



Chasing a Kidnapper (Dakota K-9 Unit #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: K-9 team will do anything

to protect a baby in danger

When patrol officer Trisha McCords six-month-old son is nearly abducted, K-9 officer West Cole saves him just in time. The single mom has no leads on who would try to take her baby—or why. And West won't let her deal with the threat on her own, especially with the kidnapper closing in and attacks escalating. With her child's life at stake, Trisha, West and his K-9, Peanut, must race to catch a ruthless criminal in time to save innocent lives—

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ONE

Where is he?

Plains City, South Dakota Police Detective West Cole peered through the foggy night as he drove his undercover SUV through town. His new K-9 partner, a female beagle named Peanut, was tucked in her rear compartment, her nose pressed against the screen. He murmured words of encouragement to the brown and white dog, knowing she still missed her previous partner, Kenyon Graves. Kenyon had been killed three months ago in an explosion set by the gun-trafficking ring they'd been investigating. Thankfully Peanut had been spared, and he'd taken over as her K-9 handler to use her expertise to sniff out illegal weapons.

His chest tightened painfully as he thought of his best friend and colleague. Losing Kenyon had been devastating to the entire Plains City Police Department, but especially to him, as he and Kenyon had been very close. Since that terrible night, West had focused all his time and energy on getting justice for his friend. Not to mention Kenyon's three-year-old twin sons, who were now orphans.

Orphans with a home, since Raina McCord, Kenyon's childhood friend, had been named as their legal guardian. He was glad to know the boys were in good hands, yet West fully intended to find the gun traffickers to make them pay for their crimes. For Kenyon's sake, and for the rest of their department. These monsters had caused enough damage. The violence in their city would only escalate more than it already had if they didn't get these weapons off the streets.

And soon.

Yet they had very few leads. Which was why he was here, patrolling the area of the city where he'd caught Petey Pawns last year. He'd arrested the guy for illegal possession of a firearm, but unfortunately, Petey was already out of jail. It wasn't a stretch to assume Petey had gotten his illegal weapon from the traffickers.

A weak link? Maybe, but it was all he had. And West was determined to find him.

The shifting fog made it difficult to see well, but he wasn't giving up. He drove past the Plains City Pizzeria and caught a glimpse of a large and boxy shadow behind the restaurant.

A vehicle? His curiosity peaked as he doused the headlights and made a loop around the block. He parked a good thirty yards away from the pizzeria and reached into the glove box for his binoculars.

It took a moment to focus on the man lugging something large and heavy out of the back door of the pizzeria and into the back a dark gray truck. From what he could tell, there were other boxes in the back, too. There was no label on the truck, making him doubt it was food items being moved out of the building at ten o'clock at night.

Adjusting the lenses on the binocs, he thought he saw the initials SD on the outside of one of the boxes. South Dakota? Or something else? Maybe a city somewhere? Before he could look further, the man stepped back, turned and reached up to close the back door. West caught just enough of the guy's profile to identify him as Petey Pawns.

"Well, well," he murmured. "Up to your old tricks, huh, Petey?" He felt certain the guy had been lured back into the criminal world. Yet there was the very remote possibility Petey was doing a legit truck driving gig.

He considered calling for backup or getting out to investigate with Peanut. Her keen

nose would alert to the scent of gunpowder and gun oil. But before he could move, Petey jumped up behind the wheel of the truck. The lights came on, and the truck rolled down the street, away from the pizzeria.

Were there guns in the back of that truck? Determined to find out, he quickly shifted into gear and eased away from the curb to follow. He didn't turn on his headlights, despite the danger of driving in the fog without them, unwilling to attract Petey's attention.

He wanted to know where Petey was delivering the boxes. And who might be waiting for him on the other end of the line to receive the goods.

In his opinion, if Petey was involved in the gun running organization, he was likely a low-level player. If this was a gun shipment rather than food being transported out of town, West wanted to find someone higher up in the criminal organization. Yet he needed to be careful, as it was likely Petey was armed.

Along with anyone he might be meeting up with.

He lifted his hand to his radio to call dispatch. "This is Detective West Cole. I'm following a dark gray truck heading northwest on highway twenty-four with unknown cargo in the back. The vehicle is being driven by Petey Pawners, a possible suspect in the gun trafficking case. I may need backup."

"Roger, Detective. Please keep us apprised of your situation," the dispatcher calmly replied.

"Ten-four." He ended the call and flicked on his headlights. He was far enough behind Petey that he didn't think the guy would notice. Not to mention, the truck was heading out of town and into a rural area of the state where deer and other wildlife were known to abruptly leap across the road.

As he followed Petey, he thought about the Plains City Pizzeria's role in this. He was going to feel like an idiot if there were pizzas in the back of the truck, but his gut told him otherwise. Petey had moved as if the box was heavy, and there were other boxes of similar dimensions inside the truck, too.

Not pizzas. He felt sure of it.

If he'd been a few minutes later in his patrol, he might have missed the entire thing. Had God been watching out for him? Maybe. But since Kenyon's death, he wasn't exactly on speaking terms with the heavenly Father.

Was it possible Henry and Martha Anderson, the owners of the pizzeria, were involved in whatever was being stored in the back of the restaurant?

One of the employees?

Or had Petey and the rest of the criminal enterprise managed to use the storage area of the pizzeria without anyone being the wiser?

Despite knowing Martha and Henry for years, he had no way of knowing for sure. Money could be an incredible motivator. Most people in the Plains City area were far from rich. And the rise in inflation had hit hard.

Petey increased his speed. West did the same, keeping at least four to five car lengths between them. The fog lifted a bit, which was both a blessing and a curse. He checked the road signs, his heart sinking a bit as he realized Petey was heading in the general direction of the Black Hills.

Out of the darkness, bright red and blue lights of a patrol car from the right blinded him. He lifted a hand to ward off the glare, glancing to the right-hand side of the road. To his horror, a Plains City squad white sedan with black doors shot out of a hidden

driveway, cutting directly between his SUV and Petey's truck.

No! He didn't want Petey pulled over!

He reached for his radio to alert the patrol officer, but it was too late. The squad car had closed the gap, and Petey was already pulling off to the side of the road in compliance to the red and blue flashing lights.

Hesitating, West slowed and considered his options. He quickly doused his headlights and pulled off the road a few yards behind the squad. Then he grabbed his binocs again, to see what was happening.

Petey hadn't been speeding, so he wasn't sure what had caught the officer's attention. Maybe a burned out headlight? If so, maybe Petey would simply accept the ticket for whatever infraction he'd committed and continue on his merry way.

His gut clenched with dread. No, that wasn't likely. Petey would know his name and driver's license would be run through the system, his previous gun conviction a bright red flag for the officer to see.

Not good. He couldn't let this officer approach Petey alone. West quickly slid out of the SUV, having turned the dome lights off earlier, then released the back for Peanut to get out, too. The beagle wasn't a guard dog, but he didn't want her to be trapped inside the SUV if things got dicey.

When he caught sight of a pretty female officer getting out of the squad car, his chest tightened with tension.

Trisha McCord was a seasoned patrol officer with the Plains City Police Department, but she had no idea what she was walking into. He walked swiftly forward with Peanut keeping pace at his side, hoping he could reach her before this situation went

sideways.

The driver's window lowered, but Petey didn't make any effort to get out of the truck. West held his breath as Trisha approached the driver's door, her hand resting on the butt of her gun.

"Sir?" Her voice held a note of authority. "I'm going to need you to step out of the vehicle."

There was no response from inside the truck. The tiny hairs on the back of West's neck rose in alarm. In the rearview mirror he caught a glimpse of Petey's right hand coming up holding what appeared to be a weapon.

"Gun!" He sprinted forward as the sharp report of gunfire rang out.

Patrol Officer Trisha McCord ducked and returned fire at the driver's side window. Then quickly pressed herself up against the side of the truck as more gunfire erupted.

What on earth was going on?

Several more rounds erupted, and the truck at her back lurched to the side. The tires. Someone had shot out the truck tires. Likely the same person who'd alerted her to the gun the driver had in his hand, just in time to avoid being hit.

Good. She wasn't alone in this. Yet the situation was still fluid. Trisha edged along the side of the truck toward the driver's window, holding her service weapon in both hands.

"Get out of the truck! Now!" she shouted.

Still no answer. Fearing a trap, she inched closer expecting the driver's door to open

at any moment, revealing an armed man.

More gunfire blasted, but this time the sound came from behind her. No, it was the other side of the truck! She whirled in time to see the windshield of her cruiser shatter beneath a barrage of bullets.

She'd never been in a gunfight like this, despite her five years on the job. She swiftly moved along the side of the boxy vehicle, running into a tall blond man she belatedly recognized as Detective West Cole. He'd come to back her up, not that she'd called for assistance. Maybe he'd been nearby and if so, she appreciated his alerting her to the guy's weapon. She gestured to the passenger side of the truck with the tip of her gun.

He nodded in understanding. On cue, they split up, she headed back up to the front of the truck where the lone headlight shone through the night—the reason she'd pulled the truck over in the first place—while West covered the back.

As she rounded the front of the truck, she saw two dark shadows running into the woods. Two men had been in the truck, not one.

And they were getting away!

Without hesitation, she sprinted after them. "Stop, police!" she shouted. But the two men ignored her.

The woods along this stretch of the road were dense. She could barely see the half-moon glowing in the sky above the bare tree branches and towering evergreens. How far were they from the Black Hills? She wasn't sure.

She heard footsteps coming up alongside her and knew West had accompanied her on the foot chase. She didn't slow her speed but was relieved not to be alone with the

two armed perps.

Another crack of gunfire had her diving to the ground. She heard the muffled thud near her right flank as West did the same. For long seconds she listened intently. Hearing nothing, she lifted her head, scanning the area ahead for signs of the fugitives.

Where were they?

She rose up on her hands and knees, then glanced over as West Cole joined her. “Stay down,” he whispered.

He wasn’t staying down. “No. We can’t let them get away.”

“I don’t like it, either, but it’s dark and they could be meeting up with others.” His voice was a low rumble near her ear. “We don’t know how far away the suspected meeting point is. I think we should head back.”

“Suspected meeting point?” She wasn’t following.

“I’ll fill you in. But trust me when I say there may be more bad guys out there.”

She hated the idea of giving up, but he made a good point about the fact there could be additional perps waiting in the wings. The darkness of the woods certainly didn’t help. If she and West used their flashlights, they’d be easy targets for the gunmen.

That wasn’t an option.

Suppressing a sigh, she nodded. “Okay. We’ll go back.”

As she turned on her hands and knees, a wet nose touched her cheek, startling her.

Peanut, the brown and white beagle that used to belong to Kenyon Graves but was now assigned to West. She let out a soundless sigh. She should have known he'd have brought his K-9 partner with him.

She and West stayed low moving across the cold earth until the dark gray truck and her damaged squad car were in view. Then they both rose and ran the rest of the way.

"What were you thinking?" West snapped as he abruptly turned to face her.

"What are you talking about?" She glared at him. "I had to follow. Why would I let them get away?"

"Not that. Pulling the truck over in the first place!" He sounded exasperated. "I tailed that truck from the pizzeria. I wanted to see where the delivery was heading. Then you fly out of the brush with your red and blue lights flashing to pull them over." He was working himself up as he spoke. "And nearly got killed for the effort!"

"How was I supposed to know you were tailing them? Did you put out a BOLO on the truck? Ask for backup?" She had her radio on and knew he had not.

"I was going to, but didn't have time," he shot back.

"Yeah, well, that truck was missing a right head lamp so I had little choice but to pull it over." Fed up with his attitude, she stabbed her index finger into his chest. "I did my job, Detective . Maybe if you would have communicated better, this wouldn't have happened!"

"Me?" His voice rose incredulously. "I didn't know you were here!"

"Yeah, well I didn't know you were here, either." She forced herself to step back, drawing in a deep breath. Obviously, she'd ruined his intent to get key intel on

whatever illegal cargo was being transported in the truck. Which had not been her plan. But he was also being unreasonable. What cop wouldn't pull over a truck without a headlight?

Deep down, Trisha knew she was being overly sensitive, having spent the past year trying to prove she could balance the needs of her six-month-old son, Gabriel, with the demands of her job. She was doing fine since her divorce.

Or so she'd thought.

Lately, she'd been assailed by doubts. The night before, she'd had the weird sense that someone had been inside her house. No proof, just a faint hint of cigarette smoke. Her babysitter, Laurel, didn't smoke, but maybe Laurel had invited a friend over?

Whatever. This wasn't the time to let her imagination get the better of her. She needed her job to raise her son.

"Okay, you're right." West abruptly threw his hands up in the air. "I get that you had to pull the truck over. I was behind it the entire time. I had no idea one headlight was out."

She nodded, somewhat mollified. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interfere."

"You didn't. Well, you did, but what's done is done." His expression was resigned. "Let's go see what's inside."

If that was his idea of an apology, it was sorely lacking. But she didn't argue because she was curious about what was being transported in the truck, too.

The one he'd been smart enough to disable, as much as she hated giving him credit for that.

West walked over and opened the back doors. She glanced down to see Peanut sitting near the rear of the vehicle, in her alert stance. Trisha knew the K-9 was trained to search for both gunpowder and gun oil.

She moved closer as West examined the outside of the boxes. She saw the white printing on each of the boxes. “What does SD and ND refer to?”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “I’m guessing South Dakota and North Dakota.” He used the tip of his knife to pry open the box closest to them.

Then he let out a low whistle. “Peanut was right. Guns.”

She peered inside, sucking in a harsh breath at the long guns stacked carefully into the crate. Her blood ran cold. “Those are Sterling MK6 semi-automatic weapons.”

“Yep.” He reached over to open another box. “And here are several Bushmaster assault rifles.” He opened yet a third box. “And a whole variety of handguns.”

She swallowed hard, trying not to imagine these weapons being used to commit crimes. “How many do you think are in here?”

“I’d say fifty total.” West shook his head. “I guess the night isn’t a total waste. We were able to prevent these weapons from getting into the wrong hands.”

“Thanks to you.” She had to admit she was grateful for his timely arrival. If he hadn’t been there, the outcome may have been much different. Then she frowned. “You followed the truck from the pizzeria?”

“Yes. I was too far back to know what was in the boxes, or to use Peanut to see if they contained weapons. As soon as I saw Petey with the gun, though, I knew my gut instinct on the cargo was right on point.”

“Petey?” She cocked her head to the side.

“Petey Pawns, I arrested him last year for possession of an illegal firearm. I happened to pull up behind the pizzeria in time to see Petey loading the last box. Although I did not know there was a second man in the truck.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ll call this in.”

She nodded, stepping back as he did so. She stood and gazed in the general direction the two gunmen had taken.

Were they still out there, waiting for a chance to return for the guns? The gun trafficking crew had already killed their teammate, Kenyon Graves. His death had sent them all reeling, and Kenyon’s good friend, her sister, Raina, now had custody of his twin boys.

She felt certain the same men who’d set the explosion would not hesitate to kill any other police officer who got in their way.

The image of her six-month-old son flashed in her mind. She’d go home to him tonight.

This time.

It didn’t pay to dwell on the downsides of her chosen career. She liked being a cop. Was good at being a cop.

But it was clear the danger wasn’t over.

And worse, their two suspects had gotten away.

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TWO

It didn't take long for the rest of the officers on duty to arrive at the scene. They were near the edge of the city limits, but since the truck had been loaded at the pizzeria and followed to this remote location, West knew the case belonged to the Plains City PD.

After filling the officers in on the events of the night, including the rounds of gunfire that had pummeled Trish's cruiser, he requested the truck and weapons be taken in for processing to find fingerprints and DNA.

"We're on it," Officer Jerry Skinner assured him.

"Thanks." He glanced down at Peanut, who was sitting at his side. The K-9 was waiting patiently for her next command. Unfortunately, there was nothing more for Peanut to do here.

His phone rang, and West was surprised to see the name of his boss, Captain Douglas Ross, on the screen. He quickly answered. "Captain."

"Fifty guns?" Ross asked. "That's quite a haul."

"Yeah." It still irked him that Petey and his accomplice had gotten away. It wasn't Trish's fault—she was doing her job. If he was honest, he'd have done the same thing in her shoes.

It was just bad timing all around.

Or maybe good timing, in that he had been there to back her up. Two bad guys with guns had been in the truck. If she had been alone...

His gut clenched and he quickly thrust that troubled thought aside. Trisha was fine. She'd handled herself extremely well under fire.

Stubborn, which he had to admire. She hadn't hesitated to pursue the two armed suspects.

"I need to place a call with the ATF on this," Ross was saying. West silently groaned. He did not want the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to take over.

"I understand," he said, masking his feelings. "I just hope they let us assist with the case."

"Oh, we'll be involved," Ross assured him. "Kenyon was one of ours. That makes it personal. I'll insist we be included in all intel moving forward."

He knew the captain would do his best, but the ATF had federal jurisdiction. His boss may not win that battle. He quickly filled him in on the rest. "I recognized Petey Pawns, a perp I'd busted last year for illegal possession of a firearm, but never got a good look at his accomplice. They took off into the woods." He glanced at Peanut again. "They fired at us, so we felt it prudent to give up the chase."

"I'm glad you and McCord aren't hurt," Ross said. "Having the name and ID of one perp helps. I've issued a BOLO for Pawns. I heard McCord's squad car is shot up pretty bad."

"Yeah, a tow truck is on the way." He glanced over to where Trisha was speaking with one of the officers. Strands of her red hair had come loose from the bun to frame her face. He forced himself to look away. He wasn't interested in a relationship, no

matter how pretty she was. His last girlfriend had left him, claiming he was married to his job. And maybe he was. People always left, either on purpose, like Shannon, or by dying, like Kenyon. He was better off alone. “I’ll drive McCord back to her place when we finish here.”

“Okay. I gotta go, the ATF is on the other line.” With that, Ross ended the call.

West shoved his phone into his pocket and joined the others. He and Trisha had already given their statements, and he was the detective on the case anyway, so there was no reason for them to hang around.

“Trish? Are you ready to get out of here?” He kept his tone casual, despite his odd awareness of her. He reminded himself that he’d offer to drive any officer home if their cruiser had been shot up by a pair of gun runners.

“Oh, uh, sure.” She looked surprised. “Thanks.”

“There are forty-eight weapons inside,” Officer Skinner announced.

“That’s about what I thought,” West agreed. “At this point, I’m interested in getting trace DNA or fingerprints from the interior of the truck. Petey Pawn’s info is already on file and a BOLO has been issued, but we need his accomplice.”

“Understood. We’ll preserve the truck until the crime scene techs can do their thing,” Skinner replied.

West wished there was more he could do, but these things took time. Rushing evidence collection wasn’t smart. He turned to Trish, gesturing toward his SUV. Then he bent and scooped Peanut into his arms. “Let’s go.”

She fell into step beside him. “I need to thank you for backing me up.”

“It’s fine.” He waved that off. “Part of the job.”

She nodded without saying anything more. He wondered if the near miss so soon after losing Kenyon was bothering her.

The way it was bothering him.

He did his best to shake it off. Trisha climbed into the passenger seat as he placed Peanut in her back crate. The beagle turned in a circle on her cushion, then settled down for a nap. He stroked the soft brown and white fur for a moment before stepping back to close the hatch. He loved Peanut and was proud of her ability to sniff out weapons, but he still missed his former partner, a yellow Lab named Willa.

After climbing in beside Trish, he made a U-turn to head back to Plains City. As he hit highway speeds, he sent her a questioning look. “Where do you live?”

“I have a small house near Robin Park.” She cleared her throat before adding, “Thankfully, I was able to keep it after my divorce.”

He and the rest of the department knew about her divorce. And how the idiot had left her pregnant and alone. He wasn’t privy to all the details, but any man who would walk away from his pregnant wife was a low-life scumbag in his book. “That’s nice.”

“Yeah, it is.” She relaxed against the seat cushion as if the events of the night were finally catching up to her. She offered a tired smile. “Gabriel is six months old now, and I’m blessed to have him.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that. The kid was a product of a divorce, just like he and his brothers were. At least Gabriel was too young to know anything different.

“Must be hard juggling work and parenthood.” He winced at his lame attempt at

small talk. He'd been alone for so long, focused only on his work, that he was out of practice.

"I have a lot of support from my sister, and my neighbor Laurel Newton. Do you know her? She was a police officer for the Plains City PD but has been retired for twelve years."

"The name sounds familiar. I've only been with the precinct for ten years, though."

"Yeah, she was there before my time, too. Her husband died last year, so she's been babysitting for me." Trisha sighed. "Second shift is not my favorite, but I'm next up for days. That will make things easier in the long run, especially when Gabriel starts school."

He nodded again, unable to come up with a response. He'd spent time with Kenyon and his twin boys, but that was about as much kid time as he could handle. And even then, he and Kenyon would hang out to watch sports after the kids had fallen asleep.

He'd admired Kenyon for being a great single dad after losing his wife to cancer. But that didn't mean he had any intention of following in Kenyon's footsteps and being a father.

Trisha lapsed into silence, and he quickly navigated the streets toward Robin Park, anxious to drop her off. "What's your address?"

She gave him the house number, and he found the neighborhood without a problem.

"It's the white ranch house." She pointed to the house on the right side of the road.

"Great." He slowed and turned into her driveway. "I'll walk you up to the door."

“No thanks. I can handle it. Take care, West.” She pushed open her door and jumped down as if eager to get away. Then she froze, frowning.

His instincts went on red alert. “What’s wrong?”

“Gabriel is crying.” Without further explanation, she slammed the door and bolted toward the front door. He wasn’t sure what she was worried about—kids cried all the time.

Yet Trisha was a cop. Was he missing something? He killed the engine and slid out of the front seat to see what had alarmed her.

He had only taken a few steps when Trisha let out a strangled cry.

“Laurel!” Trisha stared in horror when she saw her neighbor and babysitter tied to a chair, her left eye puffy from being struck. Gabriel’s crying had her racing down the hall to the nursery, her heart hammering with fear. Upon seeing him sitting in his crib, tears of relief pricked her eyes.

“I’m here. Mommy’s here.” She scooped him into her arms, crushing him close. He stopped crying, burrowing against her. She took a moment to thank God for keeping her son safe, before turning back toward the living room. She caught the same hint of cigarette smoke lingering in the air.

Not her imagination, she thought grimly.

As she retraced her steps, her cop eyes took in the mess. Her home had been tossed. Not wrecked, but thoroughly searched.

Why? A druggie looking for something valuable to sell? Entering the living room, she was surprised to find West kneeling in front of Laurel, carefully removing the gag

from her mouth. Then he used his knife to slice through the bindings around her neighbor's wrists and ankles.

"Hurry, he's getting away," Laurel said, her eyes wide with urgency. "He went out the back door."

"I'll go." West rose and immediately headed outside.

She was grateful West was there, since she couldn't chase a bad guy while holding her son.

"What happened?" She shifted Gabriel to one hip as she knelt beside the older woman. Laurel had recently turned sixty-five, and while she had been a cop, the older woman had clearly been caught off guard by the attacker.

"I didn't realize he was inside until it was too late," Laurel said. Up close, Trisha could see her puffy left eye was already turning black and blue. "He must have had a key, because I keep the doors locked while you're gone."

That seemed impossible, but it also explained how she'd felt someone had been inside her house the previous night. "Then what happened?"

"He seemed surprised to see me. He struck me in the face, sending me reeling backward. Before I could react, he grabbed my wrists and yanked them behind my back." Laurel's gaze hardened. "I kicked and fought, but he jammed his knee into my kidney, which made me black out. When I came to, I was tied to the chair and gagged, while he was going through the house, searching for the key."

"What key?" She wondered if Laurel was confused, suffering from a minor head injury caused by being hit in the face.

“I don’t know, he just kept asking me where the key was. I told him I had no idea what he was talking about. He went into Gabriel’s room to search, and the baby started crying...” Laurel’s voice trailed off. She seemed to gather herself together to finish the story. “He must have heard your car pull into the driveway because he abruptly rushed past me and out the back door. I was so scared for Gabriel, but I couldn’t move. Couldn’t call out for help...” Again, her voice trailed off.

“He’s okay. See? Gabriel is fine.” She gently set Gabriel in Laurel’s lap to reassure her. The part of the story that hit her the hardest was that she and West had arrived in time to scare the guy off.

Which meant, he hadn’t finished his search. For the key. What key? It was all so confusing.

But for now, she needed to take care of Laurel. “Stay here for a minute. I’ll get you an ice pack for your eye.”

“I wish I’d have brought my gun,” Laurel groused, holding Gabriel close. “I feel like an idiot for allowing him to get the drop on me.”

“Please don’t beat yourself up. You couldn’t know this would happen. Especially since he was able to sneak in without raising the alarm.” She pressed a bag of frozen peas against Laurel’s swollen left eye. “Hold this. I’ll take Gabriel.”

She turned as West came in through the back door. “There’s no sign of him.” West didn’t look happy about not finding the guy. “But I called for officers to come and canvass the scene. Maybe someone can identify him.”

“That’s doubtful as he was wearing a ski mask and gloves, so you won’t find any prints, either.” Laurel grimaced. “I know all victims say this, but everything happened so fast. I can’t even say for sure what color his eyes were.”

Trisha swallowed her disappointment. No facial features or prints to go by would make it nearly impossible to track down the mystery intruder. “It’s okay. How is your back? Are you still in pain?”

West arched a brow. “Her back?”

“He jammed his knee in my kidney,” Laurel said shifting with a grimace. “That pain was the worst thing I’ve ever experienced in my life. I’m ashamed to say I blacked out.”

“You have no reason to be ashamed, and you need to get checked out at the hospital,” Trisha told her. Kidney damage in a woman her age could be serious.

“I’m fine,” Laurel muttered, still holding the frozen peas against her eye.

“Please, Laurel. For me.” She crossed over to kneel beside the woman she loved like a surrogate mother. She and her sister, Raina, had lost their parents when they were seventeen and nineteen respectively. Laurel had been wonderfully supportive throughout her pregnancy and postdelivery. “I don’t think you should mess around with possible kidney damage.”

“Trisha is right,” West added, his brow furrowed with concern. “Being examined by the doc is the smart thing to do.”

The older woman reluctantly nodded. “Okay. But what about Gabriel? You need someone to watch him tomorrow, too, don’t you?”

“I’ll worry about that later,” Trisha assured her. Glancing around her tossed home, she grimaced. “I’ll have to get the locks changed ASAP.”

“I noticed the back door wasn’t damaged, but there are scratches around the lock.”

West also scanned the room, taking in the mess. “The perp may have used a lock pick to get in.”

That made more sense than him having a house key. “I wish I understood why he was looking for a key.” She explained to West what Laurel had told her. Then lifted a hand when he opened his mouth to ask more questions. “No, I don’t have any idea who he is. Or why he’s in here looking for a key.” She scowled. “At least I know I’m not losing my mind.”

“What do you mean?” West looked perplexed.

“I woke up in the middle of the night and walked into the kitchen. I thought I smelled cigarette smoke.” She wished now she’d have taken her instincts seriously. “There was no sign anyone had been in here, no forced entry and Gabriel was still sleeping, so I shrugged it off as my overactive imagination.” Easy to do, since she and the rest of the department were still in shock over losing Kenyon.

“He was definitely a smoker,” Laurel added. “I smelled the cigarette smoke on him, too.”

“Good to know,” she murmured.

“Unfortunately, that doesn’t help narrow the pool of suspects.” West glanced at her, then added, “You and your son can’t stay here tonight. Not if this guy was able to pick the lock to gain access to the home.”

She hated to admit he was right. But just then the night shift officers arrived, along with an ambulance. She stepped back to give the EMTs room to care for Laurel. She could tell the older woman was in pain, while putting on a brave front.

Gabriel fell asleep on her shoulder, but she was reluctant to put him back in his crib.

What if the intruder had hurt her baby? It was too painful to contemplate what might have transpired here if West hadn't pulled up to her house when he had.

God had been watching over her, Gabriel and Laurel tonight. West, too, although she'd noticed he hadn't attended church in months.

Deep down, she'd always admired West Cole. His drop-dead good looks aside, he was a nice guy and a great detective. She remembered how upset he'd been when he'd lost his yellow Lab K-9 partner, Willa, shortly before Kenyon had been killed.

She was glad he had Peanut as a partner now. They made a great team.

"Your pulse and blood pressure are really high," the EMT said to Laurel.

"I was attacked, of course they're high," Laurel groused. "Just get me to the hospital. The only thing I'm concerned about is my kidney."

The two EMTs exchanged a look and shrugged. Minutes later, they had Laurel packed on a gurney and were wheeling her through the living room to the front door.

She and West filled in the officers on what had gone down. The second adrenaline rush was fading, leaving her feeling shaky and weak. And wondering if this night would ever end.

First the shooting along the highway and now this.

"Let's get you out of here," West said, coming up to stand beside her.

"Yeah. I guess I'll take Gabriel to a hotel." Going to her sister's home, where she had custody of Kenyon's twin three-year-old boys wasn't an option. Laurel's place was out, too, as it was right next door and the intruder would likely look for her there. She

glanced toward the bedrooms. “I just need a few minutes to pack a few things for us.”

“Of course.” He glanced at Gabriel, and for a moment she wondered if he would offer to hold her son, but then he stuck his hands in the front pockets of his worn denim jeans and took a step back. “No rush. Take your time.”

She held his gaze for a moment, then turned away. Seeing Gabriel’s car seat, she snagged it with one hand, set it on the table and carefully placed her sleeping son into the seat. She strapped him in, then went down the hall to the two bedrooms.

She quickly changed out of her police uniform, donning a dark blue sweater paired with comfy jeans. She pulled the pins from her hair, shaking out the long tresses, then packed an overnight bag. Moving into Gabriel’s room, she took note of the few things that were out of place. Her room hadn’t been touched, but it was clear the intruder had begun searching her son’s room.

For a key. To what? A locker? A storage unit? A mailbox? There were several possibilities to consider.

After packing a large diaper bag, she picked up the portable crib, then headed into the kitchen. She could feel West’s gaze boring into her back as she packed formula, bottles, dry cereal and baby food into a box.

“That’s all for one night?” West’s incredulous tone grated on her nerves.

“Yes. I would rather have too much food than not enough.” She wasn’t sure why she was explaining herself to him. “I’d like to find a hotel with a kitchenette.”

“You can stay with me if you’d like.”

His offer came out of left field. She spun to face him, wondering if he was joking.

“No thanks. I wouldn’t want to be a burden.”

“Look, you said you need a kitchen.” He waved a hand at the box of supplies, the diaper bag and the portable crib. “I get you have a son to feed, and it looks like you have a lot of other stuff here, too. It’s probably better if you stay in my guest room. At least until we know more about this guy.”

“That could take days,” she protested. Having access to a kitchen would be nice, but truthfully, she wasn’t sure she wanted to stay with West. Things had been awkward between them since the shoot-out on the highway and during the ride home.

Maybe she’d once had a secret crush on him, but that was when she’d first started at the precinct as a rookie cop. West hadn’t seemed to know she existed. Then she’d met and married Bryan, only to end up divorced less than five months after their wedding. Which only made her feel like a fool for falling for a guy like him.

Yeah, there was no way she was traipsing down that path again. Especially since she had Gabriel to consider. Her son would not suffer from her mistakes.

“Look, it’s late. Better for you and Gabriel to stay at my place for what’s left of the night.” West had obviously caught the look of doubt playing across her features. “You’d have to check out of the local hotel by ten or eleven in the morning, which wouldn’t give you much time to take care of things.” His piercing blue eyes were surprisingly earnest. “Not to mention, you’ve had a rough night.”

His sweet empathy knocked her off balance. She hadn’t expected that from him. Suddenly she was too tired to argue. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Great.” He looked relieved. “I’ll carry that box and the portable crib. Let’s hit the road.”

She hesitated, debating whether to wake Gabriel by putting him in his winter coat. She decided against it, knowing a blanket would keep him warm enough. She looped the strap of the diaper bag over her shoulder, then used both hands to lift Gabriel's car seat, nearly staggering under the weight.

Again, West noticed. "Set him down. Let me store this other stuff in the back seat first, then I'll come back for him." He used his key fob to start the SUV, then hauled the box of food and portable crib outside.

She thought of Peanut waiting in the car and was glad the April temps weren't too cold. She knew the K-9 SUVs were well equipped to keep the dogs safe, including temperature control features, but she would feel bad if the poor thing had gotten chilled.

West returned a few minutes later. He reached for the car seat, surprise widening his eyes when he lifted it off the table. "It's heavier than I expected."

"Tell me about it." She kept the diaper bag and followed him out the front door. She took a moment to lock the door behind her—why, she wasn't sure. The perp had picked the lock and could easily do so again.

Who had done this? It didn't make any sense, and the headache she'd been trying to ignore grew worse the more she thought about it. She turned to follow West to the SUV when she caught the same scent of cigarette smoke.

"West! Do you smell cigarettes?" She slowly moved in a circle, her gaze sweeping the area. At first she didn't see anything.

Then a dark shadow moved along the far side of her house.

"The intruder!" she shouted. Dropping the diaper bag, she took off after him.

“Trish, stop!” West’s voice held a note of urgency. She turned to see Peanut sniffing the air, then dropping into her sitting position. “Get in the SUV, hurry!”

She hesitated, turning toward him. She hated the idea of this guy getting away, but if Peanut had picked up the scent of a gun, she couldn’t risk her son being caught in the crossfire.

She returned to the vehicle and buckled Gabriel’s car seat in the back, using her body to protect him. Seconds later, they were on the road, putting badly needed distance between her son and the house where she’d once felt safe.

But not anymore.

Her nerves were on edge. She scanned their surroundings as West drove to his place. She doubted she’d get any sleep.

Not when her precious son was in danger from an unknown threat.

One she needed to identify and eliminate as soon as possible.

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THREE

West mentally kicked himself for his impulsive offer to have Trisha and Gabriel stay at his place. It was watching her pack the food together, as if she and the baby were going on vacation for two weeks rather than a couple of days. That and he wasn't sure how many of the hotels in the area had kitchenettes. Besides, after seeing the intruder lurking near her home, he didn't think it would be wise to have Trisha stay alone with her son.

He'd have to get over it. This little arrangement wouldn't last for long. He'd asked the officers who'd responded to the break-in to keep an eye on her place. Hopefully this guy would come back to finish what he'd started so they could arrest him.

He hadn't liked how silently the perp had accessed her house. Lock picking wasn't as easy as it looked on TV. Whoever had gone inside and managed to subdue a former cop was likely a professional.

"Could your ex-husband be involved?"

Trisha sighed and shrugged. "I don't know why he would be. Bryan didn't have a criminal record. He was a lousy husband and had no desire to be a father, but to resort to breaking and entering, and assault and battery? That seems a bit much."

She would know better than anyone, yet in his mind, the guy was a loser. "Maybe he picked up his criminal habits after he left you."

"Anything is possible." She stared out the passenger side window, then turned in her

seat, craning her neck to look at her son. Reassured he was sleeping, she settled back. “It doesn’t make sense, though. Bryan has no reason to break in to search for a key. A key to what? I don’t have any valuables that have been locked up or anything like that.”

