use it without Manny claiming he hadn't been read his rights.

Duncan waited for Manny to nod before he motioned for Manny to come into his office. When all four of them were inside and seated, Duncan shut the door and Mirandized him.

"I'm going to record this," Duncan continued, turning on the recorder and stating the time, date and attendees. "Now, Manny, I want you to tell us what happened yesterday when you were driving."

Manny glanced at Bree, and even though there was still plenty of uneasiness in his expression, he began. "Like I told Bree and the other cops, I was driving from my house into Austin so I could meet with a supplier. A big silver truck came up from behind and rammed into me. The driver tried to push me off the road. I think he was trying to kill me," Manny added in a hoarse mutter.

"And from what I understand, you didn't get the license plate?" Duncan asked.

Manny shook his head. "I didn't even think to do that. I was just so shocked. And I didn't think to try to follow the truck or anything."

"Who knew you'd be traveling on that road at that particular time?" Duncan pressed.

"Lots of people." Manny shrugged. "I live alone, but I had the appointment on my big wall calendar in my office, so anyone who came in there could have seen it."

"Tara would have known?" Luca asked.

Manny gave another nod, and the sigh that came from his throat was hoarse and filled with emotion. "You think she could have done this. You think that's why she disappeared. But why?" Manny asked.

"Why do you think she would have done that?" Luca countered.

"I don't know. But if she did it, it must have something to do with Bree since the same thing happened to her." Manny stopped again, groaned. "It's just hard for me to believe Tara would try to scare us. Or kill us. But if she did, it could be connected to the questions Bree was asking about that murdered woman. I can't remember her name," he said to Bree.

"Brighton Cooper," Bree supplied. "I found out Brighton had gone to the Hush, Hush

shortly before she was killed—”

“Yes,” Manny interrupted, and he reached into his pocket to take out a memory stick. “You wanted the old credit card receipts, and I finally got them from my finance guy. I didn’t have your email address so I put them on this.”

Bree didn’t take the drive though. “Why don’t we go ahead and enter this into evidence?” she suggested. “To preserve the chain of custody.”

Duncan was already moving to do just that. He took out an evidence bag from his desk, dropped in the memory stick and then sealed and labeled it. Luca knew they’d soon be going through that.

“Did you look at the receipts?” Bree asked Manny.

“I glanced through them. You know, just to see if anything jumped out at me. It didn’t. We had a DJ in for the nights you asked about so business was good. Lots of customers, lots of credit card charges. The cash receipts are on there, too, but obviously there aren’t names on those.”

If Brighton’s killer had been there that night—and that was a big if—it was possible one of the cash charges might belong to him or her. But Brighton’s murder didn’t seem planned so maybe her killer’s name was indeed on those receipts.

“Look, is there any way to keep me out of all of this?” Manny asked. “I mean, I know it’s important to find who did that to the woman, but I don’t want to get mixed up in it. I want to be able to drive to work without someone trying to kill me.”

Duncan gave a sigh of his own. “Your name’s already connected to this,” he said. “Of course, I won’t advertise that you came in today for an interview, but someone might find out about it.” He tipped his head to the bag. “Especially if there’s anything on

here to link to a killer.”

Manny groaned and pressed his hands against the sides of his head. He stared down into his lap, muttering some profanity.

“Did you get the sense that anyone followed you here today?” Duncan asked.

“No,” Manny said.

Duncan continued to press. “How about any unusual visitors at the bar?”

That got another “no” from Manny. “The cops said they could do patrols on the road near my house, but that won’t stop a killer. Do you think I should hire a bodyguard?”

“If that’ll make you feel safer, then do it,” Duncan agreed. “It’s probably a good idea not to put your appointments on your wall calendar for a while. Also, shake up your routines if possible. Do you have a security system for your house?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Manny nodded, but then he glanced at the large window that looked out onto the squad room and reception. All of them did. Because the front door opened, and they saw a woman come in.

Tara.

Luca was sure of it, and she did indeed bear a striking resemblance to the sketch. She seemed just as nervous as Manny and was disheveled, too, in her wrinkled gray shirt and jeans. She'd scooped back her long brown hair into a ponytail, but there were just as many strands pulled back as were falling onto her shoulders.

Both Sonya and Ronnie were on their feet now, and Sonya started toward their visitor.

"Tara," Manny muttered. He walked toward her as well. Then, he stopped. Probably because he remembered Tara might have been the one who'd nearly run him off the road.

"Wait here, Manny," Duncan instructed, and he went into the squad room. So did Bree and Luca. "Tara Adler?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm looking for Bree McCullough..." Her words trailed off when she saw Manny. "And you," she muttered. "Manny, I think someone's trying to kill me." With that, Tara broke into a sob.

Despite Duncan's warning for Manny to stay put, the bar owner came out into the squad room, but Duncan stepped in front of him. Just as Luca had done to Bree.

“Tara, I want you to go through the metal detector,” Duncan instructed.

She looked more than a little startled at the request, but she complied. No alarms went off, and when Sonya searched Tara’s purse, she didn’t find anything.

“I’ll call to have the APB dropped,” Sonya said, returning to her desk.

Volleying glances at Bree and Manny, Tara made her way through the squad room toward Luca, Duncan, Manny and Bree. “Why are you here?” she asked Manny. “Did someone try to run you off the road again?”

He shook his head. “The sheriff wanted to talk to me...about you, among other things. Where the hell have you been?”

Duncan motioned for her to hold back on answering that, and as he’d done with Manny, he read Tara her rights.

“I’m a suspect?” Tara blurted once he was finished. She frantically shook her head. “I’m a victim. Someone followed my car this morning. Not a silver truck,” she added. “This was a black one.”

Duncan led her into his office. “Did you report it?”

“No.” Tara suddenly seemed flustered. Or else she was pretending to be anyway. She sank down into a chair in Duncan’s office. “I thought someone was following me,” she clarified, “but I’m not sure. I’m hoping I’m wrong. Am I wrong?” she pleaded.

“I don’t know,” Duncan answered. “Now, tell me why you’re here and where you’ve been for the past eighteen hours.”

Tara certainly didn’t launch into an explanation, but she handed Duncan her phone

and pointed to a text from an unknown number. “I got this yesterday, right after Bree talked to Manny.”

““Talk and you die,”” he said, reading the text out loud.

“Did you report this?” Duncan repeated.

Tara shook her head. “I was terrified,” she insisted. “And I panicked. My instincts were to run, to get away from the bar. I didn’t want to end up like that dead woman Bree asked about, or have her killer track my phone, so I took out the SIM card.”

That explained why the cops hadn’t been able to find her, but most people wouldn’t have thought to do something like that. Especially if they were in a panic as Tara had claimed.

“It’s the woman’s killer who wants us dead, right?” Tara asked. “He wants to silence us all for good.”

Bree made a sound that could have meant anything. Obviously, she wasn’t going to volunteer that to Tara.

“Sonya,” Duncan called out to the deputy. “I need phone records for this number. See if you can find out who sent that text.” He passed Tara’s phone to Sonya and then turned his attention back to Tara. “We’re looking into connections between the recent attacks and the murder of Brighton Cooper,” Duncan said. “Did you know her?”

“No,” Tara was quick to say. “I told Bree I didn’t remember her, but after I got to thinking about it, I think I recall her coming into the bar. Think,” she emphasized, “but I’m not positive.”

Luca didn’t read much into that. Witnesses often recalled things long after being

questioned.

“And you didn’t know Brighton either?” Duncan pressed, shifting his attention to Manny.

“No.” Manny’s response was equally fast.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:47 pm

Duncan drew in a breath as if that wasn't the response he wanted. "Well, we know Brighton was in the Hush, Hush shortly before her murder."

"And that's why her killer is coming after us," Tara concluded.

"Maybe," Duncan muttered. "Where did you go after you got that text?"

It took Tara a couple of seconds to shift gears in the conversation. "Home first. To my apartment. I packed a bag, grabbed the emergency cash I keep on hand and then went to a motel. I put the SIM card back in my phone this morning so I could call Manny and ask him what I should do," Tara went on. "It went straight to voicemail so I called the bar. Otto answered, and he said he heard Manny talking on the phone about coming to Saddle Ridge for an interview. So, I came here, too."

"Otto?" Duncan questioned.

"Otto Gunther," Manny supplied. "He's the janitor."

Luca immediately took out his phone to do a quick run on the man. The guy was seventy-three and had no criminal history. That didn't exclude him from being a killer though, so Luca requested a background check. While he was at it, he ordered that for all of the Hush, Hush employees.

"You can't think Otto would try to run someone off the road," Manny protested. "He's a good man. He'd give you the shirt off his back, which is why I've kept him on long after normal retirement age. He loves his job, and the rest of the staff love having him around."

“Manny’s right,” Tara piped in.

Duncan didn’t address their comments. He opened a folder on his desk and took a printed copy of the drawing that the sketch artist had done. “This woman was seen driving the silver truck that was involved in the incidents with both Bree and you,” he said to Manny.

Manny’s eyes widened, and he turned to Tara. “That looks like you.”

Tara fixed her gaze on the drawing, but she was also shaking her head. “It’s not. There must be a mistake. I’ve never driven a silver truck, and I wouldn’t try to run anyone off the road.”

“Then why does that look so much like you?” Duncan asked, going full cop mode. The muscles in his face had tightened, and his eyes were narrowed.

“I don’t know...” Her denial trailed off, and her gaze shot to Duncan. “Is it my sister, Shannon?”

The moment she asked the question, Luca started the background check on Tara’s sister. He silently cursed when Shannon’s DMV photo came up because while she wasn’t Tara’s twin, the two women did look a great deal alike.

Luca showed the photo to Duncan, and Luca was betting he did some silent cursing as well. They’d believed Tara was their suspect, but now that was in serious doubt.

“Where’s your sister?” Duncan demanded.

“I’m not sure. We’ve lost contact,” Tara said. She paused, then sighed. “Look, Shannon’s a trouble magnet. Always getting involved with the wrong guy. Always in and out of messes. I washed my hands of her about a year ago. Last I heard, she was

seeing some lowlife from Bulverde.”

The burned-out cabin was near that particular small town.

“You know this lowlife’s name?” Duncan pressed.

“No. I didn’t want to know,” she insisted. “Like I said, I’d washed my hands of her.” She stopped again, and this time she groaned. “Oh, God. Is Shannon the one who sent me that text? Is she the one who tried to kill Manny and Bree?”

Luca figured that fell into the “to be determined” category. “Do you have your sister’s phone number?” Luca asked.

Tara shook her head again. “She never had the money for a good phone so she always used cheap disposable ones.”

Burners. Which would be next to impossible to trace.

But if Shannon was indeed behind this, then she probably hadn’t been acting alone. Her low-life boyfriend would also need to be questioned.

“Where were you both yesterday morning starting at nine and going past noon?” Duncan asked, and Luca knew Duncan was trying to see if either had alibis for the incident with Bree and the shooting.

“I was home,” Manny said. “Well, I was after I reported the silver truck to the cops. Why?”

Duncan ignored the question and turned to Tara. “And where were you?”

“At my apartment,” Tara answered.

“Alone?” Duncan pressed, glancing at both of them.

Manny and Tara nodded.

“Did you see or speak to anyone during that time?” Duncan continued.

“No,” Tara was the first to say, and then Manny repeated it. Manny also repeated his, “Why?”

Before Duncan could answer, there was a knock on the side door of the office. “It’s me,” Woodrow announced. “Sandra’s appointment was quick so I brought her back here.”

Duncan unlocked and opened the door. He got Sandra in as quickly as possible.

“The doctor did some blood tests,” Sandra said. “And I should have the results soon.” She stopped when she glanced at the others in the room. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m interrupting—”

Sandra gasped when her attention landed on Manny.

“It’s you,” Sandra muttered, and the color drained from her face.

“You know Manny?” Duncan was quick to ask.

Sandra nodded. “He’s the man who was having an affair with Brighton.” She swallowed hard. “I think he might have been the one to kill her.”

Bree certainly hadn't expected her mother to say what she had. And apparently neither had anyone else in Duncan's office.

Especially Manny.

He jumped to his feet, and for a moment Bree thought he might try to run, but Luca and Duncan prevented that. Duncan, by stepping in front of the side door, and Luca by blocking the path toward the squad room. Manny cursed and dropped back down into the chair.

"It's not what you think," he insisted, aiming that at Luca and Duncan. "I didn't kill Brighton. I've never killed anyone."

"But you had an affair with her?" Duncan asked. "And you lied about it during an official interview?"

Tara, who was now also standing, spoke before Manny could respond. "You had an affair with her?" She was clearly upset.

Jealous, maybe?

It was hard for Bree to tell, but it seemed to her that Manny wasn't the only one who'd lied.

"You said you didn't know Brighton either," Bree pointed out to Tara.

Tara opened her mouth, closed it and then huffed. "I didn't know her name. But when you asked about her, I went to Manny to see if he knew her. He said he didn't," she practically spat out.

Oh, yes. Jealousy. And Duncan picked up on it. "I take it Manny and you had a

personal relationship around this time?” he asked Tara.

Again, she hesitated, and it was Manny who answered. “Not a relationship,” he insisted. “We had sex, and yes, I know that was stupid since I’m her boss.”

“It was more than sex,” Tara muttered, but then she seemed to freeze. Maybe because she’d realized she was spelling out a motive for killing Brighton. “Manny and I were together for about six months, and we agreed to end things.”

“I broke things off with you,” Manny corrected. “And it wasn’t because I was having an affair with another woman,” he was quick to add. “I ended things with Tara before I started seeing Brighton.”

Duncan huffed, and glared at Manny. “I could charge you with lying to a police officer. And I still might do that if you don’t tell me everything about Brighton and how her murder connects to what’s going on now.”

Manny got that panicked look again, and he dragged in some quick breaths. So quick that Bree thought he might hyperventilate. Duncan must have also thought that was a possibility because he got the man a bottle of water from the small fridge behind his desk.

“Talk,” Duncan demanded after Manny had taken some long drinks. “Start with your affair with Brighton.”

Manny nodded. “Like I said, I was having sex with Tara, but it was causing the other waitstaff to gossip. It was hurting morale so I ended things. About a week or so later, Brighton came into the bar, and we started talking. That led to us seeing each other. Not for long,” he quickly tacked on to that. “And I don’t think it was exclusive for her.”

“Brighton was involved with someone else?” Luca pressed.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“I don’t know for sure, but Brighton would get texts when we were out together, and I think the texts were from another man. It was just a feeling I got. She never confirmed it.”

“How long were the two of you involved?” Duncan asked.

“Only about a month.” Manny shut his eyes for a moment. “I’d made dinner reservations at a place in Austin, and Brightondidn’t show. She didn’t call or text so I figured she was ghosting me.”

“And you didn’t call or text her?” Duncan wanted to know.

He shook his head. “I just assumed she was done with me.” Manny paused again. “Then, about two weeks later, I saw something online about her being murdered. The cops were asking anyone to come forward with information, but I didn’t know anything.”

“You should have let the cops decide that,” Duncan snarled. “You should have let us know about the relationship.”

“I didn’t kill her,” Manny snarled right back. “And I didn’t want to get caught up in an investigation.”

Bingo. That was the bottom line, and Bree had to wonder if he hadn’t wanted to be involved because he’d killed Brighton and didn’t want to be on the police’s radar. But he’d come on their radar when she had spotted Brighton on the video outside the bar.

Manny looked at Sandra. “How’d you know I was involved with Brighton? Did she tell you or something?”

Sandra took in some deep breaths as well. “Brighton’s mother and I were best friends, and after she died, I tried to keep an eye on Brighton. I was at her apartment and saw a photo of the two of you on her phone. I asked who you were, but she dodged the question. Why would she do that?”

“Well, it wasn’t because she was afraid I was going to kill her,” Manny protested. “Maybe she just didn’t want to talk to you about her personal life.”

“Possibly,” Sandra admitted. “During that visit with Brighton, she mentioned she’d been going to some interesting bars in Austin. Hush, Hush was one of them, but she named a couple of others. Then, a week or so later when I went to visit her, she was crying. Sobbing, really. And again, she wouldn’t get into specifics, but I think she was having trouble with a man she’d been seeing.”

“Again, it wasn’t me,” Manny insisted. “Brighton and I didn’t have that kind of relationship. It was casual, barely more than friends with benefits.”

Of course, they had no proof that was true. At least, Bree didn’t have proof. Except...

“If it was so casual, then why would Brighton have a picture of the two of you on her phone?” Bree asked.

He leveled his gaze on her. “Who knows? Maybe she liked the way she looked in it, or, hell, maybe she was just in the mood for taking a picture and then didn’t bother to delete it. There’s all kinds of reasons for pictures to be on someone’s phone.”

True, but the photo could be an indicator that the relationship wasn’t as casual as Manny was making it out to be.

Bree turned to her mother. “You went to the Hush, Hush shortly before Brighton was killed. Did you hear anything about her involvement with Manny then?”

“No,” Sandra said. “And I didn’t see Manny either. I went to try to figure out what was going on with Brighton, but then that fight started, and I got spooked. I left.” Her mouth trembled. “If I’d stayed, I might have figured out who’d wanted to hurt her.” She looked at Manny. “I didn’t know who you were, so I couldn’t give your name to the police during the investigation.”

Manny jumped to his feet again. “This inquisition is over,” he snarled to Duncan. “If you want to talk to me again, go through my lawyer. Am I free to go, or do you plan on arresting me right now?”

Duncan took his time, though Bree knew what his answer was likely to be. There wasn’t enough evidence to arrest Manny. Yes, he’d lied, and Duncan could charge him with that, but it was probably best if Duncan used that for leverage to bring Manny back in if anything else did come to light.

“You can go,” Duncan finally said. “For now,” he immediately tacked onto that.

Manny stormed out, and Tara kept her eyes on him until he was out the door. “He wouldn’t have killed Brighton,” she muttered.

“You’re certain of that?” Duncan challenged.

Tara didn’t issue a quick, resounding yes. In fact, she didn’t verify that at all. She merely shrugged. “What about me? What if someone wants me dead?” Her gaze drifted to the door again where Manny had just made his exit, and Bree wondered if the woman was actually thinking—what if Manny wants me dead?

“I can’t provide police protection to you in Austin,” Duncan explained. “But I can

call Austin PD and explain the situation. If they feel it's warranted, they'll assign someone to watch you."

Bree figured the cops there wouldn't consider it warranted, not when the only threat had been the text from an unknown number. Still, that seemed to placate Tara because she nodded.

"Thank you," she muttered. "I'll need my phone back, too."

Duncan motioned for Sonya to bring it back in and the deputy did. "Did you get anything from it?" he asked Sonya.

She shook her head. "The text came from a burner."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

That surprised absolutely no one, not even Tara who sighed and slipped the phone into her pocket.

“Manny and you had a relationship,” he spelled out to Tara. She’d already started for the door, but she stopped. “He broke up with you and yet you still continued to work for him. Why?”

“Because I’m in love with him,” Tara admitted. “Because I want to be near him. Manny wouldn’t have killed that woman,” she repeated as she walked out.

“You think Tara believes that because she’s in love with Manny or because she was the one who murdered Brighton?” Luca asked, taking the question right out of Bree’s mouth.

“She’s definitely a suspect for all of it,” Duncan concluded. “And not just for the murder but for the cover-up attempts that I think are going on now.”

Yes, a cover-up. Bree thought that was what was happening as well. And if so, the cover-up had started with her mother’s kidnapping.

“Tara bears a strong resemblance to the sketch, and both Manny and she have means, motive and opportunity,” Duncan summarized, and then he looked up at Sonya. “Try to find out if either of them own a gun or have had firearms training. I also want their phone records to see if either made calls anywhere near Saddle Ridge yesterday.”

Sonya nodded and went back to her desk in the squad room.

“If we can get their financials, we can check and see if either bought burners or supplies we can maybe match to those taken to the cabin where Sandra was being held,” Luca suggested.

Duncan nodded and looked at Woodrow. “I can request a warrant for that. Everything we’ve got is circumstantial, but it might be enough,” Woodrow said.

“Go for it,” Duncan agreed, and Woodrow stepped to the side to make a call.

Duncan picked up the evidence bag with the memory stick. “You two want to work on this back at the ranch?” he asked, directing the question to Bree and Luca.

They both nodded. Bree was eager to get started on that since it might give them a vital clue. Of course, it could take a lot of searching to find anything, but it’d be worth it if only to close off that particular investigative thread.

“I’ll get this to the techs, then,” Duncan said, “and I’ll have them copy what’s on it and forward it to you as a secure email attachment.” He shifted his attention to Sandra. “I’d like for you to take a look at it, too, in case anything pops for you.”

Sandra nodded and made a soft groan. “Am I responsible for what’s happening? Are all of you in danger because I was digging into Brighton’s murder?”

“I was digging into Brighton’s murder, too,” Bree assured her, and because she hated seeing those fresh tears in her mother’s eyes, she went to her and pulled her into her arms. “We aren’t responsible for what a killer’s doing,” she added, hoping that she would start to believe that as well. It certainly felt as if she’d set all of this in motion, especially since she’d been investigating Brighton’s murder at the time her mother had been taken.

When Bree eased back from the hug, her mother attempted a smile. She failed

miserably. So did Bree, but the moment still felt like some kind of turning point, and it was so very good to have her mother back.

“I love you,” she whispered to her mom.

Now Sandra really did smile. “I love you, too.”

Bree hadn’t actually forgotten that they weren’t alone, but then she noticed Luca, Woodrow and Duncan were all looking at them. Not with impatience though she figured they had to be feeling some of that. The investigation had to take priority. Had to. But Bree was hoping they could all have a proper homecoming once the danger was over.

“I’ll have Woodrow and Ronnie accompany all of you back to the ranch,” Duncan explained, motioning for Ronnie to come out of the squad room and into the office. “I want to wait here until the techs have picked up the memory stick, and then I’ll head home, too.”

“Not alone,” Sandra was quick to say.

“Not alone,” Duncan assured her.

He walked with them to the side door, opened it and glanced around the parking lot. He must not have seen anyone suspicious because he stepped back to let them all out. The cruiser wasn’t far, only about ten feet away, and Woodrow and Ronnie went out first. Bree and her mother followed with Luca behind them.

When they reached the cruiser, Bree caught the strong smell of gasoline. The scene barely had time to register in her head before there was a sharp sound, like someone blowing out a huge candle.

And the flames shot up around them.

THEMOMENTLUCAheard the sound, he hooked his arm around Bree and yanked her back from the cruiser. Thankfully, Woodrow did the same to Sandra, and they fell back on the ground.

Not a second too soon either.

Because the fire blazed over the cruiser and the pavement beneath it. And the flames were spreading, too.

