



In the Dark (Cornered Collection)

Author: *Lynette Eason*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: They must bring to light the secrets of a murderer before becoming victims themselves.

After accountant Steph Crosss friend and coworker is killed in a car accident, she discovers cryptic clues while cleaning out the womans desk. The notes indicate evidence of illegal activity leading back to an ecotourism company called Bolins. It seems as if the death of Stephs coworker was no accident at all, and the murderer plans to silence Steph next.

With her own life in jeopardy, Steph works with Detective Tate Cooper and his partner Cole Garrison to decode the contents, desperate to find out who killed her friend. Unfortunately, the killer is bent on keeping secrets buried while Tate is determined to crack the case before someone else gets hurt. But can he protect the woman who has so quickly laid claim to his heart?

For fans of clean romantic suspense and short reads, Lynette Eason threads a thrilling story of criminals, law enforcement, and a murder mystery that will leave you breathless.

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ONE

THE SEPTEMBER SUN had barely risen over the mountain town of Lake City, North Carolina, casting a warm, golden glow that filtered through Stephanie Cross's kitchen window. She sipped her morning coffee, scanning the headlines of the Lake City News like she did most every day. Yes, she could read it online and sometimes did, but she liked the feel of an actual paper when she had the chance to do so. Her morning routine comforted her, anchored her for the day, and offered a moment of quiet before she headed to the office.

She flipped the page. "Local Woman Killed in Tragic Early Morning Car Accident."

CPA Brenda Hudson, her good friend and coworker at Blackston and Cosworth, had been confirmed dead at the scene. "What? No!" Steph jumped to her feet and scrambled for her phone. "No, it can't be." She dialed her friend's number and it went straight to voicemail. She hung up and called her boss, Stan Gilchrest.

Four rings, then voicemail.

"No, no, no."

She grabbed her purse and keys and darted out the door. Once in the car, she tried Stan again.

This time he answered just before the call slipped to voicemail. "Hello? Steph, that you?" His usually warm and confident voice sounded shaken. Wobbly.

“Yes. I just saw the newspaper. Brenda was killed in a car wreck? Tell me it’s not so.”

“I’m so sorry. Yes. I just got the news about an hour ago. Her husband called me at home to tell me.”

“And it’s already in the paper?”

“Yes, it is. As soon as the call came in to 911, that reporter, Cynthia Green, was right there. Probably heard it on the police scanner. Wrote her piece and sent it in on the side of the road.”

“Unbelievable. But why?”

“It happened on Youngstown. You know how people are complaining about that road. Sharp curve, no guardrail. Claiming it’s not safe and trying to get the city to do something about it. Cynthia is leading the way on that, and this is fodder to help push the agenda.”

“Youngstown Road. Oh no.”

“Yes.”

“B-but I just talked to her yesterday. We were going to have lunch today.”

“I know. I know.” His voice caught and Steph swiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks.

She blinked, keeping the road in focus. “What happened?”

“Her husband said they suspect she was going too fast and lost control. Just like

everyone else who's ever wrecked in that area."

"I just ... I can't believe it." But what was Brenda doing on that road? She lived on the opposite side of town.

"I've got to go, Steph. I'll see you at the office."

Work. Right. "Yes. I'm on my way now." She hung up only to have her phone buzz with an incoming call from her brother James. She activated the Bluetooth once more. "Hey."

"I just heard about Brenda. Steph, I don't even know what to say. I'm so sorry."

She was going to have to pull over if she kept crying. "I'm in shock. I don't even know what to do."

"Are you driving?"

"Yes." She sniffed and swiped her eyes.

"Then pull over."

Right. She turned into a grocery store lot, parked, and rested her forehead on the steering wheel. Sobs ripped from her while James's soothing voice came through the speakers. Finally, she got herself together and pulled in a deep breath.

"You still there?" he asked.

"Yeah." She swallowed. "Okay. I'm going to work and trying to brace myself. It will be horrible. Everyone loved Brenda."

“Call me if you need me, Squirt. I’m here for you.”

“I know. Thanks, James.” She hung up and aimed her Subaru toward the office, dreading the coming hours, because while her heart pounded out a rhythm of grief, her mind whirled with questions. What had Brenda been doing on Youngstown Road? She, like everyone else in the city, hated it and avoided that route whenever possible. Parents forbade their teens to drive it—and the new drivers had often lost enough friends to obey. So what had compelled Brenda to be on it? And at that time of morning? Or rather night? She couldn’t imagine.

She pulled into the parking lot of her office and parked.

And sat there.

Please, God, get me— us —through this day.

DETECTIVE TATE COOPER STOOD at the edge of the scene of the car accident, the flashing lights of police cars casting an eerie blue glow on the area around him. The air was thick with tension as his fellow officers worked to make sure they didn’t miss anything that might help them understand exactly what happened. The tow truck had finally arrived and pulled the mangled vehicle up onto the bed. Tate was ready to head home and get some sleep. Except sleep was going to have to wait.

He glanced at his watch. In just a few short hours, he was supposed to meet Detective Cole Garrison at the station and begin his first day as a newly appointed detective. He should have scheduled some downtime between his last day as a patrol officer and his first day as a detective, but he’d been eager to get started. Who could have known he’d draw the night shift and have to work an accident with a fatality for his last day?

Tate walked up the slanted embankment and looked at the road. It hadn’t rained in a few days, so the asphalt was dry. The curve was sharp, but Brenda had been a native

to Lake City, knew the dangers of the curve, so it hadn't caught her by surprise. And yet she'd gone around it at a high rate of speed. One of her tires was blown and could have contributed to the accident, but—

“What are you thinking?”

He glanced at Jeff Goode, his partner of six years. “I'm thinking there aren't any skid marks.”

“Suicide?”

“Maybe.” No matter how many times he worked an accident scene, he always had the same sick feeling in his gut. “But I guess this case will stay with you while I move on. Keep me updated. I want to know why.”

“Of course.” Jeff planted his hands on his hips. “You ready for your big day?”

Tate gave a soft huff that was half sigh, half chuckle. “If I can make it through the shift without having to take a nap, then I'll call it a success.”

“Yeah, you didn't plan that very well.”

“No kidding.”

“Hey, Cooper!”

Tate looked up to see one of the officers waving him over. Bobby Knight. He walked to the edge of the drop-off and looked down the path of destruction the runaway vehicle had left behind. “Yeah?”

“Come down here. Wanna show you something.”

Tate turned and raised a brow at Jeff. “You want this one?”

“No thanks. I’m not into rock climbing.”

Tate snorted. “This is a bit different. Just hold the rope and walk down.”

“Pass. He asked for you.”

Tate shook his head, grabbed the rope tied to the back of a fire truck, and belayed his way down. He landed on flat ground next to where the car had been stopped by a copse of trees. “What is it?”