“When did you last see him?” Talking about the break-in was easier than talking about personal stuff. He pulled into the driveway of his house and hit the garage door opener. In the rear crate, Peanut lifted her head, recognizing they were home.

He’d rather work with dogs over people any day.

“He walked out when I was barely two months pregnant. Left his house key and divorce papers on the table. If I didn’t contest the divorce, I was able to keep custody of Gabriel and the house.” She shrugged. “I signed them and that was the end of that.”

“Did he smoke?”

“Never.” She frowned. “I know he could have started the habit. But I still think someone else broke into the house. Not Bryan.”

He shut down the engine and released his seat belt. “Let’s go inside. Grab the diaper bag but leave the rest for me.”

“Thanks, that’s very nice of you.”

He let Peanut out first, giving the K-9 time to do her business, then reached for Gabriel’s car seat. He couldn’t imagine Trisha lugging it around, although obviously she was no weakling. Passing the physical for the police department required a high level of strength and fitness.

Gabriel squirmed in his car seat as he carried the boy inside. The baby lifted chubby fists, rubbing at his eyes. West had to admit, the kid was cute.

Not that being cute meant he wanted one of his own.

Trisha took Gabriel from the car seat, cradling him close. Then picked up the portable crib. "I'll get him settled in the guest room."

"Help yourself. It's the first bedroom on the right." Glancing at his watch, he realized it was going on eleven thirty at night. His stomach rumbled with hunger, and he decided to make a quick snack. Okay, maybe cooking a pizza was more than a snack, but he was hungry. And Trisha might be, too.

He had the pizza in the oven and was petting Peanut, praising her for a job well done, when Trisha returned. "I'm so glad Gabriel is a good sleeper."

"I threw in a frozen pizza if you're hungry." He watched as she began unpacking the food from the box, putting everything neatly on one end of the counter.

"That sounds great." She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Tomorrow morning, I'll need to head to the precinct to talk to Captain Ross. I'll have to take a couple of vacation days if Laurel can't babysit."

"I'm sure the captain won't mind." He stood at the other side of his counter, wondering why his house suddenly seemed ridiculously small. Having Trisha there knocked him off balance.

"I hope Laurel's not hurt too badly." She rubbed her temple. "I hate that she was hurt trying to protect my son."

"She's a cop at heart, remember?" He smiled reassuringly. "I get the impression she's

tough. She'll pull through this."

"Yeah. I know." She lifted her gaze to meet his. "I just wish I knew what was going on."

He nodded. "We'll dig into this first thing tomorrow, starting with your ex. See if he's been in the area recently."

"We?" She smiled. "Thanks, but this is my problem. You have the gun runners to focus on." She peeked into the oven. "Looks like the pizza is ready."

"Great." He was relieved to have something to do. He removed the pizza and sliced it. Trisha grabbed plates and glasses from the cupboard.

Soon they were seated at the breakfast bar. She bowed her head to pray. "Dear Lord Jesus, we thank You for this food we are about to eat. We also thank You for keeping us all safe in Your care. Amen."

There was a brief hesitation before he echoed, "Amen." He took a bite of his pizza. "Hmm."

They ate in silence for a few moments, Peanut curled on the floor at his feet. He wondered if the K-9 missed Kenyon. She seemed to have adapted to living with him, but there were times she stared out the window as if waiting for Kenyon to return.

"Thanks, this really hit the spot." Trisha stood and carried her empty plate to the sink. "I should try to get some sleep. Good night."

"Good night." He stayed where he was, telling himself he was imagining the shimmering awareness between them.

He needed to stay focused on the threat of danger. Not on how pretty Trisha was. Relationships were not his strength, as his former girlfriend had pointed out. Besides, the last thing he wanted was a ready-made family.

He finished his pizza, then quickly cleaned up the kitchen. After letting Peanut out one more time, he led the beagle to his room. Despite his physical exhaustion, sleep did not come easily.

West's phone chirped at the early hour of seven thirty. With a groan he rolled over to see his boss's name on the screen. "Hey, Captain."

"Cole. Can you be in this morning by nine thirty?" His boss got straight to the point. "The ATF will be here."

He swallowed a groan, imagining the case flying out of his reach. Peanut lifted her head, her tail thumping in greeting. It made him smile. "Yeah. I'll be there." He swung into a sitting position, prying his eyes open. "By the way, there was a break-in at Trisha McCord's home last night. Perp assaulted and tied up the babysitter to search the place."

Ross let out a whistle. "That's not good. You think it's related to the gun trafficking?"

"I don't see how." The thought was intriguing but didn't make sense. "Petey and his accomplice wouldn't know where Trisha lives. And the attack was too soon after we chased them into the woods. This perp was searching for a key."

"Okay, we'll talk more about that later. See you in two hours." Ross ended the call.

A quick shower made him feel slightly better. He dressed casually, feeling certain the case would be taken off his hands. "Ready to go out, Pea?" Living alone meant

talking to the dog as if she could understand every word. He opened the door of his room, surprised to hear sounds from the kitchen.

“Such a good boy,” Trisha crooned. “You like your cereal and bananas, don’t you? Yes, you do.”

She was up and so was the baby. The scent of coffee was enticing. He headed down the hall toward the front door to let Peanut outside.

“Good morning,” Trisha said. “I hope we didn’t wake you.”

“You didn’t.” He gave her a nod. “Captain called, wants me to head to the precinct by nine thirty to meet with the ATF.”

“Okay. If you don’t mind, I’ll catch a ride with you. My car is at the precinct.” She filled a mug with coffee and set it on the breakfast bar. “I made scrambled eggs and toast.”

“Thanks.” He was glad she’d made herself at home, even if he wasn’t entirely comfortable with the arrangement. He let Peanut back inside, then filled her food and water dishes, his elbow brushing Trish’s at the sink.

“Bahwabubbah.” Gabriel waved his arms as he babbled nonsense.

He kept his distance, trying to stay out of the way as Trisha finished feeding her son and scooped scrambled eggs and toast onto a plate for him. Multitasking at its best.

The kitchen was crowded, but he couldn’t complain about being served breakfast. “This is great.”

She flashed a smile. “Figured it was the least I could do since we’re invading your

personal space.”

“Much appreciated.” West hoped he hadn’t made her feel unwelcome, as that wasn’t his intent. He just wasn’t used to this sort of thing. He’d been alone for a long, long time.

She must have already eaten, because she wiped Gabriel’s hands and mouth, then lifted him out of the car seat. “I’ll change him, then we should be ready to go.”

They weren’t in a rush, so he finished his breakfast, then took the time to clean up the kitchen, listening as Trisha spoke to Gabriel. Much the way he spoke to Peanut, he thought with a wry smile. An hour later, they were settled in his SUV, Peanut in the back sniffing Gabriel through the grate with interest.

The drive to the precinct didn’t take long. He carried Gabriel inside, with Peanut trotting along at his side. He was a few minutes early, so he quickly wrote up his report on the break-in at Trish’s home. Trisha leaned over his shoulder, helpfully adding details. He tried not to be distracted by her alluring citrusy scent.

When that was finished, he and Trisha parted ways. He took Peanut with him to the conference room, surprised to see there were several people with K-9s, most of whom he didn’t recognize, along with ATF agent Daniel Slater and his K-9—a Great Dane called Dakota. The ATF was housed on the third floor of their police station, and he’d worked with the pair before. West nodded at Slater and Ross, wondering what was going on.

“Thanks for getting here so quickly,” Ross said. His captain swept his gaze over the room. “I’m sure you’re wondering why we’ve asked all of you to drop everything to get here. I’ll turn the meeting over to ATF Agent Slater.”

“Thanks, Captain.” Slater stood, his expression serious. “Last night, thanks to the

great work of the PCPD—Detective West Cole, his K-9, Peanut, and Patrol Officer McCord, we have taken forty-eight weapons off the street. Unfortunately, the two armed perps escaped. Last night, I was granted permission to form a multiagency task force to track down these arms dealers once and for all.” Slater swept his gaze around the room. “And I’ve asked you all here because we would like each of you to play an active role in this mission.”

West hoped his jaw drop wasn’t too obvious. “That’s great news,” he managed, thrilled the case wasn’t flying out of his hands after all.

“I’d like to take a moment to introduce everyone,” Slater said. “Please know we handpicked the members of our new DGTF, Dakota Gun Task Force, based on areas of expertise, by both human and K-9 officers. I’ll be the team leader, with Ross as our captain, but I want everyone to feel as if they have input into how to accomplish this task.”

There were nods and murmurs of agreement through the room.

“Detective West Cole and his K-9, Peanut—her expertise is critical in that she alerts to gunpowder and gun oil,” Slater said gesturing toward him. “US Marshal Gracie Fitzpatrick and her K-9, Bane.” He gestured toward a woman with long brown hair sitting beside her Belgian Malinois. “Bane is an excellent tracker, and Gracie has been instrumental in finding other fugitives. Then we have Sheriff’s Deputy Zach Kelcey from Keystone, South Dakota, and his K-9, a black Lab named Amber who specializes in search and rescue.”

A tall man with thick brown hair nodded at the group.

“Lucy Lopez—” Slater gestured to a pretty woman with shoulder-length brown hair and large brown eyes “—is from Fargo, North Dakota, she and her K-9, a springer spaniel named Piper, are experts in bomb detection.” Daniel Slater frowned. “We

recently lost Kenyon Graves to a bomb explosion and fear we may run into more explosive devices.”

Again, there were several nods of acknowledgment around the room.

“Liam Barringer is an FBI agent from Bismarck, North Dakota. He specializes in homicide investigations, and his K-9, a male bloodhound named Guthrie, specializes in cadaver detection.” The fed was tall and muscular with sandy brown hair. “Jenna Marrow is also from Fargo, North Dakota. Her German shepherd, Augie, is trained in scent detection and suspect apprehension,” Slater continued, gesturing to a woman with long brown hair and blue eyes.

West was impressed with the variety and talented skills of those gathered here in the conference room. For the first time in months, he was confident that by working together they’d bring Kenyon’s killers to justice.

“Last but not least, K-9 Officer Jack Donadio has a chocolate Lab named Beau who specializes in electronics detection, although they are on desk duty due to his recent injury,” the ATF agent continued. West noticed the cane propped against the table beside Donadio and remembered how he’d been shot during a drug bust. “Jack will help file paperwork for us, obtaining search warrants and the like. We also have full access to Tech Analyst Cheyenne Chen, who works out of this precinct.” Slater clicked his pen in his hand as Cheyenne nodded to the group. Dan took a moment to glance around the room. “Any questions?”

There was a long moment of silence as the group digested the information.

“When can we get started?” West asked.

Slater nodded. “I knew you’d be anxious to get to work. But I forgot to mention one thing. We’re swearing each of you in as federal officers for the duration of this task

force. That way you can cross state lines to follow leads.”

West sat back in his chair, resting his hand on Peanut’s silky head, honored to be included in this new task force.

Now they just had to find the bad guys and toss them in jail where they belonged.

After setting Gabriel’s car seat down, Trisha lifted him out and rested him on her hip. Captain Ross was busy, so she’d had to wait to speak with him.

Her shift didn’t start until three o’clock that afternoon, and she considered asking her sister to watch Gabriel. Yet it wasn’t as if Raina didn’t have her hands full with Kenyon’s three-year-old twin boys, Beacon and Austin. Adding one more baby to the mix might be enough to push her sister over the edge. Especially since she had recently added a beagle puppy, Chewy, to the mix.

She bit her lip, trying to come up with another alternative. There was a day care in town, but she knew they were understaffed, much like many places in the city were. Still, she may have little choice but to give it a try.

“You’d probably like friends to play with, wouldn’t you?” She tucked a strand of Gabriel’s reddish hair off his cheek. He’d gotten her red hair, but his father’s blue eyes. Thinking of Bryan took her back to the intruder in her house last night.

Could her ex have hurt Laurel? And searched her house for a key? It was difficult to comprehend, especially after fourteen months of not hearing a peep out of him, but she was at a loss as to who else would do such a thing.

Carrying Gabriel to the closest desk, she dropped into the chair and settled her son on her lap. With one hand, she used the mouse to bring up a search engine. It would be smart to check Bryan’s criminal record. She knew for a fact he had been clean when

she'd met him. Like every cautious woman, she automatically checked the backgrounds of the guys she dated.

At least, she used to. Dating was no longer an option.

The only court document that popped up under Bryan's name was their divorce. She stared at the information there, realizing her address was listed in the court records.

A chill snaked down her spine. Anyone looking for Bryan could find her, too. Is that what the perp had done? If so, that still didn't explain why he would search her house for a key.

She tried a general search for her ex, but nothing popped up. Even when she checked social media, it appeared Bryan had taken his profiles down.

Because he hadn't wanted any memories of their time together? Nah, he wasn't the sentimental type.

Yet he could be hiding something.

She told herself not to jump to conclusions. After all, she really had no evidence that Bryan was involved. Then again, she had no proof he wasn't.

"Trish?" She turned to find Captain Ross striding toward her. She quickly rose to her feet, setting Gabriel on her hip. "I heard about the break-in at your home. I've taken you off the schedule for today, and you have the next two days off anyway, since you worked the weekend." His brows were furrowed with concern. "If you need more time than that, please let me know."

"Thanks, Captain." She offered a lopsided smile. "I'm most upset at how the perp attacked my babysitter."

“I can understand,” he agreed. “Will she be okay?”

“Yes. I called the hospital first thing this morning and was told her condition was stable. They’re keeping her today and overnight for observation.” Laurel had insisted she was fine and ready to go home, but Trisha was secretly relieved the docs were keeping a close eye on her friend.

He nodded. “Let me know if you need anything. Oh, and nice work last night.”

She tried not to blush when all she’d really done was perform a routine traffic stop. One that ended up being anything but routine. “Thank you, sir. Has either perp been located yet?”

“No.” Her boss frowned. “I’m sure you’ll hear through the grapevine anyway, but we’re putting a multiagency task force together to find them and the ringleaders.”

“That’s wonderful news.” And now she understood why West had been asked to come in. She told herself she would be fine on her own now that he’d be busy with task force duties.

“Yeah, hopefully we’ll get to the bottom of this very soon.” Ross sighed, then patted Gabriel on the back before returning to his office. She sat back down in the chair, wondering if she should wait for West or head off on her own. She wasn’t afraid to be alone in the daylight, and he was obviously busy.

She took another moment to search on her ex-husband to no avail. For all she knew, Bryan had found work somewhere else. His last job, at the Rocking K Ranch, had ended rather abruptly. She took a moment to look into the ranch, owned by a man named Klinger. There was one outstanding loan in which legal action had been taken, indicating Klinger was having cash flow issues. Likely he was land rich and cash poor like many ranchers.

Having no other leads, she looked up local locksmiths. There was a place called Louie's Locksmith that offered quick services.

She called Louie's and asked him to meet at her place. He readily agreed. Feeling better about taking action to keep her son safe, she rose to her feet. No point in sticking around here. She took a moment to bundle Gabriel in the car seat, then lifted him with both hands. "Let's go chat with Louie's Locksmith, shall we?"

"Trish? Where are you going?"

She turned to see West and Peanut heading toward her. "Oh, hi. I found a locksmith that's just a few blocks from here. He's meeting me at my place." Over his shoulder, she noticed there were several other cops with K-9s leaving the conference room, too. They all must be a part of the newly formed task force. "Congrats on being included in the task force."

"Thanks." When he smiled, her stomach did a weird flip in her belly. She could honestly say she hadn't seen West smile like that in a long time. He was generally ultra serious. "I'll go with you to meet the locksmith."

"Oh, uh, are you sure?" She hadn't expected this. "Don't you have things to do?"

"I've already been sworn in as a temporary federal officer." He shrugged. "Sounds like we're spreading out to patrol our respective areas and will be called in for specific tasks as needed. That gives me time to go along with you to meet the locksmith."

"Okay, that works." Who was she to argue?

"I'll carry Gabriel." He took the car seat from her. "You need a stroller or something easier."

“I have a stroller in my car.” She hitched the diaper bag higher on her shoulder. “I should drive my own vehicle.”

“Hold off for now,” he suggested.

“Okay.” She figured it was easy enough to get a ride back to the precinct. Earlier that morning, West hadn’t paid much attention to Gabriel. Even her boss had patted him on the back. It was natural to interact with babies.

The lack of interest West showed Gabriel made her sad. Not that she expected her rookie crush to become anything more.

Still, she couldn’t help but believe West was missing out on something special. Her pregnancy hadn’t been planned, but having Gabriel was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

It took longer to get Gabriel into the back seat of West’s SUV, along with transferring the stroller from her car to his, than it did to head to her place. The locksmith truck was in her driveway, so West pulled over to park on the street. Gabriel chose that moment to begin to fuss.

“Will you head up to meet with the locksmith?” She instinctively sensed West wouldn’t want to take care of a crying baby. “I’ll join you in a minute.”

“Sure.” West jumped out of the car, released Peanut from the back and hurried toward the locksmith.

Cognizant of his comment about the stroller, she pulled it out and unfolded it. She placed Gabriel inside, tugging the strap tight and began to push his stroller up the sidewalk. A flash of movement caught the corner of her eye.

She turned in time to see a man with a ski mask covering his features rushing toward her in broad daylight! “No!” She couldn’t believe what was happening. She tried to step in front of her son, but the assailant ruthlessly shoved her to the ground. Her fingers grasped his sweatshirt, but he roughly jerked away. To her horror, he grabbed the stroller and ran off.

“No! Stop! Police!” She quickly scrambled to her feet, wincing with pain in her knee where it hit the concrete. Ignoring the discomfort, she hobbled after him. But thankfully, West had heard her shout and was already in hot pursuit, doing his best to close the gap.

Lord, give West the strength to save Gabriel!

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FOUR

West sprinted after the masked man with Peanut at his side. He would rather the beagle stay back by the SUV where it was safe but knew the dog wouldn't leave him. His K-9 had turned and alerted to the scent of gunpowder bare seconds after he caught a glimpse of the guy rushing Trish, smacking into her and grabbing the stroller.

On instinct, he pulled his weapon. He wanted nothing more than to take this guy down but couldn't risk firing and possibly hitting the baby. Especially since shooting on the run was notoriously inaccurate.

Braced for the perp to turn and fire at him, he shouted, "Stop! Police!"

Gabriel wailed as the perp ran haphazardly down the street. The little boy seemed to know the situation was dangerous. West put on a burst of speed, determined to catch up.

As West grew closer, the masked man suddenly let go of the stroller, giving it a shove as he whirled and darted to the left. The stroller teetered on two wheels for a moment at the abrupt movement. West lunged forward, grabbing the handle in time to prevent the stroller from toppling over and dumping Gabriel onto the street.

He knelt in front of the crying baby, reaching out to smooth the palm of hand over his fine hair. "It's okay, you're okay." He wasn't sure if he was trying to appease the little boy or himself.

“Gabriel!” Trisha came running toward them, limping badly as she favored her left leg. “I’ll take him. Go after the perp!”

“Peanut, stay!” He didn’t want his K-9 to be in the line of fire as he took up the chase. Leaving the baby and the stroller with Trish, he turned, sweeping his gaze over the area. He searched for the masked man, thinking he couldn’t have possibly gotten far.

But there was no sign of him.

Where had he gone? West kept moving, slower now, peering around one house and then another, checking backyards. But it was no use. The perp must have cased this neighborhood well enough to know how to get around without being seen.

As much as he didn’t want to give up the search, he was concerned about leaving Trisha and Gabriel behind. Regret burned as he turned and jogged back to where Trish, Gabriel and Peanut waited.

“I’m sorry, I lost him.” He frowned as she rubbed her knee. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. Just a bruise. Nothing a little ice won’t fix.” She had Gabriel in her arms, holding him tight against her body. “Thank you for saving my son.”

“I can’t believe that guy went after the baby while we were both in plain sight.” The kidnapping attempt was sloppy at best, since he grabbed the stroller instead of quickly getting Gabriel out to make running off with him easier. “I don’t think he’s a professional. At least, not when it comes to abducting kids.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Trisha murmured. “But you’re right. He also could have waited and followed us to a different location before making his move. Either he’s desperate, impulsive or both.”

He nodded in agreement, crouching down to pet Peanut. “Good girl, Pea. You’re a very good girl.” The dog wiggled and licked his face. He needed to reward her for alerting to the scent of gunpowder, but not until he had Trisha and Gabriel safe. Trisha was a cop and a good one, but with a dangerous perp on her and her baby son’s trail and that injured knee... He rose to his feet. “Let’s go talk to the locksmith, then we need to get out of here.”

“Agree.” Trisha tried to set Gabriel back in his stroller but hesitated when he whined and clung to her. “Okay, it’s okay. You’re fine, big guy.” She pushed the stroller with one hand, limping back toward the house.

“I’ll take it.” He reached for the handle of the stroller. “Did you get a good look at him?”

“Not as much as I’d have liked,” she groused. “He’s roughly six feet tall, slim yet muscular, maybe weighing around one hundred eighty to one hundred ninety pounds. He’s Caucasian. I could see the white skin around his eyes and the back of his neck. But the ski mask covered his facial features.” She shook her head. “I can’t even say what color his eyes were. Maybe dark like brown or black.”

“Yeah, I agree with your height and weight assessment.” He glanced down at Peanut. “I believe he was armed. Peanut alerted right as this guy rushed you.”

“I should have expected something to happen,” Trisha murmured. “This guy knows where I live. I shouldn’t have returned here with Gabriel.”

“We’ll get him.” He injected confidence in his tone. This kidnapping attempt probably wasn’t related to the gun running venture, but it was possible the perp had gotten his weapon illegally.

If so, they’d need to convince him to talk. Once they’d arrested him.

“Why don’t you and Gabriel wait in the SUV while I speak to the locksmith,” he suggested.

“My house. I’ll talk to the locksmith,” she said curtly. “But if you could stick close, I’d appreciate it.”

He wanted to argue, but she was a trained patrol officer and this was her home. “Will do.”

She shifted Gabriel in her arms, and they headed up to where the locksmith was waiting. Trisha asked, “Did you see that masked man grab my son’s stroller?”

“I—uh, not really.” The locksmith looked sheepish. “I was looking at my notes. Then I saw you both chasing him, but I can’t give you an ID or anything like that.”

“Okay.” She looked resigned, but then turned to the issue at hand. “I need all the locks changed to a type of lock that is difficult to break into. Someone picked the lock on my back door to gain access, and that cannot happen again.”

The guy looked surprised at that. “I would recommend a keyless entry. Nothing is absolutely burglar proof, but the higher-end model can be set up with a fingerprint and key code.”

“Let’s do that,” she said without hesitation. “Cost is not as important as safety.”

“Understood. I have plenty of these in stock.” The locksmith gestured to her modest home. “You should consider adding motion lights and cameras, too.”

“Yes, of course. That makes sense.” Trisha glanced at West. “What do you think?”

“I agree with all of his suggestions.” West knew it would take time to get everything

installed. “Why don’t we let this guy get to work on the locks. We can call a security company once you’re safe.” He was careful not to say anything about where they’d be staying.

“Okay. Thanks.” She gave the locksmith her credit card information and the key code. “It’s not my birthday or Gabriel’s birthday,” she said when he opened his mouth to argue. “It’s my father’s birthday month and my mother’s birthday year, with the numbers of his month in the middle of her year. I don’t think anyone will guess it. Especially since they’ve been gone since Raina and I were in our late teens.”

“That should work fine.” He was glad she understood the importance of using good password security. He turned to look back at his SUV. “Ready to get out of here?”

“Yes.” She smoothed a hand down Gabriel’s back. The baby had quieted down now, likely understanding the danger was over. He hadn’t realized small kids could sense things the way K-9’s did.

Sticking close to Trish, he escorted her and Gabriel down to the car. He worked on collapsing the stroller as she buckled him in his car seat. After storing the stroller behind the front seat, he scooped Peanut up, nuzzled her soft fur for a moment, before setting her in the back. She was smaller in size than his previous K-9 partner, Willa, but just as plucky and talented when it came to scent tracking and sniffing out guns.

He quickly joined Trish, sliding behind the wheel. As they left the neighborhood, he glanced at her. “I hope you’ll continue staying at my place.”

With a grimace, she nodded. “I will, thanks for the offer. I know you’ll be busy with the new task force, but it will be easier for Gabriel to stay with you. And for me,” she added.

Despite his earlier reluctance to share his personal space, he was relieved to hear it.

“There isn’t much to do yet with the task force. We’re hoping to get more information related to the guns that were found in the van you pulled over.”

“Hopefully the BOLO for Petey Pawns will bring results, too,” she agreed. “I can’t imagine he and his accomplice can hide for long.”

“That depends on how much help they have from other members of the organization running these guns.” It was depressing to realize Pawns had gotten away, just like the masked perp had.

It made him feel as if he was losing his touch. Which was not reassuring.

“Hey. You’ll find him.” Trisha surprised him by putting her hand on his arm. “I’m glad a task force has been created. It’s better to have more than our Plains City PD working the case.”

“True.” He managed a smile. “I’m glad the ATF didn’t take over the way feds usually do.” His smile faded. “Getting these guns off the street is critical. Gun violence is already out of control. Arresting these guys might help bring it down.”

“Yeah.” She turned to look back at Gabriel, who had started babbling again. “What I can’t figure out is why the masked man tried to grab Gabriel in the first place? Last night, when he broke into my home, he searched for something. Now he’s attempting to kidnap my son?”

“I’ve been concerned about that, too,” he acknowledged. “It could be that he was hoping to hold the baby hostage in exchange for the key he was looking for.”

“Hostage,” she echoed, her voice a low agonized whisper. “That’s horrible.”

He nodded. “Yeah, but we’re not going to let that happen.” It took him a minute to

realize he'd identified himself as the baby's protector.

Yet he couldn't very well ignore the danger to the little guy.

"I appreciate your support, West." Her tone was subdued, as he navigated the streets back to his place. "It's nice to know I'm not alone in this."

"You're not." He glanced at her again, then added, "We need to discuss your ex-husband."

"Bryan isn't six feet tall. He's only two inches taller than my five feet seven inches. And I think I would have recognized his blue eyes, if that man was him." She shrugged. "I honestly don't understand why Bryan would be searching my house for a key. A key to what? We didn't have a storage unit, a post office box or a bank safety deposit box."

Knowing the perp wanted a key was perplexing. Then he had a thought. "Did Bryan belong to a gym?"

Her mouth dropped open. "Yes! He went to the one located not far from Raina's place. It's called—Fitness Guru Gym."

He stopped at the next intersection and turned right. "Okay, that's our first stop."

"I should have thought of that before," she admitted. "But it was his gym membership, not mine. Why would he believe I have the key to his locker? Especially since it has been a year and two months since he left me?"

"I don't know, but there's only one way to find out." He hoped his badge would be enough to convince the gym manager to let him search the locker.

They needed something to steer them in the right direction to find this guy.

Before he could strike out at Trisha or her son again.

Trisha inwardly railed at herself for not thinking of Bryan's old gym membership sooner. It should have clicked in her mind last night, but the shooting event, then finding Laurel tied up and bleeding, had clouded her mind.

Sitting back in her seat, she tried to imagine Bryan as the masked man who'd roughly shoved her to the ground and then took off with Gabriel's stroller. Was she wrong about the guy's height?

No, West had agreed with her assessment. And that fact alone convinced her the kidnapper wasn't Bryan.

One of Bryan's friends? She tried to think of who her ex-husband used to hang out with. Their wedding had been small and without the usual best man or maid of honor. Her sister had been there, and she thought there was someone there for Bryan, too.

Seth Blakemore? Yes, that was it. She seemed to remember Seth was friendly with Bryan. Yet she only met him twice that she could remember. He wasn't overly tall, and he had been huskier than Bryan and the perp who'd tried to take Gabriel.

"There's one name we should look into," she said, breaking the silence. "A friend of Bryan's named Seth Blakemore."

"That's good to know. We'll dig into his background, see what we come up with." He glanced at her. "Keep thinking of anyone else your ex knows or maybe worked with. It doesn't make sense that a total stranger would break into your house to search for a key."

“I know. The problem is that we weren’t married for very long, and then got divorced barely five months after our wedding.” She flushed, embarrassed that she’d made such an enormous mistake in judgment. “I don’t know why I rushed into marrying him. I guess I was looking for the loving relationship my parents had, but I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” His blue eyes reflected a level of compassion that warmed her heart. “I’m sure it hasn’t been easy for you being a single mom.”

“I don’t mind.” She would rather be single than married to a man who didn’t love her or want their child. Then she leaned forward in her seat. “There’s the gym.”

“I see it.” He turned right at the next intersection, then drove the three blocks to the gym. After pulling into a parking space, he killed the engine. “I’d like to take Peanut inside with me, see if she alerts on anything in the locker if we find one. You and Gabriel should come inside, too. I don’t want you to be out here alone.”

“Okay.” That plan suited her just fine. She wouldn’t have considered the possibility of Bryan keeping a gun in his locker. It would be good to have Peanut’s keen nose to give an idea of what they were dealing with. “By the way, Bryan’s last name is Little. Bryan Little.”

“Got it.” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I bet he hated that last name.”

She couldn’t help but return his smile. “He did. He was shorter than a lot of guys and got teased about it.” She didn’t bother with the stroller this time. Hauling her son around was one way to build up her strength without going to the gym. Oh, she still did some running and went to the firing range, but being a single working mother didn’t allow for much spare time. Not that she minded keeping busy. Bryan’s leaving so abruptly had her guarding her heart. She wouldn’t risk being hurt like that again.

West put Peanut on leash. The sweet beagle lifted her nose to the air, eager to take in the various scents.

She followed West and Peanut inside, allowing him to take the lead. West held up his badge, then asked to speak to someone in charge.

“I’ll, uh, get Stewie for you.” The young kid made a beeline toward the back office. A few minutes later, an older man, maybe in his late forties, came over to meet with him. The guy had muscles upon muscles, and eyed West’s badge with suspicion.

“Whaddya want?” Stewie growled.

“We need to know if a member by the name of Bryan Little has a locker here. And if so, I want to see what’s inside.”

Stewie chomped hard on a piece of gum, seeming to weigh his options. She stepped forward, trying to ascertain if he smelled like cigarettes and was disappointed when he didn’t.

“Don’t you need a warrant?” Stewie asked.

“I can get one,” West said. He glanced around the gym. “But I would hate to shut the place down for the time it would take to do that.”

“Shut it down?” Stewie scowled. Then he heaved a sigh. “I don’t think Bryan has been here in months. He had his membership paid for a year, though, so I didn’t clean out his locker yet.”

So Bryan did have a locker there. She felt a surge of anticipation at the news. “When does his membership expire?” she asked.

Stewie glanced at her, then turned back to West. "I gotta look it up."

"Go ahead." West didn't move. "We'll wait."

Stewie stepped over to a computer and hit a few keys. "Looks like his membership ran out last month."

"Perfect. Looks like I don't need a warrant after all," West said. "Lead the way to the locker."

Stewie nodded at her. "She can't come into the men's locker room."

"Yes, she can. She's a cop. Just get everyone out of there," West directed.

She was surprised at West's determination to have her come along, but then again, she might recognize Bryan's personal items.

If he'd left any behind.

Less than ten minutes later, Stewie had emptied the men's locker room and was leading them inside, carrying a large bolt cutter with him to use on the lock. The place reeked of old socks and sweat, but that was hardly surprising.

"This one," Stewie said, using the bolt cutter to point to the locker tucked in a corner. "Number 105."

West bent to take Peanut off leash. "Find tools," he said, spreading his arms wide to encompass the entire locker room. "Find tools!"

She remembered tools was the key word for weapon detection. Better to say tools in an airport for example, than the word gun .

Peanut eagerly went to work, lifting her nose to the air, then moving along the lockers. She headed away from locker 105, which surprised her.

Not that Trisha thought Bryan had stashed a gun in his gym locker. That seemed over the top. However, she would rather be safe than sorry.

Peanut abruptly sat, her nose pointed upward at a locker that was roughly a foot above her head. Trisha frowned and glanced at West.

“Who is using this locker?” West asked, crossing over to where Peanut sat waiting. He pointed to the locker that Peanut seemed to be indicating. “Number 322.”

“I have no idea. It might be a general use locker.” Stewie scowled again. “You said you wanted to look inside this one.” In a quick movement, he lifted the bolt cutters and sliced through the lock on Bryan Little’s locker. Then he reached down and opened the door.

It was empty. She hid a flash of disappointment.

“That was what we wanted initially, but now I need to know who uses this locker. Three twenty-two.” West’s firm tone brooked no room for argument. When Stewie didn’t answer, he lifted his phone and thumbed the screen. “Hey, Jack, it’s West. I need a search warrant ASAP for the Fitness Guru Gym. Peanut alerted on locker 322.”

“Okay, okay!” Stewie’s face grew red. “I’ll open it for you and let you know if anyone has been using it. Cut me a break, will ya?”

She met West’s gaze as he gave her a slight nod. “Good. But why don’t you get me the paperwork, first?”

Stewie muttered something about how they were trying to ruin his business as he left the locker room to get the information West had requested.

“You think there’s a gun in there?” She asked in a low whisper.

“Peanut says there is. And she’s rarely wrong.” His expression was grim. “I’m disappointed we didn’t find anything in your ex-husband’s locker, though.”

“I guess that’s kind of a good thing.” She hoped the masked perp wasn’t terrorizing her and Gabriel for nothing.

“But having a clue would have been nice.” West fell silent as Stewie returned, holding a sheaf of papers. “Just like I thought, that’s one of the general lockers,” he said. “It isn’t assigned to anyone specific. There’s a bunch of them that are just left open for people to use.”

“Good, that means it’s your property and you can remove the lock,” West said.

Stewie stuffed the papers in his back pocket, hefted the bolt cutter again and clipped through the lock. West had donned a pair of gloves from his pocket and put them on to remove the lock, then opened the door.

Inside was a Glock 19. Nothing else, no personal items or anything remotely related to working out. Just the gun. Using an evidence bag as a glove, West picked it up and examined it more closely. “No serial number.”

“That’s interesting.” Was the gym a hot drop for illegal weapons? Or was this a one-off scenario?

After being nearly shot and killed last night by Petey Pawnors and his accomplice, she hoped and prayed this weapon would lead West and the task force to the gun

traffickers.

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FIVE

“G ood girl, Pea. Good girl!” West praised his K-9, pulling out the squeaky ducky she loved to play with. He tossed it in the air, and she agilely caught it in her mouth. The way she shook her head from side to side, then romped in the small space made him smile.

If not for Trish’s ex having a locker here in the gym, Peanut wouldn’t have found the gun. The filed off serial number convinced him this was one of the illegal handguns that had been brought through the Dakotas. This Glock could be one of them. He carefully set it down, unwilling to smudge any potential prints.

“We don’t allow guns in here,” Stewie was saying, obviously shocked by the sight of the weapon. “I don’t have any idea how that got there!”

“Someone placed it there,” Trisha said dryly. She was rocking from side to side, as Gabriel was growing fussy. “You’re absolutely sure you don’t know who is using that locker?”

“It’s available to anyone with a membership!” Stewie looked scared to death, as if fearing he was about to be arrested. “I don’t come in here to cut locks off unless they’ve been on for over a month or two. And those instances are rare.”