Ronnie, who'd been the closest to the cruiser, had a harder fall than the rest of them. The impact knocked him back, and Luca could hear his fellow deputy's sharp groan of pain.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Get back,” Duncan shouted from the doorway.

With his left arm still around Bree, Luca drew his gun and started to bolt toward the still open office door. He stopped though when he saw the fire snaking along a trail of gasoline that stopped there. It had barely had time to register in his mind when the flames shot up there, too, forcing Duncan back into his office.

Luca yanked Bree away from the door. Away from the cruiser and toward the front of the sheriff’s office.

And into what he knew could be extreme danger.

He couldn’t see who’d ignited the gasoline, but he knew the person could be nearby, ready to gun them down. That’s why he moved in front of Bree. Woodrow did the same to Sandra, and he practically dragged the woman toward Luca. Once Woodrow had her there, Luca got to a crouching position.

“Wait here,” Luca told Woodrow. “I’ll get Ronnie.”

Ronnie groaned in pain again, and Luca knew that moving might make his injuries worse. Still, it couldn’t be helped. If he stayed out in the open like that, he’d be an easier target. Luca ran toward him, the heat from the fire stinging his face. He couldn’t see any gasoline in this particular spot, but the liquid and the flames could easily spread.

Something they were already doing.

Luca had no idea how much gasoline had been spilled, maybe only a gallon or two, but it'd obviously been more than enough to create this blaze that could be a cover for another attack.

While he tried to keep watch around him, Luca hooked his left arm around Ronnie, helping the deputy to his feet. Not easily. Ronnie outsized Luca by a good thirty pounds, and Luca had to take the man's weight so he could get them started across the parking lot.

Each step felt as if it took an eternity, and it didn't help that everything inside Luca was telling him they could all be gunned down at any moment. Telling him, too, that Ronnie could have serious internal injuries from the fall.

Thick black smoke billowed up from the fire, cutting across his path to the building. For a few terrifying moments, Luca lost sight of Bree, and his mind immediately went into some worst-case scenarios. Maybe this wasn't a murder attempt but a kidnapping. The killer could be trying to take her.

That possibility gave Luca an extra shot of adrenaline, and he fought his way through the smoke and heat so he could reach the side of the building. He finally saw Bree. Saw the fear and worry that was there, and he cursed their attacker for putting them through this.

Whatever this was.

Bree reached out for him, taking hold of Luca's arm and pulling both Ronnie and him closer until they were all in a huddle.

"Tara or Manny could have done this," Bree muttered.

Yeah, they could have, and it wouldn't have been especially hard if they'd already

had the gasoline with them. Manny and Tara had arrived separately and would have used this parking lot. If they'd parked on the other side of the cruiser, the side that wouldn't have been easily visible from the street, one of them could have poured the gasoline from the door while seated in their vehicles. That theory worked.

But there was a problem.

He didn't see either Manny or Tara, and their vehicles weren't in the lot right now. So, how had the flames ignited?

Luca soon came up with the answer.

There were clusters of trees and shrubs at the far back of the parking lot, and one or both of them could have poured the gasoline, driven away and parked somewhere up the street. They could have then made their way back to the trees and shrubs and waited. If the stream of gasoline was nearby, all it would have taken was lighting a match and tossing it. Then the person could have run away and taken up the vantage point to fire some shots.

"An ambulance and the fire department are on the way," Duncan called out.

Luca glanced at the front corner of the building and saw Duncan and Sonya. Both had their weapons drawn and were firing glances all around. Clearly, they'd braced for an attack, too.

"Try to get inside," Duncan instructed.

Since that wouldn't happen from the side door where the fire was still blazing, it meant going through the front. The sheriff's office was on Main Street and there were buildings on each side as well as across the street. Places for a gunman to hide and take aim. Still, it wasn't safe where they were either.

Woodrow hurried to the other side of Ronnie and, along with Luca, they hoisted up the deputy. “Stay against the side of the building,” Luca told Bree and Sandra.

At least that way, a gunman would have to shoot through Woodrow, Ronnie and him to get to them. Maybe though the threat wouldn’t come from a gunshot. Luca realized that when he looked at the fire shooting up the front of the cruiser.

Hell.

Luca knew it was rare for a vehicle to actually explode during a fire, but it was possible their attacker had added something to the mix. Like maybe some other chemical that could be toxic to breathe in.

“We need to evacuate the area,” Luca shouted to Duncan, and he tipped his head to the cruiser to let him know what was going on.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Duncan cursed and made a frantic motion for them to move faster. They did, but it wasn't easy. Ronnie was unconscious now so Luca hefted him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry so he could put some distance between them and the cruiser.

Bree and Sandra thankfully stayed against the wall of the building, and they all moved together. All keeping watch as best they could, considering the slashes of smoke that kept coming their way.

It seemed to take a lifetime or two before they finally reached the door, and the moment they did, Duncan got Sandra and Bree inside. Luca moved to do the same to Ronnie, but he caught some movement from the corner of his eye and whipped around in that direction.

Luca caught just a glimpse of Tara running from the scene.

Chapter Nine

Bree just wanted to stop feeling as if she were about to jump out of her own skin. She wanted her heart rate to go back to normal. She wanted to stop being afraid for her precious little boy.

But none of that was likely to happen anytime soon.

She was back at the ranch with Luca, Woodrow and her mother. Away from the fire and smoke-filled parking lot. Away from immediate danger. But nothing felt safe right now.

Probably because it wasn't.

If their attacker could come at them in the parking lot of the sheriff's office, then he or she could come after them here. Luca obviously understood that was a possibility because the ranch was on high alert with the security system activated and ranch hands patrolling the grounds.

Bree watched the laptop screen as Duncan was finishing up his interview with Tara. Not at the sheriff's office. That entire area had been evacuated so when they'd seen Tara running from the fire, Duncan had gone after her, caught her and ultimately taken her to an office in city hall. He'd then set up a laptop to do a live feed of the interview so Luca, Woodrow, Joelle and Bree could watch from the ranch.

So far, Tara wasn't saying anything Bree wanted to hear.

"I didn't start that fire," Tara insisted for the umpteenth time. "I told you that I was walking to my car that I'd parked up the street. I saw the fire and ran."

"We've requested the camera feed from the bank," Luca muttered to Bree while he stood right next to her. Right next to her had been his default position since they'd escaped the fire.

And Bree wasn't complaining.

As bad as her frayed nerves were right now, she knew they'd be even worse if Luca wasn't there. Ditto for Gabriel. Even though the baby was asleep, she was holding him because she wanted him as close as possible.

"The angle of the bank camera won't help with the parking lot," Luca added, knowing that Tara couldn't hear him, "but it might be able to confirm or disprove what Tara is saying."

Bree considered the location of the bank, which was more than a block away from the sheriff's office. It was the only security camera in the area. Still, they might get lucky and be able to see Tara's movements. If she had indeed parked up the street, then it wasn't likely she'd spilled that gasoline and ignited it. Well, not likely unless she'd spilled it before she'd ever parked on Main Street and then come into the sheriff's office. It was possible she'd done just that, but it might be hard to prove unless Tara had left behind some evidence that pointed to her guilt.

Bree continued to watch as Duncan pressed Tara, trying to trip her up with different versions of the same question. But Tara was staying steady, insisting she was innocent.

Luca's phone dinged with a text, and when he lifted it, she saw Sonya's name on the screen. Ronnie's conscious, the deputy texted. Doctor says no serious injuries but he'll be admitted for an overnight stay.

Bree latched on to the "no serious injuries" part. They'd gotten lucky. With a fire of that size, all of them could have gotten burned, literally.

Luca texted back to thank Sonya for the update, but his phone dinged again before he could put it away.

"The tech picked up the memory stick and copied it," Luca explained. "He just emailed me the bar receipts."

Bree glanced at the laptop screen with the interview, then at Gabriel who was deep into his nap and would no doubt still be asleep for at least two hours. "Let me put him down in his crib, and maybe we can go over the receipts in the guest room." That way, they'd still be able to watch Gabriel while they worked.

Luca took one of the laptops scattered around the room and told the others what they

were doing. Woodrow assured him if anything came up in the remainder of the interview with Tara that he'd let them know. They agreed to do the same if they found anything in the receipts.

Bree and Luca made their way up the stairs to the guest room, which was now empty since Coral had already gone home. Bree welcomed the quiet. For a couple of seconds anyway, and then the flashbacks came.

Mercy, did they.

There was a whirl of images of the attack on the road, the shooting into the barn and the fire, all mixed with the memories of her father. It was a volatile combo, and her hands were already starting to tremble when she crossed the room toward the crib.

Luca set the laptop aside and steadied her by slipping his hands beneath hers, and together, they eased the baby onto the mattress. Gabriel stirred just a little but stayed asleep.

“Thank you,” Bree whispered. And it wasn't just gratitude for helping her with this but also for what he'd done during the fire. “You put yourself in front of me again. You shielded me.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“I’m a cop,” he said as if that explained everything. Maybe in his mind it did. Maybe he would have done that for anyone. After all, he’d run out into the parking lot to rescue Ronnie.

It was a bad time for her to make direct eye contact with him, but Bree found herself doing it anyway. As usual, things passed between them. Unspoken but still intense. Things always seemed intense between Luca and her.

Yes, the eye contact was a mistake, but she made it much worse when she stepped toward him. And into his arms. Luca pulled her to him, brushing a kiss on the top of her head. A kiss of comfort. So was the hug when he tightened his embrace. It was wrong to take this from him, but Bree couldn’t make herself back away.

She stayed there where it felt so safe. So right. The first part was the truth. The second, wasn’t. Luca and she weren’t together, and this was not only playing with fire, it was wrong. As if she were leading him on.

That gave her the steel to move back, and he eased his grip to let her do that. But it was another mistake. Because now they had the intense eye contact and the body-to-body touching. Definitely not good.

Bree felt the heat slide right through her. Of course, it did. There was always heat whenever she was around Luca. Heat and need. Another bad combo. Still, she stayed put, looking at him. Holding her breath.

Waiting.

Luca didn't stay put though. He lowered his head and brushed his mouth over hers. This was not a gesture of comfort. No. This was about the fiery attraction. And she felt it. Felt it not only on her mouth but in every inch of her.

He pulled back, looked at her, no doubt gauging her reaction, and he muttered some profanity. She didn't think his reaction was because he saw any objection on her face but because he probably saw the invitation she could feel her body sending out to him. An invitation that could complicate an already complicated situation.

Did that stop her?

No.

Bree moved in and kissed him. Really kissed him. Hard pressure of her mouth on his. Then, more. She was the one who deepened the kiss, the one who slid her hand around the back of his neck to pull him down to her.

Luca certainly didn't resist. Just the opposite. He made a sound that came from deep within his throat, and he snapped her to him. Not that she could get much closer, but instead of merely touching, they were now pressed against each other. Like lovers.

Her body knew just how to react to the feel of his chest against her breasts. Everything inside her went warm and soft. Then, hot. Everything inside her pushed her to take more, more, more. She had no doubts, none, that Luca would give her that more, but there was another sound.

Gabriel whimpering.

That sent Luca and her flying apart, and both of them whipped their attention to their son. Gabriel stirred, stretching and making a face before he sucked at a nonexistent bottle and went back to sleep.

Luca and she stood there. Breaths racing. Heartbeats, too. She knew that because she could see Luca's pulse on his neck. A neck she wished she could kiss. Heck, she wished she could do a lot of thing with Luca, but the timing was all off. Might always be off if she couldn't set aside the horrible flashbacks.

"Saved by a whimper," he muttered. Luca shook his head. Then, he surprised Bree by smiling. "I'm not sure I want to thank Gabriel for the interruption."

He seemed to be waiting for her to agree. Which she did. That whole not being sure was front and center in her mind. But so was the heat. Since she didn't want to give in to that heat, which might lead them straight to the bed, Bree motioned toward the laptop instead.

"The receipts," she reminded him, keeping her voice at a whisper.

Luca nodded, sighed and picked up the computer. He took it to the small seating area in the corner, booted it up and set it on the table that was between the two chairs. The email was indeed there with the large attachment of the receipts. Bree's heart dropped a little when she realized it was well over a hundred pages, and each page had at least two dozen transactions.

"These are for the three weeks before Brighton's death," Luca pointed out.

So, Manny had been thorough. Or it appeared he had been on the surface anyway. If he was the person who'd murdered Brighton and was now responsible for the attacks, then he might have turned over the receipts only because he knew they wouldn't incriminate him.

"Neither Tara nor Manny have alibis for the attacks," Bree said, "but we didn't ask them where they were when Brighton was murdered."

Luca nodded. “I’m sure Duncan will do that. If anything pops in their background checks, he’ll have cause to bring them back in for interviews. The same could happen if we get that warrant for their financials. If one of them held your mother captive for all these months, there could be a money trail.”

True, and that was a trail they’d have to find since neither Tara nor Manny would likely confess to something like that. Kidnapping and imprisonment were serious crimes that would carry long jail sentences. Ditto for the attacks. Added to that, if the kidnapping and the attacks could be linked to Brighton’s murder, then life with no parole could be doled out. Heck, even the death penalty.

First, they had to find evidence to prove their guilt or eliminate them as suspects. They probably weren’t going to be able to do that based solely on the receipts, but it was something that needed to be investigated.

“Email me a copy of the list,” she said, standing so she could get her laptop she’d had brought over from her house. “I’ll start at the bottom. You can start at the top.”

Luca pulled his computer onto his lap to send her the email. “Flag anything that seems suspicious,” he muttered.

Bree made a sound of agreement and settled back in the chair to get busy. Since she had no idea what the usual daily revenue was for the bar, she flagged large charges, those over a thousand dollars, just in case Manny or Tara was using the Hush, Hush to launder money. Still, she supposed charges that high wouldn’t necessarily be anything sinister but rather a single payment for large group.

“Your mom’s on here,” Luca said, snagging her attention.

She leaned over and looked at the charge. Less than five dollars, which meant it was likely water or club soda. The date matched Sandra’s account of being at the Hush, Hush the night of the fight.

“And here’s Brighton,” Luca added a moment later.

“Clearly, you got the good end of the list,” she muttered. “So far, I haven’t recognized a single name on mine.” And she leaned toward Luca’s laptop for another look. “Twenty-three dollars, and this would have been the same night Mom was there.”

“Does the bar serve food?” he asked.

“A few items. When I was researching it, I looked at the menu on the website. Typical bar stuff. Sliders, nachos, that sort of thing.”

Of course, they had no way of knowing if Brighton’s bill had been for food or drink. And maybe it didn’t matter unless twenty-three dollars was to pay for her drink and that of a companion.

“Funny that Manny didn’t give her the drinks or food on the house,” Luca pointed out.

“Manny will probably say he’d broken things off with her by then. Tara might be able to say otherwise though.” Unfortunately, Bree wasn’t anywhere near certain they

could believe what Tara would tell them.

“I’m going to flag the bar tabs paid around the same time Brighton paid hers,” Luca said. “Then, we can maybe contact these people and see if they remember her.”

“Good idea,” she said and continued with her list. Finally, she got a hit. Maybe a huge one. “Another charge from Brighton, for eighteen dollars. And this was the night she was murdered.”

That got Luca’s attention, and he leaned over to take a look. “Definitely flag the other receipts within an hour of that.”

Bree started doing that, using a highlighter function on the laptop, but her fingers froze when one name practically popped off the screen at her.

“What?” Luca questioned.

He’d obviously heard the sharp sound of surprise she’d made, and he leaned in again. Then he cursed. Because the customer’s name was one they both recognized.

Nathan.

LUCASTOODATthe window, waiting and watching. It definitely wasn’t standard procedure to interview a suspect at the ranch, but with the CSIs and fire department clogging up the parking lot of the sheriff’s office, Duncan had decided to hold the interview here. Luca didn’t especially care where they questioned Nathan. He just wanted it to happen.

They needed answers. And this just might be the break they’d been looking for.

“Even if Nathan’s guilty of murdering Brighton, he won’t confess,” Bree said. She

was right next to Luca, keeping watch as well while Sandra was upstairs with Gabriel.

Luca agreed. But sometimes confessions weren't intentional. And it was possible that Nathan being at the bar had nothing to do with Brighton. The timing was suspicious though, and the receipts could put Brighton and Nathan together at the bar at the same time. Since they were from the same small town, they would have likely recognized each other. Yet, Nathan hadn't said a word about seeing Brighton mere hours before she'd been murdered.

And that gave Luca an idea.

He took out his phone. "I'm going to text Nathan's picture to Manny and Tara to see if they recognize him. I won't mention Brighton, but it's possible one of them remembers seeing him with her. If so, Nathan won't be able to deny knowing that Brighton was at the bar the same time he was."

Bree made a quick sound of agreement, and Luca sent off the first text to Manny. When the man would answer was anyone's guess. Manny might want everything to go through his lawyer. Ditto for Tara, but Luca sent her an identical message anyway.

The moments crawled by with no response, so Luca put his phone away and continued to keep watch for Nathan. While still standing right next to Bree. With their arms pressed against each other. It wasn't anywhere near the embrace they'd had upstairs, but any contact with Bree was a mental distraction for him.

So was the memory of that kiss.

Hard to forget that, and that sensation of heat and need. He'd been on the verge of losing control with Bree. Again. Apparently, he hadn't learned his lesson about that from eleven months ago. He'd surrendered to the kiss knowing full well that it was a

bad idea, that there'd be a serious loss of focus. But that hadn't stopped it, and he had to figure out a way to make sure he kept this heat in check so he could keep Bree safe.

She looked up at him. Their gazes connecting. And he cursed. She muttered some profanity, too, so he knew they were on the same page here. A page that likely would have involved them talking about it if his phone hadn't sounded with a text.

"Manny," he said when he saw the screen.

Once again, Luca had to push aside thoughts of Bree and that amazing kiss and nail his attention to this investigation. Well, to this response anyway, which Luca knew could be Manny lashing out to demand to be left the hell alone.

But it wasn't.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Yeah, I've seen him before, Manny texted. He was in the bar with Brighton a couple of times.

Bingo. They now had the verification they needed in case Nathan lied to them. Of course, this was still just hearsay, but it'd be strong hearsay if Tara confirmed seeing Nathan as well.

Do you know if Brighton was dating him? Luca messaged back.

They were together, that's all I know. They weren't like having sex on the bar or anything like that, but I did see her kiss the guy. I figured she was doing that to try to make me jealous because I'd recently ended things with her. Why? Are you going to grill him the way you did me?

Luca definitely intended to do some grilling when it came to Nathan. For now though, he reread Manny's text. Bree was obviously doing the same thing.

"Interesting," Bree said.

It was indeed, and Luca could see one way this might have played out. "If Brighton was truly using Nathan to make Manny jealous and Nathan found out, Nathan wouldn't be happy about that. In fact, he could have been so angry that he attacked her."

Of course, there was no proof of that, not yet anyway. And it was equally possible that Manny was lying. The bar owner might say or do anything to point the finger at someone other than himself.

Thanks, Luca texted to Manny. Please let me know if you remember anything else about the guy in the picture.

He didn't get an immediate response from Manny, but Luca did see something else he'd been waiting for. Nathan's car as he pulled into the driveway. Duncan must have heard it because he, too, went to the window to stand behind Bree and Luca.

"I want you to do the interview," Duncan told Luca. "I figure if the doctor has any hot buttons, you'll be able to push them better than I could." He looked at Bree. "And I want you close to Luca while he's questioning him."

Bree's eyebrow lifted. "You want Luca and me to pretend to be together so that it'll rile Nathan?"

Duncan gave them a flat look. "Just sit close to each other. If Nathan's not an idiot, he'll pick up on the vibe between you two, and it could set him off."

Luca could tell Bree wanted to deny there was any vibe. She couldn't though because it was indeed there.

"I just got these texts from Manny," Luca said, passing his phone to Duncan. "I'm waiting to hear from Tara."

Duncan smiled when he read Manny's responses. "Definitely use this," he insisted.

When Nathan parked and got out of his car, the three of them stepped away from the window to go to the front door. Bree must have taken Duncan's advice to heart because she stood arm to arm with Luca while Duncan ushered in Nathan. Duncan also immediately riled the doctor by checking him for weapons and reciting the Miranda rights.

The annoyance was building on Nathan's face. Until he turned his attention to Bree. Then Luca saw the quick change. Worry and concern rather than anger.

"Are you all right?" Nathan asked Bree. Completely ignoring Luca, he went to her and laid his hand on her shoulder. "Are the stitches hurting?" He proceeded to examine them.

"I'm okay," Bree said, stepping back and aligning herself with Luca again.

And, yeah, Nathan noticed all right. It'd been a good call on Duncan's part to go with this ploy since it caused a spark of fresh anger to flare in Nathan's eyes,

"Good," Nathan muttered, but his tone indicated her actions were anything but. "I'm betting you'll be glad when you can get back to your own place," he said, speaking to Bree. "It can't be easy being cooped up here in a house that holds so many horrible memories for you."

Luca silently cursed because the remark had hit pay dirt. Bree flinched, but it was obvious to Luca that she was trying to suppress her reaction. Hard to do though when there were indeed bad memories here of her father's murder.

"Not all bad," Bree said. "I grew up here so there are plenty of good memories, too."

Bree's remark hit pay dirt as well because she coupled it by brushing her arm against Luca's. A subtle gesture, but it obviously packed an emotional punch for Nathan. He practically snapped to attention toward Duncan.

"So, where are we doing this interview?" Nathan asked him.

"Actually, Luca will be conducting it in the living room," Duncan was quick to say. "I've asked Bree to stay in the room as well as an observer." He'd no doubt added

that to cover any legal bases. “Hope you don’t have a problem with that,” Duncan added like a challenge.

“No,” Nathan muttered, his response in direct contrast to his expression. It was obvious he did have a problem, but Luca figured it wasn’t because Bree would be there but rather that Luca would be the one doling out the questions.

They went into the living room where Duncan had already turned around the incident board and Slater was working on his laptop at a makeshift desk in the corner. Duncan motioned for Nathan to sit in one of the chairs that he’d obviously positioned like a hot seat directly across from the sofa and chair that Duncan, Bree and he would be using. Duncan revved up the tension some more by turning on the recorder and putting it on the coffee table only a couple of inches from Nathan.

For the record, Luca read in the date, time and those present, and he added, “Dr. Bagley has consented to Attorney Bree McCullough being present as an observer for this interview. Could you state your consent for the recording?” Luca added.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Nathan's teeth came together. "Bree can be here," he said.

Good. With that formality out of the way, Luca jumped right to the heart of the matter. "Tell me about your relationship with Brighton Cooper."

Nathan seemed to do a mental double take. "Brighton?" He shook his head. "I was aware of who she was. She'd come into the hospital a couple of times, but there wasn't a..." He stopped, studying Bree's and Luca's expressions.