Bobby pointed to one of the larger trees involved in bringing Brenda’s car to a hard halt. Next to it were shards of glass and a hubcap. “That hubcap didn’t come off her car.”

Tate looked closer. “Could it have been here before she drove off the mountain?”

“Naw. Look at it.”

He did and noted it was pretty clean. If it had been there before the wreck, it hadn’t been long. “You think this is more than a one-car accident? That someone ran her off the road?”

“I’m speculating.”

“Anything on the victim’s car that might suggest that?”

“Yeah. Paint that wasn’t there when it came from the factory. It’s an olive-green color. Victim’s car is white. But here’s the deal. It’s been bumped twice.”

“Like someone hit it and then came back for another swipe?”

“Yep.”

Tate snapped a picture of the hubcap with his phone. “Anything else?”

“Well, just one thing. There’s a bullet hole in this tree right here.”

Tate blinked. “Okay. Fresh?”

“As a newborn. Now, I’m not saying they were shooting at the victim, but I can’t rule it out either.”

“Right. So they were chasing her, bumped her—twice—then shot at her?”

“That’s about how I’d put it together, but again, I can’t say for sure. The victim didn’t have any bullet wounds. Looks like she died from head trauma.”

“Okay, thank you.” Tate rubbed his hand over his bearded chin. “You bringing that hubcap up?”

“I am.”

“Good.” He sighed. “Best-case scenario in this tragedy is it really was an accident and someone got scared and ran. Maybe they’d been drinking or whatever. Knew they’d be in a world of trouble if they called it in. Worst case...”

“It was on purpose. The two hits kind of indicate this was intentional. And then there’s the bullet hole in the tree.”

“Right.” Tate radioed Jeff. “Don’t let the tow truck leave yet. I want a couple pictures

of the car.”

“Ten-four.”

“Could have been a hunter or something,” he said to Bobby.

“Could have been. It’s archery season right now. Guns don’t start till October. Of course, that doesn’t mean someone forgot to read the calendar and didn’t realize it.”

True. Or just plain ignored the date. Some hunters thought risking getting caught and fined was worth it.

Tate finished examining the area and shook Bobby’s hand. “Thanks. I’ll pass this on to Jeff, and he can share with whoever’s going to be taking over the case.” Tate made his way back up the incline, got the pictures of the paint on the white car and all four hubcaps still attached, then walked over to his partner to fill him in. He slapped him on the shoulder. “All right, buddy, stay in touch. I’m out of here.” He’d already gone through all the personnel stuff, getting his badge, gun, and everything else he needed for his first day on the job as a detective.

Jeff eyed him with an Eeyore expression. “I’m going to miss you. You always let me get away with not doing the hard stuff.”

Like walk down the side of a mountain. Most stuff Jeff thought was hard ... wasn’t. “Because I knew you’d always have my back while I did it. Maybe your next partner will too.”

“Take care.”

“You too.”

Tate went to his personal vehicle he'd driven up hours earlier and climbed behind the wheel. With a heaviness in his heart for the victim of the accident, he aimed his Nissan Armada toward the precinct and refused to feel nervous. He'd been working toward this moment his whole life. Since he was fifteen he'd been focused, one goal in mind. To be a detective and to put the bad guys away. To stop as many crimes as he possibly could before they were committed.

He drew in a deep breath. He'd done it. He was a detective. Now it was time to make his mark.

If he could just stay awake.

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TWO

STEPH ARRIVED AT THE OFFICE , her heart still beating the rhythm only grief knew. Lela Simmons was at the reception desk, tears drying on her cheeks. When she looked up and caught Steph's gaze, the tears flowed once more.

Steph hugged her. "I know."

"I can't believe it."

"I can't either, but we'll get through this. Brenda would be the first one to tell us she's happy right where she is, but to take care of her family."

"That's very true, but it still hurts." Lela sniffed and snagged a clean tissue to mop up her face. The phone rang and she sucked in a breath. "I need to get that."

"Of course." Steph left her friend and pushed through the door that led to her office. Although "office" was a stretch. It was a cubicle. One of many in the center of the large open floor. The perimeter contained private offices.

But Steph didn't mind the noise, she relished it. She lived alone, and sometimes the quiet threatened to suffocate her.

Only today, for the first time in the five years she'd been an employee, it was quiet, the atmosphere thick, heavy with grief and disbelief. Coworkers exchanged hushed whispers and shared condolences, the tragedy casting a somber shadow over their usual bustling workplace. Stephanie settled in at her desk and tried to focus on her

tasks, hoping to find solace in the familiarity of numbers and spreadsheets.

Unsure of how much time had passed, she finally blinked and realized what she'd done was going to have to be done again.

Stan walked over. "Steph?"

She looked up. "Yes?"

He cleared his throat. "I ... uh ... hate to bring this up in light of the fact that Brenda's only been dead for a few hours, but I need to clear out her desk and see where she is with different clients and notify them."

Steph blinked. Well, that was a little soon, but Stan was always worried about the clients more than propriety. Not that he didn't care, but ... she had to admit, this rankled. "Stan—"

He held up a hand. "I know. I know. I'm a horrible person, but word is getting out and clients are going to hear and then the phone is going to start ringing, wondering who will be taking care of their money. They won't mean to be unfeeling, and neither do I, but I need to get ahead of this. We all do."

Steph blew out a low breath. "It's okay. I understand what you're saying." And she did, but it just seemed wrong somehow to be worried about clients and their money when Brenda was dead. But ... "Okay. Someone has to do it and I know she'd want it to be me."

Alarm flashed in his eyes. "Oh, no, that's not ... I mean, I've got this. I just didn't want to be harshly judged when I started working on her desk." He cleared his throat. "And reassigning clients."

“No one’s going to judge you. I’ll do it after everyone goes home so they don’t have to watch me—or you—do it.”

For a moment, she thought he might offer more protests, then he nodded. “All right. Thanks, Steph.”

“Of course.”

“And there’s a basket of vegetables in the break room. Please take some home. I’m going to drop some off to Greg on my way home.”

Greg. Brenda’s husband.

“I know he’ll appreciate the gesture,” she said.

Stan’s garden was legendary in the office. No doubt he’d already had his stash picked and loaded to bring in to the office before he’d gotten the call about Brenda.

He returned to his office but paced to the window instead of taking a seat behind his desk. He walked to his little watering pot and began to care for the multitude of plants in his office. His hand shook and he lowered the can. He was more upset than he was letting on.

For the next few hours, Steph worked, but her mind kept drifting back to Brenda. Why had she been on Youngstown Road, nowhere near her home? Had she been going to Bolin’s? Bolin’s Nature Nurture Expeditions, an ecotourism spot, was one of her favorites, and she worked there one weekend a month simply because she loved it. Youngstown Road would take her there, but so would one of the other safer roads. Granted, Youngstown was ten minutes faster, but still ... No, there had to be another explanation. But what?