“I need a list of all your gym members,” West said calmly, leaning toward believing the guy. Stewie’s shock in seeing the gun was too real to be faked. Yet he also highly doubted the gym owner checked for lockers that were taken for extended lengths of time.

Stewie just didn't come across as highly organized. He was a lot of brawn and muscle, but shy on brains.

"I'll get that list," Stewie quickly agreed.

"Thanks. This room is off-limits until the crime scene techs have checked for prints." He turned away and used his thumb to call Jack Donadio. "Jack? We found a Glock 19 in the Fitness Guru Gym. I need someone here to check for prints, ASAP." He was hoping the lock had been on long enough that only the perp's fingerprints would be on the outside of the locker and on the gun.

"Understood," Jack agreed. "They should be there in less than ten minutes."

"Great. I'll be waiting." He pocketed his phone, glancing at Trish, who was still trying to keep Gabriel calm. He wished now that he'd have dropped her and Gabriel at his place prior to coming here. It was never smart to take a baby to a potential crime scene.

"I'm going to need to feed and change him soon," Trisha said almost apologetically. "I could head over to my sister's place. Raina only lives two blocks from here."

"Can you hang on for another ten minutes?" After the near miss outside her home, he wasn't keen on leaving her alone. "As soon as the crime scene techs are here, I'll drive you over." He knelt to take Peanut's ducky, tucking it back in his pocket and stroking the dog's soft fur. "The twins will enjoy seeing Peanut again."

"Okay." She turned and bounced up and down with Gabriel, talking to the boy to keep him distracted. He almost offered to take the baby, but then caught himself.

His role here was to find gun traffickers while keeping Trisha and her son safe. Playing dad to the little boy was not part of the plan.

Thankfully, the techs arrived sooner than expected. He instructed them on what he wanted dusted for prints, and they quickly complied. It didn't take long, as the lockers weren't overly large. When they'd finished and had bagged the gun to take to the lab, he scooped Peanut into his arms and headed through the gym.

"Here's the list," Stewie said from behind the reception desk. He handed West two sheets of paper. "All my current gym memberships."

"I'd like former gym memberships, too, going back at least six months. A year would be better." He held Stewie's gaze.

The guy looked like he wanted to argue but returned to the computer to print out more names. West knew Stewie's cooperation was solely to get them all out of his gym as soon as possible.

"Anything else?" Stewie asked impatiently.

"That should do it." He glanced over to where the techs had emerged from the locker room. "The place is yours."

"It's about time." Stewie didn't try to hide his snide tone. West didn't care. He'd gotten what he'd wanted.

He escorted Trisha and Gabriel out to the SUV. He stayed close as she placed her son in the car seat. After giving Peanut some water, he set her in the crated area and shut the hatch.

Gabriel began to cry in earnest. Trisha looked a bit harried as she tucked her red hair behind her ear. "You know where Raina lives, right? In Kenyon's house."

"Yes, I know." He eyed the car seat in his rearview mirror. He couldn't see the

baby's face but smiled at how Gabriel's tiny fists waved around.

"I'll call to let her know we're on the way." Trisha spoke to her sister as he drove the two blocks to Raina's. When he pulled into the driveway, two small boys with dark hair came out of the house with the beagle puppy, Chewy, on their heels.

"Unca West! Unca West!" Austin hopped from one foot to the other as West slid out from behind the wheel. Austin was the more outgoing of the two boys, while Beacon hung back in his usual quiet and shy way. Seeing the twins smiling faces was bittersweet. He was glad they were adjusting to their new life with Raina, but watching them only reminded him of the loss of their dad. "Where's Peanut?"

"Right here." He opened the hatch with a click of his key fob. Peanut nimbly jumped down and hurried over to greet the boys.

Watching the twins play with Peanut made his chest tighten with grief over Kenyon's passing. The boys seemed to be adjusting well from what he could see. Raina was doing a great job of caring for them. He had to give Kenyon credit in naming Raina, his childhood best friend, as the boys' guardian after losing his wife and knowing his job as a cop was dangerous. It still burned to know the gun traffickers had set that explosion, killing Kenyon and their female informant, Erica Rodgers.

"Let's all go inside," Raina said.

Feeling a bit like an outsider, West followed them in the house. Trisha took Gabriel into the kids' room to change the baby. He noticed Raina looked tired as he made sure Peanut and Chewy had water.

"You doing okay?" he asked.

"Yes, of course." Raina shrugged and looked toward the boys. "I love them both as if

they're my own flesh and blood. But it's hard knowing Kenyon is gone."

"Yeah. That's been difficult for all of us." He stuffed his hands in his pockets, grateful when Trisha returned with Gabriel. She set the boy on the floor by the other kids, then quickly fixed him a bottle.

"Sorry to drop in at the last minute," Trisha said, when she was able to feed Gabriel. "Gabriel was getting antsy."

"I know how that goes," Raina said with a smile. "You're always welcome."

A shadow clouded Trish's gaze, and she shot him a quick look. "Actually, there's been some trouble at my place. A masked intruder broke in, tied Laurel up and searched the house, apparently looking for some sort of key."

"What?" Raina's eyes widened in alarm. "That's terrible. Are you and Gabriel, okay? And what about Laurel? What are you going to do?"

"Laurel is fine. She's in the hospital until tomorrow, as the thug hit her hard in the kidney." Trisha looked down at her son for a moment, then added. "I—we're staying with West for a couple of days until this guy has been caught."

"That's a relief," Raina murmured. "I know you're a cop, Trish, but I'm glad you're not staying at your place."

"I would never put Gabriel's life in danger," Trisha said. "West has been very kind."

"West is right here," he said dryly. He understood why Trisha hadn't mentioned the kidnapping attempt. No point in worrying Raina when she already had so much on her plate. "And it's no trouble. I hate the way this guy has lashed out at you and Gabriel."

Peanut frolicked with Chewy and Austin. Beacon was off on the side, coloring in a picture book. The little boy appeared very intent on his task, reminding him of how focused Kenyon could be when he was faced with a problem.

Once Gabriel had been fed, Trisha repacked the diaper bag. “Thanks for allowing us to drop by. We’ll get out of your hair now.”

“It’s truly no problem,” Raina assured her. A frown furrowed her brow. “Be careful, okay?”

“Always.” She gave her sister a hug, hoisted the diaper bag over one shoulder then picked up Gabriel. “Take care.”

“Come, Peanut,” he said firmly. The beagle instantly turned from Chewy and followed him outside. As he lifted his K-9 into the back, his phone rang. Seeing his captain’s name on the screen, he quickly answered. “What’s going on, Captain?”

“I heard you found a gun at the Fitness Guru Gym,” Ross said without preamble.

“Peanut did, yes.” He quickly explained about why they’d been at the gym in the first place. “I have the list of members. I’ll scan them to you and the rest of the task force as soon as I get to my place.”

“It’s our first break in the case,” Ross agreed. “Unfortunately, there were no useable prints found on the locker. It appears to have been wiped clean after the Glock was placed inside.”

“What about on the Glock itself?” West asked, sliding into the SUV and transferring the call to the speakers. It was only right that Trisha be up to speed on the case, too.

“No prints on the gun, but Dan Slater is working with a ballistics expert from the

ATF to see if they can raise the serial number, and to test the gun to see if it's been used in other crimes. Our new task force is fast tracking the evidence, which is helpful."

"That sounds promising." Bullets fired from a gun and retrieved from crime scenes could be matched to the weapon if the slugs were uploaded into the system. "I'll touch base with Dan, too."

"Later." His boss ended the call. With Trisha and the baby settled into their seats, West backed out of Raina's driveway, then turned toward his place.

Between the Glock and the list of gym members, he felt as if they were finally on the right track in finding these guys. The fact that Trish's ex had a locker at the gym so close to where they'd found the weapon, made him wonder if the cases were connected in some way.

It would be interesting if they were, although he wasn't sure how. Things were getting complicated, that was for sure. He needed to keep Trisha and Gabriel safe, while seeking justice for Kenyon's murder.

It would be icing on the cake to accomplish both missions.

Relieved Gabriel had quieted down with a full belly and a lulling car ride, Trisha glanced at West. "I wish we knew more about the masked kidnapper, but I'm glad you and the task force have something to investigate related to the gun trafficking case."

"Me, too." He flashed a rare smile. "And we'll keep digging into this ski mask guy, as well."

"Thanks." She understood how the task force felt about nailing these gun runners.

After the way they'd lost Kenyon in that explosion, she couldn't blame them.

Yet the incidents surrounding the masked man nagged at her. She decided to begin with digging into Seth Blakemore as a possible suspect. Even if he wasn't involved, Seth may know more about what Bryan had been up to.

"Do you mind if I borrow your computer? Once you're finished scanning the names of the gym members?"

"Sure." He nodded thoughtfully. "I remember we discussed looking into Seth Blakemore. As a friend of your ex-husband, he's our best lead as to what Bryan may have been up to."

"Agreed." She glanced at Gabriel, who was happily babbling in his car seat. "I can work on Seth Blakemore, to free you up to deal with task force stuff."

"We're in this together." West waved a hand. "I'll help with Seth, although I may have to head out to follow up on other leads, as they arise."

"Okay, thanks." She was secretly thrilled to hear West say they were in this together. As a patrol officer, her job was to keep the highways and roadways safe. Their police department wasn't big enough that she had a partner to ride with, which meant she was alone most of the time.

Every time she pulled someone over, much like the truck last night, she knew she was walking into a potentially dangerous situation. And unlike last night, she normally had nothing more than her gut instincts and training to keep her safe.

Being teamed up with West, even on a temporary basis, was nice. Yet she told herself not to get used to it.

As soon as the masked kidnapper was caught and arrested, she'd be back home and on her own. Normally she thrived on being independent. Yet there was no denying that being a single mother was challenging. She and Raina had that in common. And had agreed that trying to date was an unnecessary complication.

So why was she suddenly thinking about how lonely her life was?

Enough. She shook off the depressing thought and pulled out her phone to check if Seth Blakemore was on social media. She had a profile that didn't use her last name, and didn't list her as a cop on several sites. She'd prefer not to be on social media at all, but there were times, like this, that she needed to use them in an investigation.

And that was impossible to do without a profile. Even one with a cartoon picture and her name being listed as Patricia, rather than just Trisha.

"What are you looking at?" West asked curiously.

"Checking Seth Blakemore on social media." She frowned as she scrolled down the list of Seth Blakemores. "I can barely remember what he looks like, so it may not be as easy as I'd hoped."

"We can ask Cheyenne to get his driver's license photo." He shrugged. "They're only updated every eight years, but it still may help."

"That would be good." She continued to scroll, trying to narrow her search to Seth Blakemore living in South Dakota.

They could issue a BOLO for Blakemore. Not to arrest him, as he hadn't done anything wrong but to get him to the precinct for an interview. She wanted to be there as he was questioned, so she could read his facial expressions and body language for herself.

If Seth was involved in whatever this key was that the masked man was looking for, she hoped they could pressure him into cooperating.

The sound of a ringing phone broke into her thoughts. The dashboard communication screen lit up with an incoming call, the name on the display reading Dan Slater. She knew Slater was with the ATF. That had come out during the explosion that had taken Kenyon's life.

West didn't hesitate to answer. "Hey, Dan, what's up?"

"Where are you?" Dan asked, his voice tense with urgency.

"I'm on the road heading to my house, why?" West asked. He gave the ATF agent the street signs as they drove by. "Is something wrong?"

"Can you detour to the gas station located near the shoot-out that took place last night?" Dan asked. "We just received a call about two bodies being found stuffed in the dumpster behind the building. You're closest to that location, and since you were at the shooting, I'm hoping you can recognize them."

West met her gaze, as if silently asking her opinion. She nodded. If those bodies were related to the shoot-out last night, she wanted to know what had happened, too.

"Yes, I'll head there now, I'm with Patrol Officer Trisha McCord, who was also at the scene of the shooting last night."

"Good. Get there as soon as you can," Dan said. "I've asked the manager not to touch anything and to stay away from the dumpsters until we can get the crime scene techs out there to process the scene." There was a pause, then Dan added, "I'll head over too, but call me the moment you know something."

“Roger that.” West ended the call with a click of a button. His gaze flicked to the rearview mirror, then to her. “I’m not sure it’s wise to bring a baby to a crime scene.”

She winced, glancing back at Gabriel. Lifting herself up out of her seat and craning her neck, she could see he’d fallen asleep, which was a good thing. “At least he’s napping. A quick stop shouldn’t be dangerous. Besides, this is important. I agree with Dan. We can’t allow anything to mess up the crime scene.”

“Yeah.” He scowled at the pickup truck that pulled out in front of him. “I have a bad feeling about these dead bodies.”

She nodded in agreement. Finding dead bodies crammed into dumpsters was rarely good news. During one of her patrols a few months ago she’d stumbled across a man who’d committed suicide in his car by shooting himself in the head.

That had not been a nice discovery.

And she knew what they were about to face would be as bad if not worse.

Mentally preparing herself, she kept an eye on the cars around them as West headed to the gas station. It was one she used often enough while out on patrol, stopping for snacks and to use the restroom facilities.

Yeah, maybe it was time to find a different place. One that wasn’t used as a dumping ground for dead bodies.

West slowed as they approached the gas station. Looking up at the sky outside her passenger window, she saw a couple of birds circling above the facility.

Scavengers looking for food.

She swallowed hard, trying not to let her imagination run wild. Maybe the dumpster had been closed until now, leaving the bodies relatively intact.

One could hope.

“I’ll keep the vehicle running. Stay inside with Gabriel and Peanut,” West said, as he braked to a stop along the side of the building.

She wanted to protest, but after the recent attempt to snatch Gabriel, she nodded. Then rolled down her window, despite the chilly temps. “Please let me know what you find.”

“Trust me. You’ll know.” He pushed open his door and slid out. Then he raised his gold shield for the guy coming out of the gas station to see. “I’m Detective West Cole from the PCPD. Please stay back.”

“You got here fast,” the guy said with obvious relief.

“Has anyone disturbed the bodies?” West asked, as he pulled gloves from his coat pocket. “Touched or moved them in any way?”

“No way.” The guy looked horrified at the thought. “Eli threatened to quit after finding them. No one wants to be around that kind of violence.”

“Okay, thanks.” West caught her gaze, then headed to the back of the gas station. To his credit, he approached the dumpster cautiously, scanning the ground around it. A few feet from the dumpster, he went down on his haunches, clearly searching for clues or other evidence that may have been left behind by the person or persons responsible for dumping the bodies there.

She silently prayed he’d find something.

After what seemed like forever, West rose back to a standing position and stepped closer to the dumpster. The edge of the dumpster came up to his chest, which indicated to her that there would have had to be at least two people involved in the body dump. Hoisting one dead body up and over the edge would be difficult for one man.

Unless he was a body builder, like Stewie at the gym.

West stared over the edge of the dumpster, using a gloved hand to move something aside. Then he stepped away, glancing at her.

“Who is it?” she asked in a low voice so as not to wake Gabriel.

“Petey Pawns. He was one of the gunmen from last night. It’s likely the other dead guy is his accomplice.” West stripped off his gloves and reached for his phone. “I’ll call the captain.”

Her thoughts whirled. Whoever had killed Petey and his accomplice had either done so to send a message to other gun runners not to lose precious merchandise...

Or because they were tying up loose ends.

Most likely, both.

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“Y eah, I recognize one vic as Petey Pawns,” West told Dan. “He and his accomplice were shot in the head and dumped here. No idea where the original crime took place.”

“You’re sure they weren’t killed in the dumpster?” Dan asked.

“Not enough blood or body fluids from what I can see.” West didn’t believe for a minute that the killer would have forced both men to climb into the dumpster so that he could shoot them. “The crime scene techs will be able to tell us more once they’ve processed the area. And the medical examiner will also be able to give us a time of death. I found one partial heel print, but we’ll need to rule out the gas station employees before we can consider it as possibly being left behind by the killer.”

“Yeah, okay, thanks for stopping over,” Dan said. “The ME is on his way, too. I appreciate you identifying one of the vics, but we need an ID on Pawns’s accomplice.”

“That would be nice.” West wasn’t sure knowing the second dead man’s name would help much, but it couldn’t hurt. He glanced at Trisha, still sitting in the SUV. “I have Trisha and her son with me, but I’ll stay here until you and the others arrive.”

“Thanks.” Dan disconnected from the call.

After pocketing his phone, he crossed over to the SUV. A quick glance at the baby confirmed Gabriel was still sleeping. Peanut lifted her head to look at him as if

silently asking if he needed her expertise.

“We can head home once Dan and the crime scene techs get here.” He shook his head and added, “I don’t like knowing these guys were killed likely to keep them from talking.”

“Or in retribution for losing the gun shipment.” She frowned. “You don’t recognize the accomplice other than the fleeting glimpse we got that first night?”

“No. I’m hoping his prints will hit in the system. Or we can use facial recognition to get his ID.”

“Maybe he’s on the gym membership list,” Trisha mused. “That would tie the Glock in with the gun running organization.”

He hoped not, because they needed another thread to pull to break open the investigation. “We’ll see. The sooner we can look through that list, the better.”

“I read through it, but none of the names jumped out at me.” She grimaced. “Other than Bryan’s name. Seth Blakemore isn’t a member, though.”

As much as he wanted to review the list for himself, he continued sweeping the area with his gaze, making sure there were no threats lurking nearby. After the most recent brazen attempt to get Gabriel, he wasn’t taking any chances.

As promised, the crime scene techs arrived about the same time as the coroner. The techs went to work taking photographs of the area around the dumpster. West stepped forward to meet with Dr. Cathy Owens, a no-nonsense woman with gray streaked hair in her midfifties. “Thanks for getting here so quickly, Dr. Owens.”

“That’s my job.” The doc gestured toward the dumpster. “I heard there are two vics?”

“Yes.” West realized he wasn’t going to be able to leave until the bodies had been lifted out of the dumpster. Biting back a flash of impatience, he waited for the techs to finish their preliminary work. He took a moment to show them the heel print, then approached the dumpster with the ME.

Dan arrived next. More pictures were taken before they could remove the bodies. Soon they had both dead men stretched out on the ground. Dr. Owens quickly went to work. She glanced up at him and Dan. “I suspect they’ve been dead for roughly eight hours, maybe less, as the cold temperatures slow decomp. Cause of death appears to be that gunshot wound to the head, but I will need tox screen results to make sure they weren’t drugged prior to being killed.” Dr. Owens stood. “That’s about all I can give you now. I’ll do the autopsies tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Doc.” West glanced at Dan who stepped forward to take control of the scene.

“We know one man as Petey Pawnors, but we need the prints for the second vic to be put through the system ASAP,” Dan said.

“Understood.” One of the techs eyed them warily. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope we don’t have to see either of you again real soon.”

“Tell me about it,” West muttered. They’d all been working with little rest since last night. Leaving Dan in charge, he turned away, eager to get back to work. He quickly joined Trish, sliding behind the wheel of the SUV. Seconds later, they were back on the road, leaving the gas station with its grisly discovery behind.

West made the trip back to his place, noting that Gabriel was just starting to wake up as he pulled into the driveway. It was past noon, and his stomach growled with hunger. He mentally inventoried his fridge and pantry. “How about grilled cheese and tomato soup for a late lunch?”

“Ah, sure.” She arched a brow. “Surprised you want to eat after the scene at the gas station.”

“I know it sounds terrible, but what can I say.” He shrugged as he pulled into the garage. No more parking outside, not until the masked man had been found and arrested. “I have a high metabolism. But I need to spend some time with Peanut outside for a few minutes, too.”

“Sounds good. That will give me time to get Gabriel settled.” She opened the back passenger door as she spoke, wincing a bit as she stretched her sore knee. Gabriel fussed for a moment, then seemed happy to be out of the car.

“Grab an ice pack from the freezer,” he suggested.

“Okay,” she said with a nod.

He took Peanut into the yard. After she did her thing, he spent time playing with her, having her search for “tools” after he hid his gun.

Peanut found his weapon without difficulty each time. He loved the way she was so happy, wagging her tail with excitement when he praised her.

Ten minutes later, he took Peanut inside, stopping abruptly as he realized Trisha was talking to her son while making lunch.

“You have to be a good boy so that we don’t bother West.” She glanced at the baby seated on a blanket in the middle of the living room.

“You’re not a bother,” he said, shrugging out of his coat and draping it over the closest chair. Okay, maybe he didn’t love the loss of his privacy, but that didn’t matter when Trisha and Gabriel were in danger. Peanut rushed over to sniff Gabriel,

licking his face and making the child giggle. “I would have made lunch.”

“I don’t mind.” She shot him a quick smile, then added, “Besides, I know you wanted to start reviewing that gym membership list.”

He nodded, pulling the paperwork from his pocket. “I’ll get this scanned and sent to Cheyenne, then start looking for anyone with a criminal record.”

“Lunch will be ready in ten.” She wiped her hands on a dish towel, then reached down to adjust the ice pack she’d wrapped around her knee. “I need to grab Gabriel’s car seat to use as a makeshift high chair.”

“I’ll get it.” He went out to the garage and brought the car seat in. His house seemed smaller with Trisha and Gabriel there, but he told himself to get over it. His discomfort wasn’t nearly as important as keeping them safe. Although the responsibility of that task weighed heavily on his shoulders. He crossed to the alcove off the kitchen that housed his computer and printer. After scanning and sending the gym membership to their tech analyst, Cheyenne, he began checking names for criminal backgrounds. He had only gotten through a handful of people when Trisha called, “West? Lunch is ready.”

“Coming.” He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had made a meal for him. Unless you counted the pizza he and Kenyon would share while watching a game. West’s ex, Shannon, had cooked a few times, but then had gotten really angry when one night he’d gotten hung up at a crime scene and “ruined” their dinner. It was the first time he’d understood how much Shannon had resented the demands of his job. They had only dated for six months, but most of that time they were at odds with each other. He’d been relieved after she’d broken things off.

As a patrol officer herself, Trisha would understand how a detective could run late, but that didn’t mean he was interested in trying again.

Especially not with a ready-made family. No matter how beautiful and cute Trisha and Gabriel were.

Married to his job, remember? At the time Shannon's accusatory words had stung, but there was no denying they were also true.

Cops had a high divorce rate, his parents were proof of that. His dad had been a cop, his mom a teacher, and they'd divorced when he was eight years old. He had no intention of making the same mistake his dad had.

He rose to his feet and joined Trisha in the kitchen. The grilled cheese smelled great, and she'd made him two sandwiches to have with his tomato soup.

"I would like to say grace." Trisha looked at him, waiting for his nod, before clasping her hands and bowing her head. "Lord Jesus, we thank You for this food we are about to eat. We ask that You please keep us all safe in Your care, especially Gabriel and the members of the task force. Amen."

"Amen," he echoed softly, touched by her prayer that not only included him but the entire task force. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." She took a bite of her grilled cheese, then offered a spoonful of some green baby food to Gabriel. The little boy opened his mouth, then made a face. She chuckled. "He's not a fan of vegetables."

"At least he didn't spit it out." He remembered when Kenyon had given the twins their first taste of broccoli. Beacon had spit his mouthful halfway across the table.

"He's a good eater, which is nice." She took another bite of her sandwich. "Find anything interesting?"

“Not yet.” He hoped he wasn’t spinning his wheels going through the membership list. Yet the Glock had been left by someone. His gut told him the perp wasn’t just using the locker as a safe place to keep the illegal weapon but had used the gym locker room as a drop off/pick up location, easily passing a key from one to the other. If so, the guy who had left it and the intended recipient should both be on the list.

And if neither one of them had a criminal background? Hard to believe, since most people didn’t get an illegal weapon without knowing someone sketchy.

His phone rang just as they finished eating. Seeing ATF agent Dan Slater’s name on the screen had him answering quickly. “Hi, Dan.”

“Hey, West. Good work on finding that gun at the gym,” Dan said. “I’m sure it’s from an earlier gun shipment.”

“It was all Peanut,” he said, glancing down at the beagle curled by his feet.

“I know and I’m grateful. We’re having the gun tested for ballistics, although it looks pretty clean. I also need you and Gracie Fitzpatrick to head over to the pizzeria this afternoon,” Slater said. “I would like Peanut and Gracie’s K-9 to give the place a good sniff.”

“Okay.” He glanced at Trish, hoping she would be okay staying here alone with Gabriel. He didn’t see how the masked man could know her location. “I’ll give Gracie a call.”

“I’ve already spoken to her. She’ll meet you at the pizzeria at four o’clock. There’s generally a lull between lunch and dinner so there will be fewer people there. We’re running the employees through the system but haven’t gotten any hits.”

Just like the gym membership, he thought grimly. “Understood. I’ll be there.” He

ended the call and looked up to see Trisha eyeing him curiously. “In an hour, I’ll need to leave you and Gabriel for a while. Do you want me to have an officer from the department sit outside?”

“No need.” She managed a wan smile. “I’m a cop and armed. Besides, I don’t see how the kidnapper could know where we are.”

“Yeah, okay.” He finished his lunch, trying to shake off the niggling worry. Trisha was a cop who could take care of herself. She’d proved that and more the night of the shooting.

Still, he wouldn’t relax until he was back here, where he could keep an eye on her.

And that forced him to admit that he was already beginning to care about her, more than he should.

When she finished eating and feeding Gabriel, Trisha rose to get a wet wipe. Gabriel was a messy eater, often getting food in his hair. After that, she set him back on the floor with several toys. The ice pack on her knee had helped reduce the swelling, so she tucked it back in the freezer to use again, later.

“West, while you’re gone, I’m going to use your computer to keep searching on information on Seth Blakemore.” She glanced at him as she filled the sink with sudsy water. “If you don’t mind.”

“That’s a good idea.” He pulled out a dish towel, obviously ready to dry. “Where did Bryan Little work last?”

“He had trouble holding a job,” she admitted. “His last job was at the Rocking K Ranch, which is a good sixty miles east of here heading toward Badlands National Park.”

“I’ve never heard of the Rocking K,” West admitted.

“I hadn’t, either. I looked it up. The owner is a guy named Aaron Klinger, and I found an outstanding loan for which legal action was taken. Seems to me the ranch is cash poor. Doesn’t really matter, because Bryan quit that job anyway, right after I told him I was pregnant.” She glanced at her son. “I always wondered if the reason he filed for divorce and left was because he knew he’d be a lousy father and provider.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” West murmured.

She shrugged. “We’ve all faced challenges, right? I choose to believe God has a good reason for putting me and Gabriel in this position.”

He nodded and continued drying dishes without saying anything. She wondered if West was a believer, then reminded herself that his personal life was none of her business.

This was a temporary arrangement. Nothing more.

Which was for the best, as she’d made the mistake of marrying Bryan who hadn’t been a believer, either. Certainly her ex had not taken the whole, until death do us part portion of his vows seriously.

Enough. Thinking along those lines wasn’t helpful. Despite the difficulties of being a single mom, she was in a much better place.

At least, she would be once the kidnapper was caught.

She turned to play with Gabriel, hoping to tire him out for his afternoon nap. West worked on the computer, then suddenly said, “Trish? Check this out.”

“What did you find?” She rose from the floor, wincing a bit. Crossing to the alcove where West sat, she leaned forward to look at the screen over his shoulder. The enticing scent of his aftershave teased her senses.

“Does this guy sound familiar?” He tapped the screen. “David Albright?”

She turned the name over in her mind. “No, afraid not.”

“He was arrested for B and E last year.” He turned to glance at her. “Could be that he was the intended recipient of the Glock.”

“Breaking and entering isn’t nearly as serious as armed robbery,” she felt compelled to point out.

“He may have wanted the weapon for something else.” He shrugged. “It just makes me wonder if Albright met someone in jail and made a point of catching up with him once they were both out.”

“That’s something to consider.” She straightened. “But I would think that anyone buying or selling a Glock on the black market would be planning a bigger crime.”

“Yeah, there is that.” He sighed then stood. “I need to get over to the pizzeria. Are you sure you don’t mind being left here alone?”

“We’ll be fine.” She spoke with confidence. The danger was real, but she felt safe in West’s home. “Hopefully Gabriel will go down for a nap soon. He didn’t sleep that long in the car.”

He nodded. “Let me give you my phone number and password for the computer.” He pulled out his phone. “You better give me your number, too.”

Feeling awkward, she complied. Then entered his name, number and the password into her contact list. Back when she was a rookie, she would have been thrilled to have West's number.

Before she'd married Bryan. And then divorced him. And had Gabriel.

This number was only to be used for police business.

"I hope you and Peanut find something," she said, as he shrugged into his jacket then reached for Peanut's leash.

"Me, too." He flashed a quick smile, then turned toward the door leading to the attached garage. "Keep the doors locked."

"Of course." Gabriel began to cry, holding his arms out toward Peanut. With a sigh, she scooped the boy into her arms, and held him as West and Peanut left.

"You can play with Peanut later," she assured him. Unfortunately, that wasn't good enough, so she bounced him in her arms, walking around the house.

The house seemed empty without West there, which was ridiculous since she was used to living alone. Determined not to be ruled by fear, she pushed the feeling aside.

Out of habit, she went from one window to the next, checking their surroundings. She wasn't familiar with West's neighborhood the way she was her own, so she took her time, looking at license plates and vehicles parked in the various driveways. She took note of the elderly woman walking her small poodle and an older man riding his bike, bundled from head to toe because of the chill.

That's dedication, she thought, turning away from the window. Since Gabriel was still fussing, she went to the kitchen to make a bottle.

Usually, giving him a bottle did the trick. She crossed to the sofa and nestled him in her arms. Within minutes, his eyelids began to droop. Still, she didn't move until he'd stopped drinking his formula.

Setting the bottle aside, she slowly stood and eased down the hall to the guest room where she'd set up his portable crib. Practically holding her breath, she carefully set him down, praying he wouldn't wake up.

He didn't.

Sometimes on her days off she napped when he did, but that wasn't an option today. Tiptoeing out of the room, she hurried back to the computer. Keying in West's password, she began to search for information on Seth Blakemore.

He had no criminal background, but she did eventually find him on social media. The only problem there was that he hadn't posted anything in over six months.

Frustrated, she rose and paced the room. Maybe she needed to go back to the beginning. Seth wasn't the masked kidnapper—his physical characteristics from the photos she'd seen online didn't match that of the man who'd slammed her to the ground and grabbed the stroller.

What was she missing? What key? Not the gym locker key, but a key to something else?

She found herself making the rounds from window to window again, as her thoughts whirled. At the window overlooking the street where the dog walker and biker had been earlier, she took note of a black Ford sedan. It caught her attention because it was moving so slow, almost as if the driver was lost.

Or looking for someone.

She pressed herself back against the wall to avoid being seen. When the car rolled past, she quickly memorized the license plate number, then hurried over to jot it down on the notepad near the computer.

Maybe she was making a big deal out of nothing. It was smart to drive slow through a neighborhood where kids could be outside playing. The owner could be looking for a lost pet.

Still, that didn't stop her from pulling up the DMV database and accessing it with her patrol officer credentials. The car was registered to a woman by the name of Renee Mills.

It didn't sound familiar. When she checked that name in the criminal database, nothing popped.

Frustrated, she rose to her feet and returned to the window. This time, she didn't see anything unusual. When Gabriel started to cry, she quickly turned away to tend to her son.

"Shh, it's okay. Mommy's here." She lifted the baby into her arms and paced the room. Then froze, as she heard a muffled thumping sound near the back door.

Someone was trying to get inside! She quickly set Gabriel back down and tucked the car seat behind one of the living room chairs. Then she reached for her weapon and silently moved toward the door.

The knob jiggled. Remembering how the perp had used lock picks to get into her house, made her realize he was trying to do the same thing now. With an abrupt move, she grabbed the door handle and wrenched the door open.

"Police!" She peered around the corner to see the masked intruder was already

running away. “Stop! Police!” Unable to leave Gabriel alone, she was forced to watch helplessly as the perp disappeared around the corner.

Battling a wave of frustration, she closed and locked the door, then pulled out her phone to request an officer response.

“I need back up to this location and for you to run this plate number.” She rattled off the information.

“Trish, that vehicle has recently been reported as stolen,” the dispatcher informed her. “I’m sending a squad ASAP.”

A stolen vehicle and another attempt to get to her son. She didn’t like how this was going. Not one little bit.

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West glanced at Gracie Fitzpatrick when Peanut alerted in the storage room of the pizzeria. It was no surprise, as he'd witnessed the crates being removed from the storage area and placed in the van.

"Should we check these boxes?" Gracie asked with a frown. Her Belgian Malinois, Bane, was sitting at her side, his nose sniffing the air. West knew Bane would take off after a perp with speed and agility and wished he'd had Bane with him when he'd chased the kidnapper.

The first box held paper supplies. The next contained various spices. The third held cans of parmesan cheese.

"I don't understand," Henry Anderson said from the doorway. The middle-aged owner of the pizzeria appeared distressed. "I would never condone having guns in here."

"Mr. Anderson, do all of your employees have access to this room?" West asked, as he continued checking boxes. The rest of the pizzeria had been clean. No alerts from Peanut or Bane. Although Bane's specialty was in finding people more than items.

"Yes, of course. I mean, sometimes we run out of things like napkins and cheese. You know, items that the customers might need."

"Would you be willing to give us a list of all your employees, including those who have left in the past year?" West asked. His phone rang, but he let it go to voicemail.

“Is this room always kept locked?”

“I’ll give you a list of employees past and present,” Henry agreed without hesitation. “No, I generally don’t keep this room locked. It’s not like there’s anything of value in here.”

West tried not to sigh. If that was the case, anyone who’d bothered to case the joint could have been using the room as a hiding spot without the owners being any wiser. Still, he hoped Petey’s accomplice had been an employee. At this point, both Henry and his wife, Martha, needed to stay on the suspect list, too.

“We appreciate your cooperation,” Gracie said.

West’s phone rang again. He pulled it from his pocket, his heart squeezing in his chest when he saw Trish’s name on the screen. “Hey, Trish, what’s going on?”

“The masked intruder tried to get into the house through the back door. He took off running and I couldn’t leave Gabriel to follow him. Just before that, I noticed a black Ford sedan driving by. I had dispatch run the plates, they verified it was reported stolen. We’re fine, I have PCPD officers on scene, but I need a different place to stay.”

“I’ll be right there. Don’t leave without me.” West caught Gracie’s concerned look. She knew that Trisha and her baby were staying with him temporarily. “Someone tried to get into my home and we have a lead on a stolen car,” he explained, then turned to Henry. “Please get us two copies of your list of employees.”

“Yeah, sure.” Henry left and he could hear the owner calling out to Martha.

“I heard about the abduction attempt on Officer McCord’s son,” Gracie said, her brow furrowed with concern. “You think the kidnapper stole a car and found out

where you live?”

“That’s the only logical explanation.” He didn’t really understand how Trisha and Gabriel had been found at his place. Had they been followed? He’d kept an eye on the rearview mirror and hadn’t noticed a tail.

The fact that the perp tried to get inside, only made the situation worse. There had been a fair amount of traffic in the middle of the day. Maybe he should have done a better job of taking a convoluted route back home from the gas station.

He was itching to get out of there, even though he knew Trisha was with fellow officers. When Henry returned with two copies of the list, he took his gratefully.