The doctor had been about to lie. Luca was certain of it. But Nathan must have sensed this could be a trap.

"Has that bar owner and bartender said something about me?" Nathan asked.

"You mean Manny Vickery and Tara Adler?" Luca prompted when Nathan didn't add anything.

Nathan nodded.

"How did you know we'd interviewed them?" Luca pressed.

Nathan's jaw went tight again. "Word about that sort of thing gets around. Did they say something about me?" Luca didn't respond. He just stared at Nathan until the doctor huffed. "Manny or Tara probably told you I occasionally went to the bar. You might even have proof of that if you looked over old credit card charges. Is that it? Is that why I'm here?"

Luca felt as if some of the wind had been taken out of his sails. He'd been hoping that Nathan would deny even being at the Hush, Hush, but if word had indeed gotten around about Manny and Tara being questioned, then Nathan might have realized it'd be stupid for him to lie.

That didn't mean the doctor was innocent though.

"And your relationship with Brighton?" Luca repeated.

Nathan huffed. "It was hardly a relationship. We didn't exactly travel in the same social circles or anything."

The man's snobbery was coming through so Luca gave that a nudge. "What do you mean by that?"

Nathan huffed again and looked at Bree. "I swear, I didn't have anything to do with Brighton when I was seeing you. I didn't cheat on you."

Bree shook her head. "We dated, and that wasn't exclusive, so even if you were with Brighton or anyone else it wouldn't have been cheating."

Oh, Nathan didn't like that, but instead of doling out a verbal blast to Bree, he turned his frosty gaze on Luca. "All of this feels like a witch hunt and a gross violation of my privacy."

"Not a witch hunt," Luca said. "But interviews can definitely take pokes at privacy. Especially if the interviewee has something to hide. Did you want to hide your relationship with Brighton?"

"It wasn't a relationship," Nathan practically yelled, but the outburst was short-lived, and he made a visible effort to rein in his temper. "Brighton and I hooked up a few

times, that was all. She wasn't my type, and she was six years younger than me."

"Hooked up?" Luca questioned. "Does that mean sex or just hanging out at the bar together?"

If looks could have killed, Nathan would have finished Luca off then and there. "Both. Briefly," he quickly tacked on to that. "I was only with her a couple of times and never when I was with Bree."

That was probably meant to give Luca a dig, to be a reminder that Bree and this jerk had once dated, but Luca didn't get the jolt of jealousy that Nathan was likely hoping for. Luca felt nothing but disgust over Nathan's behavior once Bree had ended things with him.

"Did you hook up with Brighton or hang out with her at the bar at the same time she was seeing Manny?" Luca asked.

Nathan did a double take, part flinch, part raised eyebrow. "Maybe. I don't know when she was involved with Manny. I'd stopped seeing her long before she died. Months," he provided.

"Yet you were at the Hush, Hush at the same time the night she died," Luca pointed out.

"That could be true, but if so, she wasn't there with me," Nathan insisted.

Maybe. But Luca wished he had security footage of Brighton leaving the bar that night so he could see if she'd left with either Nathan or Manny. The camera footage hadn't been preserved since they hadn't known for weeks that Brighton had even been to a bar in Austin. By then, the security system had recorded over the old footage.

“I didn’t have anything to do with Brighton’s death,” Nathan went on, talking to Bree now. “You know me. You know I’m not capable of violence.”

Bree stared at him. “I know you’re capable of stalking.”

Nathan cursed. “That wasn’t what was happening. I simply didn’t understand why you said you didn’t want to see me anymore. I thought maybe it was a misunderstanding and that if we just talked, you’d be able to see that I cared deeply for you. I still do,” he added. “And that’s why I’m so worried about you now.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Judging from Bree's stiff body language, she wasn't buying it. Caring deeply for someone didn't mesh with stalking.

"Where were you yesterday morning before you treated Bree at the hospital?" Luca asked.

Nathan pulled back his shoulders, obviously thrown off a little by the shift in subject. "I went on shift at seven, so I'd been there for a couple of hours before Bree arrived."

"Can anyone verify that?" Luca added.

"Plenty of people." Nathan had to answer that through clenched teeth. "Nurses and other doctors. If you need names, you can ask for the duty roster."

"I'll do that," Slater volunteered, earning his own glare from Nathan.

"And what about after Bree left the hospital?" Luca went on. "Did you stay on duty or did you leave?"

Nathan opened his mouth as if ready to do that blast, but he reined in again. "I had nothing to do with the shooting at Bree's. I'm not a killer."

"Did you stay on duty at the hospital or did you leave?" Luca repeated.

"I stayed on duty until I heard about Bree's son being missing. I left then because I thought I could help look for him."

“So, you have no alibi for the time of the shooting,” Luca concluded. “What about for earlier today when someone set the parking lot on fire?”

Nathan got up from the chair. “Enough. You clearly have it in for me.”

Duncan stepped closer. “No one here has it in for you,” he stated. “This is an interview with questions that should be relatively easy for you to answer. The fire was only a couple of hours ago so you shouldn’t have any trouble recalling where you were.”

“I was at the hospital,” Nathan snarled. “You can check the duty roster for that, too.”

Luca had no doubt that Nathan’s name would be there, but that didn’t mean he was innocent.

Duncan’s phone rang, the sound slicing through the heavy silence that had fallen over the room. He took the call, moving away from them. Luca was about to continue the interview when he heard Duncan mutter some profanity.

Alarmed that there was more bad news, Luca went to him. So did Bree and Slater, and they ended up huddled together in the corner.

Duncan put the caller on hold and looked at Slater, Luca and Bree. He cursed again before he said, “There’s been a murder.”

Chapter Ten

Bree watched from the window as Nathan drove away. She’d kept back because she hadn’t wanted him to see her watching him and conclude that she was longing for him or anything like that. She just wanted to make sure he was gone and away from the house. She didn’t want any of their suspects under the same roof as Gabriel.

“All right,” she heard Duncan say after he’d finished his latest call. The third one he’d gotten since delivering the whispered bombshell.

There’s been a murder.

Other than assuring Bree and the others that it wasn’t a family member or one of the deputies, that was all Duncan had been able to tell them. He’d then dismissed Nathan, basically telling him to get the heck out of there, and then had started the calls. Luca and Slater had done the same, and even though Bree didn’t know the specifics, it was obvious some things were happening in the investigation.

Duncan repeated his “all right” as if trying to gather his thoughts, and he slipped his phone back in his pocket. “About two hours ago, a hunter reported finding a dead body in the woods not too far from the burned-out cabin. Not on the grounds but about a quarter of a mile away. According to County Deputy Morales who arrived on scene, cause of death appears to be a single gunshot wound to the head.”

That gave Bree a jolt. Even though that wasn’t the exact way her father had been murdered, it still gave her the flashbacks.

“Any indications it could be a suicide?” Luca asked.

Duncan nodded. Then, shrugged. “Deputy Morales says it’s set up to look that way. The gun is in her hand and positioned more or less the correct way if the shot had been self-inflicted, but Morales believes the position of the body is off. He says it looks staged to him.”

Staged would equal murder as far as Bree was concerned.

“The county sheriff’s office had copies of the sketches done by the police artist,” Duncan went on. “The ones that the two witnesses said were of the woman they saw

driving the silver truck when Sandra would have been captive. Anyway, the responding deputy says he believes the dead woman is the one in the sketch. So, it could be Tara or her sister, Shannon. I've tried to call Tara, but she's not answering."

If the dead woman was indeed Shannon, then it was possible she was the one who'd kidnapped Sandra. Sandra had said the woman who'd held her had had phone conversations with someone and appeared to be getting instructions. The person giving those instructions could have been Shannon's boss, and he or she might not want Shannon around to spill anything incriminating.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“She didn’t respond to a text I sent her earlier,” Luca pointed out.

Duncan scrubbed his hand over his face and seemed to consider that a moment. “Try to contact her again. If she still doesn’t answer, I’ll have the Austin cops go to her place and see if she’s there. For now, call Manny and see if knows where she is. Find out, too, if he knows Shannon, and it’s okay to tell him there’s a body matching Shannon’s description.”

Luca nodded, and he took out his phone, moving a few yards away into the adjacent formal dining room and motioning for Bree to join him. She did, and Luca put the call on Speaker when he tried to call Tara. Bree got a very uneasy feeling when it went straight to voicemail. Maybe Tara was just dodging them, but it was also possible she was dead.

“This is Deputy Vanetti,” Luca said, leaving a message. “I need to speak to you right away.” He paused a heartbeat. “It’s about your sister.”

That might prompt Tara to return the call. If she was in any position to do it, that is.

Luca pulled up Manny’s number next and also put it on Speaker. “Didn’t I make it clear that you’ll have to go through my lawyer if you want to talk to me?” Manny greeted in a snarl.

“I’m looking for Tara,” Luca said, clearly ignoring Manny’s rant.

“I have no idea where she is. She’s not at work, that’s for sure.” He paused. “Why are you looking for her? Did you find some kind of proof that she’s the one who killed

Brighton?”

“No,” Luca answered. “I wanted to talk to her about her sister.”

“Shannon?” Manny questioned.

“That’s right. You know her?”

“Yeah, I’ve met Shannon a couple of times,” Manny confirmed. “She’s the spitting image of Tara, but they’re nothing alike personality-wise. Or rather they were nothing alike. Tara used to be reliable. Shannon’s a train wreck. She takes that whole bad girl attitude way too far.”

“What do you mean Tara used to be reliable?” Luca asked. Bree knew he wasn’t dropping the subject of Shannon, but that past tense could be a red flag if Manny knew Tara was dead. “Has something changed?”

“Damn right, things have changed. Tara’s spooked out of her mind and believes this whole thing of someone wanting her dead. I’m the one who was nearly run off the road. I’m the one who was attacked, not her, but you’d think she was the only one at risk here. Hell, there’s no indication other than her wild imagination that someone is after her.”

Bree mentally repeated all of that, and there was something about it that didn’t ring true. But she didn’t know what part. If Manny was the mastermind behind what was happening, then he could be setting up Tara to take the fall. That didn’t feel right either though.

“Truth is, I’ve told Tara that she should look for another job,” Manny went on. “Now watch, she’ll probably pull some ‘hell has no fury like a woman scorned’ deal and accuse me of all sorts of things.”

“Like what?” Luca pressed, and Bree realized this was turning into the interview that they hadn’t been able to finish with Manny when he’d been at the sheriff’s office.

“Who the hell knows,” Manny grumbled. “She’ll probably accuse me of murder or something. She might even claim I’m the one after her.” He paused. “Wait, is Tara working with Shannon to try to smear my name or something?”

“Not that I know of,” Luca assured him. “Would Tara or Shannon do that?”

“Hell, yeah. Shannon would, anyway, and it wouldn’t take much of a push for Tara to get Shannon to come after me for her version of payback.”

“You think Shannon could be violent?” Luca went on.

Now, Manny wasn’t so quick to answer. “Did Shannon do something? Does she want Tara to bail her out of jail again?”

“No,” Luca said, but didn’t add more to that. “Does Shannon have any identifying marks that Tara doesn’t and vice versa? Like a birthmark or tat?”

Again, Manny hesitated. “Why are you asking that? Did something happen to Shannon or Tara?”

Luca dodged those questions. “We’re looking into that. Tats or birthmarks?” Luca repeated.

Manny huffed. “Tara has a shamrock tat on her right ankle. As far as I know, Shannon’s not into that sort of thing.”

Bree hurried back to Duncan to let him know to have the cops on scene check for an ankle tat on the dead body. It didn’t take Duncan long to make the call or for the cops

to respond.

“No tat of any kind on her ankle,” Duncan relayed.

So, this was Shannon. Bree didn’t know whether to be relieved or not. The proximity of the body to the cabin and the eyewitness accounts of the woman driving the silver truck likely meant Shannon had been involved in not only her mother’s kidnapping but perhaps everything else that’d happened.

But that didn’t exclude Tara’s involvement.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

In fact, the conversations Sandra had overheard could have been Shannon talking with Tara. Tara might be the mastermind behind the kidnapping and the attacks. Why though, Bree still wasn't sure.

She went back to Luca to let him know that the dead woman didn't have a tat and found him in the middle of another Manny tirade. Manny was now demanding that Luca tell him what was going on, and the man was peppering the demand with plenty of profanity.

Bree mouthed the info about the tat. Luca nodded and interrupted Manny's rant. "A woman's been murdered, and it might be Shannon," he said.

That stopped Manny mid-sentence. "Murdered?" he questioned. "And you think I did it?"

"Did you?" Luca asked.

"Of course not." He paused again. "This is why you want to talk to Tara," Manny concluded with a sigh. "Do you think she killed her sister?"

Luca frowned. "Why would you think that? Is Tara capable of killing Shannon?"

Manny did more cursing. "To hell if I know. A week ago, I would have said no, but I think Tara's had some kind of breakdown. There's no telling what she might do in this state of mind."

There it was again, the feeling that what he was saying just didn't ring true. Basically,

Manny was throwing Tara under the bus. Maybe because he believed she was indeed capable of murder, but it felt to Bree as if Manny was trying to cover his own tracks by making them believe Tara was guilty.

“I really need to speak to Tara,” Luca went on. “But she’s not answering her phone. Any idea where she might be?”

“None whatsoever,” he was quick to say, “but when you do talk to her, remember what I said. Don’t believe anything she tells you about me. Or anything else for that matter,” Manny added a split second before he ended the call.

Luca stared at his phone for a moment as if he might hit Redial, but something Duncan said must have caught his attention because he headed in that direction. Duncan was still talking to someone on the phone, but he finished his conversation just as they approached him.

“They ran the dead woman’s fingerprints and got an immediate hit,” Duncan explained. “It’s Shannon.”

Bree wasn’t sure what to feel about that. With her death, she would no longer be a threat. But the threat was still out there, and if Shannon were alive, she might at least have been willing to spill the name of her accomplice. If she had an accomplice, that is. For now, all they could do was speculate as to what her part had been in Sandra’s kidnapping and the attacks.

They knew from the witnesses’ sketches that Shannon, or Tara, had been at the cabin and had driven the silver truck. So, one of them had held Sandra. It was too bad that Sandra had never seen her kidnapper’s face or she might have been able to verify which one.

But the proximity of Shannon’s body to the cabin pointed to it being her.

Shannon had that “trouble magnet” past, and she would have had an easier time getting to and from the cabin than Tara who, according to her work schedule, was putting in fifty-plus hours a week. That didn’t totally exclude Tara, but at the moment the circumstantial evidence was skewed more to Shannon. She was almost certainly the one who had brought in groceries to Sandra.

“Deputy Morales will get the body to the ME and send the gun to the lab for analysis,” Duncan explained. “Her address is listed as an apartment in Austin, so Austin PD will send someone out to take a look at the place.”

Duncan was scowling. So were Luca and Slater. Probably because this had turned into a three-prong investigation with three different law enforcement agencies involved. That meant red tape and possible delays.

“I checked and Shannon Adler doesn’t have a gun registered to her,” Slater said a moment later. “Of course, that doesn’t mean she didn’t buy one illegally, but we still might be able to trace the gun to someone.”

True. “How about our other suspects?” Bree asked. “Do they own guns?”

“Not Tara. Again, not legally anyway,” Slater answered. “Manny has a permit to carry concealed, and he owns both a Glock and a SIG Sauer.”

Those were normally cops’ weapons, but plenty of civilians carried them as well. Manny could probably justify ownership of that kind of firepower though by saying he’d wanted protection for the bar. Added to that, if Manny was responsible for the attacks, he almost certainly wouldn’t have used one of his own weapons. However, the concealed permit was an indicator that he knew how to shoot since he would have needed classes to get that.

“Did Morales say if the shot to Shannon’s head was point-blank?” Luca asked.

“It was,” Duncan verified. “There was stippling around the point of entry.”

Bree knew that stippling was unburned gunpowder striking the skin, and it was an indicator that the shot had been fired less than two feet away. So, if this wasn't a suicide, it likely meant Shannon's killer had been someone she knew. Or at least someone who could get that close to her anyway.

“Morales thinks Shannon was actually killed in the spot where she was found,” Duncan went on. “There were no drag marks, and there was an ample amount of blood to make him believe that's where she died.”

“How far from the road?” Luca wanted to know.

“About fifty yards,” Duncan answered. “It was a heavily treed area in between the cabin and the river. Morales said it was the very definition of off the beaten path.”

“So, Shannon was meeting someone or was lured there,” Luca concluded.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“This is all too pat for my liking,” Slater said, reading through something on his laptop screen.

That got Bree’s and everyone else’s attention, and they turned to Slater, waiting for him to explain that.

“Shannon had a short stint in the army before she was dishonorably discharged,” he said. “She would have gotten firearms training. She also had a record for drugs and B and E. Everything I’m seeing in her background indicates she couldn’t stay out of trouble and had issues with authority.”

Bree figured she knew where he was going with this. “So, how could she have stayed on task for the eleven months Mom was held captive?”

“Exactly,” Slater agreed. “She doesn’t seem to fit the profile of someone who could have done this on her own. Yet, she also doesn’t fit for someone taking orders either.”

“I guess that could depend on whoever was giving the orders,” Duncan suggested. “If it was someone she trusted...or loved, then maybe that allowed her to stay on task.” He paused, shook his head. “And it’s possible that Shannon is being used as a scapegoat in all of this.”

Luca made a sound of agreement. “And if so, that points back to Tara.”

It did indeed. But Bree knew they couldn’t rule out Nathan or Manny. Especially Manny who’d admitted to knowing Shannon. That made Bree wonder if Nathan would admit to knowing the dead woman as well. She was on the verge of asking

Luca, Slater and Duncan if they should ask Nathan that when Luca's phone rang.

"Tara," Luca said when he looked at the screen. The relief was in his voice, but the concern was still on his face. He took the call and immediately told Tara, "I've got the call on Speaker. Sheriff Holder, Deputy McCullough and Bree are here with me."

"What's so important?" Tara responded, the ice practically dripping off the question.

"I need to talk to you in person," Luca explained. "Can you come back to Saddle Ridge? If not, I can arrange—"

"I'm not going back there," Tara interrupted, "and I'm not talking to any Austin cops either. If you've got something to say to me, just say it fast because you've got exactly thirty seconds before I hang up and then block you."

Duncan nodded, giving Luca the okay to tell her about Shannon. Normally, this was something done in person, but it was obvious Tara wasn't going to consent to a visit with cops.

"Tara, I regret to inform you that your sister, Shannon, is dead," Luca stated.

There were a couple of seconds of silence, followed by a sharp gasp. "What?" she demanded but didn't wait for an answer. "You're lying. You're saying that so I'll meet with you."

"I'm saying it because it's true," Luca spelled out. "A positive ID was made of her body just minutes ago."

Tara muttered something Bree didn't catch. "Her body?" she repeated. "Shannon's dead."

“Yes,” Luca verified but didn’t add more. He was no doubt giving Tara some time to let it sink in.

“How did she die?” Tara asked a couple of moments later.

“We believe she was murdered,” Luca said.

No gasp this time, but Tara’s moan was plenty loud enough. There were some rustling sounds, and Bree thought maybe Tara was dropping down into a chair. “Who killed her?”

“We don’t know yet. We were hoping you could help us with that,” Luca explained.

More silence. “You’d better not be trying to pin this on me because I didn’t kill my own sister.”

The denial sounded adamant enough, but Bree knew that some people were top-notch liars. She had no idea though if Tara was one of them.

“Any idea who’d want Shannon dead?” Luca asked.

“No,” Tara said, and her tone had softened some. “But you thought she was involved in what was going on with Manny and Bree, so maybe Shannon got mixed up with the wrong person. That wouldn’t be a first,” she added in a mutter. “I want to see her body. Where are you sending her?”

“To the county medical examiner. I don’t have the number off the top of my head, but if you call the Saddle Ridge dispatcher, they can connect you. Then you can arrange a time to see your sister.”

“Good,” she said in a hoarse whisper, and she repeated it a couple of times as if using

it to try to steady herself. “Please tell me you know who killed her because I want the SOB behind bars.”

“I don’t know, not yet, but there are a lot of cops investigating Shannon’s murder. We’re—”

“Did Manny kill her?” Tara blurted out.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

That caused everyone in the room to freeze. “Why would you think that?” Luca asked.

“Because he’s an SOB, that’s why,” Tara was quick to say. “He fired me, did you know that?” Again, she didn’t wait for an answer. “Manny’s a lying lowlife scum, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he was using my sister. Used her and then killed her.” A hoarse sob tore from her throat. “If he did kill Shannon, I will bury him.”

“Tara,” Luca warned, “you need to calm down. And you need to stay away from Manny. Leave this to the cops. Like I said, we’re investigating several possibilities. Some cops are headed to Shannon’s apartment in Austin now to see if there’s anything there that’ll point us in the direction of her killer.”

“Her apartment in Austin?” Tara questioned. “She moved out of there close to a year ago.”

Bree was certain Luca, Duncan and Slater didn’t miss the timing of that. It meshed with when her mother had been kidnapped.

“Do you know where Shannon had been living?” Luca asked.

“The last time I saw her, she said she was staying in a travel trailer our grandparents left her. She had it parked on a lot she was renting... Hang on a sec,” Tara muttered. “I put the address in my phone.” A couple of seconds later, she read it off. “It’s 116 Wilmer Cranston Road, Bulverde.”

Slater immediately pulled up a map on his laptop and showed it to them. It was less

than five miles from the burned-out cabin and where Shannon's body had been found.

"Get someone out there right now," Duncan told Slater, and Bree understood the urgency. Shannon's killer might intend to destroy the trailer if he or she hadn't done that already.

Slater stepped into the dining room to make a call while Luca continued with Tara. "Thanks for the address."

"I hope you find something there that tells you who killed her," Tara was quick to say. "And if it's Manny, then I think I can add a nail to his coffin."

"What do you mean by that?" Luca asked, obviously just as unnerved by the comment as Duncan and Bree were.

"I mean, I might have some proof that'll help you convict Manny of murder," Tara spelled out.

"What kind of proof?" Luca demanded.

But he was talking to the air because Tara had already ended the call.

Chapter Eleven

Luca, Bree, Duncan and Slater stood in the living room of the ranch, their attention pinned to Luca's phone. They watched as Woodrow, who had FaceTimed them, approached the travel trailer where Shannon had supposedly lived.

This was not the way Luca wanted to conduct a search. Especially a search that could finally give Bree and him answers as to who was trying to kill them. But Luca also hadn't wanted to leave Bree behind while he joined the search. Duncan had agreed,

and that's why he'd sent Woodrow to accompany County Deputy Morales.