Steph finally pushed her chair back and stood, stretched out the ache in her lower back, and made her way to the break room for a cup of coffee. Brenda's mug had been rinsed out and placed on the rack next to the sink. The basket of fresh vegetables was right where Stan said it was.

More tears threatened, and Steph turned away to see Detective Cole Garrison and another man step off the elevator. The new partner James had told her about? He was handsome. About six feet tall with red hair, kind eyes, and a well-trimmed beard.

Stan walked over to greet them, then pointed in the direction of her cubicle with a frown. Steph took a deep breath and went to see what this was all about.

TATE LOOKED WITH ENVY at the steaming cup in the pretty woman's hands. She was about five feet six inches and had dark blue eyes and brown hair with subtle blond highlights. Definitely pretty. Gorgeous, actually. At the moment, however, he was more interested in her coffee. What he wouldn't give to be able to chug it. He cleared his throat and met her gaze while his partner took the lead on the case that had dropped into their laps as soon as they realized it was most likely a hit-and-run at the very least. Since Tate had been with it from the beginning, they'd agreed they'd be the best ones to see it through to the end.

"Hey, Steph," Cole said. "This is my new partner for the time being. Tate Cooper."

"Hello."

Tate nodded. "Good to meet you. Sorry it's under these circumstances. I've heard a bit about you from your brother."

"Don't listen to anything he says." She attempted a smile, but it faltered, her blue eyes sad and red rimmed.

Tate offered a smile in return, hoping his sympathy was reflected in it.

“Can we talk?” Cole asked.

“About Brenda?” Pain flashed on her face, but she kept the tears at bay.

“Yeah.”

“Sure. Let’s go back to the break room. It’s more private.” She shot a knowing look at Tate. “And there’s coffee if you want it.”

She’d accurately read his longing. He fell halfway in love with her just for that. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

He and Cole followed her into the small area equipped with a table and full-sized kitchen. She motioned toward the disposable cups and Keurig, and Tate helped himself. Cole did the same, then the three sat at the round table.

Cole leaned forward. “We’re going to need to talk to her closest friends and coworkers.”

“Well, then I’m a good place to start. She and I met at the gym twice a week, then worked together every day. We hung out some on the weekends. I even let her lead me down the river occasionally when she was working at Bolin’s.”

“The ecotourism place,” Tate said. “I know it.”

Cole nodded. “Yeah, me too.”

“Then there’s Stan Gilcrest, our boss. You’ll need to talk to him if you haven’t already.”

Tate scratched his chin. "Not in detail."

"Virginia Carson and Patti Smith were also good friends with Brenda. What else do you need to know?"

"Did she have any enemies that you can think of?" Tate asked.

Stephanie blinked, then frowned. "Enemies? Brenda? No. She was the kindest, most gentle soul you'd ever hope to meet. She had an incredible mind for numbers and was very good at her job."

"Like you, I'm told," Tate said. At her questioning look he said, "James."

She sipped her coffee. "Hm. Well, I like to think so."

Cole set his cup aside. "Look, Steph, I hate to say it, but it's possible Brenda's accident wasn't exactly an accident. It's possible someone ran her off the road on purpose."

She gasped, then gaped. "What? You mean as in ... killed her?"

"Maybe. We found paint from another vehicle on the side of her car in different places. Like someone bumped her twice and it was enough to send her over the side."

"B-but could it have been someone who was careless or drunk or—"

"It could be, but either way, they left the scene, so for now we're treating this like a homicide." At her stunned expression, Cole sighed. "I know it's terrible to ask this, but could you show us Brenda's workspace? We're going to need to go through it in case it was someone she knew. If it was just some weird accident by a stranger, that's one thing, but we've got to rule other stuff out."

“Stan was just talking about needing to clear out her desk this morning, and I told him I’d do it after everyone left for the day.” She frowned. “It’s right there in the middle of the room next to mine. If you guys start going through it, everyone will...” She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“We get it,” Tate said, “but it’s possible she might have something in the desk that can lead us to why she’s dead. The faster we find that, the faster we hope to find out what happened on the road.”

“Right. Of course.” Steph stood and waved for them to follow. Tate snagged his coffee and pulled up the rear.

She stopped at a cubicle that was neat and organized. Ready for its occupant to settle into the chair and start work. Unfortunately, Brenda wouldn’t be coming back. Tate pulled in a deep breath while a sense of rightness settled over him in spite of the reason for his position being necessary. This was why he did this job. To get justice for those who couldn’t get it for themselves.

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THREE

POSSIBLY MURDERED ? Steph couldn't process it. She moved the chair out of the way and motioned for Tate to help himself. Virginia Carson walked over to stand beside her. "What's going on?" her coworker asked in a low voice.

"They're investigating Brenda's death."

"They don't think it was an accident?"

Steph shrugged. "Apparently there's some evidence that warrants an investigation."

"They're going to want to talk to us, aren't they?"

"Yes. Do you know anyone who had it in for Brenda? Because I sure couldn't think of anyone."

Virginia shook her head. "No, not really. I know she was acting a little weird over the last couple of days, but when I asked her about it, she just shrugged it off and said, 'Family stuff.'"

Steph blinked. "What? I didn't notice—Wait, yes I did. She was on the phone yesterday, and I overheard her say, 'Not here. I'll call you when I finish up with work.' When I looked at her, she gave me a really strained smile and rolled her eyes like it was no big deal. So I didn't think anything about it ... until now."

"What makes that stand out to you?"

“It wasn’t so much the words as it was her tone. She sounded angry and resigned all at the same time.”

“Hmm ... guess we’d both better mention this. They’re going to talk to her husband and anyone else she had contact with just before she died.”

“And once we tell them about the phone call, they’re also going to want to subpoena her phone records,” Steph murmured.

Tate stepped back. “We’ll take her laptop and files and see what we can find.”

Cole laid a hand on her arm. “We have boxes in the car for this. I’ll be right back. Tate’s going to stay here with the desk.” He nodded to Tate and headed for the door. Virginia squeezed Steph’s hand and returned to her desk.

“So you’re James Cross’s sister,” Tate said.

“I am. How well do you know him?” she asked.

“I met him a few times while I was working patrol. He’s a stand-up guy and an excellent detective.”

She smiled. “Yeah. He is.” And Tate was going to be a good one too, if her instinct was correct. He had that look about him. Smart, observant, dedicated. Hunky. She cleared her throat.

Cole returned with the boxes, and he and Tate went through the desk. Surprisingly, Brenda didn’t have a ton of stuff in the drawers. Just office supplies that they promised to return. And a couple of books.

“Brenda was a big reader,” Steph said. “Loved all kinds of books. Fiction and

nonfiction.” She pointed to *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Man and the Sea* . “Her favorites were the classics, but she loved contemporary stuff too.”