“I have to go. I’ll check in with Dan Slater and Captain Ross, later. Come, Peanut.” He smiled when Peanut dropped her ducky and came to sit beside him. He picked up the toy, then led her outside.

Seconds later, he and Peanut were in the SUV heading back to the downtown area of the city. His house happened to be on the opposite side from where the pizzeria was located. He’d thought the location of the pizza parlor, being in a more deserted section of the city, was one of the reasons it had been used as a storage facility.

There were two Plains City squads parked on the road outside his place. He pulled into the driveway and parked. No point in going into the garage since they would not be staying for long. He folded the list of employees and tucked it between his seat and the center console.

“Hey, Detective,” Officer Thornton greeted him when he slid out from behind the wheel. “Everything has been quiet. No sign of the stolen vehicle since we arrived. We’ve issued a BOLO for the car and have spread out to canvass the area for the perp, but so far we have nothing to show for our efforts.”

“Thanks for the quick response.” West couldn’t help feeling guilty over the fact that he never should have left Trisha and Gabriel alone. The near miss made his blood run cold. He glanced at Peanut in the back crate, deciding she should wait there for a few minutes.

“We’re fine,” Trisha added from the front doorway. She held Gabriel on her hip, the boy looking sleepy as he rested his head on her shoulder. “There was no reason to rush back.”

Yeah, there was. He held Trish’s gaze for a moment, wishing he had the right to haul her into his arms to comfort her. She stepped back giving him room to enter. “How did this guy try to get in?”

“Picked the lock, just like at my place.” She moved toward the back door to show him. He scowled at the scratch marks around the keyhole. Thank goodness Trisha was smart enough to have figured out what was happening before this guy got all the way inside. He forced himself to remain calm as he turned toward her “Did you pack all of yours and Gabriel’s things?”

“Yes.” A flash of regret darkened her eyes. “I feel terrible about this. You can drop us off at a hotel. No reason for you to leave your home.”

“We’re in this together, remember?” No way was he leaving her and Gabriel at some hotel alone. Especially not after this. “I only need a minute to grab some stuff for me and Peanut.”

She looked as if she might argue, then nodded. He tossed a change of clothes in a duffel, then packed extra food for Peanut. Most of what she needed was already in the back of the SUV.

It took him a few extra minutes to get all of Gabriel’s things into the SUV. The

portable crib, car seat, box of food supplies and diaper bag, along with Trish's small suitcase. Obviously traveling lightly was impossible with a baby and a dog.

Mostly the baby, he thought wryly.

As Trisha buckled Gabriel in, he gestured to Officer Thornton. "Do you have the name and address of the Ford sedan's owner?"

"Right here. Renee Mills." Thornton thumbed his phone. "I'll send it to you if you'd like."

"Please." The name wasn't familiar, but he wanted to speak with her directly. "Thanks again. I appreciate you having my back. And Officer McCord's back, too."

"Always." Thornton's expression turned serious. "I don't like the way crime in our city has been on the rise. The sooner we toss these bad guys behind bars, the better."

"I couldn't agree more." He noticed the address for Renee Mills was on the northern end of town. "Take care."

"You, too." Thornton turned away.

He climbed into the SUV, glancing at Trish. "You're really okay?"

"Of course." She managed a smile, then added, "I will admit to being on edge while waiting for the officers to arrive."

"That was good work on noticing the vehicle in the first place," he said softly.

"I ran the plates the first time it went past because it was moving so slow. I thought I was overreacting, then I heard someone outside the door." She sighed. "When I called

in, I learned the car was reported stolen.”

“Yeah, I was thinking we should have a little chat with the owner, Renee Mills.” He frowned. “But I don’t think we should take Gabriel with us.”

“To be honest, I would rather keep him close. You don’t think Renee is a suspect, do you? She reported her car as being stolen. I highly doubt she’s the one driving it.”

“That’s true.” Like most cops, he operated under the mindset of guilty until proven innocent. Backward from how the courts viewed things, but that was the approach most investigators took. Once he could rule someone out as a suspect, he moved on to the next.

“Please, West. This probably won’t take long. And I feel like we should talk to her as soon as possible.” Trisha tucked a strand of her red hair behind her ear. “I can stay in the car, if that’s easier.”

Against his better judgment, he nodded. “Yeah, okay. In the meantime, we need to think about where we should stay.”

“Someplace with a kitchenette would be nice.” She picked up her phone. “I’ll start searching for possibilities.”

“Try to find a place that isn’t too far from the police station.” He knew the work of the task force needed to continue, and he didn’t want to be too far away from the flow of information.

At least he had a list of the pizzeria employees. He planned to cross-reference them with the list of gym members. That may be a way to narrow their focus on a particular suspect.

“Did you find anything at the pizzeria?”

“Nothing new, but Peanut alerted to the weapons that were kept in the storage room.” He shrugged. “According to Henry Anderson, they don’t keep the storage room locked.”

“That figures,” she muttered.

Renee Mills lived in a side-by-side townhouse. There was no garage, and no car in the driveway, either, which backed up her claim of the car being stolen. He pulled in and shifted into Park. “Wait here, okay?”

She wrinkled her nose and nodded. “Yes. But take Peanut. She could be armed.”

That wasn’t a bad thought, so he used the key fob to open the hatch, then got out to join Peanut. He clipped on her collar, then walked up to the front door. It opened before he had a chance to knock.

“Who are you?” a woman he assumed was Renee Mills asked. Her bleached blond hair had an inch of outgrowth on her roots. She sported several tattoos and piercings, and he assessed her as roughly his age of thirty-one. Yet her features were pinched as if she didn’t get enough sleep.

He flashed his gold shield. “I’m Detective Cole. I understand you reported your car as stolen?”

“Yeah, I did.” She didn’t invite him in. “Did you find it?”

“Not yet. I’d like to know when you noticed it missing.” He glanced at Peanut, who sniffed the air with interest but didn’t alert.

“About an hour ago.” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “I was heading out to the grocery store, when I noticed it was gone.”

He turned to scan the driveway. “I don’t see any broken glass. Do you know how the thief took your car? Did you hear anything suspicious?”

She flushed and shrugged. “I didn’t hear anything. I don’t always lock the car. Stuff like this doesn’t happen around here.”

Clearly it did, but he refrained from pointing it out. He eyed Renee Mills thoughtfully. She was cooperating, but also seemed to be holding back. The crossed arms over her chest indicated she was feeling defensive. “Ms. Mills, if you know something about this, it’s imperative you tell us.”

“I didn’t steal my own car!” Her outburst seemed a bit over the top. “Come back when you’ve found it.” With that, she stepped back and slammed the door shut.

Interesting. In his humble opinion, the woman protested a bit too much.

It chafed at Trisha to wait in the car while West did the detective work. She was a well-trained cop and should have been out there questioning Renee Mills alongside him. Gauging the woman for herself. Reading her nonverbal cues.

She’d lowered the window and had caught the gist of the conversation. It was surprising that Mills hadn’t acted like most victims. There was no outrage, no worry about insurance claims. Instead, she’d displayed a rather strange acceptance that her car had been taken.

As soon as West had put Peanut in the back and slid behind the wheel, her suspicions were confirmed. “There’s something off about that woman,” he said darkly.

“I agree.” Trisha scowled. “I think she knows who took her car.”

West eyed her in surprise. “What makes you say that?”

“She admitted it wasn’t locked, and appeared resigned, as if the theft wasn’t that much of a surprise. We need to dig into her background.”

“That’s the plan.” West grinned. “It’s nice to know you got the same vibe from her that I did. She tried to come across as cooperative but seemed far more defensive than I expected.”

She wasn’t a detective with a gold shield, but his comment was sweet. Maybe he was just trying to be nice to her, but she liked feeling as if they were working together as a team.

Too bad they were only a team when it came to police work. She knew West checked in on Kenyon’s twins, but he hadn’t seemed very interested in getting close to Gabriel.

Maybe she was making an assumption, but what did it matter? She had no interest in getting married again. One mistake was more than enough. Gabriel needed stability in his life—he’d already lost his biological father. She wasn’t interested in risking her heart again.

Nope. Not. Happening.

“Did you find a hotel?” West’s voice broke into her thoughts.

“Oh, yeah. There’s a place called The Scenic Suites, overlooking the Black Hills. They have two-bedroom suites and a small kitchen for a reasonable price. They are also pet friendly, which I knew was important for Peanut’s sake. I’ll gladly pay for

the room,” she added quickly, not wanting him to think she was being extravagant. She’d thought the suite would be better for West so he wouldn’t have to put up with Gabriel’s crying. “We’re going there because of the danger to my son.”

“I’ll foot the bill, since it seems we must have been followed to my place from the gas station.” His brow furrowed. “I don’t like thinking the perp waited for me to leave, then decided to make his move.”

“It’s possible.”

“I don’t like it,” West muttered with a scowl. “I feel like I failed you and Gabriel.”

“You didn’t.” She reached over to rest her hand on his arm. “I don’t blame you. I just wish I understood what this was all about.”

West surprised her by covering her hand with his. “We need to keep thinking through potential options for this mystery key. The gym key was a good thought. Maybe we should check the local post office. A safety deposit box. Or the bus station.”

His hand radiated warmth to the point it was distracting. What had he said? “I—uh, yes. You’re right. That’s a great idea. I think the bus station is the most likely option.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, as if he was actually enjoying their time together as much as she was. But that couldn’t be the case.

As if on cue, Gabriel started to fuss.

“He’s teething.” She moved her hand from his, praying Gabriel wouldn’t break into a full-scale wail. “I have some teething rings for him in the diaper bag.”

“He’s handling it well,” West said. “We’ll be at the Scenic Suites shortly.”

“I know.” She leaned back to snag the diaper bag from the floor of the back seat. After finding the teething ring, she stretched as far as she could to give it to Gabriel.

West pulled into the Scenic Suites and chose the closest available parking space. “I’ll move the vehicle around back after hauling everything inside.”

She understood his concern. If the driver of the stolen vehicle was looking for his SUV, it wouldn’t be good to have it parked out front in plain view.

Fifteen minutes later, they were settled in. Gabriel was in full fussy mode, quieting down only when she gave him a bottle.

Letting out a long breath, she caught West watching them. “I usually feed him dinner around six. I hope there’s a place nearby we can get something to eat, too.”

“I’ll check it out when I move the SUV. Speaking of food,” he said, unfolding several pieces of paper. “This is a list of past and present employees for the pizzeria. I’d like to cross-reference this with the gym membership list.”

He used the term *we* again, which made her smile. “Sounds good.”

After West returned from moving the SUV, they ordered food. Gabriel finished his bottle. After his usual burp, she sat him on a blanket on the floor, then gave him his chew ring. He instantly stuck it in his mouth.

She straightened, bumping into West in the process. “Oh, sorry.” Her cheeks burned as she wondered how a two-bedroom suite could feel so small and cramped.

His arms came up to steady her elbows. They were so close, an enticing wave of his

aftershave washed over her. “How’s your knee holding up?”

His voice was low, and surprisingly intimate. His gaze locked on hers, and it was as if time stood still. Then his gaze dropped to her mouth. She found herself leaning toward him, when Gabriel let out a cry.

She moved back so fast, she nearly fell. Then she turned to pick up her son. “There, there, you’re okay,” she murmured, trying to steady herself as much as reassuring her son.

The moment was broken, but awareness still shimmered through her system at their near embrace.

Something that, if she was smart, would not happen again.

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EIGHT

Get a grip! West silently chided himself for coming within a nanosecond of pulling Trisha into his arms and kissing her.

What was wrong with him? He wasn't interested!

Okay, that was a lie. Any guy would be interested in a beautiful woman like Trish. She was funny, smart, strong, courageous and off-limits in a big way.

His role here was to protect her and Gabriel.

Not kiss her.

It was all this forced togetherness that was doing him in. He had never shared his personal space with a woman before. It would help to keep busy. Work had always been his salvation, and that was something he desperately needed now.

His gaze landed on the paperwork he'd brought in. He took a seat at the table and set the lists side by side. Thankfully, they had both been generated by computers and therefore had all the names in alphabetical order.

There were two names that overlapped. Alan Hines and Greg Zillow. He turned to let Trisha know what he'd found, but his breath caught in his throat when he saw her rocking Gabriel, whispering soothing sounds to settle the fussy baby.

Since when did he find motherhood alluring?

Since never. But there was no denying how arresting Trisha looked while caring for her son. The love reflected on her face made him wish for something he'd never had.

Something he hadn't even known he'd longed for, until now.

As if feeling his gaze, she glanced up. "Did you find something?"

"Yeah." He had to clear his throat, forcing himself to stay on track. "Do you recognize either of these names? Greg Zillow or Alan Hines?"

"No, they don't ring a bell." She frowned. "You found their names on both lists? Pizzeria employees and members of the Fitness Guru Gym?"

"Yeah. Greg Zillow is a current gym member, and former pizzeria employee. Alan Hines is the opposite, a current employee at the pizza place but no longer a member of the gym."

"That's interesting. Do either of them have criminal records?"

"I'm about to check." He bent to retrieve the laptop. A minute later, he had it plugged in, booted up and connected to the hotel internet. "Zillow did time for possession of pot a year ago, but it was a small amount so it's nothing more than a misdemeanor." He quickly checked Alan Hines. "Hines also has a drug possession charge."

"Small-time drugs, but not guns." Her expression turned thoughtful. "I guess it's not a stretch to believe one or both of them has moved up in the criminal world to gun trafficking."

"Maybe." He'd been hoping for something more. He jotted down the last known address for each of them. "Makes me wonder if one of these two left the Glock for the other."

“That’s one possible scenario.” She shrugged. “Based on what we saw at the gym, I don’t think it would be difficult for a nonmember to slip into the locker room.”

“True, I didn’t get the impression that Stewie runs a tight ship,” he agreed. “He claims guns aren’t allowed, but we still found one. And I suspect Alan Hines could have slipped by without drawing attention, left the item in the locker, then sneaked out again.” He tapped the paperwork on the desk. “Although it could be that Greg Zillow, who is a current member of the gym, left the Glock for someone else. For all we know, Alan is an innocent bystander.” They had something to go on, but it wasn’t much.

“Greg Zillow is a member of the gym, which gives him easy access to the locker room, and he worked at the pizzeria, so he would know the layout of that place,” she mused. “Which means he knew very well the storage room was never locked.”

“Exactly. Knowing that puts Zillow at the top of the suspect list.” He wanted nothing more than to check Greg Zillow out for himself, but forced himself to call Gracie Fitzpatrick, instead. She and Bane would be the perfect duo to head over with another member of the team to have a little heart-to-heart with Zillow. After the attempted break in at his house, he wasn’t going to leave Trisha and Gabriel alone.

“Hey, West, is everything okay?” Gracie asked by way of greeting.

“Yes, thanks for asking. I have a potential suspect that I’d like you to interview. Greg Zillow.” He explained about the guy being a member of the gym and a former employee of the pizzeria. “He could have left the Glock in the locker room for some buyer and would know about the supply room always being left unlocked.”

“Very true,” she said, with a hint of enthusiasm in her tone. They all wanted to bring this gun trafficking enterprise down as soon as possible. “I’ll gladly talk to him.”

“I think you should take someone else from the task force along with you,” he went on. “Bane is a great protector, and will bring this perp down if needed, but anyone involved with the gun trafficking is likely armed and should be considered dangerous.”

“I’ll see if Dan Slater has someone available from the task force,” she agreed. “Maybe Deputy Zack Kelcey has time to ride along. Nice work on digging into Greg Zillow. I’ll keep you updated on what we find.”

“Great, thanks.” He ended the call, doing his best to hide his disappointment at not being able to interview their potential suspect himself.

“I’m sure I’ll be safe here with Gabriel,” Trisha said, easily reading his thoughts. “You found the connection to Zillow and deserve to be involved.”

“It’s okay. The rest of the task force has it under control.” He was trying to reassure himself as much as her.

On cue, the hotel phone rang. He reached over to answer the landline. “Hello?”

“Food delivery here for you,” the front desk clerk said.

“I’ll be right there.” He hung up and patted his pocket to make sure he had his key. Their suite was on the first floor, per his request, to make it easier to take Peanut outside. He decided to bring her with him. “Our sandwiches and chips are here. I’ll be right back. Come, Peanut.”

Peanut eagerly jumped up when he reached for her leash. At his place, he didn’t need it. But here, there were too many people milling about. Peanut was very well-behaved.

Too bad many people weren't.

He glanced back to see that Trisha had turned her attention back to her son. He abruptly realized the main reason she'd gotten a room here was so that he wouldn't be disturbed by Gabriel's fussing.

Oddly, the little boy hadn't bothered him at all. It was almost scary how quickly and easily the mother and son pair had infiltrated his life. To the point his house was going to seem empty once they were gone.

He took Peanut outside first, scanning the area as she did her business. Satisfied there was nothing unusual or suspicious, he took the dog back in and grabbed the sandwiches. His stomach rumbled with hunger as the aroma of bacon from his BLT sub wafted toward him.

Back in the suite, he'd noticed Trisha had cleared the table to make room. Gabriel was sitting on the floor again, gnawing at his teething ring. Peanut went over to the little boy, as if knowing it was a part of her job to keep an eye on him.

"I'm hungry," Trisha said.

"Me, too, but I need to feed Peanut, first." He made it a habit to care for his partner before himself. He rummaged in the oversize bag he'd packed with her things, pulling out her food and water dishes. After filling them up, he set them on the floor in front of the minifridge. Peanut watched him with dark eyes, her nose sniffing the air but not moving until he gave her the okay.

"Come and get it," he said, pointing at the bowls.

Peanut jumped up and ran to eat, her tail wagging with excitement. He stroked her soft fur. "You're a good girl, Sweet Pea."

“I love that nickname,” Trisha said with a smile. “I can’t get over how amazing K-9s are. I didn’t really appreciate them the way I do now.”

“I have to admit, it’s a blessing to be able to work with a K-9 partner.” He returned to the table, opened the bag of chips, then reached for his sandwich.

“I’d like to say grace,” Trisha said.

He flushed and dropped the sandwich he’d almost taken a bite out of. “Of course. Sorry.”

She smiled and reached for his hand. “Dear Lord Jesus, we thank You for this wonderful food we are about to eat. Please continue to keep the task force team members and my son safe in Your loving arms. Amen.”

“And keep Trisha safe from harm, too,” he quickly added. “Amen.”

“Thanks for including me.” She released his hand and waved at the food. “Now we can dig in.”

“We had pizza last night, or I’d have suggested it again,” he admitted. “The pizzeria smelled great.”

“It’s a fan favorite with me, too. But this turkey sub works just as well.” She took a small bite. “I hope you hear something from the task force soon.”

He eyed his watch. It was quarter past six o’clock. Had the lab gotten any results back on Petey Pawns’s dead accomplice? He’d hoped for something more to go on, but at this rate they may not learn anything until the morning.

He wondered if Gracie and Zach had spoken to Greg Zillow yet. He also wanted to

attend the autopsies. Maybe he could convince one of the patrol officers to stand by here at the hotel while he was gone.

They were just finishing their meal when his phone rang. Surprised to see his captain's name on the screen, he quickly answered. "Hey, what's going on?"

"We have an ID on the dead accomplice found in the dumpster with Petey Pawns," Ross said, his voice sounding resigned. "Greg Zillow. I heard you cross matched his name as belonging to the gym and being a former employee of the Plains City Pizzeria."

"I did." He sat back, letting out a low groan. "I can't believe Zillow is dead."

"Yeah, Gracie Fitzpatrick and Zach Kelcey had just gotten to his place to try to talk to him when word came in. They're going to execute a search warrant for his apartment, and Pawns's place, too. Just thought you should know." His boss sounded tired.

He shared the same weary sense of exhaustion.

Their most promising lead to identifying someone higher up within the gun running organization was dead.

Trisha quickly set Gabriel in his car seat to feed him dinner, listening as West spoke on the phone.

Greg Zillow was dead? She had gotten a glimpse of the two bodies that had been pulled from the dumpster and placed on the ground for the ME to examine more closely.

"Thanks, please keep me in the loop," West said to their boss, then set his phone on

the table, meeting her gaze. “I’m sure you heard that Greg Zillow is dead.”

“Not good,” she agreed. Gabriel kicked his feet when she didn’t feed him fast enough. Her boy loved to eat, anything but his vegetables. “But maybe they’ll find something useful when they execute the search warrant.”

“I hope so.” West sounded glum. “It feels like for every step forward, we take two steps back.”

“I know.” She wished there was something she could say to reassure him. Truth be told, they weren’t much further along on her case, either. “Maybe we should focus our efforts back on figuring out what key the kidnapper was looking for. It could have been coincidence that our investigation into the key led us to the gym, which enabled us to find an illegal gun. Or the cases could be connected.”

“You’re right.” He straightened in his seat. “I’ll make a list of places that we can check out tomorrow.” He glanced at her son, then added, “I can do the legwork. I’ll ask one of the patrol officers to hang out here with you while I’m gone.”

She frowned, not liking the sound of that. “I can see if Laurel is feeling better. Maybe she can come to the hotel to watch Gabriel.” When she’d called to check on Laurel earlier, her dear friend was grumpy about needing to stay when she felt just fine. The former cop had let Trisha know that the masked man had caught her off guard only because she had no reason to expect danger. Now she did and would be prepared.

He shrugged. “That’s up to you, but I don’t think it’s necessary for both of us to go.”

Maybe not, but that wasn’t the point. Her son was the one in danger. Laurel had been injured because of this guy, and she wanted him found and arrested.

“I want to go with you,” she said, knowing she was being stubborn. “Laurel let me

know she wants to keep watching Gabriel. And if anyone tries to break into the room, she'll be ready."

He frowned but didn't say anything more. No doubt West planned to try talking her out of going along with him in the morning.

Fat chance. She knew her ex-husband—if he was the one involved in this—better than he did.

Gabriel ate his dinner like a champ. When he was finished, she hauled him out of the seat and set him back on the floor. She'd placed the teething ring in the small freezer, and now he happily gummed it to death. He'd need a bath before bedtime, and she hoped that would soothe him enough that he'd sleep during the night.

While she'd fed Gabriel, West had cleaned up the mess from their meal, rolling up the half-finished potato chip bag and setting it aside. She had to admit, she appreciated the way he pitched in with cleanup duty.

Although he still hadn't held Gabriel. Either because he wasn't comfortable with babies or to keep their relationship professional. Either one was a good reason enough to forget about their near kiss.

She busied herself with making a bottle for Gabriel, then straightened the items in the diaper bag. She had enough supplies to last another day or two, but after that they'd have to stop at a local store to get diapers and formula.

"What about a storage locker key?" West asked.

She glanced over to where he was once again working on the laptop. "It's possible, but I know Bryan never had one while we were together."

“Still worth a look into. Unfortunately, there are several storage locker units available in at least three different locations.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I guess we could start at the one closest to where you live.”

She nodded. “I think that’s reasonable. I do wonder what we’re not thinking of, though. Besides a storage unit or safety deposit box or PO Box.”

“I made a list of other ideas, too. Storage units come in different sizes, and I think that’s the best place to start.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “If Bryan has one that he kept secret from you, I think we’ll need a search warrant to get inside.”

She grimaced. Not only was Bryan not the man she thought he was, but he’d likely kept secrets, too. It bothered her that she’d fallen for a guy like him. “Do we have enough for that?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned and added, “We’ll see what we can do. With a case involving a kidnapping attempt, we might have an easier time.”

“Whatever you think is best.” She had to smile. “You managed to get Stewie to cooperate, so maybe you can do the same with those storage unit places.”

He chuckled. “I don’t mind giving it a try, but this is a big corporation. I’m not sure they’ll be as easily swayed by a cop with a badge as Stewie.”

“Maybe not,” she conceded. Gabriel offered his teething ring to Peanut, who wagged her tail but didn’t take the rattle. Watching the two of them made her think that raising a child with a pet might be nice.

Not that her life wasn’t complicated enough. Still, it was something to consider. In the short time she and West had been together, she’d gotten attached to Peanut.

“There’s also a Greyhound bus station we can check out.” West made more notes as he spoke. “Interestingly enough, the bus station isn’t that far from the west storage unit facility. Two birds, one stone.”

“I like it.” She was excited at the idea of getting closer to finding what the masked kidnapper was looking for. Then she frowned. “Although I don’t know if the bus station keeps track of their locker assignments. This may be another situation like Stewie’s gym. The lockers are open for anyone to use.”

“I know.” He glanced at her with a half shrug. “I guess we’ll see how many lockers are in use and go from there. I still think the storage units are our best option.”

She hoped he was right about that. “I need to give Gabriel a bath. I’ll keep trying to come up with other ideas, too.”

“Sure.” West’s attention was already back on his computer.

Bath time was fun for Gabriel. He splashed and played with his floaty toys, although she only had two of them with her, unlike the dozen she’d left back at her place.

He babbled nonstop, reaching for Peanut as if he wanted the beagle to join him in the tub. Which wouldn’t have been a bad idea if the beagle had needed a bath.

Peanut didn’t but did place her paws on the edge of the tub to lick the water from Gabriel’s skin. The K-9 and Gabriel were becoming fast friends.

It made her sad to think that once the danger was over, Gabriel wouldn’t see Peanut again.

Unless—no, don’t go there, she warned. West hadn’t given any indication that he’d considered her anything but a work colleague. The awareness that shimmered

between them, and their near kiss, could be just her imagination.

When the water had cooled, she plucked Gabriel from the tub, dried him off and then dressed him in a sleeper. She carried him back to the main living area, loving the scent of baby shampoo on his damp hair.

“More bad news,” West said, when she’d set her son down on the blanket.

“Now what?” The two cases were both frustrating to the extreme.

“The cops found the black Ford sedan abandoned in the parking lot of a grocery store.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “They’re processing the vehicle for fingerprints and possible DNA. Hopefully, even if the perp was wearing gloves he left some sort of hair fibers or something behind.”

Hopefully. Maybe. Possibly. Depressing the way they kept running into dead ends.

“Hey, don’t look so glum. Even meticulous criminals make mistakes. And this kidnapper isn’t exactly a professional the way I thought at first. His attempt to grab Gabriel in broad daylight is proof of that.”

“I know.” She told herself to buck up. “It’s just been a long day.”

“I hear you.” He gestured to Gabriel. “He seems happy.”

“He is. I just need him to get tired enough to fall asleep.” The sound of her phone ringing drew her attention. Seeing Laurel’s name on the screen, she quickly picked up. “Hey, Laurel, how are you feeling?”

“Fine. I left the hospital an hour ago and just got home. But Trish, you and West Cole need to get out here, right away. I think the same guy who broke in the other night is

lurking outside my house. Like he thinks I have his stupid key!”

“What?” She gestured for West to come over. “Stay inside, Laurel, and call 911. West and I will be there shortly. Be safe, understand? Do not try to go outside to get this guy.”

“I won’t, but hurry.” Laurel’s voice was lower now. “I don’t want this jerk to get away!”

Trisha slipped her phone into her pocket and reached for Gabriel. “We need to leave. The intruder is at Laurel’s place.”

West looked as if he might argue but reached for the car seat and scooped Peanut up into his arms. She appreciated his willingness to drop everything to head to Laurel’s.

She just prayed they and the other Plains City police officers would get there in time to prevent this guy from hurting Laurel again.

NINE

West didn't like taking Trisha and Gabriel to the scene of a potential crime, yet he was loathe to leave them behind, too. He silently prayed the local police would arrive at Laurel's house before they did.

"Did Laurel get a description of the guy?" He asked.

"I don't think so. She only said he looked like the same one who'd attacked her at my house." Trish's expression was grave. "Please hurry."

"I'm sure the Plains City PD is there by now," he assured her.

"Laurel can't stay there, West. It's too dangerous. I would feel better if she stayed in the suite with us." She glanced at him. "Or a safe house of some sort, although I know we probably don't warrant that level of protection."

"I'll talk to Captain Ross about a safe house." He should have considered that option earlier. The PD had access to at least two safe houses, and any baby in danger certainly deserved to stay in one.

"Thank you." She drew in a deep breath. "I pray this guy doesn't hurt her again. She's already been through enough."

"I know." He reached over to take her hand. He didn't like the idea of a former cop being in the bull's-eye any more than she did.

There were two PCPD squads outside Laurel's home when they arrived. He was relieved to see the two officers walking around the outside of the home, using their flashlights to examine the ground. Temps during the day reached the high forties, low fifties, but dropped overnight. It wasn't that late, though, so there was a good chance this guy may have left a footprint behind.

Laurel Newton rushed out of the house when they pulled up. Her previously injured eye was turning purple, but other than that she appeared unharmed. Trisha pushed out of her passenger seat to hug the older woman.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Trisha said. "I was worried sick."

"I'm fine, except I'm upset that he got away." Laurel turned to face West. "He wore dark clothes from head to toe and the black ski mask over his face again. That's why I felt certain he was the same one who broke into your home the other night." She drew a steadying breath, then said, "I feel bad dragging you here, Detective Cole, but I was hoping you could help search for evidence."

"Call me West. And I'd be glad to help search." He frowned, then added, "But you may want to pack a bag. We're not leaving you here."

Laurel looked shocked. "Where would I go?"

"With us," Trisha said. "We have a two-bedroom suite. I believe the sofa opens to a roll-away bed."

"We have the suite, but I'll work with Captain Ross to arrange a safe house. In the meantime, pack a bag and get into the SUV with Gabriel." He eyed Trish. "I'd like you to stay here, too. Keep an eye on Peanut for me."

"Of course." Trisha looked calmer now that she knew Laurel wasn't harmed.

West headed toward the officers searching the ground with their flashlights. “Find anything helpful?”

“Not yet.” Officer Skinner, the same cop who had come to meet them at the scene of the shoot-out with Petey Pawns, glanced up at him. “Unfortunately, it looks like he stayed on the grassy area. No sign of any disturbances in the plant beds lining the house.”

“I’ll take the other side of the property,” West offered.

“Is this related to the gun trafficking case?” Skinner asked.

“No connection that I know of, although anything is possible. This perp should be considered armed and dangerous.” West turned his flashlight on and headed to the other side of the property.

Like the other officers, he took his time, playing the light across the ground in minute increments. After a solid fifteen minutes of searching, he joined the PCPD officers on the driveway.

“You were right, he must not have gotten too close,” West agreed. “There was no sign of him being on the other side of the place, either. He was gone by the time you arrived?”

“Yeah.” Skinner shrugged. “We came lights and sirens, so that probably scared him off.”

He didn’t blame them for using lights and sirens, although it would have nice to have a clue as to who this guy was. Not at the expense of an innocent person being hurt or worse, though. “Thanks for getting here so fast. Appreciate the support.”

“Hey, Newton is one of us.” Skinner scowled. “Any assault on a cop, even a retired cop, is an assault on us.”

“I hear you.” He felt the same way, hating how Trisha and her son were in danger. Two cops needing to be kept safe should be more than enough to sway Doug Ross into springing for a safe house.

At this point, he’d pay for the place himself if necessary.

Laurel Newton walked toward them, rolling a small suitcase behind her. He took note of the gun and holster she had clipped to her belt, giving a nod of approval. She flushed. “I’m not going to be caught off guard by that perp again.”

“Good. Three of us being armed should help.” He reached for her luggage, remembering how she’d been kneed in the kidney. “I’ll take that.”

“Thanks.” She relinquished the suitcase.

He stored the small bag in the back crate area with Peanut. “Sorry, Sweet Pea, you need to share your space for a while.” He scratched the beagle behind the ears, then closed the hatch.

Laurel chose to sit in the back with Gabriel. He held up a finger to Trisha and Laurel, silently asking for a minute, then pulled out his phone. Captain Ross answered on the third ring.

“What’s going on?” Ross demanded. His boss knew West wouldn’t call after hours without a good reason.

He quickly filled Ross in on how Laurel Newton had spotted the masked intruder lurking near her house. “After the black Ford sedan went past my place, I moved

Trisha and Gabriel to a hotel. We need to keep Laurel with us, and I'm formally requesting to use our safe house until we find this guy."

There was a brief pause before Ross answered. "Approved. Are you heading over there tonight?"

"Yes." The sooner the better, in his opinion.

"Take the house on Lowell Drive," Ross directed. "I'll text you the address and access code. The standard windows have been replaced with bullet-resistant glass, but you know those AKs might still be able to shatter them if enough bullets pummel the glass. Nothing is foolproof."

"Understood. Thanks. I appreciate this." He almost asked for a replacement SUV, but decided he would need the K-9 features that were built in his vehicle. He could probably swap out the license plate, but later. "I'll stay in touch."

"Do that." Ross ended the call.

After pocketing his phone, West slid behind the wheel. He glanced at Trisha and Laurel, glad to see Gabriel had fallen asleep. He spoke in a soft voice to avoid waking the baby. "We're approved for a safe house. The place has three bedrooms, so it should work out well for the three of us and Gabriel."

"Thank you," Trisha said with obvious relief. "I feel so much better knowing we'll be together."

"Hey, thank Captain Ross. He's the one who gave the okay." He pulled away from the curb. "I'm going to drop you three off first, then head back to the hotel to get our stuff."

“Maybe we should all stay together,” Trisha protested with a frown.

“I’m not the one in danger. You, Laurel and Gabriel are.” He hesitated, then added, “Don’t forget, I’m going to have to leave tomorrow to follow up on various threads of the investigations. The one involving you and Gabriel and the gun trafficking case.”

“Yes, I know.” Trisha sat back in her seat. “I’m sure we’ll be fine in the safe house.”

His phone pinged with the text message from Ross about the house number and the access code. West made sure to take a circuitous route to Lowell Street, backtracking twice to make sure they weren’t followed. When he was confident there wasn’t a tail, he drove to the safe house and pulled into the driveway.

“This looks nice,” Laurel said. “We didn’t have safe houses when I was on the force.”

“I’m just grateful we have one now,” Trisha said.

“Give me a minute to unlock the door. Oh, here’s the key code.” He rattled off the numbers for them to commit to memory. “I’ll carry Gabriel in.”

The interior of the safe house smelled a bit musty from disuse, but the accommodations were nice. He went through the house to open the attached garage door. Then he drove the SUV inside and closed the door behind them.

Minutes later, they were all inside the house, Peanut sniffing her new surroundings with interest. Laurel insisted on taking her suitcase, choosing the smallest bedroom for herself. He offered Trisha and Gabriel the master suite, taking the other bedroom.

“I’ll be back in a while,” he told Trish. “I’ll grab our bags, Peanut’s supplies, the portable crib and the laptop.” He frowned. “Anything else?”

“Maybe some food,” Trisha suggested, glancing around the kitchen. “With this much space, we could have coffee and make breakfast in the morning.”

“Good point. In that case, I’ll leave Peanut with you.” He bent to pet his K-9 partner. “See you soon, Pea.”

“She’s a good girl,” Trisha murmured. “I know she’s trained for weapon detection, but the way she stands guard over Gabriel is sweet.”

The way she adored his K-9 as much as he did, gave him the urge to pull her into his arms. But it wasn’t like they were dating and he needed to give her a hug and a kiss before he left.

This was a safe house. He needed to stay focused on the danger. He turned and headed back out to the garage.

Maybe having Laurel staying with them would help keep him focused on the investigation.

Not how much he was beginning to care about Trisha and her son.