Thankfully, Beatrice and Joelle had agreed to stay upstairs with the babies. Both Izzie and Gabriel were way too young to know what was going on, but neither Luca nor Bree had wanted them in the room in case something god-awful was discovered in the search.

Like another body.

After all, Shannon might not be the only loose end a killer wanted to tie up.

Woodrow panned his phone the entire length of the trailer, and Luca could see it wasn't that large, but it seemed to be in good shape with no obvious damage to the sleek silver exterior. Woodrow then turned his camera back on Morales as he went up the narrow trio of steps. He already had his weapon drawn, and he knocked on the door.

"I'm Deputy Morales," he announced. "Anyone here?"

There was no response, which wasn't a surprise since there'd been no vehicles in the gravel driveway that led to the trailer. From what Luca had been able to see so far, this wasn't the sort of campground where people normally parked their RVs and such. There were no community buildings, no pristine trails. This was basically just a partially cleared area in the woods, with an old mailbox to indicate the address. It was secluded, and with no neighbors in sight, no one would have seen Shannon coming or going, which was probably why she'd chosen this particular location.

"Anyone here?" Morales called out again, and when he didn't get a response, he gloved up and tested the doorknob. The deputy frowned and glanced back at Woodrow when the knob turned. "It's not locked."

Even though Luca couldn't see Woodrow's right hand, he knew his fellow deputy already had his weapon drawn, and judging from the movement of the phone, Woodrow was adjusting his aim in case someone inside the trailer started shooting. Morales was doing the same.

Morales eased open the door and immediately stepped to the side. A classic cop move so he wouldn't be in the line of fire.

But no shots came.

In fact, nothing happened. There was only silence and darkness in the trailer.

Still staying to the side, Morales reached in with his gloved left hand and turned on the lights. He must have not heard or seen anything alarming because he stepped in with Woodrow right beside him. Woodrow set his phone aside for a couple of moments while he, too, put on some gloves.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

When Woodrow resumed the call, Luca got confirmation that the camper was indeed small, with a kitchen on one side and a seating area on the other that had been let out into a bed. An unmade one. There were clothes strewn on the floor and take-out bags on the narrow strip of counter.

The bathroom door was open so Morales headed there while Woodrow focused on going through the pockets of the clothes at the foot of the bed and on the floor. “Nothing,” he relayed, moving to the small table next to the bed.

There was a phone charger plugged in but no phone or laptop, though Luca saw a charger for that as well.

“I think someone’s cleaned out the place,” Morales relayed from the bathroom. “I can see where some things were, but the shelf and the trash can are empty in here.”

That sent Woodrow to the cabinet under the sink where he, too, found an empty trash can. Considering the take-out bags were still there, it did appear that someone had almost certainly gone through it and removed anything incriminating.

And that someone was no doubt Shannon’s killer.

“Any sign that the door had been jimmied open?” Luca asked, though he believed he already knew the answer.

“None,” Woodrow confirmed while he checked behind the trash can. Nothing there. He moved on to checking the bags, stopping to check the receipt that was taped to one of them. “This was a pickup from this morning at eight, and it came from the

diner in Saddle Ridge.”

Slater and Duncan both cursed, and Luca figured Bree was mentally doing the same. This meant Shannon had likely been the one who’d set the fire in the parking lot, though it was beyond risky of her to order takeout from the diner since it was so close to the sheriff’s office.

“She must have come back here after being in Saddle Ridge,” Woodrow concluded, panning the camera around again. “But there’s no blood. No signs that anything violent happened in here.”

“No signs of that in the bathroom either,” Morales added.

The deputy started going through the fridge while Woodrow went back to the bed. He lifted it and muttered, “What’s this?”

The camera angle wasn’t right for Luca to see what had caught Woodrow’s attention, but it obviously got the other deputy’s aswell because Morales joined him and took Woodrow’s phone so he could aim it at a piece of paper.

“It’s a torn-off piece of a white delivery bag,” Woodrow explained, “and there’s some writing on it.” He paused, did some cursing of his own. “It’s Bree’s address.”

Luca heard the quick breath that Bree took in. Of course, Bree had known that Shannon was likely involved in the attempt to kidnap Gabriel, but it still had to feel like a punch to the gut.

“There’s something else,” Woodrow went on. “It’s the name Aubrey with a circle drawn around it. There are some doodles, too.”

Morales shifted the camera so they could see it, and it did indeed look as if someone,

Shannon probably, had done some crude drawings of a rifle and a baby. Now it was Luca who felt the gut punch. Because one of the doodles was another name.

Manny.

The last letter of the name had a little heart dangling from it.

“Manny claimed he didn’t know Shannon that well,” Bree muttered.

Yeah, he had. “If we confront him with it, he’ll probably just say he has no idea why Shannon wrote his name.” Luca paused. “But Manny might own up to knowing who this other woman is.”

“Aubrey,” Slater repeated, and he hurried to his laptop. “I’ve seen that name before.” It took him nearly a minute before he finally got that aha gleam in his eye. “Aubrey Kincaid. She was arrested with Shannon about four years ago when they were caught doing a B and E. Aubrey didn’t have a previous record so she got parole.” He continued to type on his keyboard. “And Shannon and Aubrey were in the army together.”

Bingo. That was a solid connection. “Contact information?” Luca asked, grabbing a notepad so he’d be ready. Slater rattled off an Austin address and a phone number.

“Slater, try to call her,” Duncan instructed, “but block your number. If she sees a cop calling, she probably won’t answer.”

“True,” Slater muttered, and he made the call and put it on Speaker. It was answered on the first ring.

“Shannon?” a woman immediately said. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” Bree lied, making her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Where the hell are you?” the woman demanded. “We were supposed to leave for the McCullough ranch by now.”

Hell. That was another gut punch. They’d planned to come here, and Luca figured that meant they’d planned another attack.

“Shannon?” the woman repeated. “Are you there?” She sounded suspicious.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

It was that suspicious tone that no doubt had Slater responding the way he did. He cupped his hand over his mouth and muttered something that was indistinguishable.

“I can’t hear you,” the woman said, punctuating that with some raw profanity. “This is a bad connection. Where are you?” she repeated.

Slater did more of the muffled muttering.

“Hang up and call me back,” Aubrey instructed. “And make it fast. We’re already running a half hour late, and we’re not going to get paid if we screw this up.”

Luca held his breath, hoping that Aubrey was about to say who was paying them. And for what? But she merely added. “Call me right back.”

Slater hung up, hit Redial, and waited for Aubrey to answer. She did. “This better be a good connection. Are you still out there in the sticks?”

Slater repeated some muttering, causing Aubrey to curse some more.

“All right, just meet me at the ranch,” Aubrey said. “We can...” She stopped, and a few moments crawled by. “Shannon?” she questioned. She paused again, doled out some more profanity, and Luca could hear her suspicions skyrocketing.

Not for long though.

Because Aubrey hung up.

Duncan whipped out his phone to call Austin PD. He didn't have to spell out that they had to stop an attack on the ranch. They needed to find Aubrey now.

BREEKNEWEVERYTHINGpossible was being done to find Aubrey, but that didn't help settle her nerves one bit. Aubrey's words kept racing through Bree's head. Words that tightened and twisted every muscle in her body.

We're already running a half hour late, and we're not going to get paid if we screw this up.

Aubrey had made it crystal clear that Shannon and she had plans to come here. Maybe to try to kill Luca and her. Maybe to try to kidnap Gabriel. It was possible Aubrey would carry through with it even if Shannon wasn't with her.

Bree had considered taking Gabriel and just leaving in a cruiser with Luca. But that could be a huge risk, too, since Aubrey could attack them on the road. At least here they had a security system. And now that they knew Aubrey was coming, they could watch for her.

That was the reason Bree had come back to the guest room so she could be with Gabriel and keep an eye out the upstairs window. Thankfully, Luca had come with her. Just having him nearby was a reminder that they were a united front there to keep their son safe.

Luca was on the phone, getting updates from Duncan, but he was practically whispering so Bree couldn't hear what he was saying. The low voice was no doubt so he wouldn't wake up Gabriel, who'd just been fed and was now asleep in Bree's arms. Since she very much wanted those updates, she eased him into his crib and went closer to Luca.

"I think we need to move another of the hands to the back part of the ranch near the

pond,” he said to whomever was on the other end of the line. “One is already patrolling that area now, but it’s a weak spot. There’s a trail there with easy access to the road.”

There was. And it was a trail where Luca and she had parked and done some heavy making out when they’d been teenagers. It probably wouldn’t be an easy place for a nonlocal like Aubrey to find, but the woman could and probably had researched such things.

Luca ended the call and slipped his phone into his pocket. “That was Slater. We’re working out where to put the hands and the deputies who are keeping watch.”

“Good,” she muttered. And it was. Any and all security measures could keep Gabriel safe. But Bree knew there were plenty of weak spots where Aubrey could get through. “I read her background. She’s had a lot of firearms training.”

He made a sound of agreement. Then he sighed as he pulled her into his arms. “If she decides to do this mission solo, we have more than a dozen hands and deputies to spot her. It’s my guess though that she’s gone on the run. Or maybe run back to her boss because she was suspicious of the two calls she got from an unknown number.”

“Yes,” Bree said. She had to figure that Aubrey would at least contact her boss. Whoever that was. Perhaps Manny since Shannon had doodled the man’s name along with Aubrey’s. No matter who it was though, during that call Aubrey might learn Shannon was dead.

“Unless Aubrey was putting on a really good act, I didn’t get the sense that she was the one who’d murdered Shannon,” Bree added.

“Neither did I,” he said.

Bree was certain that Luca had been through every one of the woman's words many times. For such a short one-way dialogue, they'd learned a lot. Shannon and Aubrey were basically hired guns, and they were supposed to have arrived at the ranch well over an hour ago. Added to that, Aubrey must have been accustomed to having Shannon call her on a burner with an unknown number since Aubrey didn't question that. She'd simply answered Slater's call and had assumed it was Shannon.

"If Aubrey goes to her boss, he or she could kill her, too," Bree pointed out, but she figured she was voicing what Luca already knew.

His nod confirmed that, and while neutralizing such a potential threat would be good for the here and now, it wouldn't be good in the long term. If they could make contact with Aubrey, they stood a chance of learning who'd hired her. If, like Shannon, she was killed, or simply vanished, the boss could just end up hiring other would-be killers to come after them.

At that thought, she had to close her eyes for a moment. Had to try to rein in the panic that was starting to slide through her. Luca helped with that.

By kissing her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Since her eyes were closed, Bree hadn't seen it coming, but she certainly felt it. His mouth landed on hers for what he'd probably thought was a soothing gesture. And it soothed all right. It also gave her a jolt of pure, hot lust.

The heat came, skimming right over the panic and filling her with a need that she knew was a distraction. That didn't stop her from sinking right into the kiss. It didn't stop her from wrapping her arms around Luca and pulling him closer.

So many sensations hit her at once. The feel of his body against hers. His scent that was as familiar to her as her own. The taste of him. That had always revved up the heat, and this time was no different.

Bree wanted to just keep kissing him. To get lost for a moment in the hazy heat he was creating. She wanted to hold on to Luca and never let go. But this was the opposite of a security measure so with much regret, she eased back.

"Sorry," she muttered.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a dry smile. "I'm the one who started it." He paused, brushed a chaste kiss on her forehead. "When this is over—"

He stopped at the sound. Not Gabriel whimpering this time. This was a car engine, and it was approaching the house. Mercy. Was this Aubrey? Had she decided to go through with an attack?

Luca and she whirled toward the window and saw two armed ranch hands step in front of the dark blue car that was in the driveway. Both hands took aim at the driver,

and a couple of seconds later, a woman stepped out.

Tara.

She lifted her hands high in the air, and even though she was saying something to the ranch hands, Bree couldn't make out what since she was so far away.

Luca's phone buzzed, and she saw Duncan's name on the screen just as Luca answered it. "I'm guessing you weren't expecting her," Duncan said.

"No," Luca verified. "I'll call her and see what she wants. The hands have instructions not to let her close to the house."

Luca ended the call with Duncan and made one to Tara. They watched as Tara said something else to the hands, and then she got back in her car. Seconds later, she answered.

"Deputy Vanetti," Tara said. "You need to tell your goons to let me through."

"They're ranch hands, not goons, and they're not letting any unscheduled visitors through," he snapped. "Why are you here, Tara?"

"Because of Manny," the woman was quick to say. "Because I want you to arrest him." Tara's voice trailed off into a sob. "I want him to pay for what he did to my sister."

"We're not certain Manny killed your sister," Luca pointed out just as there was a light tap at the door, and Duncan announced he was coming in. He did, and he headed straight to the window with Luca and her so he could hear the phone conversation.

"Well, I have something that'll help convince you," Tara argued. "Let me in, and I'll

show it to you.”

Luca huffed. Clearly, he wasn’t convinced this wasn’t some kind of ploy or maybe even a diversion so that Aubrey could get close to the house.

“What do you have, Tara?” Luca demanded.

“Something important. A video I recorded,” she added when Luca only huffed again. “Trust me, you’ll want to see it.”

Bree certainly wanted to see it, and if it was indeed something that could lead to an arrest, then this could be the break in the case they’d been searching for. Then again, it could turn out to be nothing, so Bree tried to tamp down her hopes.

“Text me the video,” Luca said.

“No, I want to show it to you,” Tara insisted.

“I’m not letting you inside, Tara,” Luca spelled out. “If you want me to see the video, then text it to me. If not, then hand your phone to one of the ranch hands, and he’ll bring it to me.”

Tara’s next sob was even louder than her other one. “All right, I’ll text it to you, but swear to me that you’ll arrest Manny once you’ve seen it.”

“I can’t promise that,” Luca said in a tone to indicate Tara was definitely testing his patience. “But I will view it and see if there’s anything that could result in charges being filed.”

That seemed to appease Tara because Bree saw the woman type in something on her phone. A few moments later, Luca got the text. Once the video loaded, Luca

motioned for Bree to step to the side of the window. Probably because this could be some kind of ruse to distract them while a shooter got in place to try to gun them down.

Bree did move to the side but motioned for Luca and Duncan to do the same. They did, but both angled themselves so they could keep an eye on Tara.

The video finally came on the screen, and Bree immediately saw this wasn't some kind of security footage. It appeared to have been filmed from a camera phone, and the person holding it didn't exactly have a steady hand. There was also something obstructing the view, and it took her a moment to realize the person was likely recording this through an ajar door.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Manny,” Bree muttered when she saw him. He was in an office with a desk and bookshelves, and he wasn’t alone. There was a woman with him, but Bree could only see the back of her head.

“I don’t want you showing up at my apartment in the middle of the night,” Brighton snarled. “I’m tired of going through this because it’s over.”

“It’s not over until I say it is,” Manny lashed out.

Just as Manny said that, the woman turned enough so that Bree could see her face. Yes, it was Brighton all right, and it was hard to tell with the shaky recording, but she seemed to be crying.

“If it was over, you wouldn’t have called me,” Manny continued. “You wouldn’t have wanted to keep having sex with me.”

“It was just sex,” Brighton insisted, the anger coming off her voice. “And, trust me, I regret it. You think I enjoyed that scene you just made when you showed up at my place last night?”

“It wasn’t a scene,” Manny snapped. “I was merely talking to my replacement.”

Replacement? So, Brighton had seemingly dumped Manny and moved on to someone else.

“You were causing a scene,” Brighton said like a warning, “and I want it to stop. Don’t contact me again. I love this bar, and I plan on coming here in the future, but I

don't want to have to deal with you, understand?"

The camera stayed on Manny's face, and Bree had no trouble seeing the rage there. Yes, rage. Apparently, Manny wasn't ready to accept this breakup. And it also meant Manny had lied to them by omission.

"Check the date of the video," Tara insisted after the recording had ended.

Luca did. And cursed. Because this had been recorded just two days before Brighton's murder.

"Well, does that convince you that Manny killed Brighton?" Tara asked.

Luca didn't respond to that. Instead, he doled out a question of his own. "Do you know your sister's friend, Aubrey Kincaid?"

"A little," Tara said after a short pause. "Why?"

"Because we're trying to get in touch with her. Do you have any idea where she might be?"

Tara paused again. "No, but Manny might. Aubrey and he dated for a while."

Bingo. There was another red flag. Well, it was if Tara was telling the truth.

"So, are you going to arrest Manny?" Tara repeated with even more venom in her demand.

Duncan nodded, not responding to Tara but letting Luca and Bree know what he was about to do. "I'll get an arrest warrant started. Arrange to have Manny picked up right away."

Chapter Twelve

Luca kept watch as they made the drive into town to the sheriff's office. He was in the back seat with Bree who was firing glances around, too. Ditto for Woodrow and Duncan who were in the front. Luca figured Slater, Joelle and Carmen were doing the same back at the ranch, along with the hands and reserve deputies who were still patrolling the ground.

They had put a lot of security in place to keep Gabriel safe while they made this trip. There were now nine armed cops or ranch hands guarding him, and Luca had to hope that the small army would be enough. Had to hope, too, that maybe this journey wouldn't turn out to be a big mistake. But pretty much anything they did at this point could fall into the "big mistake" category.

That included doing nothing at all.

Yes, they'd likely be safer if they stayed put inside the ranch house. Likely. But if they'd done a correct interpretation of those notes in Shannon's trailer, then no place was truly safe. And they had to do something about that for Gabriel and everyone else who happened to be in the path of this killer.

That something meant Bree and him traveling into town to the sheriff's office to have a chat with Manny.

Manny hadn't resisted the warrant and had immediately come in for an interview, but he had demanded to speak to Luca and Bree. Luca had considered refusing, or leaving Bree at the ranch, while he went to hear what Manny had to say. Hell, he'd considered a lot of things, but this was a murder investigation and at least some of the things had to be done by the book. That included holding the interview at the sheriff's office since that's where Manny had surrendered himself. It was also procedure for Manny to have his lawyer with him—which he did.

However, it wasn't the norm for a suspect to ask to speak with two of the people involved in the attacks. Still, Luca had reasoned that Manny might finally be ready to spill all. And spilling all could finally put an end to the danger to Gabriel.

During his visual sweep of their surroundings, Luca's gaze collided with Bree's. She was worried all right. And exhausted. Too bad he couldn't do squat about either of those things.

"A few days ago, our biggest concern was how we were going to co-parent Gabriel while being at odds with each other," she muttered.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

For some stupid reason, that made him smile. “Yeah,” he muttered.

They had much more serious concerns now, but Luca no longer felt the at-odds things. That was something good to come out of all of this. They were solidly on the same side. But would that last? Luca hoped it would but knew there were no guarantees that Bree would ever be able to look at him and not think of her murdered father.

When they reached the sheriff’s office, Duncan was forced to park out front since the main parking lot was still being processed and cleaned. However, the fire chief, Elmore Dauber, was on scene, and he motioned that he needed to talk to them. Duncan indicated for the chief to meet them inside.

They hurried into the building, but the only people Luca saw inside were the two deputies, Sonya and Brandon Rooney. “Manny and his lawyer are already in the interview room,” Brandon explained. “Sonya searched Manny and read him his rights again.”

Duncan nodded and then shifted his attention to the fire chief when he came in. Elmore was a former deputy turned fireman, with over twenty years of experience under his belt, so Luca knew this part of the investigation was in capable hands.

“We’re nearly finished up out there,” Elmore explained, “and I’ll be doing my report as soon as I’m back in my office. But I can give you the high points now.” He drew in a long breath. “The accelerant was gasoline, and we found the empty can behind a tree at the back of the parking lot. It could have been there for hours. Maybe even days. There were some sticks lying around so it’s possible they were used to cover

the can.”

So, this had been planned maybe well in advance. That didn’t surprise Luca, but he wished someone had seen that can before it’d been turned into a weapon.

“A simple trigger device ignited the gasoline,” Elmore went on. “We’ve got what’s left of the device, and it’ll be examined, but this is something anyone can learn to make from the internet.”

“Was it on a timer?” Duncan asked.

Elmore shook his head. “It was set off with a remote control or maybe a phone. Again, not hard to do if you can read and follow instructions.”

Luca considered that for a moment. “How close would the remote or phone have to be to ignite it?”

“Not especially close. We might be able to give you specifics on that once it’s examined, but it’s my guess the arsonist had line of sight of all of you when you exited the building and triggered it then.”

That was Luca’s guess as well. A timer would only be effective if the person had known the exact time they’d be leaving the sheriff’s office.

“I figure we’re looking for someone who was hanging around within a block of the building,” Elmore added. He looked at Duncan. “You’ve requested footage from the camera at the bank?”

Duncan nodded. “The camera was working, but they’re having trouble getting the footage off the server. The techs from the Rangers’ crime lab are assisting, so we should have the recordings soon.”

Luca was definitely hoping for that, and while he was at it, he was also hoping the arsonist didn't know about that particular camera and hadn't bothered to conceal his or her face. Of course, Manny and Tara would likely be on the feed since they'd been in the area for interviews. However, there would have been no valid reason for Shannon and/or Aubrey to be on scene. But it was possible that by the time of the fire, Shannon had already been dead.

"Go ahead and see what Manny wanted to tell Bree and you," Duncan instructed Luca. "I've got a few more questions for Elmore, and then I'll join you. Oh, and record everything Manny says. I don't want this to be an off-the-record kind of conversation just because Bree is there."

Luca was glad to hear that. He didn't want Manny trying to hide behind what he might consider to be private. As far as Luca was concerned, Manny's right to privacy was over.

"I'm a legal consultant for the Rangers," Bree pointed out. "Since the Rangers are assisting in this investigation, I can use that to be present during interviews of a suspect." She lifted her shoulder. "Well, I can as long as Manny's lawyer doesn't flat-out object and start some legal wrangling. I can wrangle right back, but I don't want to do anything to compromise an arrest."

Duncan stayed quiet a moment, obviously processing that and then nodded. "Get permission from Manny and the lawyer to be there," he agreed. "I haven't arrested Manny yet, but let's all hope he'll say something to the two of you that'll make that happen."

Yeah, that had to happen because if it didn't, there likely wouldn't be an arrest. There was no physical evidence to link Manny to Brighton's murder or any of the attacks. Of course, there was the recording that Tara had made, but it might or might not be able to be used as evidence. Even if it was, the video wasn't proof Manny had

murdered Brighton.

Luca and Bree headed to the interview room, and the moment Luca opened the door, Manny practically jumped to his feet.

“I didn’t murder anyone,” Manny immediately volunteered.

Luca held up his hand in a gesture for Manny to wait, and he turned to Manny’s lawyer. “I’m Deputy Vanetti, and this is legal consultant for the Rangers, Bree McCullough. Do either of you have any objections to her being here?”

“No,” Manny snapped. “In fact, I want her here so I can make both of you understand that someone is setting me up.”