Tate smiled. “I actually liked *Pride and Prejudice* .”

“I’m impressed that you would admit that.”

He grinned and her lungs stuttered a moment. Focus, Steph. She gestured to the computer. “All of her client files will be on the hard drive,” she said. She handed him the paper with the laptop password. “We have backup copies on the server, of course, but I think you’ll need a warrant to access them.” He would know that. Duh. She ducked her head, hoping to hide the heat rising to her cheeks.

“Already gave that to your boss,” Cole said.

“Of course.”

Once they had everything they wanted, Tate nodded to her, his gaze lingering on hers. “Are you okay?”

She raised a brow. “No, not really, but thank you for asking.”

He frowned. “I know you have your brother and Cole, but if you need anything, feel free to reach out. Or if you think of anything else that might be helpful.” She told him about the phone call, and he nodded. “We’ll talk to Virginia and get the phone records from her work line and cell. Thanks.”

A memory floated back to her almost as quickly as it had faded only days earlier. “You know,” she said, “you’ll need to talk to her husband, but someone might have broken into their house a couple of weeks ago.”

Tate's gaze sharpened. "What?"

"I just thought about it. Brenda told me about it the morning after it happened and brushed it off for the most part. She said it was her son sneaking back in after sneaking out . But she seemed shaken. Her German shepherd, Beau, pitched a fit barking and woke them all up, but if it was her son, he doesn't bark when Mark comes in. That was the one thing that bothered her even though she caught Mark red-handed." She bit her lip and shook her head. "She said she thought there might have been someone else outside but chalked it up to one of Mark's friends." Steph shrugged. "I don't know if that's important or not, but figured it wouldn't hurt to mention it."

"Absolutely. Thank you."

Steph nodded and watched them go, then turned back to her desk, her mind unable to focus on work. Her attention kept straying to Brenda's desk. She walked over and sat in the chair, her gaze traveling over the empty spaces where pictures of Brenda's family had hung on the cubicle walls. "Oh, Brenda," she whispered. Surely they'd left something of her friend. She opened the top drawer and glanced inside, feeling as gutted as the empty nook was. They really had taken everything. She pushed the drawer shut.

Only to have it resist sliding back into place.

She tried again and got the same result. With a sigh, she wiggled the drawer out and looked inside. Something had fallen into the space at the back.

"What in the world?" she whispered. Steph slid her hand into the opening and grabbed the small notebook. She started to slide the drawer back into its home when she noticed tape on the side of it.

Tape that matched the residue left on the notebook she now held. A notebook Brenda obviously hadn't wanted found.

TATE LEANED BACK in his chair and fought the fatigue that threatened to pull him under. He could have happily put his head on his desk and fallen fast asleep, as it had been a long night and an even longer day. But he still had hours to put in before he could go home and find his bed.

"Go catch an hour nap," Cole said from the door.

Tate blinked at him. "I'll be all right."

"No you won't. I know you've been up way longer than you should, and if I have to trust you with my life, I want you to at least be able to see where to shoot."

Heat crept into Tate's cheeks. "Yeah, I guess I didn't plan the timing of this very well."

Cole waved his phone. "SWAT got a call to a scene. Take the time to rest while I'm gone. Brenda's dead. Her case can wait an hour or two."

Tate nodded. "Be safe."

"You too."

Cole disappeared toward the SWAT HQ and Tate smiled. One day that would be him. At least he hoped.

But sleep sounded good. If he didn't rest, he wasn't going to be any good to anyone. He hurried out to his Armada. It was an older model, but he loved the spacious vehicle and refused his family's attempts to get him to upgrade. He aimed the SUV

toward his apartment complex.

Fifteen minutes later, when he walked into his first-floor two-bedroom home, he made sure his phone was on ring, dropped into his recliner, and was asleep in almost an instant.

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FOUR

STEPH PUSHED HER MOUSE to the side, rubbed her eyes, then glanced at her phone. Then at the little five-by-seven pink notebook sitting by her water bottle.

Still no return call from Cole. She'd give him another hour, then she was going to try James. But if James and Cole were together on a SWAT call, he wouldn't answer either.

She opened the notebook once more and tried to figure out the weird letters and numbers Brenda used. " ENNB ," she whispered. "What's that?" Seems like she should know, but she didn't have a clue. They all had their own way of keeping up with their work, but this coded method was a new one, and Steph had no idea what made her friend use it—or how to decipher it. On a whim, she snapped pictures of each page. She was going to have to turn the book in to the police but wanted a copy for herself. Just in case she could figure it out.

Her phone stayed silent for the next ten minutes. "Oh bother." She pulled the other detective's card from her pocket and ran her thumb over the slightly raised black print. Detective Tate Cooper.

His gray eyes with a tinge of green still played in her mind. He'd been tired and hadn't tried to hide it, but he'd also been focused on the task before him. And he and Cole seemed to get along well despite the experience gap between them.

Then again, that was probably mostly due to Cole. He didn't have anything to prove, and Tate didn't act like he did either.

A throat cleared behind her and she turned to see Stan. “Hey.”

“Hey, just walking around checking on everyone. How are you holding up?”

She shrugged. “I’m not getting much work done. I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“I know. I’m considering sending everyone home. It’s Friday. We could all probably use the long weekend.”

“Might not be a bad idea.” She hesitated, then held up the notebook. “The cops missed this when they were cleaning out Brenda’s desk. It was taped to the side of one of her drawers and came loose. I found it when the drawer wouldn’t slide back in right.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.” She handed it to him. “Have you seen it before?”

“No.” He flipped through it. “Weird. None of that makes any sense.”

“I think it’s a code of some kind.”

“ ENNB ? What’s that?”

“Beats me, but I’ll figure it out.”

“Why don’t I keep it? Maybe I can study it.”

“The cops will want it. It’s part of the contents of her desk.”

He frowned. “They’re on the way to get it?”

“Not yet. I called and told them I had it, but no one’s called me back yet. Someone will.”

“Right.” He passed the book back to her. “Well, let me know if they need me for anything. I’ll be in my office for a little bit, then I’m taking off. I’m like you. Can’t concentrate.”

“Yeah.” She studied him a moment. “Stan, are you sure you don’t know what Brenda was working on? I mean, did she mention a specific client she was having trouble with?”

He shook his head. “Nope, and that’s what I told the police. I even went through her entire client load looking to see if a name jumped out at me, but”—he shrugged—“nothing.”

“Okay. Well, thanks.”

“And now, I’m going to make a phone call and take off. My kids said something about coming home for the weekend, so I want to help the wife get things straightened up for them. You should go home too.”

“I will. Soon.” She gave him a hug, then went back to work. After an hour of nothing, she finally gave up and dialed Tate’s number.

He picked up on the third ring. “Tate Cooper here.” His voice sounded different. A deeper bass than earlier. Like he had a sore throat.