The next morning, Trisha awoke to Gabriel’s babbling in his portable crib. When he was younger, he would wake up crying because he was hungry. Just over the past week or two, he woke up happy, swinging his arms and legs around as if he could propel himself out of the crib. He’d started to roll over, too, which was always fun to watch.

“You’re such a good boy,” she crooned, scooping him up and cuddling him close. It wouldn’t take long for him to want breakfast, so she hurried to change him and to wash up in the bathroom, before carrying him to the kitchen.

West was already at the table, a steaming mug of coffee at his elbow. Peanut was stretched out at his feet, thumping her tail when she came in.

He looked good. Better than good. She felt like something Peanut had dragged in from the woods after the rain but forced a smile. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled. Something he seemed to be doing more in the past few days. “How did you sleep?”

“Great.” She set Gabriel in the car seat. “Mostly because Gabriel was down for the count.”

“I’m glad.” He nodded toward the hall. “I haven’t heard Laurel moving around yet. I hope she’s okay.”

“She’s better off here with us.” Last night, given her earlier conversation with Laurel, she’d considered asking the woman to watch Gabriel so she could tag along with West to visit the storage unit facilities. Now that they were in a safe house, with the added layer of protection of the bullet-resistant windows, Trisha didn’t have any qualms at all.

If Laurel was physically up to the task.

“I agree.” He rose to his feet and crossed to the coffee maker, pouring her a cup. His fingertips brushed hers as he handed it to her. “I can make breakfast, as long as you’re comfortable with eggs and bacon. I don’t do anything fancy.”

“I don’t need fancy, but I can make them.” She gestured to the computer. “You have work to do.”

It seemed impossible, but the safe house felt even more cozy than the hotel suite.

Obviously, being in forced proximity to West Cole was messing with her mind. He was so kind and considerate, while exuding strength and support. He was everything her ex wasn't. They could be in a huge mansion and she'd still be hyperaware of him.

Gabriel began to cry, making her feel like a failure for allowing herself to be distracted by West's good looks at her son's expense.

"I'll have to feed Gabriel first." She took a sip of her coffee, then set it aside to make Gabriel's bottle and morning cereal. The way her son opened his mouth for each spoonful, like a guppy, made her smile.

When Gabriel had eaten his fill, she wiped his hands and face and set him on the carpeted living room floor. Peanut came over to stretch out beside him. The K-9 was incredibly good-natured when Gabriel grabbed at her ear. To Trish's mind, Peanut treated her son like her own puppy.

"There's been no sign of the masked perp," West said as she began cooking bacon on the stove. "Skinner and other cops canvassed the area around Laurel's home, but nobody saw him."

"I didn't imagine him," Laurel said as she entered the kitchen.

"I know you didn't," West assured her. "I was just hoping someone else had caught sight of him, too. Or the car he's driving now if he was the one who'd stolen and abandoned the black Ford sedan."

"I didn't see a car, so I'm sure he parked out of sight," Laurel said thoughtfully. "What do you mean a black Ford sedan?"

Trisha quickly explained about the Ford driving past West's home and being reported stolen. West added his two cents about the interview with Renee Mills, the owner of

the car. “I still think she knows something. It’s worth taking another run at her now that the car has been found.”

“I agree.” Trisha started making eggs, while Laurel played with Gabriel.

Ten minutes later, they were all seated at the table for breakfast. Trisha bowed her head. “Dear Lord Jesus, we thank You for keeping Laurel safe last evening. We ask that You continue to provide the strength, knowledge and courage to find this man responsible. Amen.”

“Amen,” Laurel and West echoed.

The meal was pretty good, if she did say so herself.

“I can watch Gabriel if you need to work the case,” Laurel offered.

“Would you?” She searched her friend’s gaze. “How are you feeling? Does your back still hurt?”

“I’m fine.” Laurel waved off her concern. “According to the doctor I had a bruised kidney. He warned me there might be bleeding but I’ve been okay. When they did the repeat scan, the kidney looked fine so they went ahead and discharged me.” Laurel touched her black eye. “I know I look like I lost a boxing match, but this doesn’t hurt anymore, either. They iced it pretty well while I was in the hospital. I promise I’m good to go.”

“That would be wonderful if you could stay here with Gabriel for a few hours.” She glanced at West, who didn’t look nearly as happy. “Right, West?”

“Sure.” He shrugged then added, “I know the local cops will be taking frequent passes down this street to keep an eye out for anything suspicious. I also know for a

fact we were not followed from Laurel's place. And I drove ten miles out of my way to make sure I wasn't tailed from the hotel and the grocery store, either."

"Great. I'd like to go with you to the storage facility," she said. "We plan to see if my ex-husband had a storage unit under his name, which would explain why someone might be looking for a key," she added for Laurel's benefit.

"Good idea," Laurel said.

"I can go alone," West began, but she quickly interrupted.

"No, I'm coming, too. I know Gabriel is in good hands with Laurel."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence after I goofed up that first night." Laurel frowned. "I guarantee I will not be caught off guard like that again."

Trisha put a hand on Laurel's arm. "I know you'll protect Gabriel like he's your own son."

"You got that right." Laurel nodded, then glanced sheepishly at West. "I lost my husband last year. Gabriel has really brightened my days after suffering that loss."

"I'm sorry to hear that," West murmured. "I know Trisha values your support."

"The feeling is mutual," Laurel said. Then she seemed to drill West with a narrow look. "I won't be happy if Trisha or Gabriel gets hurt."

West looked surprised, but simply nodded. "We're both in agreement on that score."

Trisha felt herself flush as she suspected Laurel was warning West not to hurt her on a personal level, not physically hurt while working the case.

It was both sweet and embarrassing. Were her growing feelings for him that obvious?

She sincerely hoped not. All the more reason to keep things professional.

After finishing her breakfast, Trisha rose to carry her plate to the sink. “I’d like to freshen up.”

Without waiting for either West or Laurel to respond, she headed down the hall to her room. Time alone was a precious commodity, but she didn’t linger. When she emerged from the master suite, feeling better and ready to face the day, she stopped abruptly in her tracks when she saw West sitting on the sofa cradling Gabriel in his arms.

It was the first time he’d taken any interest in holding the baby. She couldn’t help smiling widely as she came farther into the room and said the first thing that popped into her head. “You’re a natural with him.”

“I’m not. Laurel needed to take a shower, and he started to cry.” As if struck by a cattle prod, he jumped up and thrust Gabriel into her arms. “I—uh, need to make a few calls.”

“Sure, I understand.” She turned away to hide her stark disappointment. Watching West care for Gabriel was a stark reminder that her son deserved a father. One who would love him as much as she did.

But no matter how attracted she was to West, she couldn’t allow herself to go down that path again.

If she fell in love with West and he walked away the way Bryan had, she would never recover.

TEN

West felt as if he'd been caught stealing rather than holding a baby. When Gabriel had begun to cry, Peanut had looked up at him as if expecting him to do something. Squelching a surge of panic, he'd picked the baby up from the blanket. Gabriel had instantly quieted in his arms, which surprised him.

But a natural father? No way.

He pulled out his phone to call his colleague Jack Donadio.

"What's up, West?" Jack asked. Being on desk duty wasn't fun, but he knew Jack would help the task force in any way he could.

"I plan to visit a storage unit facility today related to the attempted kidnapping of Gabriel McCord." He raked a hand through his hair, glancing over to where Trisha held her son. "What do you think our chances are of getting a search warrant based on the perp who assaulted Laurel Newton because he wanted a key?"

"Not very good," Jack said with regret. "Unless you found a storage unit bill or something else that would indicate that a storage unit is being used by Trish's ex, I'd say it comes across as a fishing expedition."

That was his fear, too, but it helped to hear Jack confirm his suspicions. Yet there was something else he'd forgotten. "We issued a BOLO for Bryan Little. Wouldn't that help?"

“Not unless you have proof Little was the perp in the ski mask.”

West remembered that Trisha had mentioned the height and weight of the masked man didn't match that of her ex. “Unfortunately not.”

“Sorry, man, but I don't see how any judge would sign off based on what you have so far,” Jack said.

“How is the processing of the black Ford going?” West asked. Finding a fingerprint belonging to Little or to anyone who was not Renee Mills would help.

“No fingerprints,” Jack said with a sigh. “The vehicle was wiped clean. They did find a few hair fibers, but DNA will take time, and you know as well as I do those hairs may belong to the car owner.”

“Yeah, okay.” The bad news just kept coming. “Keep me in the loop.”

“Will do. Later.” Jack ended the call.

West crossed over to the computer where he'd been digging into Renee Mills. He had been looking at her social media page when Gabriel had started to cry.

“No luck on a search warrant?” Trisha asked, coming over to stand beside him.

“Nope.”

“Her social media?” Trisha leaned closer. “That's a great idea.”

He nodded, resisting the urge to turn and look at her. She was too close. The sweet scent of Gabriel's baby shampoo wafted toward him. He remembered how Kenyon's twins had smelled the same way after their bath time.

Pushing that thought aside, he scanned the list of Renee Mills's friends. Thankfully her social media profile wasn't secured with privacy settings. As he scrolled through the list of friends, nothing jumped out at him. He'd been hoping for a male relative of some sort.

Turning to the pictures, he quickly found one where Renee had tagged a guy by the name of Nick Cutter. Looking more closely, he couldn't say the guy looked familiar, but he found other photos featuring Cutter, too. And in digging further, he discovered a Dale Cutter who was apparently Nick's father. And then he also found a woman by the name of Peggy Mills, who looked old enough to be Renee's mother.

Minimizing that page, he pulled up the circuit court database. It was the one place where divorces and other civil cases were listed.

"Trish? Check this out." He tapped the screen, feeling a surge of excitement. "There's a divorce listed here between Peggy Mills and her husband John from nearly twenty years ago. And there's also a divorce between Dale Cutter and his wife Nancy Cutter eighteen years ago."

Trisha let out a whistle. "Wow, it looks like Dale Cutter and Peggy Mills got married a year after Dale's divorce." She met his gaze. "That makes Nick Cutter Renee Mills's stepbrother. She never mentioned him when you interviewed her about the stolen car, did she? And they must be on good terms if they're all on her social media page."

"No, she never mentioned him. The parents are too old to be our masked perp, but Cutter is the right age, and height." He pushed back from the computer. "Remember how we suspected she wasn't being fully cooperative? Maybe she suspected her stepbrother had taken the car but didn't want to implicate him."

"We need to talk to her again," Trisha agreed, shifting Gabriel to her other hip.

“Yeah, we do.” Trisha jiggled Gabriel in her arms. Laurel came over and took the baby.

“I heard you have work to do,” Laurel said. “I’m feeling much better this morning, so please hit the road. The sooner you find that masked perp, the sooner our lives can get back to normal.”

West reluctantly nodded. Leaving Gabriel with Laurel was the smart thing to do. Especially as he knew the PCPD would have squads going by on a regular basis. He glanced at Trish, then down at Peanut, who seemed to sense they were going to work. “Let’s hit the storage unit facility first, then head back to interview Mills.”

“I like that plan.” She crossed over to grab her coat. “Thanks for keeping an eye on Gabriel for me,” she added to Laurel. “Call if you need anything.”

“We’ll be fine. Won’t we?” Laurel kissed Gabriel’s cheek. Then she patted the gun in her holster. “I won’t let anyone sneak up on me unawares again.”

“I know you won’t.” West shrugged into his own black leather jacket then put Peanut’s black K-9 vest in place and clipped a leash to her collar. The morning temps were cold, but the high for the day was a solid fifty degrees. A sure sign spring was just around the corner. He noticed Trisha had her gun on her belt, too, as he did. Feeling better about their situation, especially having Laurel and Gabriel in a safe house, he opened the door leading to the attached garage. “Come, Peanut. Let’s go.”

“Why do you want to hit the storage unit facility first?” Trisha asked once they were on the road.

“It’s still early enough that the manager may not be there.” He flashed a wry grin. “Easier to intimidate some young kid manning the post than someone with authority.”

“I like it.” She grinned. “If anyone can intimidate a kid, it’s you.”

“Thanks, I think.” He had to stifle the urge to laugh. Why was it that he felt lighter when he was with Trish? As if Kenyon’s death and the responsibility of the job didn’t weigh as heavily on his shoulders?

Willing the uncomfortable thoughts away, he kept an eye on the rearview mirror to make sure they weren’t followed. Late last night, he’d gone out to use black electrical tape to alter a letter and number on his license plate, just in case the masked perp had taken note of it. The alteration wouldn’t hold up under close scrutiny, but from a distance it did the trick.

They reached the storage unit facility fifteen minutes later. This one was closer to Trish’s home, and in theory more likely to have been chosen by Bryan Little.

He parked near the office, and then let Peanut out of the back hatch. Peanut looked alert—the vest was her cue to know they were working. “Ready to find tools? Find tools, Peanut.”

Peanut wagged her tail, lifting her nose to the air. When Trisha joined him, they headed inside.

Unfortunately, the guy behind the counter looked older and less likely to be intimidated. Hoping for the best, West flashed his gold shield. “I’m Detective Cole and this is Officer McCord. We’re here to look at Bryan Little’s storage unit.”

The guy took his time looking at one badge and the other, then shrugged. “Don’t recognize the name. Do you have a warrant?”

“I can get one,” West said, even though that wasn’t exactly true. “We’re investigating an assault and attempted kidnapping of a minor.”

The guy winced but lifted his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “Look, I’m Curtis Jenkins, the manager on duty. I’d like to cooperate, but I would lose my job if I gave out personal information about our renters or allowed you to search a unit without a warrant.”

West nodded, eyeing Peanut, who sniffed the area with interest. He’d half hoped his K-9 partner would alert on a weapon, but she didn’t. Resigned, he pulled out his business card and pushed it across the countertop. “Call me if you see anything suspicious. I’ll get to work on that warrant.”

“Yeah, sure.” The manager pocketed the card. “Nice dog. What does she do for you?”

“She finds weapons,” he said, more to scare the manager into possibly cooperating. Too bad, it didn’t work.

“I’ll be happy to help once you have that warrant,” Jenkins called out after them.

“Thanks.” He pushed through the door, holding it for Peanut and Trish. Outside, Trisha let out a heavy sigh. “I was hoping he’d cooperate.”

“Yeah.” He opened the back hatch for Peanut. Then went to the driver’s side of the SUV. “Maybe we’ll find evidence from the stolen car to justify a warrant.”

“In the meantime, we need to convince Renee Mills to cooperate,” Trisha said, settling into the front seat beside him. “Didn’t we hear that the black sedan wasn’t broken into?”

“True.” He caught her gaze. “You’re thinking her stepbrother knew where to get her key?”

“Why not? Her purse, a jacket pocket? A hook in her entryway. I’ll ask Jack if he can

run Nick Cutter to see if he has criminal background.”

He nodded, leaving the storage unit facility behind. Trisha made the call, then pocketed her phone.

“Nothing?” he guessed.

“Cutter is clean.” She shrugged. “But I’m sure he just hasn’t gotten caught yet.”

That made him chuckle. “Spoken like a true cop.”

The trip to Renee Mills’s home took longer because traffic had picked up. Even in Plains City, South Dakota, they had a mild version of the early morning commute. He finally pulled into the woman’s driveway and killed the engine. He turned to face her. “I’ll take the lead if you don’t mind.”

“You’re the detective,” she said lightly. He remembered how she’d gotten angry with him in the aftermath of the truck shooting. After working with her the past few days, he believed Trisha would make a good detective if that was a career path she was interested in pursuing, but kept the thought to himself.

Once again, he opened the hatch for Peanut. He offered the K-9 some water, which moistened the dog’s mucus membranes and enhanced her ability to track scents, then gave her the same instructions. “Search for tools, Pea. Tools.”

Peanut appeared eager to get to work. He kept Peanut to his left, so that his right hand was free to draw his weapon as needed. Trisha was on the other side of Peanut.

Renee Mills scowled when she answered his knock. “What do you want? They said they’d call when I could pick up my car.”

“How often does your stepbrother, Nick Cutter, stay here with you?”

His question caught her off guard. “He doesn’t live here,” she said after a beat.

“But he knows where you keep your car key,” West pressed. “Do you think he stole your car?”

A resigned expression crossed her features. “I don’t know. I tried to call him, but he hasn’t answered me.”

“Why didn’t you mention your stepbrother as a potential suspect before?” Trisha asked.

Renee shrugged. “I wanted to talk to him, first. See if maybe he just borrowed it.”

Borrowed without asking? West held the woman’s gaze for a long moment. “It’s against the law to aid and abet a criminal. You should have mentioned your stepbrother yesterday.”

“You gonna arrest me for that? For protecting my family?” she demanded.

It was tempting, but he shook his head. Glancing down at Peanut, he was relieved his K-9 didn’t alert. Trisha frowned as if she wasn’t buying the woman’s story, either. “Not yet. But if you do this again, I will.” When she didn’t respond, he held up his business card and added, “If you hear from Nick Cutter, please call me. We would like to talk to him.”

Renee opened the screen door a crack, just enough to take the card. “Fine. Goodbye.” She closed the screen door and then the inside door, exactly the way she had yesterday.

West blew out a annoyed breath. The day was young, but so far, they weren't getting anywhere on the case. And at the rate they were going, he felt certain this forced togetherness with Trisha and her adorable son would not come to an end any time soon.

He wasn't sure if he was thrilled or horrified by that thought.

Trisha felt as frustrated as West looked. They returned to the SUV without speaking. After West placed Peanut in the back, she pulled open the passenger door. "Do you think we have enough to issue a BOLO for Nick Cutter?"

"Probably. He had access to the car key and he hasn't responded to her calls." He shrugged. "I'm not holding out a lot of hope, though, because the BOLO for your ex hasn't yielded results yet. There's a lot of wide open spaces here."

"I know." She had hoped to have a lead on her ex-husband by now, too. As West pulled into traffic, a horrible thought hit. "What if Bryan is dead?"

West turned to look at her. "That possibility has crossed my mind. Sounds like the masked perp was looking for something Bryan had. Possibly because Bryan had told him you had the key, prior to being killed. I'm not saying there's reason to be sure, but we should consider it."

She should have thought of this angle sooner. "I would hope that someone would have reported him missing, like a coworker, friend or supervisor."

"Maybe, unless he's been off-grid for a while. I searched for a last known address," West admitted. "The apartment was a dead end. The manager told me Bryan didn't live there anymore and that he left no forwarding address."

She frowned at that. "I wonder if he found another job that provided housing. He had

some experience working on the Rocking K Ranch.”

“Something to consider,” West agreed. “If you don’t mind, let’s stop in at the station. The autopsies of Petey Pawners and Greg Zillow are scheduled to take place soon.” He shot her a quick glance. “You don’t have to go with me. I know patrol officers don’t usually attend autopsies.”

“I’ll tag along.” She grimaced and added, “I’m not sure why it’s a requirement to attend, though. They were both shot, right?”

“Yes, but the ME could find other clues, too. That’s why it’s routine for detectives to attend.”

“Okay.” She wasn’t going to complain, although the thought of Bryan being possibly dead continued to gnaw at her. She didn’t love him, and Gabriel didn’t even know him. Yet the idea of her son never knowing his father bothered her.

More than she’d have thought.

She gave herself a mental shake. It would be a long time before Gabriel would ask questions about his father. This wasn’t the time to worry about how she’d respond.

Finding Bryan and the masked kidnapper was her priority. “Is there time to swing by Bryan’s old apartment?” she asked. “I was thinking we could ask the manager if he noticed anything odd about Bryan’s activities over the past few weeks.”

West hit the vehicle’s touch screen to make a call, confirming with the ME that the autopsies would happen later that morning. He hit the end button. “We have an hour. May as well stop by the apartment.”

“Great.” She tried not to get her hopes up too high, but even the smallest clue at this

point would be helpful. At the next intersection, West turned right to head in the opposite direction.

The apartment building where her ex had been living looked worse than she'd anticipated. The building was run-down and there were several shingles missing from the roof, along with a few broken windows covered with plywood. There was no reason to feel guilty over Bryan's apparent dire financial situation. He wasn't paying any child support and had no claim on the house, since she had purchased it with her savings and a portion of her parents' estate that she'd split with Raina.

"I'm going to drive around, first," West said, passing the building.

"Looks like the type of place criminals might hang out," she said with a frown. "I had no idea he lived here."

"Considering the city's population is roughly eighty-five thousand people, I'm not surprised." West made a loop around the block. When he reached the front again, he pulled into the small parking lot and shut down the engine. "Let's do this."

She climbed out, knowing he would bring Peanut along for this discussion. It was mighty nice to know if the people you're interviewing might be carrying.

Too bad all patrol officers weren't issued weapon detection K-9s. It would make her job much easier.

The manager was a balding man who introduced himself as Leon. He wore a stained T-shirt and flannel pants, as if he rarely left the apartment. She glanced down at Peanut, who sniffed curiously but didn't alert.

"I'm Detective Cole and this is Officer McCord. We'd like to ask a few questions about Bryan Little."

Leon squinted. "I talked to you before, right? Told you Little don't live here anymore."

"Yes, but I'm wondering if you've had any trouble with him prior to his departure." West spoke in a calm voice. "We're worried about his well-being, so anything you can tell us would be helpful."

"I can't say I noticed anything unusual." Leon scratched his chin. "He paid by the month. Tole me he got a new job and was heading out."

"Did he have a lot of visitors?" Trisha asked.

"Nah, he kept to himself." Leon scrunched up his forehead. "Although someone came by asking for him the day after he left."

"What did that person look like?" Trisha asked, her pulse kicking up with anticipation. "Tall, short, thin, old, young?"

"Younger guy, tall, like you." Leon gestured to West. "White, muscular, with brown hair. Didn't leave his name."

The general description fit that of the masked intruder. Yet it was also not very specific.

"Tattoos or piercings?" West asked.

Leon shrugged. "Nah, I didn't see anything."

"Did you notice what car he was driving?" West asked.

"Nope. He walked up and left on foot." Leon scowled. "You think he did something

to Bryan Little?”

“We’re not sure, but we appreciate your help.” As before, West handed Leon his business card with instructions to call if that same guy came back.

They headed toward the SUV. They were about halfway there when West abruptly turned as if to go back because he’d forgotten something.

A sharp crack of gunfire rang out. Trisha dove to the ground, keeping her head down while pulling her weapon to return fire.

ELEVEN

West dropped to the ground, rolled and searched for the shooter. Peanut was at his side, so he tucked his partner close, trying to shield her as he pulled his weapon. More gunfire rang out, and he realized Trisha was firing back.

Catching a glimpse at the darkly-clad figure near the corner of the apartment building, he took aim and fired, too. Instantly the shooter disappeared from his line of sight.

“Cover me,” he said, jumping up to his feet. “Peanut, stay!”

His K-9 partner obeyed his command. West sprinted across the muddy ground outside the apartment building in the direction the shooter had gone. He wanted to get this guy!

When he reached the building, he kept his back to the wall as he edged toward the corner where he’d last seen the gunman. Taking care to make himself as small a target as possible, he peeked around the corner.

No sign of the shooter.

What in the world? He quickly rounded the corner, scanning the area for hiding places. Then he heard the rumble of a car engine.

No! He raced toward the parking lot on the other side of the apartment building in time to see a black sedan, not a Ford but a Chevy, peeling out of the parking lot. He

ran after it, determined to get a license plate number, but the plate holder was empty. As the Chevy sped away, he could see there was a cardboard temporary plate sign in the back window.

Yeah, that temporary plate number was likely fake. Swallowing a wave of frustration, he turned to head back to where he'd left Trisha and Peanut.

Trisha was kneeling beside Peanut, her weapon still in hand. "I've called for backup. PCPD should be here soon."

"You're okay?"

She nodded. "Peanut is, too."

"Thanks. I don't like this." He knelt beside Peanut, taking a moment to soothe the animal. Peanut was accustomed to the sound of gunfire, but she'd already lost Kenyon, and he didn't doubt that the K-9 would be sensitive to his possibly leaving her, too. He looked at Trish. "How did the kidnapper know we were going to be here?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. This was a spur of the moment stop. We didn't tell anyone our plan to drive over. However, this perp must know I'm a cop, and figures you are, too. Maybe he was hanging around nearby in case we did show up. Since he can't find the safe house, he's trying to anticipate our next moves."

He nodded slowly. "That makes sense. The only part of this incident that's reassuring is that the gunman must not know the location of the safe house. He decided to wait here to see if we came to him, instead."

"I agree. I called Laurel. She's fine. She mentioned seeing the patrol officers making rounds past the place, so she feels Gabriel is safe there."

He blew out a breath. “Let’s get over to the SUV so I can put Peanut in the back. I feel too exposed out here.”

They headed to the vehicle, Trisha standing off to the side as he opened the back hatch. He petted Peanut for another minute, then closed the door. He turned to Trish. “The shooter took off in a black sedan, a Chevy this time.” He pulled out his phone. “I need to see if any black Chevy sedans have been reported stolen.” He considered using Cheyenne as a resource but decided against it. It was looking more as if this perp wasn’t one of the gun traffickers.

“Good idea.” She swept her gaze over the area as he made the call. The dispatcher quickly answered.

“This is Detective Cole. Have any black Chevy four-door sedans been reported stolen?”

“Just a moment.” He could hear the female dispatcher typing on the computer keyboard. “No, detective, there have not been any reports of a stolen vehicle matching that description.”

That figured. Maybe this guy recently stole the sedan and the owner hadn’t noticed yet. “Okay, I need a BOLO put out for a black Chevy sedan with a temporary plate note taped to the rear window. No rear license plate.”

“Absolutely.” He heard more key clicking. “I’m sure someone will spot it.”

He hoped and prayed that was the case. “Will you please call me ASAP if a report of a stolen vehicle with that description comes in? Thanks.” As he ended the call, screaming sirens from the PCPD police response filled the air.

The arrival of the officers helped ease his tension. “I’ll show you where the shooter

was standing.” He gestured for one of the officers to follow him to the corner of the apartment building. “We need to search for shell casings.”

They split up, and it only took a minute for West to find one of the shell casings.

“A 9 mm,” the officer noted, without touching it.

West knew the perp had used a handgun. “That doesn’t narrow the type of weapon by much, but maybe we’ll get a match in the system.” Shell casings and bullets were entered into a forensic database.

“Why were you and Officer McCord here?” the officer asked.

“This is the last known address of her ex-husband, Bryan Little, who is a person of interest.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “The manager wasn’t much help, but he did mention a guy had shown up shortly after Little had left, looking for him. Makes me wonder if Little stole something that didn’t belong to him and this perp wants it back.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Trisha said, coming up to stand beside them. “I never imagined Bryan would do anything illegal, especially after being married to a cop, but based on everything that’s happened, that’s the only theory that makes sense.”

West frowned. “His actions are not a reflection on you, Trish.”

“Aren’t they?” Her gaze clung to his for a heartbeat before she looked away. “It doesn’t feel good knowing a man I married would commit a crime.”

“That’s his failure, Trish. Not yours.” He longed to pull her into his arms to comfort and reassure her, but this wasn’t the time or place. She wouldn’t want to appear weak

in front of her fellow officers. “Besides, you’re better off without him.”

A reluctant smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “Yes, I am.”

Their gazes locked and held. He wanted to tell her how glad he was that she wasn’t married, but the words stuck in his throat.

“I found another shell casing,” the officer interrupted them. “It’s wedged in the ground as if someone stepped on it.”

“Could have been me,” West admitted. “Or the perp himself. I chased him, but he escaped in a black Chevy sedan with no license plate, just a temporary sign taped to the back window. I’ve already requested a BOLO for the vehicle.”

“Sounds good. I’ll get this evidence tagged and bagged. Is there anything else you can tell me about this guy?”

He thought for a moment. “Nothing other than he’s roughly the same height and weight as the masked kidnapper reported yesterday by Officer McCord, brown hair and no visible tattoos or piercings.” He glanced at Trisha as he spoke. “Is that your impression, too?”

“Yes. Although I honestly didn’t get a good look at him, either. Dressed in black, and the same ski mask.” She frowned. “I have to wonder why that ski mask isn’t getting more attention from the general public. It’s not January with wind chills of minus twenty degrees. It’s April. Chilly in the morning but above freezing during the day. Most of the time,” she amended.

“That’s a good question,” West agreed. “Maybe Captain Ross needs to do a news conference, stressing the importance to the public that if they see something, they should say something.”

“Can’t hurt.” Trisha sighed. “I really wish we could grab this guy.”

“Me, too.” He reached out to touch her arm. “Let’s get out of here and head back to the police station. I don’t want to miss the autopsies.”

She turned and fell into step beside him. “It feels like we’ve been working this case for weeks rather than a couple of days. And that we’re getting nowhere fast.”

“I hear you.” He shared her concern, not liking that her son was still in danger. Trisha wasn’t used to the investigating side of things, but he was. He offered a reassuring smile. “Trust me, the gunman will make a mistake. They always do.”

She nodded, without saying anything more. As they headed back to the SUV, where Peanut was patiently waiting, their hands brushed. When her fingers tangled with his, he was in no hurry to let them go.

At the SUV, he opened the car door for her. She caught him completely off guard by giving him a quick hug and a chaste kiss on the cheek. “Thanks,” she whispered, before sliding into the passenger seat.

He stood frozen for a moment, before he managed to close her door. Then he slid in behind the wheel, his cheek still tingling from her kiss.

Trouble. He was in deep trouble. It took all his willpower and concentration not to pull over to the side of the road and sweep her into his arms for a proper kiss.

And as he drove, he couldn’t help but think that kissing Trisha was inevitable. That it was bound to happen.

The same way the sun rose in the sky every day.

The bigger question was what in the world he was going to do about the fact that one kiss would never be enough.

Trisha was hyperaware of West sitting beside her. There seemed to be a tension between them now, and she silently lectured herself for giving in to the impulse to kiss his cheek. He'd just been so kind and supportive. She'd reacted without thinking about it.

In some corner of her mind, she'd thought they could be friends. Maybe spend some time together. She liked and respected him, as more than just colleagues.

But that was asking for trouble. It would be better if they parted ways, never to hang out together again. Sure, she'd see him around the police station, but that would have to be enough.

Work pals, nothing more.

"Do you think Renee's stepbrother, Nick Cutter, could be our shooter?" She decided the best way to ease the tension was to get back to the case.

"That's a strong possibility," he admitted. "However, stealing Renee's car by helping himself to the keys is easy, compared to boosting a car without them."

"Yeah, it's rare for people to leave their keys in the car." Part of her training had been to learn some of the tricks car jackers pulled. "Was there a vehicle registered to Nick?"

"No. But you make a good point. He could have purchased something used from a private party. Maybe the temporary plate in the rear window wasn't fake."

Trisha appreciated the way West treated her like an equal. As if her thoughts and

opinions mattered. “That makes sense. Renee could have lied about not speaking with Nick. He probably abandoned the ride after she warned him of our interest.”

“Yeah, but then why bother to report the vehicle as stolen in the first place?” West asked with a scowl.

“She might not have realized her spare key was missing until after she made that call.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what else to think. Other than to try to find a connection between Nick Cutter and Bryan.”

He nodded. “We should check the gym membership. Maybe they met there at one point.”

That possibility lightened her mood. She had never been in the line of fire as much as she had over the past few days. Thankfully, her instincts had kicked in enough that she could avoid being hit while returning fire.

But once the immediate threat had passed, she couldn’t help thinking about Gabriel and what would happen to him if she was killed in the line of duty, like Kenyon had been.

She made a mental note to discuss Gabriel’s future with her sister, Raina. She had already planned to have Raina step in as Gabriel’s guardian, but now Raina was taking care of Kenyon’s twin boys.

A baby might push her sister over the edge. Then again, knowing her sister, Raina would insist she’d be fine. And would absolutely step up to take of her son if needed.

It wasn’t smart to dwell too much on the what-if scenarios. She was good at her job and intended to be around for a long time. Besides, recent gun trafficking aside, this area of the state didn’t see the high rates of crime like other cities did. Plains City

wasn't Chicago, New York or Los Angeles.

Kenyon Graves was the first officer their department had lost in the past three years. And that was under extenuating circumstances.

She pushed those depressing thoughts aside as West pulled into the precinct parking lot. He released Peanut from the back hatch and joined her as they headed inside.

The Plains City Police Department was in the center of the city, a four-story building in which the ATF had the entire top floor. What Trisha liked the most was that there were plenty of restaurants and coffee shops within walking distance.

After passing through the front desk, they headed up to the second floor where most of the cubicles were located, along with the large conference room.

"I only have a few minutes before I need to leave for the autopsies," West said. "If you don't mind, I'd like you to wait here. It shouldn't take too long."

"Not a problem." She glanced at Peanut. "Are you taking her with you?"

West hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, she'll be fine. Give me, say, fifteen to thirty minutes, okay?"

"Sure thing." She stepped to the side as West and Peanut retraced their steps down to the main floor. The medical examiner's office building was only a few blocks away.

She caught sight of a beautiful woman with shoulder-length brown hair and big brown eyes coming out of the conference room with her K-9, a springer spaniel, at her side, along with a small carry-on suitcase. The woman's concerned features had Trisha walking over.

“I’m Officer Trisha McCord. You must be on the new task force,” she said by way of introduction.

“Yes, Lucy Lopez.” The woman’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m from Fargo, North Dakota, and am about to head home. My daughter...” Her voice trailed off as she flushed. “Never mind. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I have a six-month-old named Gabriel,” Trisha offered, sensing Lucy was struggling with something. “My husband left me when I discovered I was pregnant. I know how difficult it is to juggle work responsibilities while being a mom.”

“Yes, exactly.” Lucy’s gaze warmed. “I’ve never been married and it’s not easy. My daughter, Annalise, is four years old, but she has some anxiety issues.” Lucy bit her lip. “I’m honored to be included in this task force but hate leaving her for long periods of time. My mother watches her for me, so that’s helpful. Still...” Her voice trailed off.

“I understand,” Trisha assured her. “I’m sorry to hear about your daughter’s anxiety problems. That must be difficult.”

“I’ve reached out to a man named Micah Landon who trains anxiety dogs.” Her brown eyes brightened. “I love my K-9 partner, Piper, but Annalise having her own therapy dog would be good for her, too.”

“Absolutely.” Trisha placed a reassuring hand on her arm. “I truly wish you all the best. And I will keep you and Annalise in my prayers.”

“Thanks so much.” Lucy smiled. “It’s always reassuring to talk to other single moms working in law enforcement, and I will gladly take all the prayers I can get. Come, Piper.” Lucy turned and headed to the elevator.

Trisha sent up a silent prayer for Lucy, then headed for the closest cubicle. She may as well begin searching for a connection between Nick Cutter and her ex-husband.

After logging on, she found Nick Cutter on social media and began scanning his photos. Bryan had taken himself off social media, but if he and Nick Cutter knew each other, Bryan might appear in some of Nick's pictures. Especially if Nick hadn't tagged him.

"What brings you in on your day off?" Captain Ross asked.

She smiled wryly at his comment. Investigating with West didn't feel like a day off. "You may not have heard that West and I were targeted by gunfire at the apartment building where my ex used to live. Worse, the shooter got away."

"Gunfire?" Ross scowled. "I had heard the report come in, but I didn't realize you and West were the ones involved. What can I do to help?"