Luca shifted his attention to the lawyer. “No objections at this time. I’m Corey Bennett,” he said. He shook hands with both Luca and Bree, and Luca noted that the lawyer didn’t seem anxious or ready to launch into a tirade about how they were treating his client.

“Someone is setting me up,” Manny repeated, but once again, Luca gestured for him to hold off on that so he could start the recording and read in the time and those present.

“You believe someone is setting you up,” Luca repeated. “Who and why?”

“I don’t know.” Manny groaned and dropped back into the chair. “But someone must be if there was a warrant for my arrest. Why the hell would your sheriff do that?”

Bree and Luca took the chairs across from Manny and the lawyer. “Because we recently got access to a recording of you having a very nasty argument with Brighton Cooper, a woman you claimed you didn’t know well.” Luca leaned in, spearing

Manny with his narrowed gaze. “You knew her, and if you lie and say you didn’t, then I’m arresting you on the spot.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Manny had already opened his mouth, but he closed it, huffed and leaned back in his seat. “A video,” he repeated. “How did you get it and what’s on it?”

“I’m not at liberty to disclose who gave it to us, but it’s obvious from the recording that Brighton and you were lovers, and you were enraged when she ended things. Lie to me about that, and you’re under arrest,” Luca repeated.

Manny’s lawyer started to speak, but Manny lay his hand on the man’s arm. “Tara,” Manny grumbled. “She recorded something and gave it to you. She’s the one trying to set me up.”

“Why would she do that?” Bree wanted to know.

Manny made aduhsound. “I’ve already told you that Tara’s upset because I dumped her. She’d do anything to get back at me.”

That was possible, but Luca didn’t voice that to Manny. “Tara didn’t make you lie to us about Shannon,” Luca pointed out. “You did that on your own.”

“I did,” Manny admitted. “But lying about my sexual partners isn’t the same as committing multiple felonies.”

Maybe not. But it could be red flags.

“What about Aubrey Kincaid?” Luca pressed. “Is she a lover, too?”

Manny’s forehead bunched up. “No. Why are you asking that? Did Tara claim I’d

slept with Aubrey?”

Luca didn't respond to that either. He just sat quietly and stared at Manny until the man was practically squirming in his seat.

“I didn't sleep with Aubrey,” Manny insisted. “I'll admit to having an affair with Brighton, and she did break up with me. But I didn't kill her, and there won't be anything on any video saying otherwise.”

Luca gave that some thought. Manny could probably say something like that because perhaps he'd never come out and threatened Brighton with violence. The violence could have still happened though.

“I was in love with Brighton,” Manny added, his voice lowering to a whisper. “I loved her, but she was seeing someone else.”

“Who?” Bree immediately asked.

Manny shrugged. “It's all speculation. You're not the only one who investigated Brighton's murder,” he said.

Luca and Bree exchanged glances. “What does that mean?” Bree pressed.

“After you called and asked me to give you those old receipts, I talked to some of the regular customers who were around back then. No one could confirm it,” Manny explained, “but a few people recalled her having some conversations with that doctor.”

Everything inside Luca went still. “What doctor?”

“Dr. Nathan Bagley,” Manny spat out like profanity. “That snake oil quack who lives

right here under your own nose.”

Luca made a circling motion for Manny to continue just as Duncan came in. Duncan announced himself for the recording and took a seat at the end of the table.

“Manny here was just telling us that he suspects that Brighton was seeing Dr. Bagley,” Luca summarized.

Duncan’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t get a chance to say anything because Manny continued. “I don’t have proof of it so don’t try to charge me for withholding evidence. And I only found out about this two days ago after Bree wanted the receipts.”

“Why don’t you just tell us what you do know about Brighton and the doctor?” Duncan prompted, not addressing the withholding gripe.

“I knew Brighton was seeing someone else,” Manny quickly confirmed, “and like I already told Luca and Bree, a couple of people I talked to said they recalled seeing her with Dr. Bagley.”

Duncan pushed a notepad Manny’s way. “Jot down the names of those people.”

Manny huffed, but he wrote two names and passed the notepad back to Duncan. Luca glanced at the names but didn’t recognize them. Bree shook her head, indicating that she didn’t either.

“So, these two people saw Brighton with Nathan Bagley,” Luca went on. “Did you know she was seeing the doctor?”

Manny wasn’t so quick to respond this time. “No, but once she came in the bar sporting bruises on her arm. They were clearly marks left by fingers. It was obvious

to me she'd gotten them when someone manhandled her."

"Bruises?" Bree questioned. "When was this?"

“About a month or so before she died,” Manny answered.

Luca had studied the photos of Brighton’s lifeless body, and while there had been bruises on various parts of her torso and arms, there hadn’t been any that resembled marks made by fingers. A month though would have been plenty of time for them to have healed.

Manny lifted his arm and clamped onto the fleshy part between his elbow and wrist. “There with the thumbprint underneath and the other four on top. I was furious that someone had hurt her like that, and I wanted her to come to my office so we could talk about it. She wouldn’t. She said the bruises were nothing and that I should mind my own business, but then she admitted she was having trouble with someone she was seeing.”

“Did she specifically say she was seeing Nathan Bagley?” Luca asked.

“No.” Manny sighed. “But one of the bruises was bigger than the other, and when I pointed to it, she mumbled something about the guy wearing a class ring and that the stone in it was tilted to the side on his finger.”

Luca tried to picture Nathan’s hands, trying to recall if he had worn a ring with a stone, but he couldn’t recall one. Apparently, neither did Bree because she shook her head again.

“I was trying to rein in my temper because I knew if I got mad, Brighton would just walk away,” Manny went on, “so I tried to get her to tell me more about the bruise by saying it must have been a big ring. She said it was one of those chunky gold ones

from Texas A&M.”

Bree took out her phone, and Luca knew what she was doing. A couple of moments later, he got confirmation when she showed him the hospital information page with Nathan’s bio. There it was.

He’d attended the Texas A&M School of Medicine.

Again, that was nowhere near proof that Nathan had murdered Brighton, but it was a connection that needed further investigation. They already knew from the receipts that Nathan had been at the bar the night Brighton was murdered, and if he had been involved in a volatile relationship with Brighton, then that would give him motive.

“Any reason you didn’t tell us sooner about seeing those bruises on Brighton?” Duncan asked.

“Because I forgot about it. Hell, it’s been five years, and I’d moved on with my life. Or rather I had moved on before you guys started trying to accuse me of things I didn’t do.”

“Then why didn’t you tell the original investigating officer?” Duncan pressed. “You hear about a woman you claim to have loved had been murdered, and you know someone bruised her up just a month earlier, and you didn’t think that was something the cops should know?”

Some of the color drained from Manny’s face, and he shook his head. “Her death gutted me, and I wasn’t thinking about anything but my own grief.”

Duncan made a sound to indicate he wasn’t totally convinced of that. Neither was Luca. Manny had had plenty of time to work out what to say so he didn’t sound like a killer. And maybe he wasn’t. But Luca wasn’t taking him off the suspect list, and he

doubted Duncan or Bree would either.

“I need to have a word with my client,” the lawyer said.

Duncan nodded, stood, and Luca, Bree and he went back into the hall. “I want to get old work schedules for the hospital,” Duncan said, keeping his voice low. “I need to see if Nathan was possibly on duty when Brighton was murdered. We know he was at the bar that night, but we don’t have an exact time of death for her. I want to know where he was in the hours leading up to and after she was killed.”

“Good idea,” Bree muttered. “If he wasn’t on the schedule, then he can’t claim that as an alibi.” She paused. “Nathan could have murdered her,” she added. “Not premeditated but in the heat of the moment.”

Luca turned to her so fast, he heard his neck pop. “You said Nathan never got violent with you.”

“He didn’t,” she insisted, “but I thought maybe the potential was there because of his temper. It was always there, simmering just beneath the surface.”

Luca had to rein in his own temper over hearing that. Not anger aimed at Bree but at the SOB Nathan. And anger wasn’t going to help solve this investigation.

“Did you ever see Nathan wearing a Texas A&M ring?” Duncan asked her.

Bree shook her head. “And I think I would have noticed. Those class rings are usually big, and since I went to A&M’s rivalschool, University of Texas, I probably would have made some kind of joke about it.”

Luca considered that for a moment. “You dated Nathan long after Brighton had been murdered so maybe he quit wearing the ring after he killed her. He might have

believed the ring had left a mark on her. Like the bruise on her arm.”

Both Duncan and Bree made quick sounds of agreement. “Nathan might not have thrown the ring away,” Bree added. “He could have just stopped wearing it.” She looked at Duncan. “What are the chances of getting a search warrant to go through Nathan’s house?”

“Nil on the evidence we have.” Duncan groaned, shook his head. “Which as you know isn’t much. Yes, he was in the bar the night Brighton was murdered, but with her estimated time of death, she wasn’t killed until about four to six hours or so after she left Hush, Hush. Nathan could have been home. Or at work.”

Bree groaned as well, not because she was disagreeing with Duncan, but because she knew all of this was true. It also wasn’t a mark of guilt that two people had seen Nathan talking to Brighton. Neither was Manny’s speculation that Nathan had put those bruises on her.

So, yeah, nil chances on the search warrant.

“We can’t just ask Nathan if he has a ring like that,” Luca spelled out, “because if he’s guilty, he could toss it. If he hasn’t already done it, that is.”

They all went quiet, and Luca knew they were trying to figure out a way around this.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“I can pay Nathan a visit and try to have a discreet look around,” Bree threw out there.

Luca gave her a flat look and was sure Duncan was doing the same. They both voiced a firm “no” together.

“I wouldn’t take the ring if I spotted it,” she went on. “I could leave it in place and then you could get a warrant. If the ring is still there, it could have Brighton’s DNA on it since she was stabbed to death.”

“No,” Duncan repeated, and Luca shifted his flat look to a narrow-eyed stare.

“You’re not going into the house of a potential killer,” Luca insisted. “And even if he didn’t murder Brighton, Nathan has a temper and a short fuse. You could be hurt. Or worse.”

“I could have my phone on,” she suggested. “And Duncan and you could be waiting nearby to run inside the house if anything goes wrong.” She stopped and shut her eyes for a moment. “Look, I don’t want to be around Nathan, but these attacks have got to stop, and this might be the way to do it.”

“No,” Duncan said for a third time.

Bree clearly didn’t like that because she huffed. “Then, what? We can’t just ask around to see if anyone recalls Nathan wearing a ring because it’d get back to him and he’d ditch it.”

True, but an idea flashed into Luca's head. "We can search through social media and look for any photos of Nathan that might have been posted of him wearing a ring. Coupled with Manny's statement, that might be enough to get a warrant."

Duncan didn't look convinced, but he nodded. "Let's do that." He took out his phone. "I can get Joelle started on it right now. She's been chomping at the bit to get more involved in the investigation."

Yes, she had, and when Bree and Luca got back to the ranch, they could search as well. Newspaper archives might have something as well.

At the sound of footsteps, they turned to see Brandon making his way to them, and the deputy had his attention on a laptop he was carrying.

"We just got back the footage from the bank camera," Brandon explained, turning the laptop toward them and hitting Play.

Luca watched as Main Street came into view. Not the sheriff's office since it was tucked just out of sight of the camera, but as the feed advanced, he saw the smoke billowing out of the parking lot.

He soon spotted the woman.

Luca instantly recognized her because he'd seen her driver's license photo. It was Aubrey. She was on the sidewalk, moving in the opposite direction of the sheriff's office and the fire, but she was glancing over her shoulder.

And she smiled.

Luca cursed. The woman was actually happy that she'd put them in danger like that.

“I want an arrest warrant for her,” Duncan snarled.

“I’ll make that happen,” Brandon assured him. “For now, keep watching,” he instructed, though he sounded just as angry at the smile as the rest of them were.

Someone had already zoomed in on Aubrey so they watched as she lifted her phone that was already in her hand, and she made a call right before she walked out of camera range.

“The techs believe they can enhance the footage and get the number she called,” Brandon said. “What do you bet she was calling her boss to let him or her know the job was done?”

There were no bets because that would have almost certainly been what she’d done.

“What are the odds they can get the number?” Duncan asked.

“Good,” Brandon verified. “In a couple of hours, we might know the name of the killer.”

Chapter Thirteen

Back at the ranch, Bree glanced around the living room and saw nothing but frustrated expressions. Her own expression fell into that category as well. For the past four hours while the nannies and Sandra had watched the babies, Luca, Joelle, Slater and she had been digging through social media and newspaper archives to try to find a photo of Nathan wearing the ring.

They’d all struck out.

There’d been plenty of pictures of Nathan, but so far, his hands hadn’t been visible in

any of them. So, Bree had moved on to a different approach. She was calling jewelers who specialized in making and selling rings for the A&M School of Medicine. So far, she wasn't having much luck with that either, even though she had introduced herself on the calls as legal counsel for the Texas Rangers and was looking for information pertinent to an investigation. The people she'd spoken to had all been cooperative, but none had a record of Nathan purchasing such a ring.

Duncan was clearly getting some frustrating news as well because he'd started pacing and muttering under his breath while he listened to the latest call he'd received. Bree seriously doubted he was hearing anything that would give them hope that this case would soon be solved.

And that's why she would have to push the visit to Nathan.

Duncan, Slater and Luca weren't just going to agree so she needed to come up with an angle to convince them. She considered that while she made a call to the next jeweler on her list. As with the other calls, it took her a couple of minutes to work her way through to speak to the manager, and then a perky-sounding woman who introduced herself as Laine Martinez came on the line. Bree went through her spiel again, and as she'd done with the others, she gave the woman three names to search. Nathan's and two others that Bree had plucked from A&M class rosters. That way, the person wouldn't solely home in on Nathan's name and try to contact him.

"The ring would have been purchased about eight or nine years ago," Bree explained. "But please check for a couple of years in either direction in case—"

"Nathan Bagley," Laine confirmed. "Yes, he did purchase a ring from us."

Bree practically sprang to her feet, and it got the attention of the others, except for Duncan who was still on the phone. Slater, Luca and Joelle, however, came closer.

"I'm putting you on Speaker," Bree informed the woman. "I have three police officers with me who'll want to hear this. You can verify that Nathan Bagley bought a ring from you?"

"He did. The ring had the Texas A&M School of Medicine logo and is fourteen-karat yellow gold with a full carat diamond in the center. A custom design," she went on. "And because of the design, it was priced higher than most class rings. He paid just under five thousand dollars for it."

Not a fortune but still expensive. Maybe so expensive that Nathan hadn't been able to part with it.

"Do you have a receipt for the purchase?" Bree asked.

"Not a paper one, but all the information is here in my computer files. Would you like me to send you a copy?"

"Yes," Bree couldn't say fast enough, and she gave the woman her email address. The moment Bree saw the info pop into her inbox, she thanked Laine, ended the call and pinned her attention to Luca.

"No, I don't want you going into Nathan's house to look for the ring," Luca snapped, and then he sighed, and his expression softened. "It's too dangerous."

"It is," Duncan verified, having obviously heard the gist of what Bree had learned. He put away his phone and joined them. "We'll get to the ring and Nathan, but first, I need to tell you about Aubrey. The tech's got the number she called, but it was made to a burner. The recipient of the call was in Saddle Ridge."

Bree wasn't sure whether to groan or curse so she did both. "All three of our suspects were in Saddle Ridge at the time of the call," she pointed out.

Duncan did some groaning and cursing of his own. "They were, which means the footage didn't help us narrow down anything. Well, nothing except Aubrey being responsible for the fire, and there's no sign of her."

Bree had to hope that would soon change since there was an APB out on the woman. Of course, Aubrey might have already fled.

"I went ahead and told Brandon to cut Manny loose," Duncan added. "His lawyer

was squawking about no evidence to hold him, and he's right. So, I told Brandon to let him go with the warning that he not leave the state."

If he was truly guilty, Manny might run, but Bree figured he'd just stand his ground and fight any charges. Nathan would no doubt do the same, which was why they needed more proof. Or something they could use to exclude them as suspects.

Duncan took out his phone again. "I'm calling the hospital to see if Nathan is on duty." They waited, and like her calls to the jewelers, it took him several connections to get to someone who knew the answer. "He went home about an hour ago."

"I have an idea of how to deal with Nathan," Joelle said. She didn't continue until everyone faced her, and she kept her attention on her husband, maybe because she knew she'd have to convince him to go along with any sort of plan. "Since we now have proof that he bought a ring, I could go to his place with backup," she quickly added, "and ask him about it."

This time there were three negative responses. Luca, Slater and Duncan. Duncan's was the loudest.

"Hear me out," Joelle demanded, and Bree noticed her sister instantly switch to cop mode. "We aren't going to get a search warrant, not without alerting Nathan that we could be onto him being a killer. He'd just toss the ring before we got there and maybe say he lost it. But if I show up in an official capacity, with backup," she added again, "then I could question him about the ring. If he denies owning it, then you could use his lie to get a warrant and come straight over before he has the chance to dispose of it."

"And if he attacks you?" Duncan snarled. In contrast, he sounded more like a worried husband than a cop.

Joelle sighed. “He won’t because Bree and Slater will be with me.”

A hushed silence fell over the room. But it was short-lived. Then, the grumbles and complaints came.

“Nathan could be behind the attacks on Bree,” Luca was quick to point out.

“Yes,” Joelle admitted, “but he’s also smitten with her. Mercy, what a word,” she muttered. “But it’s the truth. He’ll be on his best behavior if Bree is there because he’s trying to win her over.”

“That’s true,” Bree said, earning sharp looks from Duncan, Slater and Luca. She went to Luca and ran her hand down the length of his arm while she met him eye to eye. “The attacks have to stop, and Aubrey is still at large. If I can do something to prevent Gabriel from being in danger, then I’ll do it. And I’ll go in armed,” she said. “With Joelle and Slater.”

Judging from the tight sets of their jaws, Luca and Duncan weren’t convinced. Slater, however, seemed to be seeing the logic of this so Bree continued with the argument.

“The three of us can just show up at Nathan’s,” Bree spelled out. “Joelle or Slater could read him his rights, and I could hang back, looking sympathetic and acting as if he’s being railroaded. That’ll make him less defensive and more inclined to play nice. More inclined to lie, too, since he won’t want to admit he has anything that can be linked to Brighton.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“I’ll use my phone to record him,” Joelle said, taking up the cause, “and if he lies, you get the warrant. Slater and I will detain him so he can’t leave the room and toss the ring. If he admits he has the ring, then I’ll ask him to let me take it into evidence for processing. If he refuses, get the warrant. This can work,” she insisted.

Luca looked as if he wanted to curse a blue streak. Probably because he knew it could work as well. But he was also aware of something else.

“Yes, it’s a risk,” Bree admitted. “We could be attacked going to or from Nathan’s house, but we could be attacked anywhere. Including here.” Mercy, it twisted at her to voice that last part, but it was true.

“Maternity leave hasn’t made me forget how to be a cop,” Joelle pointed out to Duncan. “And I’m a good cop. I’ll keep my eyes on Nathan the entire time, and if he tries to pull a gun, he’ll have three people pulling theirs.” She shifted to Luca. “I’m not going to let that scumbag lay one finger on Bree.”

The silence came again, and the moments crawled by before Duncan sighed. Bree could tell from his expression that they had convinced him, but he turned to Luca, no doubt to get his take on the plan.

“I could go in with Bree and Joelle,” Luca said, but then he immediately waved that off. “No, because Nathan would just get defensive. But I’m going to his house,” he insisted. “I’ll wait outside in the cruiser.”

Bree would feel safer with Luca that close, but that left them with a big problem. “The babies have to be protected,” she stated, though she was certain no one had

forgotten that.

“I’ll stay here,” Duncan said, taking out his phone again. “And I’ll have Woodrow and Sonya come and stay as backup. I’ll have them drive by Nathan’s place on the way here to make sure he’s actually home.” He made the call to get that started.

“You’re okay with this plan?” Joelle asked, glancing first at Slater and then Luca before her attention settled on Bree.

Slater shrugged. “This could definitely shake things up. Maybe it’ll shake in the right direction.”

Luca settled for a nod, and Bree could practically see the nerves tightening in every part of his body. “Give us a minute,” Bree said, taking hold of Luca’s hand, and she led him out of the living room.

Since Sandra, the nannies and babies were using the family room and adjoining kitchen, she didn’t head there. Instead, she took Luca to Duncan’s home office, a room that had once been her father’s. Yes, there were memories of him here, but at least it was private. She stepped inside with Luca and shut the door.

Then, she kissed him.

Bree hadn’t actually intended to do that, but her body was calling the shots here so she kissed him long and deep. Kissed him until she felt some of those nerves start to settle. It worked for her, too, though she knew there’d be a price to pay for this. She could end up with a broken heart since she was falling for Luca all over again. For now, she just enjoyed the moment. The heat.

And Luca.

Definitely an enjoyment, and her body went a little slack in places. The man certainly had a calming effect on her. A surprise since at the same time, he could make her want him more than her next breath.

It had been like this that last time when they'd ended up in bed. The night she'd gotten pregnant with Gabriel. And it stunned her to consider they could easily end up in bed again. Things certainly seemed to be moving that way, and even though she'd been the one to initiate the kiss, Bree didn't think she was ready for that big of a step.

Especially now.

When their son was possibly still in danger.

She eased back, immediately feeling the loss of the heat, and she stared into his eyes. "I can apologize since I shouldn't have done that."

"No apology needed or wanted," Luca let her know. "Did you kiss me to distract me from this plan?" he asked.

"No. But maybe I did it to try to level myself out. I want to do this," she was quick to add. "I need to do this, but I know things can go wrong." He groaned, but she cut him off. "Trust me when I say I'll do everything to stay safe. So will Joelle and Slater."

Luca stared at her for a couple of seconds and then let out a slow breath. "I do know it, but that doesn't stop me from worrying."

She nodded. "And I'll be worrying about you since you'll be parked outside Nathan's house. We'll both be worried about Gabriel," she added before she stepped back. "I need to go upstairs and get my gun." She'd put it on the top shelf of the closet when Slater had brought it over for her with some clothes and her toiletries.

“I’ll check with Duncan to see if he wants to put any more security measures in place, and then I’ll meet you in the cruiser,” Luca said, and they headed off in different directions.

After Bree had gotten the gun and headed back downstairs, she saw Woodrow and Sonya pull to a stop in front of the house. It was showtime, and just as Sonya and Woodrow came inside, Joelle gave Duncan a quick kiss before Slater, Bree and she headed out to Duncan’s cruiser. Bree took the back seat, and Slater got behind the wheel. Joelle was shotgun.

“Does Luca know you’re in love with him?” Joelle asked.

Bree frowned at her sister. “Who says I am?”

“Me,” Joelle and Slater said in unison.