“Did I wake you?” she asked.

“Yeah, but it’s a good thing. I was taking a break and fell asleep.”

“Sleeping on the job is allowed these days? I need to switch careers.”

“Cute. I had permission due to bad scheduling on my part.”

“Ah. You worked all night and then caught this case before you could go home.”

He chuckled. “Exactly. Now you know my secrets. What can I do for you?”

“I found something that I think you need to see. It’s a notebook that belonged to Brenda. I’m going to leave work in about five minutes if you want me to meet you somewhere.”

“What if I just swing by your place?”

“That works.” She gave him her address and hung up, gathered her things and Brenda’s notebook, then waved goodbye to Stan, who was still on the phone and pacing his office.

He returned her wave, then went back to his phone conversation. And his pacing. He was usually so even-keeled it was odd to see him off-kilter, but Brenda’s death had obviously thrown him. Like it had all of them. She almost stopped to ask if he was okay but didn’t want to interrupt since he was obviously making a number of calls. Probably to clients who needed to know about Brenda’s death. She’d catch up with him next week.

In the parking garage, she hurried toward her Subaru Outback, pumps clicking on the concrete floor. Leaving early meant getting a head start on the usual flood of traffic exiting the building, and it was eerily quiet except for the road noise two floors down.

And something else. Footsteps. Quiet ones, but nevertheless...

She stopped.

The footsteps behind her continued for a moment, then stopped too. Was she being paranoid or was it just someone else leaving early and the footsteps stopped because they'd arrived at their vehicle?

She scanned the area, her eyes sweeping right, then left. Nothing. Or was someone actually following her? She shivered. Brenda's death had spooked her, making her more jumpy than usual.

Steph picked up the pace, wishing she'd found a spot closer to the door, but she'd been running late this morning and the only spot available had been all the way at the end of the row.

Naturally.

Once again, she swore she heard footsteps and the rustle of pant legs rubbing together. Just a swish of a sound, but it was there. She clicked her remote to unlock her doors. Finally, she slid behind the wheel and slammed and locked the door.

She pressed the Start button and her engine purred to life. Steph aimed her vehicle toward the exit, faster than she should, but looking for anyone who might have been following her. And there. A man dressed in jeans, a blue short-sleeved shirt, and a baseball cap stood next to an older model SUV, head averted. She was tempted to stop and ask him if he was following her, but decided that might not be the smartest thing to do and kept going.

All the way home, she watched her rearview mirror, but finally pulled into her garage without incident. Only when the door was lowered behind her vehicle did she get out and scurry into her home. With the doors and windows checked and double checked, she stopped a moment to look at her phone.

Tate was on his way.

TATE PULLED INTO Stephanie's drive and cut the engine. She had a smaller home in one of the more affluent neighborhoods. It was a Victorian cottage-style house that somehow seemed to suit her. He propelled himself out of the vehicle and onto her front porch. It was nearing dinnertime, so he'd grabbed some Chinese from his favorite place after consulting with James about what his sister liked.

He rang the doorbell.

Seconds later, footsteps sounded and the door swung open. Steph stood there with a forced smile and pale face.

He frowned. "Are you all right?"

"I look that bad?"

"No, that's not what I meant. You just look ... scared."

She waved a hand. "I just got home. I ... uh ... had a weird experience in the parking garage at work and it shook me."

He held up the food. "Want to tell me about it over sweet-and-sour chicken?"

Her eyes widened. "My favorite. How'd you know?"

"I called James and asked him."

She blinked. "Oh. Well, thank you. The kitchen is this way."

Tate followed her into the spacious area just off the den and put the food on the

counter. “Now, tell me what happened.”

She filled him in and he mulled it over. “And no one else was there?”

“No, no one other than the one man I saw as I was leaving. I mean, it was four o’clock in the afternoon. Most people don’t leave until five or five thirty. Sometimes even later.” She shuddered. “I’ve never been afraid in that garage. Not even at night. There are cameras and security patrolling—most of the time anyway. And before you ask, I have no idea where security was earlier. Probably on another floor.” She sighed. “The point is, yes, it was weird, but the more I think about it, I’m pretty sure I overreacted. I’m actually a little embarrassed.” She pushed a bag toward him. “Let’s eat and forget about that while I show you what I found.”

“Okay, sure.” And while she could have overreacted, as she said, Tate wasn’t sure he was comfortable just brushing off the incident. While she busied herself readying her food, he tapped a request for the security footage of the garage. Just out of curiosity.

He then grabbed one of the plates she offered, dumped his food on it, and carried it to the table. “You mind if I say grace?”

She smiled. “I’d love it.”

He said a short prayer of thanks for the food and for guidance to find Brenda’s killer, then looked up to find her watching him. Heat started to crawl into his neck and he cleared his throat. “What?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to stare and make you feel uncomfortable. I was just thinking that you’re a nice guy, aren’t you?”

“I try to be.”

She took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. “So, what got you into police work?”

His mind flew back to the incident that started it all. Did he want to get into that? He looked at her. She was waiting, expectant. Listening. “When I was fifteen, my best friend’s father was killed in a grocery store holdup. The killer had just been released because of a technicality that very day.” Tate rubbed his chin, wishing he could rub away the memories. “I saw what that did to my buddy and his family. It made me want to be the kind of cop who didn’t make mistakes. The kind who got it right the first time so that no sharky lawyer could get someone off and put them back on the street to kill again.”

“I’m so sorry, Tate. That’s awful.”

He blinked the past away and took another bite. “It was, but my buddy became a cop too and just testified at the killer’s parole hearing, keeping him behind bars for another few years.”

“Good for him,” she said, her voice soft, eyes wide and focused solely on him, drawing him in, making him want—

No, that wasn’t the plan. No romantic entanglements until he was settled.

You’re pretty settled, Detective Cooper. You’ve reached your goal. You can—

He shut off the little voice in his head and cleared his throat. “Anyway, that’s why I do what I do. Each time I catch a bad guy—and make sure I do it right—I think about the fact that maybe, just maybe, I kept someone else’s family from going through what my friend’s did.”

“Very admirable.”

“Thanks. Enough about me. Tell me what made you delve into the world of numbers.”

She laughed and he was grateful she let him change the subject. “I was always good at math,” she said. “I like things that make sense, and numbers make sense to me. When I found I could make a living helping businesses balance their books, it was a no-brainer. I love my job.” She sighed. “And Brenda loved hers, but something was definitely going on. I don’t know what, but I think it’s highly possible it’s connected to someone running her off the road.” She pulled a small pink notebook from her purse and handed it to him. “You missed this. It was taped to the side of the drawer at one point. All of the opening and closing must have loosened it. I went through her desk, looking to see if you left anything. You didn’t. Anyway, when I opened and closed the top drawer, this was dislodged. I found it because the drawer wouldn’t shut properly.”