"We issued a BOLO for the vehicle the shooter used to escape. And we're trying to find a nexus between our current suspect, Nick Cutter, and my ex." She paused, then added, "Oh, yeah. West found a couple of shell casings, too. At this point all we can do is wait for something to pop from the scant bit of evidence that's been collected to date."

"I'll make sure the lab puts a rush on that," Ross said. The lab was housed on the third floor of the building. "I was hoping you'd be in the safe house."

"Former police officer Laurel Newton is staying there with my son. I couldn't just sit by while West did all the legwork on this case. Besides, I know my ex better than anyone." Even as she said the words, she realized that wasn't exactly true.

She didn't know the man who'd turned criminal. The fact that the shooter may have

staked out the apartment building only confirmed that Bryan had gotten wrapped up in something bad.

She just wished she knew what this was about. And where the key was that someone wanted badly enough to kill for.

“I understand.” Ross turned to answer his mobile phone. “Yeah, I’ll be right there.” He headed back to his office without saying anything more.

Trisha went back to her search, which was painstakingly slow work. She knew she’d recognize Bryan when she saw him, but he was not in a single photograph on Nick Cutter’s profile page.

Another dead end.

She tried to come up with another avenue to search when she heard footsteps behind her, along with the telltale click of dog paws on linoleum.

She turned to see West and Peanut crossing toward her. West’s expression was serious, so she jumped up from her seat, mentally preparing herself for bad news. “How did it go?”

“Doc confirmed cause of death as gunshot wounds to the head for both Petey Pawns and Greg Zillow,” he said somberly. “I need you to come with me, though.”

“Okay, what’s going on?” She searched his gaze. “You look upset.”

“Not upset, just concerned.” He took her hand in his. “Let’s go.”

She accompanied him outside to his K-9 SUV. After he placed Peanut in the back, she reached for his arm. “Spill it, West. What is this about?”

He cupped her shoulders with his broad hands. “The ME has a John Doe that we believe is your ex-husband, Bryan Little. She would like you to confirm his identity since his fingerprints aren’t in the system.”

Bryan was dead? She had suspected that, but hearing about a John Doe matching his description was a shock. She leaned against West, her mind whirling. Bryan had walked away, had refused to be a part of her son’s life.

But forever was a long time. She’d always wondered if Bryan would change his mind at some point. Would decide to meet Gabriel when he was older.

Now, her son would never know his father.

TWELVE

West hugged Trish, concerned about how she would handle seeing her ex-husband's dead body. He probably should have mentioned that the ME believed Little had been badly beaten, not just in his face but throughout his entire body.

Likely the masked perp had used brute force to get information from her ex-husband. Maybe Little had only been able to mention a key before being rendered unconscious.

Or taking his last breath. Hard to know for sure, since Dr. Owens found massive internal bleeding.

It reminded him of the way the masked man had struck Laurel in the kidney. Whoever this guy is, he knows how to inflict pain on his victims.

Trisha stepped away, then climbed into the SUV. He quickly slid behind the wheel, looking at her with concern.

"I'm fine," she said, answering his unspoken question. "I didn't love Bryan. He wasn't the man I thought he was when we got married. I don't believe he deserved to die, but he made his decisions." She frowned. "Really bad ones, apparently."

"Yeah." He honestly wasn't sure what Little had been thinking to walk away from a woman as kind and beautiful as Trish, not to mention leaving his son.

The trip to the ME's office didn't take long. He drove around back where the lab was located. The sun was out, so he decided to leave Peanut in the SUV, knowing they

wouldn't be inside for long.

Trish's apprehensive expression tugged at his heart. "Have you seen a dead body before?"

"Yes." She shrugged. "I had to identify my parents' bodies, too, after they died in a car crash."

He caught her hand as they headed inside. No matter how strong she might be, he had a feeling this would hit her hard. "You need to know he was beaten pretty badly," he said in a low tone.

"I figured as much." She shook her head. "He was so stupid to steal something, then refuse to give it up. Material things aren't worth risking your life over."

He silently agreed. Dr. Cathy Owens was waiting for them inside. The no-nonsense ME eyed Trisha critically.

"Are you going to faint?" she asked.

"No." Trisha lifted her chin. "This isn't a first for me."

Owens nodded, then gestured for her to come closer. "His face is swollen and bruised," she warned. "I hope you can still make a positive ID."

West stood behind Trisha to catch her if she did in fact pass out. Dr. Owens pulled back the sheet, revealing what he felt certain was Little's bruised face.

"Yes, that's my ex-husband, Bryan Little," Trisha said in a remarkably strong voice. She reached back for his hand. "Where was he found?"

“In the back alley behind the Wild Wild West Restaurant.” Dr. Owens pulled the sheet back over his face. “Thank you for coming in to provide a positive ID. I am ruling his death a homicide. His cause of death is blunt force trauma resulting in internal bleeding.”

“Thanks, Dr. Owens.” West continued to hold Trish’s hand. “We’ll look forward to seeing your formal report.”

“I’ll submit my preliminary findings by the end of the day,” Owens said. “But I can’t do the final autopsy reports until the tox screens come back, in about thirty days.”

“I understand.” He was well aware of the length of time tox screens took. Almost as long as DNA testing. Patience with this kind of thing wasn’t his strong suit. He tugged Trish’s hand. “Let’s go.”

She allowed him to draw her back outside. She paused for a moment outside the SUV, a hint of tears in her eyes.

“Hey, it’s okay.” He looped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “You were married to the guy.”

“It’s not that.” She swiped at her face, then leaned her head on his shoulder. “My only regret is that Gabriel will never know his father. I had accepted the fact that Bryan wouldn’t be a part of Gabriel’s life, but I had hoped that maybe someday...” Her voice trailed off. “Foolish thought, I know,” she finally added.

Her tears were for her son’s loss, not hers. He admired Trisha more than ever, knowing that she would have supported a relationship between Gabriel and his father despite the way the jerk had walked out on her.

He drew her more fully into his arms, wishing he knew what to say.

Trisha slipped her arms around his waist and hugged him. Then she tipped her head back to look into his eyes. “You’re amazing, West.”

“Not me, you.” He could barely push the words past his tight throat. His gaze dropped to her mouth. As if she knew exactly what he was thinking, she went up on her tiptoes and kissed him.

Not a chaste kiss on the cheek this time, but a real kiss. Their lips fused together, sending a zing of awareness down his spine. He couldn’t help but pull her closer still, enjoying their kiss far more than he should.

Somehow, he managed to pull away, abruptly conscious of how they were standing out in plain sight. The recent shooting outside Little’s apartment building had proven they were far from being out of harm’s way.

“I—uh, we need to get back.” He stepped back with a pang of regret. Peanut was standing in the back crate area, her nose pressed against the window. Almost like his partner was asking him what in the world he was doing. Wasn’t that a good question? “I—we still need to find this guy.”

“Yes, we do.” She held his gaze for a moment before pulling away. “I was thinking we should head over to that restaurant where Bryan’s body was found.”

She was? He had barely managed to form a coherent thought in his head after that intense kiss. He forced himself to focus on the case. “That’s a good idea. I’ve never been to the Wild Wild West Restaurant.”

“That will be a first for me, too.” She stepped up to the passenger side door. He shot Peanut one last look, before heading around to get in behind the wheel.

He took a moment to plug the restaurant name into his map app. “According to the

GPS, it's on the far east side of the city."

"The opposite direction from where Bryan used to live," she mused. "I wonder what he was doing there?"

"We can ask around, see if anyone recognizes him." He frowned, realizing he had no idea which detective was assigned to Bryan Little's case. "I better call Ross. He needs to know about this, too."

She nodded. "He's going to let you handle Bryan's murder, right? I mean, it has to be connected to the masked intruder asking for a key and the kidnapping of Gabriel so he'd have a bargaining chip."

"I agree. But Ross may have assigned it to someone else, not knowing about the connection." He used his hands-free function to connect with the precinct. After asking to be transferred to Ross, his boss quickly answered. "Hey, Captain. Trish's ex-husband was murdered. She has positively identified his body in the morgue. He came in as a John Doe. Which detective has the case?"

"Rory Jacobs. But I think you're right about his death being connected. I'll let him know to send whatever information he has over to you," Ross said. "I doubt he'll mind."

"Thanks." West knew Rory was easygoing about stuff like this. "Later."

A minute after he ended the call with Ross, he heard from Jacobs. "You taking over my John Doe?" Jacobs asked.

"Yeah, sorry. Your vic is Bryan Little, ex-husband of Trisha McCord. We believe his murder is related to the break-in at Trish's home and the attempted abduction of her son." Not to mention the shooting outside the apartment building. "What do you

know about what happened?”

“Not much,” Jacobs admitted. “Vic was found dead earlier this morning by the restaurant cook, a guy named Tim Vale. I asked uniforms to canvass the area, but no one claimed to see or hear anything. I figure he was killed elsewhere and dumped there. I was going to head back to the restaurant later to see if I could get anything more.”

“I’m heading there now,” West said. “I feel bad taking your case, but I’ve been working the assault and kidnapping for the past two days. We have reason to believe Little stole something valuable that his killer wants back in a big way.”

“No problem,” Rory assured him. “The case sounds interesting. Don’t hesitate to call if you need additional support.”

It was tempting to say that he already had Trisha as a partner but managed to hold back. Trisha wasn’t a detective, and Rory was. Yet her instinct to return to the Wild Wild West Restaurant was spot-on. “Thanks. I will.”

“I know Rory. He’s a nice guy,” Trisha said after he’d finished the call.

“Yeah.” The unwelcome pang of jealousy was completely out of line. Rory was happily married, and he was being ridiculous.

This was why he shouldn’t have kissed Trish. He was already starting to care for her. She was a single mother, a smart cop and absolutely off-limits.

The sooner his brain accepted that fact, the better.

Doing her best to ignore the heady impact of West’s kiss, Trisha tried to think of what Bryan might have stolen, where he’d stashed it and where on earth he’d hidden

the key.

It didn't make sense that he would have hidden the key at her house. Yet he wouldn't have left it behind at his apartment, either.

And when had he gotten inside her home to hide it? Had he done that prior to their divorce? Or a few months afterward? He'd left his house key but could have made a duplicate.

"It's getting close to lunchtime," West said, interrupting her thoughts as they neared the Wild Wild West Restaurant. "I wouldn't mind grabbing something to eat, although I can understand if you're not interested."

She shrugged, knowing he was concerned about her seeing her dead ex-husband's body and about being at the scene of the crime. It was sweet of him to worry, but she was anxious to find this perp so that her life could get back to normal. "I'm fine with grabbing lunch. One thing I learned in five years on the job is to eat when you can."

"That's the golden rule," West agreed. He tapped the GPS screen. "This place seems to be in a rather isolated part of town. Maybe that's why his killer chose that location to dump his body."

She nodded. "Or the killer was driving in from the Badlands or Mount Rushmore area and stopped at the first sign of civilization." A horrible thought hit. "Do you think Bryan's body was dumped here as a warning to me?"

"I think this guy has already broken into your home, assaulted Laurel, tried to kidnap Gabriel and took shots at us. That's more than a mere warning, Trish."

"You're right." She sighed. "I tried to find a connection on social media between Nick Cutter and Bryan, but there's nothing. Maybe he's not our guy."

“Maybe not, or there’s a team of people working together on this. We know for sure someone took the black Ford sedan,” he pointed out.

She glanced at him. “Being an investigator is frustrating.”

He barked out a laugh. “Yes, it can be. But solving a case is extremely satisfying.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that.” She could see the building housing the Wild Wild West Restaurant up ahead. “Looks like it’s a bit run-down.”

“Yeah.” West frowned. “We’ll ask questions first. We may want to eat someplace else.”

“Whatever you’d like is fine with me.” In all her patrols, she had never been called to this restaurant.

And wasn’t sure if that was a good thing, or a bad one. Either the patrons avoided the cops at all costs, or the inside was nicer than what it appeared from the outside.

She hoped for the latter.

West parked the car, then let Peanut out of the back. She gestured to the beagle wearing her K-9 vest. “Do you think there are weapons inside?”

“Never hurts to have Peanut’s nose warning me if there are,” he said with a shrug. “The name of the restaurant could attract the type of clientele who carry concealed weapons.” He glanced around curiously. “There is also the possibility the gun traffickers might use a place like this the way they used the Plains City Pizzeria. As a staging location. Or a meeting place.”

She nodded, steeling herself for whatever they would find inside. West opened the

front door for her, saying in a low voice to Peanut, “Want to find tools? Find tools, Pea.”

The dog lifted her snout to the air and sniffed, making her smile. Crossing the threshold, Trisha was surprised to see the interior was rather nice, with the usual Wild West type of motif. Wild Bill Hickok and his infamous last poker game, when he was brutally gunned down in the back by a former rival, was the area’s claim to fame. Tourists expected to find this kind of thing.

There was a long gleaming oak bar along the wall to the right, and a spattering of tables took up the rest of the room. It appeared as if the kitchen was somewhere in the back.

A woman wearing skintight jeans, a denim shirt and a cowboy hat strolled over to meet them. “Table for two?” she asked, glancing down at Peanut. Seeing the K-9 vest, she frowned. “Are you here in some sort of official capacity?”

“I’m Detective West Cole and this is Officer Trisha McCord.” He took a photograph from his pocket. Trisha winced when she saw the picture of her ex-husband’s battered face. “Do you recognize this man?”

The woman took a step back and shook her head. “No. Is that the dead guy our cook found out back?”

Not a surprise that the news of Bryan’s body being found had run through the restaurant.

“That’s correct,” Trisha confirmed. “You’re sure he was never a customer?”

“I didn’t say that,” the woman said, backpedaling. “I don’t recognize him, but I don’t memorize every person that eats here. You know how many people stop in as they’re

passing through?”

“A lot, I imagine,” West agreed. “We’d like to know if any other employees recognize him.”

“Ask away.” The woman threw up her hand. “Nobody here has anything to hide.”

Trisha noticed how West eyed Peanut as he moved across the room. It wasn’t until they reached the bar that Peanut’s nose rose again. She sniffed the air, then sat and stared up at West.

“Can I help you?” The bartender’s nametag identified him as Jim.

West flashed his badge, but Jim didn’t appear impressed. “Do you recognize this man?” West pushed the picture of Bryan’s battered face across the bar.

Jim barely looked at it. “Nope.”

“Do you have a gun behind the bar?” West asked.

That made Jim’s head snap up. “No! Why do you ask?” he demanded.

“Because my K-9 is telling me you do, so it may not be wise to lie to me.” West held Jim’s gaze. “You want to answer questions down at the precinct? Because that can be arranged.”

Jim glanced at the cowboy hat woman, then sighed. “Look, I have a permit.” He pulled out a small forty-five from beneath the bar. “Druggies sometimes try to rob us. It’s only for my protection.”

“I’d like to see the permit,” West said calmly. Trisha had to admit, watching West in

action was educational. She wished she had half his confidence when it came to being in control of a situation.

Jim dug in his wallet and pulled out the license. West examined it for a moment, then returned it.

“Thank you. Are you sure you haven’t seen this guy around?” West asked, going back to the issue of her ex’s dead body.

“I really don’t remember him. But as Corey says, we get a lot of tourists. I can only tell you that this guy—” Jim tapped the photo “—was not a regular.”

“Okay, thank you.” West nodded and took the picture.

Unfortunately, every employee they spoke with had never seen Bryan before, either. Or if they had, they weren’t telling.

West must have decided against staying for lunch, because he turned and headed back outside. She followed, curious as to what he was thinking.

“Let’s walk around back,” he said. “I want to see the dumpster myself.”

She followed him down along the side of the building. There was a narrow alleyway behind the restaurant and a larger building on the other side of the street. She stopped abruptly when she realized it was another storage unit facility. Much like the one they’d been to back in the center of the city.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” West asked as they walked the length of the alleyway. He’d instructed Peanut to find tools, but the K-9 did not alert. Even with the strong scent of garbage, he knew Peanut would be able to sniff out a weapon if there was one.

“That Bryan was killed in a storage facility by some perp who then stole the key from him and then dropped his body here?” she guessed, then shook her head. “It’s an odd coincidence to be sure, but if that is what happened, I don’t understand why the gunman would be still searching for the key. He’d have the one he’d taken from Bryan that opened the storage facility, right?”

“Yeah, that’s a sticking point,” West agreed. He frowned and swept his gaze over the area. “Rory, the detective who took the early morning call, didn’t mention finding any evidence. If there had been something here, it’s long gone.”

“That’s disappointing. I was hoping we’d know more by now.” She wondered again why this location was used as the dump site. “Will finding Bryan’s body so close to the storage facility help us in getting a search warrant?” she asked, desperately trying not to breathe in the scent of old garbage.

He grimaced. “Probably not. As you said yourself, if Bryan had been killed at the storage facility, then why is the gunman still searching for the key?”

“Maybe the key isn’t related to the storage facility at all,” she said with a sigh. “It seems the most logical, but maybe Bryan stole something much smaller.”

“We never did check the bus station,” West said, glancing down at his K-9 partner. Peanut looked up at him adoringly. “I guess we can do that after we find a place to eat lunch.” He waved toward the Wild Wild West Restaurant. “I’d rather not eat here. The staff was not nearly as cooperative as I would have expected.”

She knew the fact that the bartender had lied about having a gun was part of that decision. “Fine with me.”

As they made their way up to the SUV, West abruptly grabbed her arm. “Down!”

She dropped to all fours behind the SUV just as the sound of gunfire rang out.

THIRTEEN

West had caught a glimpse of the black Chevy sedan just as the window lowered, revealing a hand holding a gun. Possibly a Glock, but he couldn't say for sure as he'd yanked Trisha to the ground to avoid being shot, wrapping his arm around Peanut to keep her tucked beneath him.

When there was a lull in the gunfire, he poked his head up to shot three times in rapid succession. The sedan swerved making him think one of the bullets had hit its mark, but the driver kept going.

"Peanut, stay." He jumped out from behind the car and ran out into the road. He wished the driver would come back to make another attempt, but he didn't. Obviously the perp knew he was outnumbered. He couldn't figure out why this guy who'd tried to kidnap Gabriel had shot at them twice now. Was he trying to scare them into cooperating? Or was he frustrated and lashing out in anger at not getting what he wanted?

Killing Trisha was not the best way to get his hands on the key that he believed was located in her house.

Then West realized the shooter must have been trying to get rid of him, leaving Trisha more vulnerable to an attack.

Not gonna happen on his watch. Besides, she was a cop—it wasn't as if she would simply throw her hands up and tell him what he wanted to know.

Especially since she had no idea where the stupid key was, or what it opened.

“He escaped?” Trisha asked, coming up to stand beside him.

“Unfortunately.” He leaned down to stroke Peanut for a moment. With a sigh, he holstered his weapon and turned to look at Trish. “I really want to know how this guy knows where to find us.”

“If he killed Bryan and dumped his body here, he may have assumed we’d show up sooner or later.” She scowled. “It’s as if he’s baiting a trap, scattering breadcrumbs for us to follow, then lying in wait to make his move.”

It made sense, similar to what had taken place at the apartment building. “Yeah, that must be it.” The situation nagged at him. It was always a problem when criminals didn’t act in a logical manner. He bent down to scoop Peanut into his arms. “You okay, girl?” He ran his fingers over her fur, but didn’t find any indication she’d been injured.

“She’s really good about not bolting at the sound of gunfire,” Trisha observed.

“Well trained,” he agreed with a nod. He opened the rear hatch of the SUV to put Peanut inside, then closed the door. “We need to get out of here.”

“Without reporting the shooting?” She asked.

He shrugged. “We’ll let Doug Ross and Dan Slater know. But there’s no reason to stick around.”

“Fine with me. What about lunch?” she asked.

“First call Laurel, make sure all is well back at the safe house.” He couldn’t shake the

feeling they were missing something. “It might be better to grab something to go.”

“We can’t just give up the investigation,” she protested. “What about checking to see if we can get that search warrant for the storage facility? Or stopping at the bus station?”

He hesitated, torn between wanting Trisha to be safe and doing his job. And since when did he let a woman get in the way of his career? He had to remind himself she was a cop.

“Okay, we’ll head to the bus station first.”

“Let’s grab something to eat on the way. For some reason, being shot at makes me hungry.” She sounded cranky as she wrenched her door open and slid into the passenger seat.

He couldn’t help but chuckle as he went around to the other side. “Okay, how about a drive-through burger? Will that work?”

“Fine.” She sighed and ran her fingers through her auburn hair. “I feel like we’re no closer to getting the answers we need.”

He nodded, sharing the sentiment. “I hope this guy isn’t waiting for us at the bus station.”

“Anything is possible, so we’ll need to be on high alert.” Her brow furrowed. “If the stash is in a bus locker, then a storage unit is probably too big.”

He shrugged. “Just because storage units are large, doesn’t mean you can’t hide something smaller inside.”

“True.” She sat back with a sigh. “It’s driving me crazy that I don’t know where this key is or what it opens.”

“I feel the same way.” Could there be more than one guy involved? It didn’t seem likely, but that was another possibility. Maybe the owner of the personal items that were taken had hired muscle to get it back.

Too many unanswered questions, he thought grimly.

He chose a chain hamburger place for lunch. They each ordered cheeseburgers, along with two bottles of water. Trisha called Laurel to check in at the safe house. She chatted with the older woman for a few minutes before hanging up.

“No issues back at the safe house?” West asked when she slipped the phone into her pocket.

“Laurel sounds tired and said she’s still a bit sore, but otherwise things are good.” She grimaced. “Maybe having her take care of Gabriel wasn’t the best idea. I worry she’ll have a relapse.”

“Would you rather skip the bus station?” he offered. “I’ll drop you off at the safe house now, and just go with Peanut.”

“No. You need backup.” She took another bite of her cheeseburger. “Besides, we’ll have to head back to the safe house when that’s done. It’s not like we have any other leads.”

They didn’t, although he was hoping they’d have some additional evidence to go on by now. He finished his burger as they approached the bus station. This could be a wild-goose chase, but he wanted to see the lockers for himself. The key to a storage unit was much like that of a house key. The locker keys could be smaller, or maybe

even a padlock style.

But if a padlock had been used, then why was the gunman looking for a key?

Were they on the wrong track checking the bus station?

Maybe whatever Trish's ex had taken was large enough to warrant a storage facility. He abruptly glanced at her. "What sort of vehicle did your ex-husband drive?"

"A blue pickup truck. Why?" Then she nodded. "Oh, I see, you're trying to estimate how big this item is."

"Yeah." He remembered now that the BOLO had included the blue pickup truck registered under Bryan Little's name. "I'll feel better if we at least check the bus station."

"Me, too," she said with a weary smile. "That way we can check one possibility off the list, right?"

"Spoken like a true investigator," he teased.

She flushed. "You're nice to say so."

It wasn't nice, it was the truth. There was a small parking lot out front, but then a much larger parking area behind the building. He pulled into the closest spot, then glanced at her. "I wonder if finding Bryan's truck would help us narrow down what this is."

"Maybe. I'm surprised it hasn't been found yet." She pushed her door open as he did the same.

Moments later, he had Peanut on leash. He gave her a sip of water, then said, “Find tools, Peanut. Tools!”

Peanut wagged her tail, excited at the chance to work. Or play, as she was taught. The dog eagerly walked beside him, her snout in the air.

They were here to search for a possible hiding spot for Bryan Little’s stolen stash, but he wanted Peanut to be on alert for weapons, as well. Two birds, one stone.

It was the same approach he’d used at the Fitness Guru Gym, which had revealed one stolen weapon.

He counted at least a dozen people inside the bus depot. To the left, there was one wall with lockers, smaller in size compared to the gym lockers. They weren’t tall and skinny for hanging clothes. They were small and square, roughly big enough for a small duffel bag.

Peanut’s nose worked as he and Trisha walked toward the lockers. Scanning them, he only saw a handful that had locks. And all of those were combination padlocks, rather than ones that needed a key.

Probably not the location of Little’s secret stash. Peanut sniffed the lockers with interest, then surprised him by sitting right beside a locker that was located farthest from the bus depot front counter.

Her alert had him glancing around, curious to see if anyone was watching. No one was paying them any attention.

“Is there a gun in there?” Trisha whispered.

“Either there now or had been recently.” Peanut’s nose was good—she could

sometimes capture the smallest amount of gun oil left behind. He tugged on the lock, then reached for his phone. Thumbing the screen, he found the Dakota Gun Task Force leader's name.

"What's going on, West?" Dan Slater asked.

"I'm at the bus station. Peanut has alerted on a locker here secured by a combination padlock. We were searching for something else, but I think we need to know what's inside."

"I'll be right there," Dan said.

"Bring a bolt cutter with you," West advised. "Weapons are not allowed in here and these lockers don't belong to any person in particular, so we shouldn't need a search warrant to get inside."

"Got it." Slater ended the call.

"I'm going to the front desk to see if anyone recognizes Bryan," Trisha said.

"Good idea." It was a smart move, and he thought again that Trisha had great investigator instincts. As she walked away, he pulled Peanut's ducky from his pocket and tossed it as her reward for a job well done.

Trisha returned a few minutes later. "Nobody recognized him."

Before he could respond, he caught a glimpse of Dan Slater, accompanied by his Great Dane, Dakota, entering the building. The ATF agent must have broken speed records to get there so quickly.

"This the one?" Dan asked, hefting a bolt cutter up with one hand.

“Yes.” He grinned as Dan snapped the lock off. Then frowned when the inside of the locker was empty. He knelt down and cautiously sniffed, catching just the slightest scent of gun oil.

“A gun was kept in here at some point.” He straightened and shrugged. “This could be used as another drop point for a small gun sale. The locker is only big enough for about ten handguns.”

“I’ll ask an officer to stake the place out for the next day or two,” Dan said. “I’ll request photos of people going in and out to see if we can match them with perps having a criminal record.”

“That sounds good.” West hoped this drop point was still in use, but it could have been recently abandoned, too.

Another depressing dead end for both the gun trafficking case and the search for the masked perp.

Trisha could tell both West and Dan were bummed, but the plan to keep an eye on the place was a great idea.

In the meantime, she had no idea where to look next for something that might hold stolen property. She was anxious to head back to be near Laurel and Gabriel, although she feared that once she did that, West would take Peanut and go off on his own.

He was in as much danger now as she and Gabriel were. It didn’t sit well that he would leave her behind.

Granted, he was participating on the gun trafficking task force that could call him away at any moment. She had hoped they’d have a few answers by now.

How much longer would she, Gabriel and Laurel have to stay at the safe house? How could they find this guy when they had no idea where to look?

Or who he was? Nick Cutter? Or someone else?

“Okay, we can get out of here,” West said after Dan finished speaking on the phone. “Dan has it under control.”

She glanced around, then reluctantly nodded. There wasn’t anything more to do here. There were four lockers that were closed with a padlock, but a key wouldn’t work to gain access.

And the masked perp had specifically mentioned looking for a key.

“Come, Peanut,” West said. The beagle trotted to his side and dropped the toy ducky on the floor at his feet. He picked it up, tucked it away and clipped the leash to her collar.

She fell into step beside him as they headed back out to the SUV. The ATF agent’s SUV was parked next to theirs, or so she assumed because there was what appeared to be an extra-large crate area in the back for his impressive Great Dane K-9.

“Did Laurel need us to bring food back?” West asked once they were settled in the car.

“No, she mentioned having groceries delivered,” she explained. “I guess she felt we were running low on diapers and formula for Gabriel so she made the call. I told her I’d reimburse her for the expense.”

He frowned. “I’m not sure I like the idea of a stranger delivering food.”

“What else was she supposed to do?” She shot him an exasperated look. “The shooter was out at the Wild Wild West Restaurant, so they were perfectly safe.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m being overly protective.” He rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture that betrayed his frustration. “That was smart of her to order out for items she needed.”

“We need something more to go on,” she said, sharing his frustration. “What about heading back to my house?”

“No.” His tone was sharp. Then he added, “I considered that, but we’d need to search with backup on standby. I’ll call the captain to see if we can arrange to do that later.”

“Okay, that sounds good. To be honest, I’m not even sure where to start looking for the stupid key.” She frowned. “From what I remember that first night when Laurel was injured, the perp had done a good job of tossing the kitchen and living room and had started on Gabriel’s room before we arrived.” The more she thought about the possibilities or lack thereof, the more depressed she became. “Maybe Bryan only told him he’d hidden the key in the house, but really put it somewhere else.”

“Your bedroom wasn’t touched?” he asked.

“Not that I know of. Maybe he assumed that if Bryan had hidden something in the house late at night while I was home, he wouldn’t have gone into the room where I was sleeping.”

“And how many bedrooms?” He asked.

“Just two. It’s a small home, more than enough, though, for what Gabriel and I need.” It was also all she could afford.

“I think we’ll have to check it again, just to be sure,” West said. “I’m inclined to believe you’re right that he wouldn’t have risked stashing the key in your bedroom.”

“Maybe the garage, although Bryan didn’t have any tools or anything.” She sighed and shook her head. “I still find it hard to believe he stashed anything at my house in the first place. I mean, why would he? Why not take the goods and skip out of state?”

“He may have hidden it to wait for the heat to die down,” he said thoughtfully.

She straightened in her seat. “But there was no heat. Unless I missed hearing about a robbery.”

“That’s a really good point,” he admitted. “We need to look into robberies that may have taken place a year or so ago.”

Now she was anxious to get back to the safe house. “We should have considered that option before now.” She mentally kicked herself for the lapse and immediately used her phone to search for any South Dakota robbery reports.

“I agree, I have not been doing my best here,” West said.

“You’re doing great, and considering how often we’ve been dodging bullets, it’s amazing we’ve been able to find anything at all.” She felt bad for speaking about the lapse out loud.

Several hits about robberies came up from her search, but as she began scrolling through them, her brief surge of hope evaporated. Most of them were small-time stuff—shoplifting from stores, holding up gas stations or personal car-jacking robberies.

In many cases the perps had been caught as being drug addicts searching for money

to supply their drug habit. There was a string of armed gas station robberies in which there had been no arrests yet.

Could Bryan have committed them? Her ex had never owned a gun, but what did she really know about him, anyway?

Not nearly as much as she'd thought.

As West pulled into the driveway of the safe house, she gave up her search. It may be easier to do on a laptop, anyway, accessing the criminal database for specific unsolved cases.

West pulled into the garage, then shut down the engine. By the time he had Peanut out of the back, she was already stepping inside the house.

"Laurel?" She didn't call out too loudly, unwilling to wake Gabriel in case he was sleeping.

There was no answer. Maybe Laurel was taking a well-deserved nap, too. She walked into the kitchen, then frowned when she saw Laurel stretched out on the sofa.

Her friend groaned, her eyelids fluttering open. Trisha rushed to her side, noting how pale Laurel was. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't feel well," Laurel whispered. "I got Gabriel down, though, and hoped you'd get here soon." She moaned again, putting a hand to her left side. "My back is killing me."

"Your kidney?" Trisha battled a wave of guilt and helplessness. "We need to get you back to the hospital."

“I hate leaving you,” Laurel whispered. The fact that the tough cop wasn’t arguing about being examined by medical staff told Trisha everything she needed to know.

“I’ll call an ambulance,” she said, pulling out her phone.

“No, please, just have West drive me.” Laurel grimaced. “Ambulance companies charge over a thousand dollars for a one-way trip.”

That seemed outrageous, but just then West came over. “What’s wrong?”

“She needs to go to the hospital and wants you to drive her.” Trisha put a hand on Laurel’s head, somewhat relieved she wasn’t running a fever. Then she checked her pulse. Fast, but steady. That was also reassuring. She nodded at West, silently agreeing with the plan to drive her, rather than calling 911.

“We’ll go right now,” West said. “I’ll leave Peanut here.”

“Thanks. Come on, Laurel. Let’s get you to the car.”

Her friend managed to stand, making her way to the car on her own two feet, although her features were pinched with pain. Trish watched with concern and sent up silent prayers for healing as West and Laurel drove away.

Despite being armed and a cop, she couldn’t deny a sense of dread at being here alone with Gabriel.

The shooter couldn’t know about Laurel’s relapse, but that didn’t keep her from going from one window to the next, searching for any sign of danger.

FOURTEEN

West drove straight to the hospital, concerned about the way Laurel leaned against the passenger door as if unable to sit upright. “Are you okay?” he asked for the third time.

“Fine.” It was the same response he’d gotten before, but each time her voice was weaker. His SUV was equipped with a narrow band of red and blue lights, but he had avoided using them, not wanting to draw attention to the safe house.

Once he was several blocks away, though, he’d flipped them on to make better time.

When they arrived at the emergency department he ran around to help Laurel out. The triage nurse immediately took Laurel into a small room to do a quick assessment. He waited, knowing Trisha would want answers when he returned.

After a few minutes he was allowed back to Laurel’s room. The older woman looked as if she was in severe pain.

Worry nagged at him. He really needed to find the masked intruder who’d done this to Trisha’s friend.

“West, they’re making me stay overnight for some suspected bleeding around my kidney.” Laurel’s stricken gaze glommed on to his. “You’ll keep Trisha and Gabriel safe?”

“Absolutely.” He moved closer to take her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “I

will protect them with my life.”

“I know you will.” Laurel clung to his hand for a moment, then released him. “Thank you. There’s no reason for you to hang around here. I’d rather you head back. I’m in good hands.”

He held her gaze for a moment, then nodded. Laurel would be more concerned with Trisha and Gabriel being safe than her current health situation. He removed a business card from his wallet and slid it across the bedside table. “Keep this and call my cell phone if you need anything.”

“Okay. But tell Trisha I’ll be fine.”

“I will.” He turned to head back through the emergency department to where he’d left his SUV parked in front of the main entrance.

As he slid behind the wheel, his phone rang. Expecting Trisha to be checking in on Laurel, he was surprised to see Ross’s name on the screen.

“What’s going on?” West asked.

“We picked up Nick Cutter.” Ross got straight to the point. “He actually showed up at his stepsister’s house as one of our squads drove by.”

A wave of excitement hit hard. “Has he said anything?”

“Not yet,” Ross admitted. “He hasn’t lawyered up, either. He’s cooling his heels in an interrogation room. I figured you’d want to be there to talk to him.”

“I do,” West answered without hesitation. “I can be there in ten minutes or less.”

“We’ll wait for you, then.” Ross ended the call.

He started the SUV, then used the hands-free function to call Trish.

“How is she?” Trisha asked the moment she answered the phone.

“The doc ordered another CT scan.” He quickly filled her in on the update from the provider. “Laurel doesn’t want you to worry. She says she’s in good hands.”

“Of course I’m going to worry,” Trisha said. “But I’m glad she’s getting the medical attention she needs. She never should have left the hospital so soon. And lugging Gabriel around probably didn’t help.”

“I know.” He turned toward the precinct. “I have to make a stop at headquarters to interview a perp. I don’t think it will take too long.”

“Which perp?” Trisha asked.

Since she deserved to know this could be the break in the case they’d needed, he decided to tell her. “One of the patrol officers picked up Nick Cutter at Renee Mills’s house. Ross wants me to come in to interview him.”

“I wish I could be there, too,” Trisha said, a hint of wistfulness in her tone. But then she added, “That’s great news. West. I hope he cooperates.”