Bree extended the frown to her brother, though he probably couldn’t see her face since his focus was on keeping watch around them. “It’s my guess you kissed Luca when you carted him off like that,” Slater went on. “And it’s also my guess that the two of you enjoyed that kiss way too much.”

“Is there a point to this?” Bree asked, huffing.

Slater glanced back at her just long enough to flash her one of his cocky smiles. “Yeah, the point is love, little sister, and that’s what you’re in when it comes to Luca.”

Bree wanted to dispute that. Couldn’t. Because, heck, Slater and Joelle could be right. But even if they were, she had no intentions of trying to work out her feelings right now.

“I’m looking for gunmen,” she muttered, pinning her attention to their surroundings.

Thankfully, Joelle and Slater did the same. Also thankfully, Luca hurried out of the house and into the cruiser, and Bree hoped he wasn’t picking up on the vibe that was still lingering around because of the short conversation she’d just had with her siblings. There was no need for Luca to be distracted with thoughts of how they felt or didn’t feel about each other.

Slater immediately drove away, not exactly speeding but not dawdling either. They were all on edge. All bracing for the worst to happen. However, there were no signs of a gunman or any other vehicles for that matter.

They made it all the way into town before they encountered any traffic, and it was minimal. Slater took the turn off MainStreet and drove the two blocks to come to a stop in front of Nathan’s place. As the deputies had said, Nathan’s car was in the driveway, indicating he was home.

The two-story white Victorian wasn't the biggest or most impressive in Saddle Ridge, but it did have an old money air about it, and Bree knew it was one of the first houses built in the area. At least one hundred and fifty years ago. And it'd been in Nathan's family the whole time. He'd inherited it from his parents after their deaths when Nathan had been in his twenties.

"See anyone hell-bent on trying to kill us?" Luca asked, his gaze combing both sides of the street.

Bree was about to say no, but then her attention landed on the front window, and she saw Nathan standing there, staring out at them. Maybe he'd heard the sound of the cruiser approaching, but it didn't seem to Bree that he'd been expecting them.

Just the opposite.

He was scowling, possibly the cold, hard stare of someone who wanted them dead. Nathan moved away from the window, and a couple of seconds later, the front door opened.

"Let me phone Duncan so he can listen in," Joelle said, making the call, and when he answered, she reached for the door handle.

Bree reached for hers, too, but she also gave Luca a look. She didn't repeat that she'd be careful, and he held back on anything verbal. But both of those things passed between them, and then Bree got out to go to the house with Slater and Joelle.

"What's this about?" Nathan asked, clearly directing the question to Bree. "What happened?"

"May we come in?" Bree tried to keep any wariness and emotion out of her voice. She probably failed though because there was plenty of emotion since Nathan could

indeed be a killer.

Nathan wasn't quick to agree to invite them in, but he finally stepped back. Not before shooting Luca a glare in the cruiser though. "What's this about?" he repeated.

"We have a few questions for you," Joelle said. She, too, had leveled her voice, and she was actually attempting a pleasant expression. "And we didn't want you to have to go into the sheriff's office." She took out her phone and lifted it to show him that it was connected to a call. "Sheriff Holder is listening."

Nathan eyed her with suspicion. "So, you brought the sheriff's office here to me, and that includes backup waiting in the cruiser," he grumbled, and he shifted his attention back to Bree. "Are you all right?"

There it was. That creepy concern that Bree in no way wanted from this man. "I'm holding up," she settled for saying.

He continued to study her. "I'm here for you," Nathan murmured. "You know that, right?"

His words made that icky feeling skyrocket, but Bree held back on saying anything. She didn't want Nathan on the defensive before they even got started.

"We don't want to take up too much of your time," Joelle interjected. "But since this is an official visit, I'm going to remind you of your rights." She didn't wait for Nathan to agree. Joelle just went ahead and recited the Miranda.

Nathan's eyes narrowed, and he whipped his gaze to Slater. "Have you come here to try to pin something on me?"

Again, it was Joelle who responded. "Actually, we were hoping you could help us

clear up something. Something that could eliminate you as a possible suspect.”

“I haven’t done anything to make me a suspect,” Nathan snapped. “What the hell is it you think I’ve done now?”

Bree’s skin was practically crawling from being in the same space as Nathan, but she pushed that aside and went closer to him. Not too close but she wanted to do something to diffuse the anger she could see building inside him. She knew Joelle and Slater wouldn’t be able to do that, but she could.

“We were hoping you’d help with the investigation,” Bree said. “There’s been some accusations, and while we’re not at liberty to divulge specific information about the case, we need your help.”

Nathan blinked, and just like that, the bulk of the anger faded. Probably because he might think if he did help, then it might earn him some brownie points in her eyes.

“What kind of help?” he asked.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Bree waited until Joelle gave her a slight nod before she continued. “We need to know if you have a Texas A&M class ring.”

Clearly, Nathan hadn’t been expecting that because his eyes widened. “What does a ring have to do with the investigation?”

“Maybe nothing,” she managed, “but it was just something that came up. Again, we can’t spell out the specifics.”

Nathan’s gaze stayed pinned to her. “This has something to do with Brighton’s murder? And with you being run off the road?”

“Possibly,” Bree admitted. Then, she waited for what she was certain would be the denial.

The moments crawled by. Nathan’s intense stare was making her stomach knot and twist. Her breathing and heart rate weren’t faring much better either. But once he lied, she could stop the pretense of being nice to him—

“I have a Texas A&M ring,” Nathan said.

Bree’s heart dropped. This definitely wasn’t what she’d expected him to say. They’d needed the lie to get the warrant.

Had Nathan figured that out?

Or was his admission simply the truth with no ulterior motive?

Bree didn't want to believe that, but she had to admit her personal feelings for Nathan were playing into this. She despised the man, and she'd maybe let that convince her that he was a killer.

"Uh, may we see the ring?" Bree managed to ask.

Again, Nathan didn't jump to agree, but he finally muttered some profanity. "I don't wear it often because it's bulky and could scratch a patient during an exam."

Or leave bruises on a woman. But Bree didn't voice that.

"I keep it in a safe in my bedroom." Nathan paused, continued to stare at Bree "Do you want to go upstairs with me while I get it?" he asked.

Bree figured that Duncan was silently yelling for her to say no, but she had no intentions of going anywhere alone with Nathan. Slater, however, quickly volunteered.

"I'll go," her brother said, causing Nathan's scowl to return in full force, but he didn't refuse.

Joelle and she paused in the foyer, watching as Nathan and Slater went up the stairs. Bree knew her brother was a good cop, but she felt the instant sense of worry and dread. She didn't want Slater alone with Nathan in case he tried to attack him and run.

"We'll come, too," Bree insisted.

That caused Nathan to stop, and he looked down at Joelle and her. Nathan wasn't doing a good job of covering up his anger, but there was also a touch of that ickiness, too, as if a small part of him was pleased that she'd be in his bedroom.

They all went up the steep stairs to a large bedroom at the front of a narrow hall. The door was open, and Bree could see the king-sized bed. Not antique. Nathan had gone for modern here, and nothing seemed out of place. Still, she continued to look around as Nathan went to a landscape painting on the wall and slid it to the side to reveal the safe.

While Nathan put in the combination, Bree looked around and knew that Slater and Joelle were both doing the same thing. They didn't have a search warrant and were not able to get one, but that didn't mean they couldn't spot something obvious that would link Nathan to Brighton and maybe the attacks. Of course, if there had been such a thing lying around, Nathan almost certainly wouldn't have invited them into the room.

The safe door made a clicking noise when Nathan opened it, and he took out a wooden box that he set on the foot of his bed. There was no lid so it was easy to see the contents. Assorted rings, watches and cuff links. Nathan plucked out the ring and tried to hand it to Bree. She looked at it but didn't touch it.

"May we take this into custody for a while?" Slater asked, pulling out a plastic evidence bag from his pocket.

"Custody?" Nathan challenged. The anger had risen again. "What the hell is this? Who said something about me and this ring that would make you want to take it?" He stopped, stared at Bree. "What do you think you'll find on this ring?"

"We're not at liberty to say," Joelle stated before Bree had to come up with a response.

Nathan did more staring, and then he cursed. For a moment, Bree thought he was going to refuse to give Slater the ring. He didn't though. He practically shoved it into Slater's waiting hand and then they all headed back downstairs.

“Was it Manny or Tara who lied to you?” Nathan came out and asked once they’d returned to the living room.

“What exactly would they lie about?” Joelle countered.

Nathan huffed. “Well, I’m guessing it’s about the ring, and that’s why you want to take it and send it to a lab. You’re expecting to find something. Maybe DNA. Maybe gunshot residue.” He leaned closer to Bree. “You won’t. You won’t find anything because I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Both Manny and Tara had said pretty much the same thing about their innocence. And maybe they were innocent. Heck, maybe Nathan was as well, but someone was responsible for the nightmare that had been set in motion.

“I hope you’re taking Manny’s jewelry in for processing,” Nathan went on. “Or arresting him. The man’s a liar, and he’s dangerous.”

“How so?” Bree asked.

Nathan smirked. “How many lies has he told you? I’m betting a lot,” he quickly tacked on to that. “Yet, he, or maybe Tara, convinced you that I had something to hide and that you’d find it on that ring. Don’t you see what he’s trying to do?” But he waved that off. “No, of course you don’t. You have trouble seeing what’s right in front of you.”

Bree frowned. “What does that mean?”

He tipped his head to the front of his house. “Luca,” he said and leaned toward her again. “Has it occurred to you that if you’re dead, he gets custody of your son? Sole custody,” he emphasized.

Bree had to bite back a whole lot of profanity, and she didn’t take the bait he’d just tossed at her. Nathan could want her angry. Or scared. He could want her to say or do something that would compromise the investigation. Then again, maybe he was delusional enough to believe he could put a wedge between Luca and her.

He couldn’t.

And as long as she knew that, there was no need for her to unleash some venom on him.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Bree said, using her lawyer’s tone.

She glanced at Joelle and Slater to see if they had all they’d come for, and both gave her confirming nods. That was all Bree needed to turn and get the heck out of there. She didn’t glance back to see Nathan’s reaction. She just left out the front door with her siblings.

Luca had his gaze pinned to the house, but he was also on the phone with someone. One look at his face, and Bree knew that he was aware of what had happened in the house. Well, maybe not aware of that last part that Nathan had hurled toward her.

“Woodrow was listening to Duncan’s phone,” Luca explained as she slid into the back seat with him. “And he called me to tell me that Nathan fessed up to owning the ring.”

She nodded, but that was all she managed to do because Luca’s shoulders suddenly snapped back in reaction to something Woodrow had said. “Where?” Luca demanded.

That one-word question and his expression were more than enough to send a jolt of fear through her. The fear only intensified when Luca snapped, “Drive,” to Slater. “One of the hands just spotted Aubrey near the ranch.”

Chapter Fourteen

Luca tried to tamp down the panic. Tried not to think the worst could be happening. But it might be.

“Gotta go,” Woodrow said, ending the call.

Luca wanted him to go, wanted him to do something to stop Aubrey from attacking them, but it meant Luca now had no way of knowing what was going on.

“Where was Aubrey spotted?” Bree asked, her voice already a tangle of nerves and adrenaline.

“By the back fence. A ranch hand using binoculars saw her, but then she ducked out of sight. He’s sure it was Aubrey because Duncan had given all the hands photos of her so they’d recognize her if they saw her.”

The back fence was about a quarter of a mile from the house, but a good marksman could hit a target from that distance. Luca didn’t know if the target was the house—and those inside it—or if Aubrey had been getting herself into a position so she could shoot them.

“If Aubrey had the ranch under surveillance,” Bree said, “she might have seen us leave and could be waiting for us to get back.”

Yeah, that was a strong possibility. Well, it was if Bree and he were her intended victims. If Gabriel was, then Aubrey could be working her way to the house right now, and heaven knew how many people she’d shoot or kill to get to him.

Slater was already driving fast, probably too fast, considering the narrow country road, but Luca wished they could break speed records to get there. His son could be in danger. Everyone in the house and on the grounds could be, and he needed to be there to stop this woman.

Since it occurred to him that Aubrey could be some kind of decoy, Luca kept watch. He also gave Bree’s hand a gentle squeeze. It wouldn’t help. Nothing would at this

point other than arriving at the ranch and finding everyone safe. But he needed the contact with her. Needed her touch to steady him some. Apparently though, she needed something from him as well because she looked at him with tear-filled eyes.

“We’ll stop Aubrey,” he swore to her. Luca didn’t know how, but he would stop her. And her boss, too, once this threat had been neutralized.

But who exactly was her boss?

They still didn’t know, and with Nathan volunteering to give them the ring, it might not be him. That left Tara and Manny. Hell, it might not be one of them either. It could be someone who wasn’t even on their radar, but if so, they’d have to find that person. No way could Luca let Gabriel and Bree continue to be in danger like this.

Luca already had his gun drawn, but he readjusted his position when the ranch came into view. And his heart dropped. The two ranch hands who were guarding the driveway were still there, but they were on the ground behind their truck where they’d obviously taken cover.

Not merely a precaution, either.

Because Luca heard the crack of the gunshot.

The back fence wasn't anywhere near this spot, but if Aubrey had climbed into a tree, she could have fired pretty much anywhere on the ranch. Maybe she'd decided to take out the hands first, one by one, and from that range she could maybe manage to do it.

More shots came, tearing through the truck. Aubrey probably couldn't actually see the men on the ground, but the gunfire was keeping them pinned down. Preventing them from returning shots. The same might be happening to the other ranch hands as well.

"I'm going closer," Slater said. "It'll maybe draw the gunfire away from them."

Since the cruiser was bullet resistant, that was the right decision. However, that didn't mean shots couldn't get through to Bree. Luca wanted to ask her to get down, but she was already taking out her own gun.

"I need to protect Gabriel, too," she muttered. She met Luca's gaze, and he could see the fierce determination there. A determination he fully understood.

"If you get a shot, shoot to kill," he advised her, hoping it wouldn't come down to that. Right now, anything and everything was a possibility, including the fact that Aubrey might not be alone. Another hired gun could be with her.

Or her boss.

If so, Luca hoped he got to take a kill shot. Everything inside him was shouting for him to take out the SOB who'd put babies in danger like this.

Slater pulled up behind the hands' truck, and he motioned for them to move to the side of the cruiser where they'd be better protected. They did while the shots continued. The truck and the hands were no longer the target though.

The cruiser was.

A bullet slammed into the rear window, right where Bree was sitting, but thankfully the glass held. For now. It might not if shots continued to hit that same spot.

"Trade places with me," Luca said, not waiting for Bree to agree to that. He wanted to be on that side in case the glass gave way. Because then he might be able to return fire and get Aubrey to back off.

"Should I open the door and let the hands in?" Bree asked.

"Not yet," Joelle said. "They're safer on the ground where they are. Besides, there could be a shooter waiting for you to open it."

Bree didn't gasp, didn't make any sharp sound of surprise, which meant those kind of scenarios had already occurred to her.

Slater's phone rang, the sound slicing through the noise of the stream of gunfire, and after he answered it, Luca heard Duncan's voice.

"Everyone inside the house is okay," Duncan was quick to say. "No shots have been fired at us. Lenny's spotted Aubrey though," he added, referring to one of the hands.

“And she’s no longer by the back fence. As you’ve probably guessed from the direction of the gunfire, she’s taken up position near the back edge of the property by the road.”

Luca immediately looked in that direction. And cursed. Because there was nothing but trees there. Thick clusters of them where Aubrey could be hiding.

“Lenny doesn’t have a clear shot, but he can fire into the trees to distract her. I would suggest you just get yourself and the ranch hands to the house—” Duncan continued.

“No,” Bree interrupted. “If we do that, she’ll just try to shoot us there.”

Duncan didn’t dispute that. Couldn’t. Because it was exactly what would happen.

“The hands here both have rifles,” Luca said. “I might be able to take Aubrey out.”

Bree was frantically shaking her head, but she stopped when Luca met her gaze again. This had to be done.

“I’ll tell Lenny to fire those shots,” Duncan said after a long sigh. “If it flushes her out, then put an end to her.”

Luca gave Bree one last look, trying to reassure. Knowing he failed. Then, he moved back to the side with the hands just as he heard the new rounds of shots. From Lenny, no doubt.

“I need your rifle,” Luca said, getting out of the cruiser. “Both of you get in the back seat.”

The hands did as he’d instructed, and Luca took aim over the top of the cruiser. Not exactly the safest position, but he had to see if he could spot Aubrey. He didn’t. Not

at first anyway. But then, there was an exchange of gunfire, and Luca saw the movement in the trees. Aubrey was in one of the large oaks, and she was moving out onto a thick limb, probably so she could kill Lenny.

Luca didn't let that happen.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

He took his own advice that he'd given to Bree. Shoot to kill. Even if that meant Aubrey wouldn't be able to tell them who'd hired her. He took aim. Fired.

And put two bullets in the woman trying to murder them.

BREECONTINUEDTOhold Gabriel even though the baby was asleep and had been for nearly a half hour. It was his bedtime, and she should have already put him in his crib for what would likely be a three-or four-hour stretch of sleep, but she needed to have him near her a few moments longer.

Those moments ended when Luca came into the guest room, and she could tell from his body language and expression that he needed to be near her as well. Along with that, he probably had updates on Aubrey. Updates she wanted to hear. So, she eased Gabriel into his crib, went to Luca and pulled him into her arms.

Bree hadn't planned to kiss him. But that's what she did, and the moment her mouth landed on his, she realized she needed this as much as he obviously did. Luca sank right into the kiss, stretching it out for several long moments before he ended it and pulled her close against him.

"There was nothing on Aubrey's body to indicate who hired her," Luca whispered. His voice was strained with fatigue, spent adrenaline and worry. "She had a burner phone, but she'd used that only to call another burner. We tried to call it, but no one answered."

Bree had expected that. Aubrey's boss likely would have demanded that she use a burner so Aubrey couldn't be linked back to him or her. But Aubrey's boss had

almost certainly wanted her to kill or kidnap Gabriel, Luca or her, and the woman had failed. In fact, no one on the ranch had ended up getting shot except for Aubrey.

“Are you okay?” Bree asked him. She could only guess at the emotional toll this was taking on him.

He nodded, but she figured that was a lie. None of them were going to be okay until the killer was caught. The only thing they could do was make the ranch as safe as possible, but they all knew that might not be safe enough. Now that it was night, the killer could use the darkness to get close to the house. Bree tried to imagine which of their suspects could manage to do that. Maybe all of them.

Or none.

It was just as possible the killer would send another hired gun like Aubrey.

“I need a shower,” Luca said, stepping back from her. “I, uh, have blood on my clothes. After the CSIs had photographed the scene, I helped them move the body into a bag,” he explained.

Aubrey’s blood. Bree hadn’t seen for herself how that’d happened, but once she was secure in the house, Slater and he had gone to check the body, to make sure Aubrey was truly dead and no longer a threat.

Bree took Luca by the arm and led him into the bathroom. She left the door open to the bedroom so she could hear Gabriel and turned on the shower. When Luca just stood there, staring at her, she unbuckled his holster and laid it and his gun on the vanity.

He kept his gaze on her.

Bree didn't shy away from that. After she pulled off his shirt, her eyes locked with his—those incredible brown eyes that always seem to drown her in heat—and she considered her options. She could go back into the bedroom and let Luca have that shower. Or she could do something about those raw nerves. Not just his but her own.

She went with option two.

So did Luca.

He slid his arm around the back of her neck and kissed her. Not exactly a kiss of comfort either since it was long, deep and filled with need. Still, his mouth did the trick of firing enough heat through her that the raw nerves just melted. Heck, she melted, but then she always did when Luca kissed her.

Maybe because his jeans had blood on them, he moved his hands between them to undo his belt and unzip. The touching added to the flames, especially since Luca didn't break the kiss to do that. It took some maneuvering, some dipping down and moving to the side with him, but their mouths continued to pleasure each other while he rid himself of his jeans and boots.

Bree took full advantage of having a nearly naked Luca. She touched him, sliding her hands down his back over all those muscles. The man was certainly built. And even though she knew the feel of every one of those muscles, this moment, this now felt new, as if she'd never had him before. That was probably because her body was starved for him, and that's why Bree didn't hold anything back. She kissed and touched until Luca was cursing her.

Cursing her clothes, too.

That's when she realized that unlike him, she was fully dressed. Luca did something about that. He yanked off her top, immediately kissing the skin he'd just bared. Her

neck. Then, the tops of her breasts. He stopped though. Just stopped, and his gaze fired to hers.

“Is it okay?” he asked, nearly stopping her heart because she thought he might, well, be stopping. “I mean, Gabriel’s two months old.”

Her heart revved up again. “Yes, it’s more than okay.” Except now, she had to pause. “Well, it is if you have a condom.”

He pulled away from her, located his jeans and fumbled through his wallet until he came up with the foil wrapper. She’d known he usually carried one, but Bree had never been more thankful to see it.

Luca smiled, probably because of her obvious relief, and he launched back into another kiss. Not solely that, though. He was obviously a man on a mission, and that mission was to get her naked because he unzipped her jeans and push them down until they dropped around her feet. He lifted her, turning her so she was sitting on the vanity.

Then, he kissed her again.

This slam of heat was so hard and fast that she couldn’t catch her breath. Soon, though, she didn’t care if she ever caught it again because all she could think of was what Luca was doing to her. He was taking her on one wild ride all the while firing up the need until it became a throbbing ache in the center of her body.

Luca didn’t ease away that ache but added to it when he stepped between her legs and pressed them center to center. He was hard as stone and pushed against just the right spot to make the need skyrocket.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Bree wanted him naked, and she wanted it now so she went after his boxers. Luca went after her panties and bra, but he clearly wasn't in the frantic now mode. Not yet anyway. She did something about that by closing her fingers around his erection.

He cursed her, and the sound that rumbled in his chest was all male, all need. All now. Finally.

It was Bree who did some cursing when it seemed to take a couple of lifetimes to get the condom on, and she might have cursed, too, at the immense pleasure when he pushed into her. She didn't have breath to form words. The only thing she could do was feel, and she was having no trouble with that.

Luca and she had been lovers for a long time so she knew the familiarity of this rhythm they found. And because he knew every inch of her body, he knew how to draw out the pleasure. He knew how to take her to the peak, right to the edge and then bring her back down so it could last a little longer.

He kissed her again but then pulled back, spearing her gaze as he made those now frantic thrusts inside her. Bree couldn't have come down from the peak now even if he stopped. She was past the point of no return, and Luca knew it. That's why he gave her exactly what she needed to feel the climax slam through her.

Bree let herself shatter, let the sensations wrack her body and wash over her. And when it was Luca's turn to take that fall, she gathered him into her arms and held on.