He frowned and opened it to the first page. “This looks like a bunch of random stuff.” He looked up. “Code?”

“That’s what I think.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. If I had time, I might be able to figure out the key.” She shook her head. “It’s weird that she would feel the need to do this. She’s not into conspiracy theories or anything.”

“But she obviously came across something she didn’t want anyone else seeing—or if they did see it—she didn’t want them understanding it.” He pressed his lips together. “All right, well, I already have a list of her clients, so we don’t have to ask for them. Maybe if we go through this and the client names, we’ll see something that matches?”

“Maybe. I have her clients too. We all have a list of each other’s clients in case we have to handle something while someone is on vacation or ... in case of an emergency.”

She pressed her lips together for a moment and he placed a hand on her shoulder while she fought the emotion. “It’s okay to cry and grieve,” he said.

“I know. But not now. Crying won’t find who killed her, and that’s what I want to do more than anything at the moment.” She glanced at him. “Have you talked to her husband, Greg?”

“We spoke with him briefly when we told him of her death, but he was in no shape for questioning. We’re supposed to go back in the morning for a more in-depth interview.”

“Could I be there?”

“You’re friends with Greg?”

“I am. I often babysit—sat—for him and Brenda when they wanted a date night.” She offered him a sad smile. “Yes, I’m that single friend all married couples with children want.” Tears appeared and she blinked them away. “But I didn’t mind. Her children are precious, and I love them dearly. Greg is a wonderful man and husband. He’ll miss Brenda terribly.” She looked away and sniffed. “We all will.” Then she straightened her shoulders and her eyes steeled. “Which means we must find the person responsible and get justice for her and her family.”

“Yes,” he said. “But not we . Me. And Cole.”

She sighed. “I know you need to take this with you, but what do you say we spend a little while trying to decipher it?”

Her desire to help him get justice for her friend warmed him, and he nodded. “I think that’s a great idea.”

Maybe it was we after all. At least for the next little while.

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FIVE

WHEN TATE LEFT, Steph shut the door behind him and pursed her lips. They'd worked on the code for the better part of two hours without a breakthrough, and now she was frustrated and tired. And grieving hard for her friend. She had other friends, of course. And family. All of whom had texted and called over the course of the day.

Lainie Jackson, soon to be Lainie Cross and Steph's sister-in-law when she walked down the aisle with James, had called twice while Tate was there, and Steph had let it roll to voicemail. She dialed her friend's number.

"Steph, are you all right?"

Lainie's question in lieu of a greeting made her smile. "I am. I'm sad and mad and craving justice for Brenda, but I'll be okay."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. And thank you for checking on me. It's a long weekend with Labor Day, so at least I have an extra day before I have to face her empty desk again." Not that the day would really help, but...

"I'm just sorry. I wish I had other words that were helpful, but I don't."

"I know. It's okay."

"I'm sure he told you," Lainie said, "but James said anyone who wanted to come to

the lake house on Monday is welcome. Do you think you'll feel like coming?"

Her brother lived on Lake City Lake with his boat and other fun water accessories and enjoyed hosting his friends and family whenever possible. Lainie would move in after the wedding, but her two dogs, Rex and Tex, had already made the place their home. "I'm planning on it. What about everyone else?"

"Everyone who can will be there."

Which meant Kenzie King, Cole Garrison, Jesslyn McCormick, Kristine Duncan, and others. All close friends Steph usually enjoyed spending time with, but with the shadow of Brenda's death hanging over her, she'd almost feel guilty having fun. Not that her friend would want her to stop living just because she was gone. In fact, the opposite was true.

But still ... "Okay, well, I'll just have to see how I feel, but I'll plan on doing my best to enjoy the day with you all."

"That's the spirit."

Her phone buzzed with an incoming call. "Hey, Lainie, I have another call. Let me grab this and we'll talk later."

"Bye."

Steph swiped the screen. Cherry Bolin, a longtime friend who worked just about every waking hour at her family's ecotourism company. They owned Bolin's Nature Nurture Expeditions, and she and her brother ran it while their parents did a lot of traveling. She'd also been Brenda's boss one weekend a month.

"Hi, Cherry."

“Hey. I’m calling to see if you’re okay. I honestly don’t even know what to think. I can’t quite process that she’s dead and won’t be walking through the office door.” The last word ended on a sob, and Steph closed her eyes to hold back her own tears yet again.

“I know,” she said. “She loved working with you, though. Both at the business and having you for a client.”

“And she was good at it too.” Cherry cleared her throat. “Would you want to get together to just visit and have coffee sometime soon? Brenda and I were supposed to do that and ... didn’t. So, I’m just trying to ... well ... you know.”

“Reach out to people you care about and let them know?”

“Yes. Something like that.”

“I’d love to. Give me a couple of days and we’ll figure out a good time.”

“Sure.”

They talked for a few more minutes before saying their goodbyes, and Steph hung up to sit in silence for a moment.

Yeah, that wasn’t going to do.

She turned the television on low for background noise, then pulled her phone from the table to open it to the pictures she’d taken of the pages from the notebook. She squinted at the small print and huffed. “I’m too young to need readers,” she muttered. But printed the pages anyway.

Once she had them from the printer, she curled up in the recliner with a pencil and

stared at the letters and numbers. “What in the world were you doing, Brenda? All these letters. Two letters and four letters and random numbers and ... ugh!”

She didn’t even know where to start. With her earlier attempts, she’d tried the obvious—the alphabet for the first twenty-six numbers—and that had been a bust. She’d also tried it backward, and nothing.

So, what next? Every second letter? Every third? This was definitely going to take some time.

For the next two hours, she worked and came up empty. When she finally yawned for the third time in as many minutes, she put the pages aside and leaned her head back, eyes focused on the picture of her, Brenda, and Lainie on the mantel. They’d gone white water rafting and had laughed for hours. Steph loved the outdoors, but not like Brenda. The woman would have lived in a tent and off the land if Greg had been willing.

The Monday after the one weekend a month Brenda worked with the ecotourism company, Brenda would come to work refreshed and glowing.

“Why on earth would you choose to be a CPA when you love the outdoors so much?” Steph had once asked her.

“Because it takes money to raise a family.” She shrugged. “And I love numbers. Truly, I have the best of both worlds. And the Bolins are wonderful.” She nudged Steph, shoulder to shoulder. “Cherry babysits when you’re not available.”

“Ah, the truth comes out,” Steph said with a laugh. “The real reason you spend as much time as possible there. Suck-up.”

Brenda had laughed too, and they’d finished their lunch.

On that happy memory, Steph finally allowed her eyes to close and sleep to come.

Something woke her. A soft pop? Then a scraping sound that came from her bedroom on the other side of the wall next to her recliner. A window opening? She rubbed her eyes and sat up, papers fluttering to the floor and the soft drone of the television still playing in the background.