“I do, too.” Each interview had its challenges. “I’ll head to the safe house as soon as I can.”

“It’s okay.” She sounded more cheerful now, as if the possibility of making progress on the case lightened her spirits. “We’ll be fine. Especially if Cutter is the masked kidnapper.”

He hesitated, wondering if he was making a mistake. The words I'm falling for you almost popped out of his mouth, but he managed to hold them back. "If you need me, I'm only a phone call away."

"Thanks, West." He could hear Gabriel beginning to fuss. "I need to go."

"Bye," he said, but there was no response on the other end of the connection. Trisha had already ended the call.

He hit the gas, making it to the precinct in record time. Ross was waiting for him and gestured toward the closest interrogation room. "Cutter is waiting inside."

"Thanks." West entered the room to find a scowling Nick Cutter. "Mr. Cutter? I'm Detective Cole."

"Why am I here?" Cutter demanded. "I didn't do anything wrong."

West took a seat across the table from him. "Did you take your stepsister's car without her permission, then abandon it?"

"What? No! Why would I do that?" West watched Cutter's eyes closely. The confusion seemed genuine. "Did Renee tell you I took it?"

"No, she didn't tell us anything about you knowing where she keeps the keys," West said, continuing to gauge Nick Cutter's response. "But she eventually admitted you could have been the one to take it."

"I didn't." Cutter spread his hands wide. "Why would I?"

"Where were you two nights ago?" West said.

Now Cutter's expression cleared. "I was working. I'm a bartender for the Plains City Pub and Grill."

That was news to him, then again he'd assumed the guy was in the wind since he hadn't answered his stepsister's calls. He should have dug into Cutter's background sooner. He continued asking more questions, but by the end of the interview, he knew Cutter wasn't their masked kidnapper.

Leaving the interview room, he headed to his captain's office. "He's not our guy. Oh, we'll verify his alibi, but if his story of being a bartender and working the past two nights in a row holds up, he's not our perp."

Ross sighed. "What's your plan?"

He wished he had one. "I can interview Renee Mills again—" He was interrupted by his cell phone. "Hang on, this is Dan."

"Where are you?" the ATF agent asked.

"At the precinct, why?"

"I'm bringing in another perp, a guy who showed up at the bus station, went to the lockers then came back out and glanced around as if looking for someone." Slater's voice held satisfaction. "He may be a gun buyer. I was hoping you'd help interview him."

"Absolutely," West agreed. He glanced at his watch, glad to note the interview with Cutter didn't take too long. "I'll be here."

"Thanks." Slater ended the call.

He filled in Ross. “Once I’m finished here, I’ll head back to the safe house. The next step might be to head back to Trish’s place to search for the key. I’d want several officers there, though, to back us up.” He frowned. “Especially if I bring Trisha and Gabriel along. She knows her house. It will help to have her there.”

“Fine with me. The sooner we wrap up that case, the more we can focus on these gun traffickers.” Ross waved his hand. “Do what you have to do.”

“Thanks.” He left his boss to return to the hub of the police station. Glancing at his watch, he hoped Slater and his perp would get there soon. As much as he was happy to have a lead on the gun traffickers, he wished there was more he could do to make sure Trisha and Gabriel were safe.

His best lead on Trish’s case was a bust. He’d really hoped Nick Cutter was their guy. He decided to use the time to call the Plains City Pub and Grill to verify he was indeed working.

Cutter was, which officially took him off the suspect list.

The only other step they could take was to return to Trish’s place. If they didn’t find the key, and soon, he was afraid this guy would make another attempt on Trisha and Gabriel.

And he could not let that happen.

His relationship with God had been rocky since Kenyon’s death, but now he lifted his heart in prayer, begging for God to grant him the strength and wisdom to keep them safe.

Gabriel’s teething meant lots of walking him around the house, bouncing him on her hip. If this was what her friend had been forced to do, it was no wonder her kidney

had started to bleed. Trisha never should have left Gabriel in Laurel's care.

"It's okay, big guy," she murmured soothingly. She had given Gabriel the teething ring again, which he gnawed with relish. But the moment the coolness wore off he'd dropped it.

Hence the pacing. And jostling. And rubbing his back.

Peanut seemed to sense her son's discomfort, following her as she paced from one end of the house to the other.

After giving her son his bottle, his eyelids finally started to droop. She was hopeful that he'd take an afternoon nap so she could try working on the computer again.

Her phone dinged with an incoming text from West. Her heart sank when she read the message.

Cutter isn't our guy. Has an alibi. Need to stay for a bit. Will call later.

She quickly texted back the thumbs up sign. Then frowned.

If Nick Cutter hadn't taken Renee Mills's car, then who had? Someone who had a duplicate key for some reason, or who knew where she kept them.

The moment Gabriel drifted off to sleep, she set him in his portable crib and went back to West's computer. Peanut stretched out at her feet as if glad to rest. Renee Mills had purposefully remained silent about her stepbrother's access to the car keys.

Maybe the woman had lied about someone else having the ability to sneak the keys out of the house, too.

It would be better to confront Renee in person, maybe even take her down to the police station for an interview. She liked the idea of West threatening to arrest her for aiding and abetting a criminal.

In the meantime, she'd see what she could dig up on the woman's social media pages. She'd looked at them before, which is how she'd found Nick Cutter, her stepbrother, but maybe there was something she'd missed.

This time, she planned to take the time to dig into every one of Renee's friends' profiles.

It was something to do since she was stuck at the safe house, anyway. She wondered why West had to stick around at the precinct but resisted the urge to text him with more questions.

West would fill her in later. Hopefully whatever had kept him later would help break open that case.

Her case was currently dead in the water.

The process of going through social media posts and diving deeper into the profiles of each of Renee Mills's friends was painfully slow.

Gabriel cried a little, causing her to spring from her seat. Peanut jumped up, too. She took the teething ring from the freezer and tucked it next to her son. With his eyes still closed, he grabbed it and stuck it in his mouth.

She stood for a moment, watching him. He and her sister were the only family she had left in the world. The two most important people in her life.

West, too, she silently admitted. Maybe he didn't feel the same way. After all, she

hadn't planned to open her heart again. But there was no denying she was falling in love with him.

She forced herself to turn away. Enough. This wasn't the time to moon over West Cole. As she tiptoed from the bedroom, a flash of something bright caught the corner of her eye.

What was that?

Frowning, she rested a hand on her weapon and moved closer to the window. Then gaped in shock when she saw the bare tree right next to the safe house was on fire.

Fire!

Reacting instinctively, she scooped her sleeping son into her arms and ran toward the kitchen. Grabbing her phone, she quickly called 911.

"This is the 911 operator, what is your emergency?" The calm voice of the dispatcher asked.

"There's a tree on fire." She quickly gave the address, then caught the hint of smoke. "Please hurry."

"I've dispatched two fire trucks to your location," the kind dispatcher said. "Please evacuate the premises."

"I will." She ended the call, then hesitated. Why was there just one tree on fire? If so, why? No storm to cause a lightning strike.

What if the house had been set on fire, too? Going still, she put all senses on alert. Catching the scent of smoke, she knew there wasn't a second to waste.

They needed to get out of here! She fastened Gabriel into his car seat and looped the diaper bag over her shoulder. She glanced down at Peanut, deciding not to put the dog on leash. Leaving probably wasn't smart, but she couldn't sit there as the building burned, either.

Holding Gabriel's car seat with one arm, her muscles groaning in protest, she held her weapon in the other and peered out the back door. The area looked clear.

Still, she ran to the front, to check there, too. And saw more foliage burning, yellow flames jutting out from the bushes along the front of the house.

Not good. She holstered her gun and used the phone to call West. He didn't answer, but his voicemail invited her to leave a message.

"It's Trish. The bushes and trees around the safe house are on fire. Hurry back!" She ended the call, stuck the phone in her pocket and made her way toward the back door with Peanut.

This could be a trap. An effective one at that. She hesitated, wondering if it was safer to stay in the house. Yet the way the smoke stung her eyes, she feared for her son's safety.

No, she couldn't stay inside. She opened the back door a crack and scanned the area. Peanut slipped past as if sensing the need to leave.

Seeing nothing alarming, she pushed the door open wider. There weren't any trees or bushes back here, which was good and bad. No fire, but there was nowhere to hide, either.

Maybe she had enough time to get to a neighbor's house. All she needed was a few minutes. She pushed the door open wide enough to get Gabriel's car seat through.

Her left arm screamed in protest in carrying Gabriel and the car seat, but she didn't dare holster her weapon. Peanut ran ahead. She stepped outside and moved to the right. She was hoping that whoever had set the fires was expecting her to come through the garage, which was to the left.

Trisha had barely taken five steps when a masked man charged toward her from the left side of the house. She turned, intending to fire at him, then noticed the barrel of his gun was trained on Gabriel.

"Drop the gun," the guy ordered. "Or I'll shoot your kid."

She didn't want to let go of her service weapon but knew he wanted the key. Peanut was somewhere behind her, and she prayed the K-9 would stay out of the way.

"Sure. I hear you." She tossed her gun a few feet away, then grabbed Gabriel's car seat with both hands. "What do you want?"

"The key!" The masked man practically shouted the words. "Give me the stupid key or die." An evil smile creased his features. "The same way your ex-husband did."

Her thoughts whirled, and she hoped the fire trucks and West were already on the way. She almost told him she had no idea where the key was, when something clicked in her mind.

The elephant lamp in Gabriel's room. She vaguely remembered one day several months ago when she'd thought the lamp had been moved. The only reason it had caught her attention was that her elbow had almost knocked it off the table. At the time she hadn't considered it to be a big deal. But now she couldn't help but wonder if the lamp had been moved on purpose.

Why hadn't she thought of it before now?

“Okay, fine.” She held the masked man’s gaze. “I’ll take you to the key if you promise not to hurt me or my son.”

“You’re in no position to make demands,” the gunman snarled. He kept coming toward her, his weapon still pointed at her son. “I have a car on the next block.” He used his chin to indicate the direction he wanted her to go. “Move it!”

Trisha reluctantly headed across the backyard, refusing to look around for Peanut. She prayed someone would notice and call the police and that Peanut would find West.

Before she and Gabriel were kidnapped by this ruthless killer.

FIFTEEN

West and Dan Slater sat across from a skinny guy with a goatee by the name of Craig Benson. He was the suspect who'd come out of the bus station, looking around as if wondering where his gun was.

"I'm ATF Agent Slater and this is Detective Cole," Dan said. "I've noticed you have an outstanding warrant for burglary."

Benson shifted nervously in his seat. "That was nothing more than a big misunderstanding."

Sure it was, West thought dryly. He thought of the Glock that had been found at the Fitness Guru Gym. Dan had told him before the interview that the gun was clean. No crimes had been committed with it.

They needed this guy to talk.

"I want to know the name of the man who sold you the gun," Slater went on, ignoring his comment.

"I don't know anything about a gun," Benson said, but the way his gaze skittered sideways was a dead giveaway.

"You can cooperate with us or sit in jail. Your choice." Slater sat back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest as if he had all day. "Doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

West didn't interrupt, letting Dan take the lead. It took all his willpower not to look at his watch. Trisha and Gabriel were in a secure location—no need to rush back to be at her side.

But it was difficult to ignore the weird nagging feeling that urged him to head back to the safe house as soon as possible.

“If I tell you who sold me the gun, you won't put me in jail?” Benson asked.

“Yes. I'll work with the district attorney's office to drop the burglary charges against you,” Slater confirmed. “But only with your full cooperation. If you hold back key information, or lie to me, you'll do your full stint of jail time. Oh, and that includes any jail time for any additional charges for crimes I discover.”

West hoped Craig Benson would go along with the plan. It was obvious to West that the locker in the bus station and the one at the Fitness Guru Gym were drop points for individual gun sales.

Their task force was after the bigger fish behind the gun trafficking. Benson was a minnow in a shallow pond, likely far removed from the real brains of the outfit.

But they would take what they could get.

“How do I know you're not lying to me?” Benson demanded.

“I don't care about your burglary charges,” Dan said with a shrug. “I want the guy who sold you the weapon. After all, you paid him, didn't you? So where's the gun? Isn't that what you were thinking when you stepped outside?” Slater leaned forward. “He took your money but didn't leave the gun. Why be loyal to a scumbag like that?”

There was another long pause, as Craig Benson considered his options. “Yeah, okay.

I'll make the deal."

"Great," West spoke up for the first time. "Tell us who sold you the gun and we'll get the DA here to sign off."

"First the DA, then I'll talk." Benson's face settled in a grim line.

West rose and headed out to make the call to the DA's office. ADA Sharon Walsh came over right away, eager to help them with the gun trafficking case.

West and Sharon returned to the interview room. After discussing the parameters of the deal, ADA Walsh nodded. "Okay, I'll abide by those terms."

Craig Benson sat up straighter in his seat. "Petey Pawnors sold me the gun."

West inwardly groaned. Petey was dead. This guy wasn't going to be able to help them much at all.

A flash of disappointment darkened Dan Slater's eyes, too. "Okay, how did you know to contact Petey Pawnors to get a weapon in the first place?"

Benson darted a glance at the ADA, then said, "I know a guy who bought a Glock off Petey. Petey bragged about how he could easily sell any type of weapon for the right price." Benson shrugged. "I figured I might need some protection, so I got his name and number from my—uh, buddy."

"Are there other rumors on the street about Petey Pawnors and the types of guns he was able to sell?" Slater pressed. "Don't hold anything back."

Benson nodded slowly. "Yeah, word on the street was that Pawnors could get anything you wanted, included assault rifles and other high-powered guns if you were

willing to pay top dollar. I only wanted a handgun,” Craig Benson hastily added. “Just for my personal protection.”

West didn’t believe that for a minute, suspecting Benson had intended to use the gun to make it easier to rip off more innocent people. If Craig Benson walked out of here today, West would make sure to let the patrol officers know to keep an eye out for him.

It was only a matter of time before Benson broke the law again.

“We need the name of your buddy,” Dan said.

“I don’t want to drag him into this,” Benson protested.

“You promised to cooperate and to be honest with us,” Slater shot back. “That includes the name of your buddy. If you don’t tell us, the deal is off.”

Benson began to whine about how that wasn’t fair, but Slater ruthlessly cut him off.

“We already know about Pawnners. We need more. If you can’t help, we’ll find someone else.”

With great reluctance, Benson gave up the name of Kurt Adams. “Don’t tell him I gave you his name,” Benson begged. “You gotta promise you won’t rat me out.”

“We’ll do our best,” Slater said with a nonchalant shrug. “I can’t make promises, though. Besides, it’s likely Adams will figure out you were our source anyway.”

Benson slumped in his seat. “He’s gonna come after me,” he muttered.

“We can make sure that you’re protected,” Slater said. “We will let Adams know if

anything happens to you, he'll be our primary suspect.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Benson did not look reassured. West couldn't blame him. Street justice was no joke. And even threatening to arrest a guy didn't mean he wouldn't seek some sort of revenge.

He rose to leave, anxious to get back to the safe house. He pulled out his phone and frowned when he noticed Trisha had left a voicemail. Something about Laurel maybe?

Before he even finished the message, Ross emerged from his office.

“West? Trisha called 911 to report a fire at the safe house.”

An icy chill snaked down his spine. “Are Trish, Gabriel and Peanut all right? Did they all get out of the house?”

“They did get out of the house, but we don't know where they are,” Ross said, his brow furrowed with concern. “There was no one at the residence when the fire trucks arrived.”

The masked assailant? He had a very bad feeling the guy had started the fire to force Trisha and Gabriel out of hiding. How the perp had found the safe house, he wasn't sure.

And where was Peanut? He wished now that he'd brought his K-9 along for the interviews. Yet there was not a second to waste. If Trish, Gabriel and Peanut weren't at the safe house, then he needed to be smarter than the perp.

“This is all about a key,” he said curtly. “I'm heading to her place. You need to send officers there to back me up.”

“Go,” Ross said. “I’ll send officers to the safe house to search the neighborhood and more officers to help back you up at her place.”

West didn’t bother to answer, he simply spun on his heel and ran out of the police station to get to his SUV. He scanned the area, half hoping Peanut would have come to the police station to find him, but there was no sign of her.

Please, Lord Jesus, keep Trish, Gabriel and Peanut safe in Your care!

He silently repeated the prayer as he hit the red and blue flashing lights on his SUV and sped toward Trish’s house. He told himself not to panic. This guy wanted the key. He wouldn’t kill her or Gabriel until he had the key.

At least, he hoped not. Yet he couldn’t get the image of Bryan Little’s battered and blue mottled face out of his mind.

He shut down his lights as he reached Trish’s neighborhood. If he was the first one on scene, he figured it would be better to go in quietly, rather than announcing his presence.

After parking at the curb two blocks away, he headed off on foot. He’d barely gone a few feet when he saw Peanut streaking toward him, ears flapping. Had his K-9 followed Trisha and Gabriel’s trail?

“Sweet Pea,” he whispered, scooping the K-9 into his arms. He nuzzled her for a moment, then set her back down. “Heel,” he softly commanded. He needed her to stay close—the last thing he wanted was for his partner to be caught in the crossfire if this guy started shooting.

Peanut seemed to know exactly where Trish’s house was located, easily keeping pace beside him. As he approached the property, he noticed there was a black SUV in the

driveway. Not the Chevy sedan, but yet another car.

The perp's vehicle? Did that mean Trisha and Gabriel were inside with him?

He crept up to the side of the house, then pressed his back against the wall. Peanut stayed at his side in the heel position, but her nose worked the air, taking in the various scents. Even without his command, he knew she would search for tools.

Moving swiftly along the side of the house he paused at one of the bedroom windows. A quick peek inside revealed the master bedroom was empty.

Were they in Gabriel's room?

He turned to head around to the other side of the house, remembering the bedrooms were across from each other with the hallway in between. Taking more care now, he peered into the room.

And saw them. Trisha stood, holding Gabriel in her arms, while the masked gunman waved his arms theatrically. The perp had his back to the window, so West lifted his hand to get Trish's attention.

Her eyes widened when she saw him. But to her credit, she didn't let on, turning her attention back to the masked man.

Time to move. He ducked back around the house to reach the front door, praying Trisha hadn't locked it.

And that he'd be able to reach her and Gabriel before it was too late.

Trisha had sent up a silent Hallelujah when she'd glimpsed West through the bedroom window. She had known he'd find them, but the danger was far from over.

She'd been stalling the masked man as much as possible. But time was running out and this guy was losing his temper. She didn't trust him not to hurt her or Gabriel if she gave him the key. In fact, she believed he'd just kill them and be done with it.

"Where is it?" the masked perp demanded.

"I told you, I wasn't exactly sure where Bryan hid the key!" She spoke loudly, hoping to mask any sound of West making his way inside. She'd left the door open, hoping he or other officers would arrive in time to save them. "I thought for sure he hid the key in Gabriel's crib, but he must have tucked it somewhere else."

"Where is it!" The perp took a threatening step toward her.

"I think you should look under the elephant lamp." She took a step back, needing distance between them. "Now that I think about it, the lamp was moved at one point. I hit it with my elbow when I was reaching for Gabriel's diapers on the changing table. I'm sure the key is hidden beneath the lamp."

A gleam of anticipation brightened the perp's eyes, and he instantly turned toward the elephant lamp sitting on the edge of the changing table.

Trisha took several steps back, just in time to see West peeking around the door frame.

"Police! Drop the gun!"

West's curt demand startled Gabriel into crying. She tried to soothe him as the masked intruder spun toward West, his weapon still in hand.

"Drop it!" West said again. When the perp simply lifted the gun higher, West shot twice, striking the guy in the center of his chest.

Gabriel wailed at the sharp retort of gunfire. She watched in horror as the force of the bullets sent the perp flailing backward until he landed on the floor with a sickening thud.

“Are you and Gabriel okay?” West asked.

“We’re not hurt.” She strained to see if the masked perp was still breathing. She doubted he’d survive since officers were trained to hit center mass. And West had been close enough that he wouldn’t have missed.

She knew West would have preferred to take this guy alive, to fully understand what in the world was going on, but had little choice but to use deadly force.

The masked perp had dropped the weapon when he fell. She continued to soothe Gabriel as West lunged forward, kicking the gun out of reach. She caught a glimpse of Peanut heading over to sit beside the gun and was glad to see the K-9 hadn’t been hurt.

West knelt beside the guy, then reached up to pull his mask off.

“I don’t recognize him.” West looked disappointed.

She grabbed a baby blanket from Gabriel’s crib and tossed it to him. “Use this to help stop the bleeding. I’ll call for an ambulance.”

“Hear those sirens? They’re already on the way.” West grabbed the blanket, then ran his hand over the guy’s chest. “He’s wearing a bullet-resistant vest!”

“Really?” Now that she looked more closely, there wasn’t any blood staining his black clothing. “Where did he get it?”

“No idea.” West ran his hands over the vest, then reached up to feel along the side of his neck. “He still has a pulse.”

“That’s good.” She turned to set Gabriel in his crib, then turned to help provide first aid to the masked perp.

“Owww,” the guy moaned.

“You’re under arrest for kidnapping and attempted murder of a police officer.” West slapped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists.

“He admitted to killing Bryan, so you’ll want to add murder one to those charges,” she told him.

“Done. Who are you?” West demanded. “Why do you want the key?”

“Go...” the man whispered. Then his body went slack.

“Who is this guy?” Trisha asked as West searched the guy’s pockets, pulling out a wallet.

“His name is Edward Watley.” He lifted his gaze to hers. “Does that ring a bell?”

“Edward Watley is one of the friends on Renee Mills’s social media page.” She frowned. “How did he know my ex-husband?”

“I’m not sure.” West glanced at the lamp. “Do you really think the elephant lamp is where the key is hidden?”

“Yes.” She stood and crossed over to lift the lamp. She nodded in satisfaction as she pulled the large swath of duct tape from the bottom, revealing a small key stuck in the

adhesive.

“Glad you found it,” West said.

“This doesn’t look at all familiar.” Somehow she thought she might know what the key would open if she saw it. She held it out to West with a frown. “This is an oddly shaped key. Do you recognize it?”

“Yeah, it’s a key to a safety deposit box.” He grimaced. “Now we’ll just have to figure out what bank has the box that matches the key.”

PCPD officers came running inside. She moved out of the way as West met them at the door.

“This is Edward Watley.” West gestured to the man lying on the floor. “He held Officer Trisha McCord and her son, Gabriel, hostage at gunpoint demanding this key. He whirled on me with the gun in his hand. Then he pointed the weapon at me when I told him to drop it. I shot twice, hitting him in a bullet-resistant vest. He needs a bus—the impact knocked him out.”

“Wow, a perp wearing a vest?” Officer Skinner whistled. “That’s unusual.”

Trisha could tell that West looked relieved. And she understood. As cops they were trained to hit center mass if their life or other innocent lives were at stake. But no officer wanted to use deadly force.

“Watley also admitted to killing my ex-husband, Bryan Little,” she added. “He kidnapped us and threatened to kill Gabriel if I didn’t help him find the key.”

“Good to know. Get the paramedics in here,” Skinner called.

Trisha leaned over the crib to pick up Gabriel, who had quieted down. Then she edged out of the room, knowing the paramedics would need to get Watley out of there.

“Good girl, Pea,” West said. “Come.”

The beagle rose and trotted toward West, her tail wagging happily at a job well done. It made Trisha smile to realize Peanut had found the gun the perp had dropped, even though it hadn’t been missing.

In the main living room, West pulled the ducky from his pocket. Peanut caught it in the air and pranced around as if she was the queen of the world.

“What do you think is in the safety deposit box?” she asked, setting Gabriel into his car seat.

“I don’t know.” He stared at her for a moment, then abruptly stepped forward and pulled her into his arms. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” he whispered.

She hugged him back, burrowing close. “I knew the fire was a trap, but I was too afraid to stay inside,” she confessed. “I was hoping Peanut would find you.”

“She met me here at your house.” His arms tightened, and she relaxed against him.

“Peanut came all this way? She followed us in the car?” She glanced at the amazing K-9, then leaned back to look into his eyes. “I knew you’d find me.”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t answer your phone call.” Regret filled his eyes. “I wish I had gone straight to the safe house rather than going in to interview perps with Dan Slater.”

“Don’t say that, West,” she chided gently. “You had a job to do.”

“I almost lost you,” he said. Then lowered his mouth to kiss her.

She hugged him tight, cherishing their embrace. She kissed him back, wishing he cared about her as much as she had come to love him.

Their embrace was interrupted by the arrival of Captain Ross. West let her go, and she ducked her head, hoping their boss hadn’t noticed what he’d walked in on.

“We found the key, Captain,” West said. “I believe it’s to a safety deposit box.”

“Do you know which bank?” Ross asked.

“I don’t know for sure,” she said, moving forward. “However, Bryan and I used the Waterville Bank just a few blocks from here during our brief marriage. He closed his account after our divorce.” She shrugged. “It’s worth a try.”

“Go check it out,” Ross demanded. “I’d like to know what this guy killed for.”

She reached for Gabriel’s car seat. West took it from her hand, then gestured for her to head outside. “We’ll try the Waterville Bank, first. If Little has a box there, we’ll get a warrant.”

“Sounds good to me.” She wasn’t about to argue. She wanted to know what her ex-husband had stolen. What he’d done that had put her and Gabriel in danger.

The trip to the bank took five minutes. She carried Gabriel inside, accompanied by West and Peanut. West asked to speak with a manager, and they were led to a small corner office.

“I’m Detective West Cole and this is Patrol Officer Trisha McCord.” West set the key on the man’s desk. “We need to know if Bryan Little, who is now deceased, has a safety deposit box here. If so, I’ll obtain a warrant to compel you to provide us access to the box.”

“One moment please.” The manager tapped keys on the computer, then looked up in surprise. “Mr. Little does have a box here, and he added Ms. Trisha McCord to have access to the box if he was deceased.”

Trisha was shocked by that news.

“Let’s see the box, then,” West said.

The manager checked her ID, then led them down the hall to a room full of safety deposit boxes. After a moment, he used a master key to open a box, pulling out a large box that was obviously extremely heavy.

West stepped forward when the manager nearly dropped it. “Maybe he stored bricks in here,” the man joked.

Peanut didn’t alert, sniffing around in the room with interest. Trisha found herself holding her breath as West used the key to open the box.

It was full of long bars of what appeared to be solid gold.

Gold? Was that what Edward Watley had tried to say?

She looked at West, who appeared just as shocked as she was.

They had one answer to the puzzle surrounding the danger to her and Gabriel.

But they still had plenty of unanswered questions. Like where had Bryan gotten the gold?

And did the gold belong to Edward Watley or was he just a hired gun for the rightful owner?

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West had not expected to find ten solid gold bars in the safety deposit box. Truthfully, he'd thought there would just be a bunch of cash, or maybe even drugs.

But gold? The price of gold had been going back up again in the past few months. He was no expert, but there had to be close to five hundred thousand dollars' worth of the precious metal in this safety deposit box.

He turned toward Trish, smiling at the happy grin on Gabriel's face. He found himself reaching out to smooth a hand over the baby's back, extremely thankful the little boy hadn't been hurt. Then he focused on the issue at hand. With a quick glance, he made sure the manager was out of the room. "We searched for reported robberies but didn't find anything. You would think someone who lost something with this high of a value would have reported the theft to the police."

"Yeah, it makes me wonder if the owner of the gold didn't want anyone to know he had it." Her eyes widened. "Like he stole it first, and then Bryan grabbed it."

"Exactly." He nodded thoughtfully, then added, "We need to find the rightful owner."

"Edward Watley must know something," she offered, switching Gabriel to her other hip. "I still think it's odd that he was wearing a bullet-resistant vest. He must have gotten it from a friend in law enforcement or the military."

"Now that we know his name, we can dig into his known contacts." He placed the lid back on the box and stepped back.

"I found his name on Renee Mills's social media page as one of her friends, maybe

even a boyfriend.” She scowled. “I’m sure he knew where Renee kept her car keys and helped himself.”

“Yeah, Renee Mills needs to be held accountable for not cooperating with this investigation.” He crossed over to poke his head through the door, gesturing for the bank manager. “Please replace the box. We’ll be back later.”

“Fine with me,” the bank manager agreed.

“Let’s get out of here.” He rested his hand on the small of her back. Gabriel started fussing again, so he reached for the boy, taking him from Trish’s arms. “Hey, you’re okay.”

Instantly Gabriel quieted, his wide eyes fixated on his face. West abruptly realized that the baby hadn’t been around men in the duration of his short life.

No father figure to look up to.

And why did he have the strange impulse to fulfill that role? The thought didn’t scare him as much as it should have as he followed Trisha outside. Peanut stayed in the heel position, occasionally looking up at him as if asking when she’d be going back to work.

A few steps from the SUV, Peanut abruptly alerted, moments before an older man with shock white hair beneath his Stetson stepped out from behind the vehicle. West froze when he saw the handgun pointed at him.

“I’ll take that key,” the man said gruffly. “The gold is mine.”

“Is it?” West wished he hadn’t taken Gabriel from Trish’s arms, or assumed the danger was over. Trisha was armed, as he was, but it was too late to pull a weapon.

“Yeah.” The old cowboy took a small step toward them, while staying behind the relative protection of the SUV. “Give me the key and escort me inside to get past that bank manager. Once I have the gold free and clear, no one will get hurt.”

West didn’t believe that for a second, but his options were limited. He shifted to hand Gabriel over to Trish who subtly moved away using the side of the SUV for safety, so he would have both of his hands free. Rushing the cowboy wasn’t really an option, but he needed to do something. “How did you find us?”

The old man barked out a laugh. “Gotta love technology. That idiot Bryan Little wouldn’t talk, but Watley did grab his phone. They have this new app now, called Find My Device. Have you heard of it?” The old man’s eyes gleamed. “Worked like a charm. Most of the time.”

West kicked himself for not thinking of that possibility sooner. Especially after discovering Bryan Little had been murdered. He stepped in front of Trisha and Gabriel while sliding his hand in his pocket to grab the key. Getting the old man inside the building and away from Trisha and Gabriel would be the first step. If things went south, he would gladly sacrifice himself to protect them.

“Where did you get the gold?” Trisha asked.

“None of your business,” the old cowboy growled. “Hand over that key! Then escort me inside, got it?”

West pulled the key from his pocket, holding it up where the old man could see it. “Here’s the key.” Then he abruptly tossed it in the air off to the right.

The old man’s gaze greedily followed the path of the key, giving West just enough time to rush the older man, slamming his gun hand upward. The old guy pulled the trigger, firing several rounds up into the sky.

Ears ringing, he brought his knee up into the old man's gut and held his wrist with an iron grip, squeezing until the old man dropped the gun.

"I don't know who you are," he said, grabbing the guy's other hand and holding it tightly. "But you're under arrest for attempting to murder a police officer. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law." He continued reciting the Miranda warning.

The old cowboy's eyes glittered with anger. "That gold is mine!" he shouted. "I deserve it! It's mine!"

West sincerely doubted that, otherwise why hadn't he reported it stolen months ago? Now that the old man was no longer a threat, he glanced over his shoulder to where Trisha stood with Gabriel. Her face was pale, but she nodded, as if to reassure him they were fine. Then she pulled out her phone to call this in. "Dispatch, this is Patrol Officer Trisha McCord. We need backup at the Waterville Bank as we have a man in custody for holding two police officers at gunpoint and threatening to kill us."

Her statement only reminded him of their close call. He lifted his heart in prayer, thanking God for keeping them safe. And for giving him the strength and wisdom he needed to disarm this guy.

It was over for real this time. Although he still needed to find the rightful owner of the gold bars. Watley had hired someone to try to kill Trisha and to kidnap Gabriel. An extreme move to get loot that was rightfully his.

"Trish, can you grab the flex-cuffs from my pocket?" He'd used his handcuffs to secure Edward Watley. "I want to check this guy's ID."

She stepped forward to grab the plastic zip ties. She opened the back door of the SUV to place Gabriel inside, then used the cuffs to secure the old cowboy's wrists. When

that was done, he removed the guy's wallet from his back pocket.

"Aaron Klinger?" He frowned. "You're the owner of the Rocking K Ranch?"

"Yeah. So?" Klinger scowled defiantly.

"Bryan worked for you, didn't he?" Trisha asked. "Is that when he stole the gold?"

Klinger averted his gaze, then reluctantly nodded. "Yeah. But it's mine, and you can't legally keep it from me." The old man's eyes brightened. "I have a right to defend myself and my property!"

West snorted. "Nice try, but you don't get to point a gun and threaten to shoot and kill two police officers and an innocent baby. And if that gold is yours, why didn't you report it stolen?"

Klinger shrugged. "I didn't want people coming to the Rocking K, thinking there was more gold to be had."

That sounded plausible, but West wasn't convinced. "I guess we'll see about that."

Klinger fell silent, as if sensing he'd already said too much.

The two squads arrived a few minutes later. He filled the officers in on the situation, including the gold bars they'd found in the safety deposit box and the impending charges he intended to file against Aaron Klinger.

"I heard something about missing gold a few years ago," one of the officers said. "I think it was taken from a ranch in Montana."

"Montana? Really?" West wondered why he hadn't heard about it. Then again,

Montana was hardly his jurisdiction.

“I think so.” The officer shrugged. “I honestly didn’t pay that much attention, but I was seeing a girl who lived there and it was all the news for a while.”

West glanced at Aaron Klinger, who stared off in the distance with a mulish expression. “Thanks for that information. We’ll follow up on that missing gold in Montana.”

Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought a look of resignation crossed Aaron Klinger’s features. Yeah, he thought. The jig is up.

Once the officers had taken Aaron Klinger away, he turned to Trish. “I’m a lousy detective,” he said. “I didn’t anticipate your ex-husband’s phone had been used to track yours since he’d been out of the picture for so long.”

“Hey, that possibility never occurred to me, either,” she protested. “I never set up that find your phone feature with Bryan. He must have done that without me realizing it. Likely the same time he planted that key in the house.”

“I was so scared,” he admitted stepping closer. Gabriel appeared fine in the SUV, so he quickly drew her into his arms for a hug. “I was worried he’d shoot you or Gabriel.”

“You stepped right in front of us,” she said with a frown. “I was scared he was going to shoot you!”

“I would rather be the one in the line of fire.” He closed his eyes for a moment, then said, “Don’t you understand? I would do anything to protect you and Gabriel.”

“Ah, West,” she whispered, hugging him. “I wish things were different for us.”

Different how? Before he could ask, she lifted up on her tippy toes and kissed him.

Savoring their embrace, he tried to understand how this had happened. How he'd fallen for Trisha and her son.

His phone rang, interrupting their kiss. He was tempted to ignore it, but reluctantly pulled away from Trish's embrace to pull the device from his pocket, not surprised to see Captain Ross's name on the screen.

"Our boss," he said in a low husky voice.

"Of course." She stepped out of his arms, and it was all he could do not to haul her back.

"West? What's this about Aaron Klinger holding you and Trisha at gunpoint?" Ross demanded.

"We'll head over to the precinct to write up our report," he promised. "Bottom line, I don't believe Klinger owns the gold or he would have reported it stolen."

"Yeah, that's what I hear." There was a brief pause, then Ross added, "I'm glad you're both safe. And Trish's son, too."