Luca eased Gabriel back into his crib, and he hoped now that the baby was fed and dry he would sleep for another four-hour stretch. A stretch that might give Bree some rest and him as well.

They'd managed a couple of catnaps, but they needed more. Despite being revved from the incredible sex, Luca knew they were both exhausted. That's why he'd done the midnight feeding and diaper change.

Luca slid back into bed, and Bree made a sleepy sound of satisfaction and automatically snuggled against him. She was warm and naked, and he wished they didn't have the threat of danger hanging over their heads so they could truly enjoy every moment of this night. It was still amazing, but Luca figured this was just a short reprieve. Tomorrow, they'd need to dive back into the investigation, and maybe they'd finally get the break they desperately needed.

After that, after the killer was caught, well... Luca wasn't sure what would happen, but he sure as hell wanted the chance to have some time to try to work out things with Bree. Unfortunately, that working out might mean they still continued to be apart, but he thought this night was a good start in repairing their relationship.

"Thanks for giving Gabriel the bottle," she murmured.

He sighed because Bree obviously wasn't asleep as he'd thought. Of course, that only gave him an excuse to brush a kiss on her mouth. She brushed one right back, causing him to smile. A kiss from Bree was something to be savored despite everything else going on.

Luca didn't have a second condom or he might have pushed the kiss to something deeper, but the deeper didn't get a chance to happen. Bree and he both groaned when his phone vibrated. He'd turned off the ringer so it wouldn't wake Gabriel, but his phone was practically skittering across the surface of the nightstand, which meant it

was making plenty of noise. Luca snatched it up and saw Slater's name on the screen.

Hell.

This couldn't be good. Not at this hour. The ranch should have been locked down for the night.

"What's wrong?" Luca answered in a whisper. He didn't put the call on Speaker, but Bree moved closer to him.

"Two of the ranch hands aren't responding," Slater quickly said. "We've been doing check-ins every hour, and they both missed the midnight one. I've tried to call them, but they aren't answering."

Luca mentally repeated his, Hell. "Where were they positioned?"

"Both by the back fence. One on the east corner, the other one the west. Yeah," Slater muttered when Luca groaned. If someone was going to try to sneak onto the ranch, those'd be the places to do it.

Luca got up and started dressing. Bree did the same. "I've got thermal imaging binoculars," Luca explained. He'd brought several back to the ranch from the sheriff's office, and Duncan had arranged for more to be delivered so the hands could use them. "Let me go to the window and see if I can spot anything."

"I've asked another of the hands, Mike Travers, to use his binoculars to see if he can locate them," Slater explained. "Mike's not at the best angle for that, but I don't want to pull him away from his area since he's guarding the spot near the road."

Luca made a quick sound of agreement. The road was a vulnerable part, too. Heck, there were lots of places that a killer could use to gain access to the house.

“The security system is on, right?” Luca asked, already knowing the answer, and Slater gave him instant confirmation.

“Woodrow’s monitoring that,” Slater explained. “He’s trying to get some sleep, but he’s got it set to alert him if there’s any movement in or around the house.”

The perimeter security and cameras were a new addition, put in just hours earlier. A series of motion-activated sensors had been staked into the ground around the entire house, and some had been positioned in the backyard.

“Good,” Luca said, putting on the rest of his clothes and hurrying to the window that would give him a somewhat limited view of the east back corner of the pasture. Limited because of trees and the outbuildings.

Luca handed his phone to Bree who’d joined him at the window, and he looked out with the binoculars. He got a jolt when he saw the glowing eyes but then realized it was a deer. He picked up the livestock, too, and a couple of raccoons. What he didn’t immediately see was a ranch hand or anyone else.

He shifted his view, panning the binoculars over the grounds, and he caught just a flash of a heat source. For a moment, he thought it was another animal, but then Luca realized the red blob was a torso. The person was on the ground, partially hidden by a tree, and he or she wasn’t moving.

“I think someone’s down,” Luca relayed just as he saw another slash of red. He muttered a single word of profanity because he had no idea if this was one of the hands or a killer coming their way. “I’m pretty sure we’ve got a breach,” he said, figuring the guy on the ground was indeed one of the hands.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Slater cursed, too, just as there was a knock on the bedroom door. Bree hurried to open it, and Duncan stuck in his head.

“The security camera has likely been compromised,” Duncan immediately said. “Woodrow just told me he thinks the camera feed’s on a loop.”

Luca’s stomach dropped because that was the same thing that’d happened to the baby monitor.

“I think we’ve got a hand down and someone already on the grounds,” Luca explained, handing Duncan the binoculars so he could see for himself.

It took a couple of seconds with Duncan moving the binoculars around, but his muttered profanity told Luca plenty. “Someone’s coming across the pasture, and I don’t think it’s one of the hands.” His attention slashed to Bree. “Grab Gabriel because you need to take cover now.”

THEFEARANDadrenaline slammed through Bree. Oh, God. No.

Please not this again.

She hurried across the room to scoop up Gabriel. She prayed this would turn out to be nothing, that her baby wasn’t in danger yet again. But she had the sickening feeling that a killer was coming for them. And they still didn’t know who was after them. Whoever it was, the person was relentless.

“Take Gabriel to the main bedroom,” Duncan instructed. “Joelle and Sandra are there

with Izzie. I want all of you in the bathroom. It's bigger than the one in here, and the shower stall is all tiled."

Tiled and therefore more resistant to bullets than a wall would be. Bree had to tamp down images of bullets slamming into the house, the way they had when they'd all been huddled in the barn. She had to tamp down a lot of things and focus on keeping Gabriel safe.

Bree glanced at Luca, and their gazes connected for just a second. He was checking his primary weapon and backup, obviously gearing up for a fight. One where he could be shot.

Or worse.

Yes, that was another image she had to shove to the side because she couldn't give in to the fear and panic. She had to do whatever it took to keep their baby safe.

Clutching Gabriel to her chest, Bree hurried down the hall. Unfortunately, the jerky movement woke him up, and he started to cry. She soon learned Izzie was doing the same thing as Joelle and her mother maneuvered them into the shower. The shower stall was plenty large enough, but her mother was trying to make it more comfortable by placing heaps of towels on the floor so they wouldn't have to sit on the tiles.

"I didn't grab Izzie's pacifier," Joelle muttered, handing off Izzie to their mother so she could run back into the bedroom.

Gabriel didn't use a pacifier, so Bree tried to rock him to soothe him. That wasn't working though, and she figured Gabriel had to be picking up on her racing breath and accelerated heartbeat. He was too young to understand the danger, but he likely sensed something was wrong.

When Joelle hurried back, she saw that her sister not only had the pacifier and a small stuffed animal but also her holster and gun. It was a reminder for Bree that she hadn't grabbed her gun from the closet. And she wanted it. If the killer managed to get into the house, she needed to be able to defend Gabriel and her family. Definitely not something she wanted to do because it would mean the killer had gotten way too close to them, but Bree didn't want to risk being unarmed.

Once Joelle had taken Izzie, Bree eased Gabriel into her mother's arms. "I'll be right back. I just want to get my gun and a bottle for Gabriel." He wouldn't be hungry, but a few sips might allow him to settle down enough to fall asleep.

As she'd done with Luca, Bree met her mother's gaze for a second. Of course, there was fear there. Plenty of it. But she also thankfully saw a resolve that Bree figured was in her own eyes and Joelle's. They weren't going to let a killer get near the babies.

Bree rushed back out into the hall and spotted Duncan and Luca on the stairs landing. Duncan went ahead down, but Luca stayed put while she made her way to him.

"What happened?" she asked because she could tell from his expression he'd gotten yet more bad news.

"Duncan's not sure how long the security system's been compromised," he said, the worry flaring in his eyes. "He checked the doors and windows, and they're all still locked, but he can't be sure someone didn't manage to get inside."

It felt as if someone had sucked all the air out of her body. She fired glances around as if someone might be ready to jump out at them. But she heard and saw no one other than Luca.

"I want to get my gun and a bottle for Gabriel," she managed to say.

Luca nodded. “Do that, and then go straight back into the bathroom. Lock both the bedroom and bathroom doors and turn off the lights. I don’t want anyone watching the house to be able to pinpoint our locations.”

She nodded and tried not to look ready to curse. But she was. It was heart crushing to know the danger could be so close to them.

Luca’s phone vibrated, and when he took it from his pocket, she saw Woodrow’s name on the screen. “Go ahead and get the gun and bottle. Duncan and I are going to do a room-by-room search downstairs and up here, but I won’t do that until you’re safe in the bathroom.”

A horrible thought occurred to her, and Luca must have known what put the terror on her face. “The killer didn’t sneak into our guest room or the main bedroom. If so, we would have heard it.”

That restarted her breath because he was right. It was probably the same for her mother’s room. That left the hall bathroom and the nursery. It was right next to the main bedroom and was empty since Duncan and Joelle had moved Izzie into their room.

Bree hurried into the guest room, grabbing a premade bottle of formula and the diaper bag since she wasn’t sure how long they’d be stuck in the bathroom. She took her gun, shoved it into the back waist of her jeans and went back into the hall. Luca was still there, talking on the phone to Woodrow. He had his back to her and was peering down the stairs, no doubt looking for any signs of trouble. Judging from his body language, he wasn’t seeing any.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Not until he turned toward her.

“Watch out!” Luca yelled.

Bree heard the sound of running footsteps behind her, and she whirled around to see the figure dressed all in black charging right at her. She dropped the diaper bag and bottle, reaching for her gun.

But it was too late.

She felt someone latch on to her, knocking away her gun and dragging her hands behind her back. The person slapped plastic cuffs on her before pressing a gun to her head.

LUCASHOUTEDBREE’SNAME, but she didn’t get the chance to run. Couldn’t. That’s because the person who’d run up behind her from the nursery hooked his left arm around her throat and put her in a choke hold. He pressed a gun directly to her temple.

Hell.

This had been exactly what they’d tried to avoid. What they’d been avoiding since the attacks had started. And now, the killer or one of his henchmen had Bree.

Her captor was probably a man, one several inches taller than Bree since he was hunching down behind her. He was dressed all in black, including a ski mask that covered everything but his eyes.

“What’s going on?” Duncan shouted, and there were the sounds of movement at the bottom of the stairs.

Luca brought up his gun to take aim even though he wouldn’t have a clean shot, but when the attacker turned his own gun in Luca’s direction, Luca had no choice but to dive into the open door of the guest room. He landed hard on the floor, the fall knocking the breath out of him so he had to struggle just to get to his knees.

“Stay back,” Bree yelled. “Everyone stay back.” Which was no doubt what her captor had told her to say.

The man didn’t come after Luca and follow up with what would have likely been a kill shot. But he did move. Luca heard the footsteps, heard the sounds of Bree struggling to get away.

And then she went quiet.

That got Luca hurrying to the doorway, ready to launch himself at her captor, but Bree was still alive and she shook her head.

“He says if I fight that he’ll shoot into the bathroom,” she muttered. There was terror in her eyes, and it came through in her voice. She reached in her pocket, pulled out her phone and dropped it on the floor. No doubt something else the man had instructed her to do.

“Who is he? Who has you?” Luca whispered.

“I’m not sure. He’s using something to alter his voice. Probably because he was worried we’d recognize who he was.”

Which meant this thug had come prepared. Of course, he had. He’d compromised the

security system and then had gotten in and hidden until the time was right to launch this attack.

The masked thug leaned in closer to Bree's ear and said something, but Luca couldn't make out what.

"He wants you to stay put," she said, her voice cracking. "You, too, Duncan," she added, shifting her attention toward the stair landing. "I'm going with him."

"To hell you are," Luca snarled.

There was no telling what this SOB would do to Bree if he got her alone. But then something occurred to him. If he'd wanted Bree dead, he could have just killed her on the spot. So, he wanted her alive, maybe solely as a human shield.

Maybe for something else.

"Trade her for me," Luca bargained.

The guy laughed, and the sound was like a cartoon through the voice distorter. A sick sound that ate away at Luca like acid. Somehow, he had to stop this from happening. He couldn't lose Bree, but he also didn't want this armed snake so close to the bathroom where the babies were. He had to hope that Joelle had already locked the door and was ready to stop anyone who tried to get in.

Bullets could still get through.

And that was probably why Bree didn't put up any kind of struggle when the man started toward the stairs with her.

"Duncan, move back," Bree instructed.

The masked man turned, angling Bree so that she was not only in front of him but so he was pressed hard against her with his back against the wall. That would ensure no one would be able to get a clean shot, not with him plastered to her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Staying low and prepared to dive again for cover, Luca came out of the guest room, his gun ready. He figured Duncan and maybe Slater and Woodrow were doing the same in the foyer.

“Duncan, he wants you to open the front door,” Bree relayed.

Luca could see her glancing around, no doubt looking for a way out. He prayed she would find one. If she could just manage to drop down, he would be able to send this snake straight to hell.

There was more movement in the foyer, and Luca heard the front door opening. He crept forward, peering down the stairs just as Bree and the thug reached the last step. Lightning fast, the masked man turned his gun toward Luca.

And fired.

For a couple of heart-stopping seconds, Luca thought he'd been hit. But the bullet missed, smacking into the wall above his head.

“Stay back!” Bree shouted. “All of you please stay back,” she added, her voice a strained plea.

Luca couldn't do that. He couldn't stay behind cover while she was in immediate danger, but he also had to time it so the masked man couldn't get off a shot inside the house. He inched forward again and saw the gunman and Bree had already reached the now open front door. Duncan, Woodrow and Slater were indeed all there. All had their weapons drawn and were peering out behind the arched opening that led into the

family room.

The thug looked up at Luca, and even though he still couldn't see the guy's face, their eyes met for a moment. Luca couldn't tell for sure, but it seemed to him that the SOB was smirking. The rage knifed through Luca, but he didn't allow it to trigger him into doing something reckless. It definitely wouldn't help matters if he got shot. Or if he did something to cause Bree to be hurt.

The thug moved her onto the porch, and that got Luca hurrying down the stairs. Woodrow, Slater and Duncan all came out from cover, too.

And the sound of a gunshot blasted through the house.

It took Luca a moment to realize it hadn't come from the thug dragging out Bree but rather it'd come from the direction of the kitchen. Every muscle inside him turned to iron when he saw someone. Another person dressed all in black and wearing a ski mask. He or she had a gun and fired again.

This shot, too, missed, slamming into the wall and sending Woodrow, Slater and Duncan scurrying back. Luca didn't head back up the stairs. Instead, he bolted out through the front door and onto the porch.

He cursed when he realized he still didn't have a clean shot. And worse. The thug was dragging Bree toward one of the ranch hand's trucks that was parked behind a cruiser.

Luca could only watch as the man shoved Bree into the truck. Seconds later, he started the engine and sped away.

Chapter Sixteen

The moment her captor started driving away, Bree tried to figure out how to escape. She hadn't wanted to fight before now and risk him shooting into the house. Or shooting Luca, Woodrow, Slater or Duncan.

But someone inside the house had fired a shot.

Probably a hired gun, and she prayed that everyone had stayed out of the path of the bullet. Prayed, too, that she could figure a way out of this truck.

Her hands were cuffed, but her legs and feet were free, and she tried to swivel around in the seat and kick the driver in the face. She landed a blow on the steering wheel that caused the truck to jerk to the side, but before she could regroup, the driver landed a blow of his own. He bashed the gun against her head, the barrel cutting through her stitches. Had she been standing, the pain would have brought her to her knees.

She fell back on the seat, gasping for air, trying to tamp down the searing pain. But it was overwhelming, and her chest was so tight, she couldn't draw in a full breath.

"There are still people I can shoot," her captor snarled in that fake voice. "If you want them to live, stop fighting."

She immediately spotted two ranch hands running toward the truck as it reached the end of the driveway. They would indeed be easy shots, so she pulled back. Temporarily. She had to regroup. Had to push away the pain, so Bree waited until the truck was on the road before she geared up to try to land another kick.

"One wrong move, and your baby will pay," he snapped.

That got her attention all right, and she stopped again. Even though her head was pounding and making it next to impossible for her to think, she recalled the shooter

inside the house.

Maybe more than one of them.

Maybe enough to overpower Luca, Duncan, Woodrow and Slater and get upstairs to the babies. Of course, an attacker would have to get through Joelle, but her sister could be gunned down. If so, Gabriel could be taken.

Or hurt.

Oh, God. That couldn't happen.

She couldn't lose Luca, her son and her family like this.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Bree cursed the tears that instantly burned in her eyes. Cursed that she didn't know what to do to save her little boy. Or even who had kidnapped her. She tried to pick through what she could see of him, but every inch of him was covered, and since he wasn't even using his real voice, she had no idea if this was Nathan or Manny. Or maybe neither. This could be another hired gun taking her to his boss.

“What do you want with me?” she demanded, hoping she'd be able to get answers that would help.

He didn't answer, but he was looking around for something. There were no other actual roads on this stretch, but he was still firing glances to his left. Maybe hunting for somewhere to stop. She had no idea though why he would want to do that.

The man continued to glance around, and this time he looked over his shoulder and ground out some harsh profanity. She soon saw why. There was a cruiser in pursuit. Somehow, Luca had managed to get away from that shooter in the house. He was coming after her.

That was both good and bad.

Because Bree very much wanted to be away from this killer, but she didn't want Luca or anyone else dying in the process. The odds were Luca would be able to catch up with them in the cruiser and follow them to wherever they were going. There could be a shoot-out, and she had no doubts that her captor would use her as a shield again so he could fire at Luca.

She turned back to her captor who was volleying glances ahead on the dark road and

in the rearview mirror. And she thought of a ploy. Probably not a good one, but she tried it anyway.

“Are you taking me to Nathan?” she asked.

The driver’s shoulders went stiff. Not a huge reaction. But she noticed it.

“Nathan wouldn’t want you to hurt me,” she tacked on to that.

He didn’t respond, verbally or otherwise, but she thought maybe she’d hit a nerve. The man had recognized the name. Did that mean Nathan had hired him?

Maybe.

Or was this Nathan?

“If this is about Brighton’s murder,” she tried again, “then it’s all for nothing. Silencing me won’t stop the investigation.”

He cursed again, maybe the sign of another raw nerve. But then, it could also be because the cruiser was quickly gaining ground. Bree saw in the side mirror as the driver pulled out into the lane next to the truck.

It was Luca, and Slater was with him.

Her captor saw them, too, because he belted out more of that profanity and jerked the steering wheel to the right. There was the sound of metal slicing into metal, and the bottom part of the passenger’s door started to cave in. Bree scrambled away from it so her foot wouldn’t get trapped if the door collapsed.

“Finally,” her captor muttered.

He twisted the steering wheel again, bashing into the cruiser. Bree watched in horror as the impact sent the cruiser into a ditch. She immediately geared up to try to kick her captor, but he must have seen it coming because he hit her with the gun again. Bree fell against the door, the back of her head hitting the window, and then she was immediately slung into the dash when he made a sharp turn onto a ranch trail.

Bree knew most of the trails in this area and was aware this one had gullies on each side caused by rain and erosion. She lunged across the seat and caught hold of the steering wheel to get them off the trail. The man cursed her and tried to knock her away with the gun, but Bree kept fighting. The truck finally veered off the narrow dirt path, and the front end plunged into the ditch.

The impact was like a collision, and Bree jolted forward. The airbags deployed, slamming into her captor and her and spewing a cloud of powder over the entire cab of the truck. Bree didn't waste a second. She dove toward the passenger's side door while the man tried to catch on to her. He had the disadvantage of being trapped behind the steering wheel by the airbag, but she had a huge disadvantage too. Since she was cuffed, she had to turn her back to the door to open it.

And her heart dropped when she realized it was jammed.

Pain shot through her shoulder and back, but she rammed against the door, all the while trying to kick her captor. When the door finally opened, she tumbled out onto the ground. She heard the man curse again, and he must have managed to bat down the airbag because he was there. Right behind her.

She kicked out again, somehow managing to get to her feet, and she started running toward the blue cruiser lights that were slicing through the darkness.

She didn't get far.

The man tackled her, both of them falling onto the ground, and he landed on top of her. She continued to fight. So did he. And in the struggle, the mask hiked up enough for her to see his chin and mouth. Even in the darkness, she recognized him.

Nathan.

LUCARANASif his life depended on it. Bree's life certainly did, and he sprinted away from the cruiser and toward the trail where he'd seen the truck turn. He couldn't let the vehicle get out of sight.

He had to get to Bree in time to stop her from being driven off somewhere.

Slater was out of the cruiser, too, and running behind him, but he was also calling to get the status of the immediate backup they'd already requested. They needed a vehicle here now if he stood a chance of catching the SOB who'd taken Bree.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Still at a full sprint, Luca turned onto the trail and nearly skidded to a stop when he saw the truck.

And Bree.

She was running or rather she was trying to do that, but the thug tackled her, both of them dropping to the ground. Luca started running again, and when the thug pulled back his hand, Luca saw that he was trying to aim the gun at Bree.

The snake was going to shoot her.

“Stop!” Luca yelled, already bringing up his own gun. He didn’t have a clean shot so he fired over the guy’s head to get his attention.

It got it all right.

The man rolled to the side, dragging up Bree in front of him so he could cower behind her.

“Coward,” Luca snarled plenty loud enough for her captor to hear him, and then he had to drop down into the ditch when the guy took aim at him.

He fired, too, and while the shot didn’t come anywhere near Luca, he shouted for Slater to be careful. Luca definitely didn’t want Slater to take a bullet meant for him. Hell, he didn’t want anyone other than this thug dying tonight.

“It’s Nathan,” Bree managed to yell. “He’s the one who took me.”

Luca spat out the name like profanity, “Nathan.” So, he was their attacker.

Nathan did some actual cursing, and he whipped off the mask and the voice alternator he had against his throat. He also latched on to Bree’s hair and pulled her up so that his face was right against hers.

“It’s too late for you to save her,hero,” Nathan taunted. “Too late for Bree to choose the right man.”

“You’re not the right man,” Bree snapped, and she tried to elbow Nathan in the gut.

Luca admired the fact that she wasn’t giving up, but he didn’t want her to fight right now. He didn’t want Nathan to have any reason to kill her. At this point, though, her knowing his identity was probably the only motive Nathan needed to end her life. That’s why Luca got down as low as he could and continued toward Bree. Maybe he’d get that clean shot he needed to take out this SOB.

“I’ve already told him if this is about Brighton, the investigation isn’t going away,” Bree said, straining against the grip he had on her hair.

“I don’t need it to go away,” Nathan was quick to say. “I just need the cops looking at someone else.”

Luca mentally replayed the words while he glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the movement. Slater was in the ditch, crouched down and making his way toward Luca.

“You’re going to set someone up for Brighton’s murder?” Luca asked. “Another cowardly thing,” he added in a mutter.