She stayed quiet, listening. Was someone in her house?

When nothing else reached her ears, she almost closed her eyes once more, then stopped. She couldn't just go back to sleep. Steph rose.

Another sound from the bedroom. Like wind blowing through an open window? She grabbed her phone and dialed James's number. When it rolled to voicemail, she started to dial 911, but at a footstep behind her, she spun to see a figure dressed in black wearing a ski mask, a gun pointed at her. She shrieked and raced for the back door even while knowing she wouldn't make it in time to flip the dead bolt, open the door, and get out.

He easily caught her sweatshirt and spun her to face him. "Where is it?" He was taller than she by several inches and his voice was a low, raspy whisper that grated over every nerve ending. And he was strong. Very strong.

"The police are on the way." The words came out in a rush, and he pressed the weapon against her chin. Terror flooded her and she froze.

"I'm only going to ask one more time," he said, his voice low. "Where is the notebook?"

"The—? I gave it to the police."

He cursed and she flinched. “Of course you did. What was in it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know you read it.” He slammed her against the island and the barrel of the gun jammed harder.

“I tried! But it was all written in code. I have no idea what it said or even what the key is!” She wanted to fight, to push him away, but was afraid she’d jar the finger on the trigger. A musky cologne registered, and all she could think was that he’d taken the time to smell nice before he killed her. Get a grip, Steph!

“The guy that was here earlier. He’s the cop you gave it to, isn’t he?”

Did she dare admit it? Did he know who Tate was? And why did something about her intruder seem familiar?

“Isn’t he!”

“Yes! But he was taking it to put it into the evidence room! It’s probably already there.” She gasped the words, trying to force her fear-frozen lungs to work.

Another curse and he shoved her to a chair, the gun now in her face. When he pulled zip ties from his pocket, she trembled while her mind scrambled for an escape plan. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Shut up and put your hands behind the chair. I can leave you alive or dead. Doesn’t much matter to me. I’ll do what’s easiest.”

Steph complied, and soon her hands were bound behind her. He secured them to the chair before he raced out her front door.

Tate! She had to warn Tate.

TATE COULDN'T SLEEP, so he'd been sitting at the kitchen island working on the code in the little notebook for the past two hours since he'd left Steph's place. He'd have to turn it over first thing in the morning and log it as evidence—probably should have done that tonight, but the truth was, he'd wanted a little more time with it.

Fat lot of good that had done him. Part of it could have been his splotchy concentration. He kept circling back to Stephanie Cross. Steph.

Despite her eyes and nose reddened from her grief, she was a beautiful woman who'd captured his interest the moment he'd set eyes on her. The professional in him wouldn't let that interest show. Not yet anyway. She was grieving and he needed to focus on finding who killed her friend.

But maybe in a couple of weeks there would be an appropriate time to ask her out.

His phone pinged and the security footage from the garage at Steph's office popped up in file format. He thanked the sender and pressed play. There was Steph, walking to her car. And then stopping. She looked behind her before walking once more, picking up her pace. The video stuttered, then shifted to a different angle. One that allowed him to see a man dressed in jeans, a blue short-sleeved shirt, and a baseball cap. He kept his head down, but he was definitely watching Steph. So something had happened since she left the office.

He picked up the notebook. "You're after this, aren't you?" Tate said aloud. Was that too much of a leap? From Brenda's death to Steph finding the notebook to the man in the garage being after it? The security footage showed him following her at a distance, the license plate covered with some kind of white cloth.

"Probably took that off after he got away from the cameras," he muttered. But he

definitely believed the man not only was watching her but followed her home.

Which meant he knew Tate had been there if he kept watching for any length of time. He texted her.

The guy from the garage could have followed you home. Make sure your doors are locked. I'm texting James and Cole to let them know and I'm sending a cruiser to your house. I'll be there soon.

Tate shut the book and patted his pockets. No keys. He walked into the den and grabbed them from the coffee table. Asking Steph out might not be okay right now, but he'd do everything in his power to make sure she was safe.

He hesitated. He should probably call her to make sure she saw the text.

A creaking sound came from the floor in his kitchen. He frowned, his hand automatically going to the weapon at his hip. Only to remember he'd taken it off and laid it on the kitchen counter.

The same kitchen with the floor that squeaked when someone walked across it. "Who's there?" He grabbed his phone and tapped 911, then turned the volume down so whoever was in his home wouldn't be able to hear the voice on the other end. But that voice would hear him. "Hello?" he said as soon as the dispatcher picked up. "I'm a detective with the Lake City Police Department. You're trespassing in my home. I'm also armed, so you might want to think about going back out the way you came in."

He grabbed the Louisville Slugger from the mount over his recliner and gripped it while he walked with slow, measured steps toward the now silent kitchen. Not exactly armed, but better than nothing, and the dispatcher now knew he was law enforcement. He just prayed the invader didn't pick up his weapon.

Before he could swing through the entrance, the intruder beat him to it, moving first and fast. Something slammed into the side of Tate's head, and he went to his knees while darkness swirled, threatening to suck him under.

This time the footsteps were loud as they rushed past him. Then his front door banged open, and the figure was gone before Tate could get to his feet.

When he finally managed to stand, the room spun, and he grabbed the nearest chair to hold himself upright. The wave of dizziness and nausea passed, and he pressed a hand to the goose egg rising. Sirens finally reached him, and after confirming his weapon and badge were still where he left them, he walked outside to sit in the wicker chair on his small front porch, empty-handed, bat at his feet.

Officers swung into the parking lot opposite him, climbed out, and walked his way, hands on their weapons. "You armed?" the nearest one asked.

"Just the bat." Not that it had done him any good. "My piece is on the kitchen counter." He kept his hands where they could see them.

"You're with the LCPD?"

"Yeah. First day as a detective. Badge is on the counter next to the gun."

The officer let out a low whistle. "You make someone mad already?"

Tate chuckled, then winced. "Looks like it."

"I'm Brad Covington. My partner is Elisa Sanders." He nodded to the officer at his side. "You mind if she checks your kitchen?"

"Not at all. Help yourself. I'm curious to know how he got in." Elisa walked through

his open door and Tate touched his throbbing scalp. “And what he used to bean me with.” The skin wasn’t broken, but the lump kept getting bigger.

“You need an ambulance?” Brad asked.

“For this?” Tate almost shook his head, then thought better of it. “No. It was a pretty hard hit, but I know the signs to look for that indicate a concussion. If I have them, I’ll get help.”

“Good enough.”

The officer returned and placed her hands on her hips. “Well, I know how he got in. He used a glass cutter on your window and simply flipped the lock, raised the window, and climbed in.”

“Fabulous.” Tate made a mental note to upgrade his alarm system to include the windows.

“You’re the second one tonight.”

“No kidding?”