"Thanks." He caught Trish's hand in his, earning a surprised glance. The danger was over, but he wasn't ready to let her go.

Until now, he'd been focused only on his career. One that could have ended here today if Klinger had gotten a shot off. He'd told himself people always left, but now he realized that was a cowardly way of avoiding relationships.

Kenyon hadn't asked to be killed. Shannon had left West, but in hindsight, he hadn't

cared about her as much as he should have.

The way he'd fallen in love with Trish.

No, he wouldn't waste this second chance. God had brought Trisha and Gabriel into his life for a reason.

To show him what he'd been missing.

Still reeling from the dizzying impact of West's kiss, Trisha tried not to get her hopes up that their embrace was anything special. Maybe that had been nothing more than a goodbye kiss.

After all, they would both go their separate ways now that this nightmare was over.

Yet she couldn't get the image of him carrying Gabriel out of the bank from her mind. He'd looked so comfortable with her son, a far cry from the way he'd acted when she and Gabriel had initially stayed with him.

Despite her attempt to protect her heart, she'd fallen in love with him. Yet she had no idea what to do about her newfound feelings, either.

"We need to head back to the precinct," West said. "Will Gabriel be okay for a little while longer?"

"I think so." She double-checked Gabriel was securely fastened in his seat before climbing into the passenger seat. West opened the back for Peanut, then slid behind the wheel.

"We just need to write up our reports, then we're good to go," he said. "You may want to bunk with me tonight, as your house is still a crime scene."

The offer shocked her. “Oh, well, I don’t want to put you out. Now that the danger is over, I can stay with Raina and the twins.”

West frowned but didn’t argue as he drove the short distance to the precinct. The front parking spots were full, so he drove along to the side lot.

As she took Gabriel out of the car seat, she noticed a small child sitting by herself, eating goldfish crackers at a picnic table that was sometimes used by the staff at the police station.

“West? Do you see anyone with that little girl?” Trisha asked, gesturing toward the child she estimated to be about fourteen to fifteen months old.

“No.” He frowned, releasing Peanut from the back. “Do you?”

“No.” She quickly headed toward the toddler. “Hi, my name is Trisha and this is Gabriel. What’s your name?”

The little girl’s fingers and mouth were stained orange. She didn’t say anything, either too shy or unable to talk. As Trisha moved closer, she saw there was a note pinned to the little girl’s coat.

My name is Joy. I’m Agent Daniel Slater’s kin.

“West? You need to see this.” She knelt beside the toddler. The child didn’t seem overly afraid of strangers, which was a good thing. “Hi, Joy. Where is your mommy?”

The little girl didn’t answer. Then again, she was too young to talk much.

“What in the world?” West had Peanut on leash, and the K-9 was sniffing Joy

curiously. “Who would leave a kid alone out here?”

“I don’t know, but we need to take her inside.” Trisha smiled at the little girl. “Joy? Will you come with us?”

Joy looked shyly at her, then nodded. She lifted the little girl off the bench and set her on the grass. Maybe it was because of Gabriel that the child felt safe with them.

“Hang on. I’m calling Dan.” West made the call, and less than a minute later, the tall, blond ATF agent came running toward them.

“I don’t understand,” Dan muttered, reading the note for himself. “I don’t have any kids. Or siblings.”

“A cousin?” Trisha asked helpfully.

Dan ran his hands through his dark blond hair. “I have no idea how she could be related to me.” He reached down and snagged the backpack that was partially hidden beneath the picnic table. He rummaged inside, then looked up. “There’s a birth certificate here, but the mother’s name is blacked out and there’s no father listed.” Dan appeared shell-shocked. “I’ll need to take her to the hospital to be checked out, and maybe this birth certificate can be traced to the girl’s mother.”

“Good idea,” Trisha said. “She looks fine, but it’s not exactly warm out here.”

“Yeah, okay.” Dan looked as if he wanted to say something more, then bent to lift the little girl into his arms. Thankfully, Joy nestled against him, her hands staining his black shirt orange.

She exchanged a glance with West, as Dan headed to the parking lot. She couldn’t imagine what it felt like to have a relative show up in the shape of a small child out of

the blue.

After following West inside, she set Gabriel on the floor, then quickly wrote her report. West had disappeared for a few minutes in Ross's office, then had found a computer nearby to work on his.

When she was finished, she battled a wave of sadness as she picked up her son. She would miss spending time with West, but heading to Raina's house until hers had been cleared was the right decision.

Tears pricked her eyes. She ruthlessly swiped them away. She had much to be thankful for.

"Ready to go?" West asked. Peanut came over to greet Gabriel. If only West was as easy to win over as his K-9.

"Yes." She jumped to her feet.

They headed back outside, her stomach growling with hunger. She did her best to ignore it. Although Gabriel would need to eat, and soon. And she needed to check in on Laurel, too.

Once they were settled in the SUV, she pulled out her phone. After texting Laurel, she glanced at West. "I'll call Raina to let her know we're on the way."

"No need." West reached over to lower the phone. "I've arranged for the officers at your house to pack supplies for Gabriel and to bring them to my place."

Her jaw dropped. "Why would you do that?"

"I told you, it's better for you to stay with me until your house has been cleared." He

held her gaze for a moment, then added, "Please. I think we need to talk."

They did? About what? The case? Yes, that was it. He still needed to find the rightful owner of the gold bars.

And maybe he wanted her to help with that. She shrugged, relenting. "Okay."

The trip to his house didn't take long, and there was a squad car in the driveway when they arrived. West released Peanut, then took over carrying Gabriel's car seat.

Officer Skinner slid out from behind the wheel to join them. "I packed everything I could think of," he said.

"It's fine," she assured him. "Thanks so much."

"No problem." Skinner hauled the box up to the house. She didn't have the portable crib but would make do.

This was a temporary arrangement.

She went to work unpacking the box of items, then made a bottle for Gabriel. West popped frozen pizza in the oven, reminding her of their first night here together.

Then he picked up her fussy son, walking back and forth with him as she finished making Gabriel's dinner. The way West pitched in was also very different from that first night.

"Set him in his seat," she said. "I'll feed him while you work on the mystery of the missing gold."

"Okay." He placed Gabriel in his seat. She began feeding her son as West booted up

his computer. He was quiet for a few minutes, then his phone rang. He looked at her. “This is Ross. He might have news.” He pulled out his phone, surprising her by placing the call on speaker so she could hear. “Hey, boss, I’m here with Trish. Did Watley talk?”

“Yep, came to shortly after arriving at the hospital and spilled the beans in hopes of a lighter sentence,” Ross said. “He worked the Rocking K with Bryan Little. He got suspicious when Bryan abruptly quit, without having another job. A few months later, Aaron Klinger reached out to Watley to let him know about the gold that Little had stolen. Klinger apparently promised one gold bar to Watley if he could get all of it back. Watley admitted to taking his ex-girlfriend Renee Mills’s car, along with stealing a few others.”

“Mills was holding back,” West said with a dark frown.

“Yes. Apparently Watley tried to get information about the gold from Little, but he was too rough in trying to get Little to talk about exactly where the key was hidden, and he ended up killing Little before he could get specific.”

So Watley was a hired gun, she thought, then asked, “Any idea who the gold belongs to?”

“Yeah, the Montana link panned out. Apparently Klinger stole the gold from his uncle, but blamed it on someone else. The uncle suspected Klinger was involved, but the Rocking K Ranch was barely turning a profit, so the uncle figured the other guy was the real perp. Klinger didn’t go to the police when Little disappeared with the booty, fearing his uncle would hear about the gold being taken.” Ross sighed heavily. “Watley admitted to kidnapping Trisha and Gabriel as a bargaining chip to get the key. Claims he never tried to hurt them, but we’re not about to let him off the hook so easily. He killed Bryan Little. With both first degree murder and kidnapping charges being filed against him, he’ll spend the rest of his life in prison.”

“That’s good to know. I’m glad this is finally over,” West said thoughtfully.

“Yeah, for us, too. Thanks again for your hard work on this, West, and you, too, Trish,” Ross added.

“Just another day at the office,” West drawled with a smile. “Thanks for giving me and Trisha tomorrow off, too.”

Wait, what? She frowned as Gabriel pushed the spoon away, having had enough.

“You’re welcome. Take care.” Ross ended the call.

“Why do we both have off tomorrow?” she asked, cleaning Gabriel’s face with a damp cloth.

West rose and reached for her hands. “Trish, we’ve been through a lot these past few days. I was hoping we’d have time to talk about our future.”

“Our future?” She stared at him. “I’m surprised. I mean, I didn’t get the impression you were interested in a family.”

“I wasn’t at first, my parent’s divorce has made me leery about marriage.”

“I can understand that.” Her divorce had scarred her too.

“I failed at my most recent relationship,” West added. “And I can see now that I was holding back even then. But not anymore. I very much want a family. Only if the woman is you and the little boy is Gabriel.” He smiled gently. “I’ve fallen in love with you, Trish. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting that. I didn’t think I had room in my life for love. Now I can’t imagine my life without you. And Gabriel.” He glanced at her son, then back to her. “Please give me a chance. I don’t know much about babies or

being in a healthy relationship, but I'm willing to try."

"Really?" She searched his gaze. "Are you absolutely sure about this?"

"I love you," he repeated. "I don't want to rush you into anything, but I know God brought us together the night of the shooting for a reason. Because He knew we belonged together."

"Oh, West." She blinked back her tears and threw herself into his arms. "I love you. I don't need time to know what's in my heart." She'd loved him before he'd stepped into the line of fire to protect her and Gabriel.

She would always love him.

Peanut came up beside him, so he picked up the K-9. West still had task force work to do, but solving this case was reason to celebrate.

"Bahwahah," Gabriel said, making her laugh.

"I think that means Gabriel loves you, too," she whispered.

West kissed her, then leaned over to address her son. "Your mommy is beautiful, smart and courageous. When the time is right, I'm going to ask her to marry me. I hope you'll convince her to say yes."

It was all moving very fast, but she didn't care. West was the right man for her and Gabriel.

And she couldn't imagine spending her life without him.

If you enjoyed West's story, don't miss Gracie's story next! Check out Deadly

Badlands Pursuit and rest of the Dakota K-9 Unit series!

ONE

Don't go back there, Diana. There's nothing in Rachel's Crossing but ghosts.

Her father's warning had played on a loop in Diana Fisher's head every mile of the way back to her childhood home in Rachel's Crossing, Kentucky. And right up until the moment she'd gotten into the car to leave Louisville, William had never stopped trying to change her mind. Yet Diana had remained resolute. She'd waited fifteen years for answers as to why her mother had left them. No matter what—even if it broke her father's heart—she couldn't back down.

While on the force in Louisville, Diana had searched every database available for some clue as to where Greta Fisher might be hiding. There had been nothing. Not a word from her mother since she'd skipped town when Diana was young, taking her belongings and leaving only a note.

When the chief-of-police position at Rachel's Crossing became available, Diana jumped at the chance to apply, never expecting to get the job. Her timing was perfect—the town needed a new leader after facing a scandal with the previous police chief, who'd been forced to resign. Corruption had overtaken the small department, and it would be Diana's job to rebuild it. She believed this was God's intervention. She'd prayed for years for answers about her mother, and now she had the chance to find them while reviving the integrity of the police department her father had once led. She just had to return home... Was she ready to hear the truth?

Her former childhood house appeared in the gathering darkness. Diana's heartbeat hammered in her ears as she pulled into the drive and parked.

She'd dreaded this moment. The fear of what waited inside became paralyzing.

Kit, the Dutch Shepherd who had been her K-9 partner in Louisville, licked Diana's cheek, as if understanding.

Diana gave herself a mental shake and petted Kit's head. She'd waited half her life for answers. Did she really think they'd come without a little pain?

A blast of humid air greeted her as she opened the car door. Despite it being early evening, the thermometer in her vehicle had registered a three-digit number.

Kit jumped out, eager to stretch her legs, while Diana grabbed a box from the back seat. "Ready to see your new home?"

Kit would be the first K-9 officer on the Rachel's Crossing Police Department. Diana had gotten the mayor's permission and had worked hard to secure funding for the program.

The dog sniffed around the ground while Diana stared up at the house. No more stalling. Time to confront the past.

When she'd interviewed for the chief's position a few weeks back, Diana hadn't been able to face this place. She'd asked her father once why he'd held on to the house. William told her that he hoped one day Greta would come back to them.

She shifted the box onto one hip to unlock the door. Kit trotted inside. Diana followed more slowly, her heart clenching at the house that seemed frozen in time. Nothing but a heavy layer of dust to remind her she was no longer that fifteen-year-old girl who missed her mother.

Diana dropped the box on the kitchen counter as the past hit her in waves. She wouldn't cry. Too many tears had been shed already.

Kit whimpered, drawing her attention. The dog looked up at her with troubled eyes.

“I’m okay.” She had to hold it together for Kit.

Diana returned to her vehicle to retrieve the rest of her things while Kit stayed close. The dog was a protector as well as a friend.

She brought in her suitcase and the bags of groceries she’d purchased in town. And the box containing photos and the few things she had of her mother’s. A silver brush and mirror set. A music box with a palomino horse on top that played “My Old Kentucky Home.” Greta had said William bought it for her when they’d gone to the Kentucky Derby once.

Darkness brought an ominous feel to the July evening. The house was in the middle of nowhere. The closest neighbors were members of the Amish community, which had been here longer than the town of Rachel’s Crossing.

She set the groceries in the kitchen and carried her suitcase and the box of personal items into her old bedroom, then dropped them on the bed. This room held the hardest memories to face. She could almost picture her mother standing in the doorway smiling that last night. Because of that image, she’d spend her first night on the sofa until she had a better handle on her emotions.

Ignoring what needed to be done, Diana carried the iced tea she’d bought in town out to the back porch, along with her handgun and flashlight.

She settled into one of the old wicker rockers that had aged badly. Kit circled a couple of times before getting comfortable at her feet.

“Good girl.” Diana noticed Kit had carried out her favorite stuffed toy. The move hadn’t been an easy one for Kit, either.

A slight breeze rustled the trees. Katydid's sang their song. In the distance, the dark shape of Black Mountain loomed over everything around Rachel's Crossing.

Diana could almost smell the coal dust still resting inside the closed Black Mountain mine. The town had formed around the coal mine years after the Amish community had settled in the late 1800s, and was named after an Amish wife who'd tried to cross the river to get life-saving medicine for her husband. In a sad irony, she'd died, and her husband had lived to raise their five children alone.

While the Amish community remained strong, when the coal mine shut down in the late nineties, Rachel's Crossing had almost faded into the history books. But somehow, it held on. Kept going. Like Diana.

"Oh, Mama...why'd you leave us?" Their life here in Rachel's Crossing had appeared perfect yet something had caused her mother to walk away from her husband and child.

At her feet, Kit suddenly scrambled to a sitting position, growling long and low. The Dutch Shepherd's hackles rose an alarm.

"What is it, girl?"

Kit charged the nearby woods before Diana could stop her.

"Kit! Come back." Diana grabbed her weapon and the flashlight from the nearby table. Though most of the animals roaming the woods were harmless, there were reports of mountain lions in the area. Kit wouldn't stand a chance against a cornered lion.

Rustling noises headed away from the house. Whatever Kit was chasing moved quickly. Something alarming grabbed Diana's attention. Cigarette smoke. Kit's target was human.

Diana quieted her steps at the new threat. It was a tactic she'd learned from her police-officer dad. When tracking a perp, it was best to be as silent as possible. She killed the flashlight and relied on memory alone. She used to know every square inch of the property and woods. The hollows up here were where she'd grown up. Played for so many years. Yet that felt like another person's life now.

A twig snapped nearby. She swung toward the sound and tried to see through the darkness as something bounded her way. Kit. Diana's relief became physical. She bent over, exhaling a breath.

"You scared me." The dog didn't look at her. Kit's attention remained on something behind Diana. The dog appeared confused, which was completely out of character.

Before Diana turned, teeth-jarring pain shot through her body as something sharp slammed against her head. Bursts of light danced before her eyes. Her head felt as if it had been split open. She became aware of Kit attacking the person. Snarls registered through the fog and then a yelp. Kit had been hurt. Someone shoved her from behind and she fell forward. The world around her blurred as she clung to consciousness.

Seconds ticked by before awareness of her surroundings returned.

Kit licked her face and whimpered a warning that her attacker was still out there somewhere.

Diana rose to her knees unsteadily. Kit had been hurt in the attack, too. The world around her spun. She patted her dog's head to comfort her and brought back blood.

Diana staggered to her feet and found her handgun and flashlight.

Now, she had a job to do. Catch the bad guy before he got away.

In the distance, she could hear someone tramping through the woods. Before Diana locked in on the location, a woman's bloodcurdling scream overrode the sound of her own frantic breathing. Diana ran forward, but Kit overtook her, claiming the lead. Strange lights appeared. Not quite bright enough to be from flashlights. She reached a clearing and realized this was the beginning of the Amish community. The lights belonged to lanterns inside a nearby Amish home.

Kit zeroed in on something near the back of a barn and loped over to investigate. As Diana neared the location, she realized someone was lying there. She kneeled beside the young woman, who wasn't moving. She had a weak pulse.

Diana grabbed her phone and called Casey Masterson. He was the only remaining officer on the once corrupt force headed up by Zahn Torres. Torres had been an officer under her father, but his approach to the police-chief job had been completely different. Although it wasn't widely known around town, Torres had been asked to step down from the chief's position due to accusations of bribes, among other crimes. According to the mayor, Torres hadn't gone away quietly.

Thankfully, she liked Casey and knew she'd work well with him. He seemed competent and he knew the community well. Dispatcher Susan Copland told her Casey reminded her of Diana's father, and Susan should know. She'd been the dispatcher back when William was chief.

Diana told Casey what happened. "Roll medical assistance to this location." She couldn't leave the victim alone in case the attacker returned to finish the job.

"Copy that. Rolling medical. I'm on my way, Chief Fisher." The call ended.

In the distance, a car engine fired. Tires peeled down a gravel road. Whoever had attacked Diana and this young woman was fleeing, and she couldn't do a thing about it. She called Casey back and told him to pursue the vehicle.

A siren blared in the background. Casey would do his best to head off the perp.

The flashlight beam revealed dark smudges resembling fingerprints on the woman's neck. She'd been strangled. The woman's dark blue dress, white apron and the prayer kapp slipping from her head confirmed she was Amish. The combination of strangulation and the fact that the victim was Amish dragged to life a fifteen-year-old cold case. Diana's father's worst investigation, which had gone unsolved.

Growing up in Rachel's Crossing, Diana had heard the whispers when the troubles first began. Young Amish women had gone missing. Only one was ever found—one who had managed to escape her kidnapper. She'd told a harrowing tale of being choked until she passed out. The attack had been interrupted when someone had spotted them and come to her rescue. Unfortunately, neither the young woman nor the person who saved her had been able to identify the attacker.

Soon, the disappearances continued.

The young woman before her stirred and murmured something. Her terrified eyes latched on to Diana's. She tried to scream but couldn't.

"You're safe. I'm Chief Fisher with the Rachel's Crossing Police. Medical help is on the way."

The words didn't appear to tamp down her fear. She grabbed her bruised throat, her voice raspy. "He—he tried to kill me."

"He's gone now." But was he? Diana glanced uneasily around the darkness. She'd interrupted the attack. If she hadn't been outside, would she have heard the scream? The young woman might be dead, or could have vanished, like the others.

"Is this your home?" Diana wondered if her parents were there. She couldn't imagine how terrified they'd be. Many around the community had lived through that dark

period. They'd see the similarities.

"Nay . I live on the next farm over," the young woman responded.

A light moved near the front of the house and was heading their way.

"There's someone coming." Until she knew if they were friend or foe, she had to protect her victim. "I'll be right back." Diana rose to intercept the person when the young woman grabbed her hand.

"Don't leave me."

Kit growled aggressively and headed for the approaching person until Diana called her off. Kit couldn't afford another run-in with a potential attacker.

Diana retrieved her weapon, and remained close to the woman. A flashlight beam hit Diana's face and she turned her head.

"What's going on here?" a deeply masculine voice filled with steel asked.

"This woman's been attacked. I'm Chief Diana Fisher." Diana gave only the pertinent information. She had no idea who this person standing before her was. Despite hearing a car disappear, she wasn't convinced the attacker had left the area. It could have been some kids racing. "Can you turn your flashlight off?"

The man quickly complied.

It took several seconds for her eyes to adjust. "Did you hear anything suspicious?" she asked.

"Only the scream." He stepped closer and Diana backed away. In a short amount of time, she'd been struck from behind and this young woman had almost been

strangled.

She couldn't take any chances here.

"I'm DCI Agent Micah Nissley." He brought out his badge, as if sensing her unease.

Diana wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly. "DCI?" What was a Kentucky Department of Criminal Investigations detective doing here in Harlan County?

At least four inches taller than Diana's five foot, ten inches, she tipped her head back to get a good look at Micah. Dark curly hair cut short and neat. Intense green eyes held hers without flinching throughout her assessment.

"Are you working a case in the area?" She hadn't been notified of any joint investigations.

He shook his head and crooked his thumb back toward the house. "This is my childhood home. I'm here doing repairs." She remembered the farm had once belonged to an Amish family. It didn't add up, but for now, her concern remained with the victim.

"There's backup on the way as well as medical help. Do you mind if we bring her to your place? I don't like having our victim out in the open in case her attacker is still around."

"No, of course not." Micah didn't hesitate. He assisted Diana in getting the victim to her feet. As she bent over to take the young woman's arm, the world around her swam once more and she stopped abruptly. Diana closed her eyes and fought back nausea.

"You're hurt," Micah said, looking concerned.

Diana slowly straightened and pulled in a couple of breaths, letting the world settle down before she answered. “I’m okay. He caught me off guard and hit me from behind. My dog was struck as well.”

“By the same person who attacked this young woman?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Micah scanned the area. “Do we have any idea where he went?”

Diana explained about the car. “My officer is giving pursuit.” Yet, if this was the person who took those women in the past, she wondered if Casey would be able to catch him. The predator had gotten good at attacking and then disappearing into the night, taking his victims with him. She prayed this was just a strange coincidence. To her knowledge, there hadn’t been any Amish women go missing here in fifteen years. So why start up now? Had he left the area and come back? Stopped hunting only to begin again?

Highly unlikely though not unheard of. Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, had stopped killing—lived a seemingly normal life—for a time.

“You should let them take a look at your head once they’ve finished examining this young woman.”

Diana didn’t respond. She touched the spot and winced. It could have been far worse.

Despite being injured, Kit glued herself to Diana’s side. The dog would fight to the death to save her. She’d proven this time and again.

They reached the porch when Diana’s cell phone rang.

Casey bypassed the customary hello. “Chief, I drove all the way past the Amish

community down where the road ends. There's no sign of him. I'm thinking he must have turned off one of the side roads. I'll keep looking, but I'm thinking he got away."

"Looks like I'm getting a running start on the job." Diana told him.

"No doubt. Tough way to start out." This was the first case she and Casey would be working together. They still needed to feel each other's methods out. She told him where to reroute the ambulance before ending the call. Diana ended the call and shoved the phone back into her pocket with an unsteady hand.

If this was the person who had hunted Amish women in the past, why make a comeback now...at the same time Diana had returned? There wasn't any scenario that would make Diana believe in such a coincidence.

Micah assisted the young Amish woman over to his sofa and placed the quilt his mother made over her shoulders. She was in shock and shivering. Micah didn't recognize her, but then again, he'd been away for a long time, and he hadn't ventured out among the community. Too many bad memories.

The marks on her neck transported Micah back to the worst time in his life. To what happened to Tessa.

Until she went missing, Micah hadn't thought much about there being someone out there hunting Amish women. Tessa's disappearance had changed everything.

He knew her better than anyone. They'd talked about the future. She couldn't wait to marry him. Tessa wouldn't simply run away. The alternative had kept him awake many a long night and haunted him because he, in part, was responsible for what had happened to her. He should have protected her. Instead, he'd acted in anger and left her alone.

Micah shoved the past back into its hiding place. This might just be an isolated attack. Best not to get ahead of himself.

“I want to go home.” Tears filled the young woman’s eyes. “I’m oke . My mamm and daed will be worried. They expected me hours ago.”

“I’ll have my officer let them know what happened if you tell me where you live,” Diana said. Once the girl provided the address, Diana made the call to her officer while Micah studied the new chief. There was something familiar about her. She’d introduced herself as Chief Diana Fisher. Was it possible she might be related to the former Chief Fisher?

She appeared to be in her early thirties, like him. He’d heard rumors around town about the new chief who had once lived in Rachel’s Crossing. No doubt they would run into each other once or twice.

Diana’s golden-brown hair was mostly escaping from its bun at the nape of her neck. Blood matted the top of her head where she’d been struck by something heavy. The woman was tall and had the physique of a runner. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that had the University of Louisville emblazoned across the front. She was...beautiful. The thought surprised him.

The dog had followed her inside and kept a careful watch on Diana, as well as Micah, who hadn’t won her trust yet. A blood-matted patch of fur on the dog’s head confirmed the injury Diana had mentioned.

The new chief ended the call and faced him. Intense hazel eyes bored right through Micah, sizing him up. Analyzing everything he’d said. His body language. Determining if he was a friend or foe. From the guarded expression, it appeared the jury was still out.

“EMTs should be here soon,” she said at last.

He nodded, not knowing what else to say.

Diana glanced around at the small house where he'd grown up. Micah had lived here until he'd turned eighteen. That year, everything changed.

"How long have you been in this house?"

The question snatched him away from the rabbit hole he'd started down. "I don't live here anymore. Well, not full-time at least. I come here whenever I'm able to work on repairs. I thought I'd maybe use it as a vacation home." His glance touched on the table his father had made for his mother when they'd wed. Daed had planned to make one for Micah and Tessa's wedding gift...

Once again, Tessa's pretty face appeared from his memory where she snuck out to haunt him from time to time. Always smiling, her blue eyes twinkling when she teased him. Her auburn hair escaping from its bun.

Stop it.

Micah cleared his throat. "As you can tell, there's a lot of work still left to do."

"You were once Amish." The surprise on her face confirmed she'd reached the right conclusion. How long before she realized he'd been a suspect in Tessa's disappearance? Not long before the questions he'd hoped he'd left behind returned.

Red and blue lights flashed across the open windows, saving him the need to answer.

"That's my officer with the EMTs." Diana stepped out onto the porch. The tightness in Micah's chest lessened. He'd known at some point his past would return to brand him again, but he never expected it to be so soon. And he never thought there'd be another attack after so many years. The victim had been strangled...just like the case from fifteen years earlier. Collette Verkler, had gotten away. Micah wondered if

Collette's escape and the killer's fear of getting caught had caused him to go dormant all these years. If so, why return now?

Two EMTs entered the house along with an Amish man and woman who were his closest neighbors. The girl's parents.

The older woman spotted her daughter. "Esther!" She rushed to her side. "Oh, my child."

Her father's concern was etched on his face as he patted his daughter's shoulder. Like Micah, these people would remember the darkness that had descended on the community in the past. "Hon, my name is Bree Logan. Let us have a look at you, okay." She knelt in front of Esther who reluctantly agreed.

Micah stepped outside, where Diana was speaking with an officer who appeared to be in his forties. The conversation ended abruptly as he approached.

"EMTs are examining her now," Micah told them when an awkward silence followed.

"She's pretty shaken up. I can't imagine what she went through." Diana introduced Micah to her officer, Casey Masterson.

"Nice to meet you." Micah shook Officer Masterson's hand. He was tall with sandy blond hair he kept short. His intense blue eyes seemed to bore through Micah, as if he knew about his past connection to the Amish women.

The guilt is in your head... Still.

Diana turned to him, gaining his attention. "I want to search your property for any evidence the attacker might have left behind." She waited for him to respond, those strangely mesmerizing eyes holding his.

“Anything you need.”

She shifted toward Casey. A breath escaped from deep inside Micah as he recalled the interrogation he’d gone through in the past. All he’d wanted to do was help find Tessa. It never occurred to him that he might be a suspect.

“Casey, why don’t you start the canvass without me? I’ll speak with the victim and then join you. Take Kit. Here, use this.” Diana held out the young woman’s prayer kapp, which had fallen off. “Kit can zero in on where she’s been.”

“I’ll dress Kit’s wound first,” the officer said.

“Thanks, Casey.” The man headed for his patrol car with Kit behind him.

“If you’d like, I can assist your officer,” Micah offered. If this attacker was the same person who took Tessa, he wanted to be part of the investigation. He’d reach out to his commander and get him to put pressure on the chief if needed. This was his case as well. And he’d waited many years, along with Tessa’s family, for answers.

Diana zeroed in on him once more, assessing him through cop’s eyes. “We can certainly use the DCI’s help. Our police staff is woefully undermanned.”

Micah had heard about the scandal that plagued the department. Theft. Bribery charges. Blackmail. “I’m at your service.”

Diana nodded. “Why don’t you sit in on the interview?”

He was more of a boots-on-the-ground agent, but hearing about the attack from the young woman might help him understand what Tessa had gone through.

Micah returned to his living room with Diana. The EMTs had finished their exam and were preparing to leave when one saw the gash on the back of Diana’s head.

“Better let us have a look, Chief.”

Diana introduced the EMT as Trevor Rosenberg. “He’s right, you know,” Micah told her.

Diana reluctantly agreed and sat at the kitchen table.

While she was treated, Micah watched the young woman with her parents. Their family had lived next to his farm for generations.

He knew the Stoltzfuses and their three sons. He hadn’t realized they had a daughter.

“All done, Chief.” Trevor closed his bag. “If you experience any dizziness or double vision, get to the hospital immediately.” With a nod Micah’s way, Trevor and Bree left the house.

Diana rose slowly and winced. Micah could tell she was suffering at least one of the symptoms Trevor had mentioned, yet he didn’t point it out. The chief didn’t want or need his concern.

She went over to where the young woman was huddled beside her mother.

Micah introduced her to the parents.

“May we take Esther home, Chief?” Victor Stoltzfus asked, dispensing with social pleasantries.

“Soon. I just need to ask her a few questions if that’s all right?” Diana smiled at the shrinking teen.

“Jah. I suppose it’s oke ,” Esther said meekly without looking at her.

Bit by bit, the teen's story unfolded. "I was walking home." She glanced at her parents as if to reassure them she hadn't done anything wrong. "I work at the Neuenschwander Diner just outside of Rachel's Crossing."

Micah recognized the name of the diner that had been around for as long as he remembered. The diner was now run by three generations of Neuenschwanders.

"We were busy and my shift ran late. It was dark out when I left." She cast pleading eyes at her father. "I'm sorry. Josuha told me he'd take me home, but I thought it would be oke to walk. It was a nice night."

Victor patted his daughter's shoulder awkwardly. "You did nothing wrong."

"What happened next?" Diana prompted when the girl hesitated.

"A—a car came up behind me," Esther said, her voice shaking. "It was dark. I couldn't see the driver." She told them she thought he planned to turn onto the road Esther had just crossed. "Only he didn't. Before I knew it, he snatched me up. He tried to stick something in my neck—a needle of some type—but I managed to knock it out of his hand. He grunted at me and then forced me into the trunk."

Esther's abductor had tried to use something to knock her out. Thankfully, she'd managed to disarm the threat. If he'd gotten her unconscious, Micah doubted she'd still be with them now.

Fresh tears filled her eyes. She wiped them away. "I was so scared."

"You never got a good look at this man?" Diana asked, a hint of disappointment in her tone.

Eshter's bottom lip quivered. "Nay . When he let me out of the trunk, he'd parked on the side of the road, and he wore a mask covering his face. He grabbed my arm tight

and forced me into the woods.” Esther covered her face with her hands. “I thought he would kill me.”

Diana gave the young woman a moment to collect herself. “Did he speak to you at all?”

Esther shook her head. “He never said a word, which was the most frightening. I kept begging him to let me go. He just kept walking. When we reached a certain place deep in the woods, he stopped. There was something in his eyes. Almost as if he enjoyed seeing my fear. That’s when I broke free and ran, but he came after me. Then I heard your dog and later the scuffle.”

“You were close to my house. He must have seen me as a threat and had to get me out of the picture before he went after you. That’s how I got this.” Diana indicated the wound on her head. “I heard something in the woods near my place. When I went to investigate someone hit me from behind.” Her focus returned to Esther. “What happened next?”

The fear on the teen’s face appeared permanently etched there. “I kept running. I was almost at your house,” she said to Micah. “He caught me near the barn. He jerked me around to face him and then... And then...h-he tried to strangle me.” Her voice evaporated into sobs.

“Looks like my place is less than a mile from yours,” Diana told him.

Growing up, they’d been neighbors even though he didn’t realize it. Micah rarely left the community back then. As far as he knew, Diana never visited the Amish settlement.

Diana clasped the young woman’s hand.

Once the interview ended, Diana told the parents they could take Esther home. Victor

helped his daughter to her feet. Diana promised to stop by the following morning to check on her. They left with a shaken Esther holding her mother's hand.

"I can't believe this is happening again," Diana said as she watched the family leave in their buggy.

Again? She knew about the case that still haunted most Amish in Rachel's Crossing?

Micah pretended ignorance. "What do you mean again?" He kept his expression blank as he waited for an answer.

"I used to live here. My father was the chief of police at the time when there were multiple disappearances over a six-year span. All Amish women. All but one never came home. The one surviving victim said her attacker tried to strangle her."

His heart plummeted. She was William Fisher's daughter. That explained why Diana appeared so familiar. Why he'd recognized the name. Her father had been the one who'd interrogated him. William Fisher hadn't believed Micah's story about leaving Tessa alone the night she died. He'd all but accused Micah of being involved despite Micah's insistence he loved Tessa and wouldn't harm her.

"I remember the time." Micah's tone turned bitter. Even after so many years, he couldn't dispel the feeling that he'd been the one and only suspect. That the chief had wasted valuable resources looking into Micah rather than finding the real killer.

He realized Diana was still watching him closely.

"You lived here at the time. You remember what happened, right?" she asked.

He slowly nodded. "Yes. One of the victims, Tessa Weaver, and I planned to marry. She disappeared along with the others."

Those startling eyes widened, the only response to his admission. “I remember you now.” The familiar doubts he’d lived with every time he came to the community were written on her face.

“I’m not a killer,” he said softly and stepped closer. Would he be able to convince her of what he hadn’t been able to convince her father or Tessa’s family?

Her uncertainty—the struggle to keep from backing away—showed on her face, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I loved Tessa,” he said quietly. “I would never hurt her or anyone else.”

She didn’t look convinced. “You’ll understand that as an officer of the law I can’t take your word for it alone. And our latest victim was found outside your home.”

He lowered his head to hide his frustration. “I realize that, but I was inside when I heard her scream. You saw. It wasn’t me.” Would there ever come a time when he could outlive the stigma of being an official suspect in the disappearances of those Amish women? Even after fifteen years, it still followed him everywhere.

“Why don’t we give Casey a hand?” she said, instead of responding to his assertion of innocence. “Hopefully, he’s come up with something that will give us an idea of who we’re dealing with.”

She didn’t trust him—she needed his help. He couldn’t explain why that hurt. But it did.