“I’m not going to jail for what happened to her,” Nathan practically yelled. “It wasn’t

my fault.” If he had any composure left, he seemed to be losing it fast. If he snapped, he just might start shooting before Luca could figure out a way to get Bree out of this alive.

“Are you saying it was an accident?” Luca asked.

Nathan jumped right on that. “Yes, an accident.”

That didn’t convince Luca one bit. Then again, there wasn’t anything Nathan could say that would make Luca believe he was innocent. After all, he was holding Bree at gunpoint.

“Things just got out of hand,” Nathan said, and then he made a hoarse sob as if he was about to break down and cry.

“Did things get out of hand with my mother, too?” Bree demanded. “Is that why you kidnapped her?”

“She was insurance, that’s all,” Nathan readily admitted. “Leverage. If the investigation had turned bad, then she would have been of use to lure out Bree. Or you.”

“Me?” Luca questioned. “Why the hell would you want Bree or me?”

“Because Sandra had an alibi for the night of Brighton’s murder. We didn’t know that at first, but then we found a photo of her on Facebook that would have proved she couldn’t have killed her. We couldn’t set her up to take the blame.”

Luca was surprised Nathan had admitted that since it also implicated him not only in Sandra’s kidnapping but also Brighton’s and Shannon’s murders. So, why would he spill it? And why wasn’t he just trying to get away with Bree?

Was Nathan waiting for a hired gun to show up?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Maybe the one at the ranch who'd fired those shots at Woodrow, Duncan and Slater?

When Luca and Slater had run out of the house to go in pursuit of Nathan, they'd left Woodrow and Duncan to deal with that. And Luca had to hope they had. It'd been two against one. Well, unless there had been others lurking around, but there'd been no choice about coming after Bree and trusting that Duncan and Woodrow would eliminate any threat at the ranch.

But maybe Nathan thought that person would escape and come to help him.

It wouldn't happen because Slater and he would hear an approaching vehicle and would prevent the person from getting to Nathan. Nathan should have realized that by now. He should be panicking and trying to run. Unless...

A thought flashed into Luca's head. A bad one. Nathan had turned onto this trail, and that might be because he knew help would be nearby.

Luca tried to pick through the darkness and look ahead on the trail. He couldn't see another vehicle, but that didn't mean one wasn't there. In fact, there almost certainly was since this particular trail fed out to a road.

"What? No questions for me?" Nathan shouted. "You don't want to know if I killed Bree's father? I didn't," he was quick to add.

Luca tuned him out because he was certain that Nathan was talking to try to distract him. It didn't work. Luca heard the sound of something or someone moving in the ditch on the other side of the trail. He pivoted in that direction and got just a glimpse

of the man. Someone he instantly recognized.

Because it was Manny.

And Manny fired a shot at him.

BREEHEARDTHEblast of a gun being fired, and for a heart-stopping moment, she thought Nathan had shot her. Or Luca.

But he hadn't.

The sound had come from her right, and she tried to turn in that direction. Nathan didn't let her. He tightened thechokehold, much harder this time, so she quit struggling so she could breath.

And pray.

That gunshot couldn't have hit Luca or her brother. And soon she got confirmation they were alive.

"Manny," Luca yelled, and she saw both Luca and Slater drop back down into the ditch.

"Manny?" she muttered.

What was he doing here? Had he come to help? Maybe he'd followed Nathan so he could try to clear his name.

But that wasn't it. If it had been, Nathan would have dropped flat on the ground with her, or he would have moved her so she'd be facing the direction of the shot. He didn't do either of those things.

“About time you got here,” Nathan snarled.

“I was waiting up the trail where I was supposed to be,” Manny snarled right back. “You’re the one who messed up by wrecking the truck.”

Bree heard every word they said, but it took her a couple of seconds to process it. Manny and Nathan were in this together. There hadn’t been one killer but two.

“You tried to pin the blame on each other,” Bree muttered.

“To muddy the waters of the investigation,” Nathan readily admitted. “And now we’ve got to get out of here. Sorry, Bree, but you can’t die here,” he added in a mutter. “We haven’t finished setting you up yet.”

So, that’s why they wanted her. Manny and Nathan were going to try to pin all of this on her. Unlike her mother, Bree didn’t have an alibi, but that didn’t mean anyone would believe she would kill the woman and then launch into these attacks to cover it up.

“I had no motive to murder Brighton,” Bree managed.

“There’ll be the motive,” Nathan said. “There will be texts to prove how much you loved me and how jealous you were of Brighton. They’ll be an eyewitness who saw you go into Brighton’s place that night. By the time we’re done, even your darling Luca will have thought you did it.”

Luca. Bree tried not to think of what he might be doing right now. He was no doubt trying to get into a position to save her. Slater, too. But what they wouldn’t be doing was believing she’d had anything to do with Brighton’s murder.

And that’s why Nathan would try to kill them, too.

“Why are you helping him, Manny?” Bree asked. “Why are you doing this?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Nathan chuckled. “Oh, Manny has just as much to lose as I do. Don’t you, Manny?” He put his mouth to her ear as if telling a secret. “Because you see, Manny was there when Brighton died. In fact, he was the one who set all of this in motion.”

Manny didn’t address that other than to huff. “Nathan, we need to get out of here. More cops will be coming soon.”

“You don’t think I know that!” Nathan snapped. “I’m not an idiot. I know they called for backup, and they’ll be here soon. Two minutes. If we haven’t gotten the text by then, we both start shooting.”

“What text?” Bree asked.

“More leverage. The best kind,” he added with that despicable taunting in his voice.

Bree had to fight the panic. Had to fight the groan that was trying to claw its way past her throat. She couldn’t handle worst-case scenario right now. She had to focus on getting Luca, Slater and her out of this alive.

“I thought you wanted me back,” Bree said to Nathan. “I thought you cared about me.”

“I despise you,” he admitted through what had to be clenched teeth. “You took my love for you and threw it back in my face. It sickened me to act all moony-eyed around you, but I endured because I knew one day I’d make you pay.”

In the distance, she heard the wail of sirens. A welcome sound for her, but it caused

Nathan to curse and tense even more. He laughed though when his phone dinged with a text.

“Well, the payment you owe me is about to start,” Nathan boasted.

Bree pushed aside any thoughts of what the text might be. Pushed aside everything but what she had to do. She gathered her strength and waited for Nathan to take out his phone so he could read the message.

Nathan kept his arm around her neck, kept the pressure so tight that she could barely breathe. But he finally lowered his hand, and therefore the gun, to his pocket. That’s when she moved.

“Now!” she shouted to warn Luca and Slater, and she rammed her elbow into Nathan’s stomach.

She didn’t stop there. Bree scrambled away from him, landing on her back so she could kick him. She landed a hard blow to his face, and she heard the satisfying crunch of his nose breaking. Her satisfaction didn’t last long though.

Cursing her, Nathan turned the gun toward her. Ready to kill her.

And the shot came.

The sound of it blasted through the air, and Bree waited for the pain. Waited for her own death.

But it didn’t come.

Nathan stopped, his head or torso freezing while his arms dropped limply to his sides. The rest of him dropped, too, and that’s when she saw the gunshot wound to the

center of his head.

Bree snapped toward the ditch and spotted Luca. He still had his gun aimed at Nathan and had obviously been the one to shoot him.

“Stay down, Bree,” Slater yelled.

“Manny,” she muttered on a rise of breath. He was there, and he could finish the job that Nathan had started.

Before she could even look in Manny’s direction, she heard the shots. Two back-to-backs that caused the fear to slam through her. Oh, God. Had Manny managed to shoot Luca and Slater?

Bree was terrified of what she might see, but she forced herself to look at Luca. He was still standing. So was Slater, and her brother had his gun on Manny. Or rather what was left of Manny anyway. Like Nathan, he was on the ground, and his lifeless eyes were staring up at the night sky.

The relief rushed through her so fast that Bree lost her breath again, but she still tried to get to her feet so she could go to Luca. He made it to her first though and pulled her into his arms.

“Are you all right?” he asked, fishing through his pocket to come up with a small knife. He used it to cut the plastic cuffs and then pulled her right back to him for another hug.

“I’m okay,” she said. It was a lie. She was shaking and maybe in shock.

Because this wasn’t over.

“The text,” Bree managed to say. “We need to see what was in that text.”

Luca was already steps ahead of her on that, too, and he snatched out Nathan’s phone. The screen was still lit with the message.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Hell,” Luca cursed. “Let’s go.” He took hold of Bree’s hand and started running toward the road.

“What’s wrong?” Slater asked, hurrying after them. “Who was that text from?”

“Tara,” Luca blurted while he ran, the world of emotion in his voice. “She said she has Gabriel.”

Chapter Seventeen

Tara.

The woman’s name hammered through Bree’s head as Luca, Slater and she ran. Tara had Gabriel. And that meant Tara had likely been the person who’d fired those shots inside the house at the ranch. She was in on this with Nathan and Manny.

All three had worked together to create this nightmare.

She didn’t ask why Duncan, Joelle, her mother or Woodrow hadn’t stopped Tara from taking Gabriel. Because Bree couldn’t deal with the sickening dread that they were all now dead. If Tara had Gabriel, then she’d managed to neutralize them in some way.

No, she couldn’t ask about that.

She could only focus on getting to the ranch so she could find Tara and get her son.

They ran out onto the road just as a cruiser braked to a loud stop next to them. Sonya was behind the wheel with Carmen in the passenger's seat.

"What the hell happened?" Sonya asked.

Luca didn't answer. He threw open the back door, and Slater, Bree and he all piled in. "Get to the ranch now," Luca demanded.

Sonya didn't hesitate. She gunned the engine, the tires squealing against the asphalt, and she got them moving while Luca yanked out his phone. Bree saw that he was trying to call Duncan. If she'd had her phone, she would be trying to call Joelle or her mother.

Luca cursed when Duncan didn't answer, and Bree nearly lost it. She wanted to scream. She wanted to tear the world apart to get to her son, but losing it wouldn't help. They had to focus. They had to get to the ranch and find Gabriel.

Slater took out his phone, too, and he called Joelle. Since he put it on Speaker, Bree could hear the rings as she watched the scenery fly past the window. Her heart crushed with each unanswered ring.

And then Joelle answered.

"I'm a little busy here," Joelle said, sounding out of breath but very much alive. "Are you all okay? Did you get Bree?"

Bree didn't want to respond to those questions. Not when she only wanted to know one thing. "Gabriel," she blurted. "Did Tara take him?"

"She tried," Joelle confirmed. "But she didn't succeed."

Bree went limp with relief, and she sent up a thousand prayers. “But Tara sent a message saying she’d taken him.”

“Sorry about that. The text was already composed on her phone, just waiting there, and during the scuffle to retain her, it was accidentally sent. We didn’t know who the recipient was since it was being sent to a burner.”

Bree was beyond thankful that was how things had played out. “Is Gabriel hurt?”

“No,” Joelle was quick to assure her. “No one here is. Well, except for Tara. She’s got some cuts and bruises from Duncan and Woodrow tackling her to get that gun and phone away from her. Duncan’s cuffing her now.” Joelle paused. “Please tell me Luca, Slater and you took care of Manny and Nathan.”

So, her sister knew. “They’re both dead.” That prompted Carmen to make a call to dispatch to get someone out to the scene to secure the bodies.

“Good,” Joelle murmured, and she repeated that as if trying to steady herself. “Tara’s talking, and she said Nathan and Manny put this plan together.”

Soon, Bree would want to hear all about that plan, but for now, she just needed to see her baby. Sonya was trying to make that happen. She was driving as fast as possible while Carmen continued her call to coordinate the efforts to secure the crime scene.

“They were all three in on this,” Bree managed to say.

“Yeah.” That was all Joelle said for a long time. “How far out are you?”

“Under a minute,” Bree said after she glanced around. A minute that was already feeling like an eternity.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Joelle made what sounded to be a sigh of relief. “Mom’s still in the bathroom with both babies, and Woodrow is there standing guard.”

Bree didn’t ask why he was doing that. She knew there could be other hired guns around.

“Some of the ranch hands are searching every inch of the house while others are going over the grounds,” Joelle explained. “Every available deputy and reserve deputy will be here soon to help us make sure everything is secure.”

“Thank you,” Bree managed.

“You’re more than welcome. Just get here,” Joelle said. “I’m signing off so I can better aim my gun at Tara in case she thinks about trying to escape.”

Her sister ended the call, and Bree turned to Luca. She hadn’t allowed herself to really look at him because she’d known what an emotional punch it would be. And it was. She couldn’t fight back a sob any longer, and she practically tumbled into his arms.

“It’ll be okay,” he murmured, brushing a kiss on her head.

She winced a little because she realized she probably had some bruises there from being manhandled by Nathan. It felt as if she’d popped a couple of stitches as well. But that was minor stuff. They were all alive, and Gabriel was safe.

“I’m sorry,” Luca said, and she got the feeling he wasn’t apologizing because of the

pain that had caused her to wince. No. Luca was putting all of this nightmare on his shoulders.

Bree eased back, caught onto his chin and kissed him. She made it long, hard and deep, and when she ended it, she looked him straight in the eyes.

“You did everything to put a stop to the danger,” she told him. “You saved me.”

Bree would have added more. So much more. But Sonya took the turn to the ranch, and both Luca and Bree readied themselves to jump out. That’s what they did even before the cruiser was at a full stop, and they ran into the house.

Duncan and Joelle were indeed there, and Joelle had a gun aimed at Tara who was cuffed and belly-down on the floor. Duncan was in the process of bagging her phone and gun.

“I want a deal,” Tara shouted when her attention landed on Bree. “Immunity for testifying against Nathan. He’s the one who got me into this, and Nathan killed my sister.”

“Manny and Nathan are both dead,” Luca snarled, and he hurried up the stairs with Bree.

Tara continued to shout, but they ignored her and went to the bathroom door where Woodrow was indeed standing guard. He quickly let them in to the quiet room. Emphasis on quiet. Her mother was still in the shower stall with a baby in each arm, but both Gabriel and Izzie were sound asleep.

“Thank you,” Bree told her mother and figured she’d be saying that a lot tonight.

Bree went to the shower and eased Gabriel into her arms. She immediately pressed

against Luca so he could get in on kissing their son and making sure he was okay. There was so much relief in that moment. Relief that likely would have brought her to her knees had she not been leaning against Luca.

They both examined their little boy, making sure there were no injuries. Physically he was fine. And he thankfully wasn't showing any obvious signs of trauma because he continued to sleep.

Bree wanted to just stand there and hold him until some of the raw nerves had settled in her body, but there were still a few loose ends to wrap up. Added to that, she wasn't sure the hands had finished their search of the house.

"Just stay in here a little while longer," Bree told her mother and put Gabriel back in her arms. "As soon as Duncan gives us the all clear, we'll be back up to get you."

Her mother nodded, blinking away tears, but Bree thought they were definitely of relief. They'd all had a horrible scare tonight. A scare brought on by three people who'd joined forces to create a living hell.

Bree wanted Tara to pay for that.

Luca slipped his arm around Bree as they headed out of the bathroom and toward the stairs. He stopped on the landing, and even though they could hear Tara cursing and sobbing below, Luca still took a moment to kiss her. That helped with the nerves. Helped generate some heat, too, but she could practically feel the apology coming off him.

"Not your fault," she reminded him.

"I should have realized they were lying," he argued.

“You did realize it. You just didn’t know what they were lying about. You need to request to be issued a crystal ball.”

He gave her a flat look. “I needed to have been a better cop.”

She could have reminded him that none of them had seen this unholy alliance between all of their suspects, but Bree figured a kiss was the way to go here. She kissed, and kissed and kissed until she finally felt some of the tension slide right off her. She might have continued but she heard Tara break into a sob. On heavy sighs, Luca and she went down to see what was going on.

“Manny’s really dead?” Tara asked. Duncan had moved her to a sitting position, and both Carmen and Sonya were getting the cruiser ready to take her into custody.

“He is,” Luca verified.

That brought on more sobbing from Tara. “He’s dead,” the woman said and she kept babbling it. “You didn’t have to kill him.”

“I beg to differ,” Slater spoke up. “He was about to shoot Luca and me.”

Tara sucked in a hard breath, nearly choking on it, and she shook her head while tears streamed down her cheeks. “This is all Nathan’s fault. Manny and I wouldn’t have gotten mixed up in this if it weren’t for him.”

“She’s been Mirandized,” Duncan informed them. “And she’d obviously decided not to remain silent.”

“I want the world to know what Nathan did,” Tara snarled. “All of this is his fault.”

“How so?” Bree asked.

“Because he started up things with that woman. Brighton,” she snapped out like profanity. “Nathan must have known that Manny was still sniffing around her, but that didn’t stop him. So, Manny decided to go to Brighton’s place to confront her. I followed him because, well, because.”

“You were in love with him,” Bree provided.

“Yes,” Tara readily admitted, “and I was hoping once Manny saw Nathan and Brighton together that it would get her out of his system. It didn’t.” Her voice broke

and she began to cry again. “Everything got messed up.”

“How?” This time it was Luca who pressed for more details.

“A heated argument. Brighton said some horrible things about both Manny and Nathan.” She paused. “Nathan slapped her, and Manny stepped in. A fight broke out, but then Brighton attacked Manny. She was punching, and I tried to stop her.”

“Who actually killed her?” Bree asked.

“Nathan,” she snapped but then shook her head. “Both Manny and Nathan. It was awful. Everything was out of control, and Brighton wouldn’t hush. She just kept telling Nathan and Manny that they were pathetic losers. She said she was going to file charges against both of them for assault and stalking.”

“Only one of them stabbed her to death,” Duncan snapped.

Tara shook her head. “Both of them did. Manny lost it. He just lost it, and he grabbed a knife from her kitchen counter. It seemed to go on forever, and she didn’t die. She just kept fighting and clawing at them. Then, Nathan shoved Manny aside and finished it.”

So, Nathan was the killer. But Manny and Tara were accessories.

“Nathan said Manny and I would be charged with murder if we went to the cops,” Tara went on. “He said as accomplices that we’d get the same sentence as if we’d actually killed her. I looked it up, and it’s true.”

Yes, it was. And while it likely wouldn’t have been a capital murder charge had they reported it, they still would have ended up with life sentences.

“Nathan took Brighton’s top because he said it would have all of our DNA on it,” Tara added. “He said that was his assurance that we wouldn’t try to save our own skins.”

Bree shook her head. “So, you created a pact of silence. How did my mother fit into that? And my father?”

Tara’s denial was fast and frantic. “We didn’t kill your father. I swear. We were all stunned when it happened.”

Maybe. But it was possible that Nathan was faking his reaction. Then again, he had denied killing her father when he’d been holding her at gunpoint.

“Your mother, well, we took her,” Tara said. “Or rather Shannon and Aubrey did. Manny set that up, but he messed up by using Nathan’s real name. Nathan was so mad and threatened Manny and me until Manny fixed it by linking it to some offshore account deal.”

Manny had hidden those steps well. His business experience had likely helped with that.

“Your mother was continuing to dig and had made the connection between Brighton and the bar,” Tara went on. “Manny and Nathan were worried she might learn the truth. So, we took her and thought we could somehow set her up for Brighton’s murder, but we found out she had an ironclad alibi.”

Hearing that gave Bree a fresh slam of fury. “So, you what...just decided to hold her captive?”

Tara nodded. “Nathan knew you were digging, too, and he wanted to be able to use your mother as leverage.” She swallowed hard. “Your son, too. He said you’d

cooperate with anything if we had your son.”

This time, it was more than fury. It was a whirl of sickening disgust at this trio who hadn’t wanted to take responsibly for what they’d done.

“But Nathan wanted more than my cooperation,” Bree pointed out. “He told me he was going to frame me for Brighton’s murder.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 pm

Tara gave another nod. “It was all supposed to be over tonight. We’d have the baby to make you confess to the murder, and the investigation would all go away. We’d be in the clear.” She shook her head. “But now they’re both dead. Shannon, too. Manny killed her when she screwed up and let your mother escape.”

So, Nathan and Manny had murdered at least two people, and they’d orchestrated a whole litany of other crimes.

“I didn’t want to do any of this,” Tara insisted. “But Nathan drew up the plan and said I’d go to jail if I didn’t do everything he told me. Manny and I were to lie and point the finger at each other. Nathan said that way, it would mess with the investigation.”

It had done that. All the lies. All the accusations. Peppered with attacks. In hindsight, those attacks hadn’t been meant to kill her, but they could have. In fact, all of them could have been killed.

“You gave us that video of Manny,” Luca reminded Tara.

Tara lowered her head. “Because I was so angry that Manny had killed Shannon. I thought, well, I wasn’t thinking straight, but I couldn’t come and say Manny had killed her so I’d hoped you’d arrest him for Brighton’s murder. I figured Manny would accuse Nathan and me of helping him do that, but there wouldn’t be any proof. Manny would end up paying.”

“So, why’d you go through with the plan tonight?” Bree demanded.

“Because I was scared of Nathan. Of what he might do. I’m not a killer like Manny and him. I’m not. I was supposed to kill the hands when we sneaked onto the ranch,” Tara murmured. “I just couldn’t. I used a stun gun on them instead, tied them up and took their keys so we could escape in their trucks. That counts for something, right? It counts that I didn’t kill them?”

Disgusted, Bree only shook her head and stepped back. Luca was right there to take hold of her and walk with her into the dining room when Sonya and Carmen began to walk Tara out to the waiting cruiser.

“She’ll spend the rest of her life behind bars, and that doesn’t feel nearly enough,” Bree muttered.

She felt the anger taking over, and she quickly shoved it aside. The anger was justified and would maybe always be there, but she didn’t want this moment to be about that. Luca, their baby and she were all alive, and that’s what she wanted to latch on to. Later, she’d deal with her feelings for Tara, but for now, she needed Luca.

Bree pulled Luca to her and dropped her head on his shoulder. Instant relief and comfort. Everything about it felt right.

Because it was.

Luca and she were right together.

Part of her had always known that, and it was why she’d found herself going back to him time and time again. It was why she wanted to be with him now.

“You know I’m in love with you,” she admitted.

He eased back, lifted his eyebrow. “Really? You never said.”

“Well, I’m saying it now. I’m in love with you, and I don’t want to co-parent our son. I want the whole parent deal with you with us for, well, everything.”

Now, he smiled and brushed his mouth over hers. “Good.”

He kissed her. Really kissed her. And she felt the remnants of the anger and fear just vanish. The man could certainly work miracles. But he stopped the miracle kiss and stared down at her.

“You know I’m in love with you,” he said, giving her back her own words.

She mimicked his gesture of a raised eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really,” he verified, and he finished that off with exactly what she needed to hear.

“And everything is exactly what I want with Gabriel and you, too.”