“Yep, just as we pulled up to your place, a call came over the radio that a neighbor reported a break-in a couple of miles away in that fancy neighborhood.”

Tate stilled. “Whose house was it?”

“Believe the neighbor said it was Stephanie Cross, James’s sister. You met James Cross yet? He’s a detective too.”

His stomach dropped. Someone had hit Steph’s house, then his? That was no

coincidence. He stood and ground his teeth against the pain that spiked before it eased. “Yes, I know him.”

He walked inside to the kitchen. The little pink notebook he’d set next to his gun was gone.

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SIX

STEPH HAD MANAGED to walk the chair over to the counter where the knives were and, with a lot of maneuvering and failed attempts, finally got the paring knife under the zip tie and cut it.

She grabbed her phone mid-ring, noted the caller, and slapped the device to her ear. “Tate! There’s a guy who’s looking for Brenda’s notebook. He broke into my home and now he’s looking for you and—”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, but you’ve got to be watching—”

“He’s already been here and gone. I’m okay, but he did get the book.”

She snapped her lips shut. “Oh.” She’d been too slow. Guilt slammed her hard. He could have been killed because she’d admitted she gave the book to him. “I’m so sorry. He knew I’d given you the book. I didn’t want to tell him, but he knew. He just forced me to confirm it.”

“I’m glad you told him. You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I am. And if it helps, it’s not the end of the world—or the case—that the book is gone. I took pictures of all of the pages that had code on them.”

He went quiet. “You did?” he finally said.

“I figured you’d have to take the thing and turn it in, and I wanted to work the code, so ... yeah. Sorry if that was against the rules.”

“No specific rule. And I’m grateful you did that. At least we have the copy if not the actual book.”

“I have printed copies too.”

“You’re amazing. Can you send the digital pictures to me?”

“Of course. As soon as we hang up. I’m also saving them to the cloud just in case someone decides to steal my phone and burn the printed ones.” She thought he might have chuckled at her disgruntled tone.

“I’m heading your way in about fifteen minutes,” he said. “As soon as I can convince everyone I’m fine and that I’m not going to the hospital. Are officers there?”

Not going to the hos—Sirens sounded. “They’re close. I hear them. Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“I don’t. I’m fine. I have a headache, but I’m fine. You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. I promise. He didn’t hurt me.” Not really. Not like he could have. Not like he would have if he’d felt the need. She shuddered.

“I’ll be there shortly,” he said.

She walked into her bedroom and glanced at the hole in her window. “Okay. I need to let James know. He’ll probably be here when you get here.” Maybe. Depending on where he was sleeping tonight. It was pushing one o’clock in the morning, and now that her adrenaline was crashing, climbing into her bed sounded better than calling

James. But she had to report it, and if James took the statement, she could kill two birds with one stone. Get it on record and keep him from being livid that she didn't call him. Okay, three birds. She needed her window fixed. "I read your text, by the way. A little late, but thanks for trying."

"Sure thing. I was going to call, but that's when I heard the guy in my house."

"It's fine. Everything worked out okay. I'll see you in a bit."

When she hung up with Tate, she dialed James, who answered on the third ring. "This better be good," he croaked.

"Are you sleeping at your apartment or the lake house?" He kept a place in town close to the station so that when he was on duty he didn't have the long forty-five-minute drive to work.

"Apartment. Why?"

"Because someone broke into my house and tied me up before they went to Tate's house and stole evidence that was found after he and Cole cleaned out Brenda's desk."

"What?!"

It was a testament to how well he knew her that he understood that jumbled paragraph. "Since you're only ten minutes away," she said, "I need you to come take the statement so I can go to bed. If you were at the lake house, I was going to just get Cole to do it." Which, now that she thought about it, she maybe should have done. He'd probably show up anyway with Tate.

"I'm on the way."

“Bring a hammer. And maybe some nails. I have plywood somewhere in my garage. I have no idea where a hammer might be. Or nails.”

“A ham—? Never mind. I’ll be there soon.”

True to his word, James was there in under fifteen minutes, took her statement, then declared he wasn’t leaving.

And she was glad.

Tate arrived a short time later, and while the men talked, she busied herself in the kitchen, then stopped to lean against the counter and tried to grab a breath. The front door opened and James stepped outside to speak with the officers who were getting ready to leave.

The shakes set in and sobs gathered in her throat. She swallowed but couldn’t seem to choke them down. Tears flowed and dripped into the sink. She pulled in a gasping breath, doing her best to stay quiet.

Warm hands landed on her shoulders, and she turned to see Tate’s compassionate gaze welcoming her to use his chest to muffle her crying. She leaned in and let him encircle her shoulders.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “Just let it out.”

So she did for a few seconds, drawing strength and comfort from his presence.

“I prayed for you all the way over here,” he said. “That you would feel protected and unafraid. That you would stay strong and be willing to continue the fight.”

She sniffed. “I’m willing. And I’ll be strong in just a minute.”

“That works.”

“Steph?”

James’s voice ended her tears, and she stepped away from the shelter of Tate’s arms and broad shoulders. “Thank you,” she said.

“Of course.”

James stepped through the door. “Hey, Steph?”

“Yes?”

He frowned when he got a look at her face. There was no way she could cover the evidence of her crying jag.

“Don’t say anything,” she said. “I’m okay. Really.”

“Right.” His gaze slid to Tate, then back to her. “I found the plywood in your garage and got your window fixed. You’ll have to order a new pane for it, but you won’t be trying to cool the outdoors with your AC.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“You want to come stay at the apartment with me? Or have me stay here?”

She sighed and raked a hand over her head. “I mean, I’m not in danger now, right? The guy wanted the notebook and he has it. So I should be fine?”

“Should be. But you’re probably going to jump at every sound if you’re alone. If I’m here, you’ll rest better.”

He wasn't wrong. And if she was honest, there was a fourth bird. She'd been waiting on him to offer so she could accept. The whole reason she'd wanted him to come take her statement rather than Cole or Tate.

"Okay. Thanks." She nodded. "Yeah, stay here if you don't mind."

"I don't. Your couch is more comfortable than my bed." He saluted Tate. "Cole is waiting for you in the car." He turned and headed to the den and settled on her couch.

Tate gave her a small smile that looked pained, and she gasped. "I'm a horrible person. I never checked to make sure you're okay!"

He touched his head. "Yeah. He got me with something that knocked me silly for a few seconds. Long enough to grab the book and get away, but I'm fine. It was probably the grip of a gun, which I prefer to a bullet." He reached out and squeezed her fingers. "Seriously. We'll talk tomorrow, okay?"

"We're still on to visit with Greg?"

"We are. I'll pick you up and you can ride with us."

"Then I'll see you in the morning."

He left and she turned to see James watching with an odd little smile on his lips. She huffed. "Stop it."

"I didn't say anything."

"Yes. You did."

He laughed and she walked into her bedroom, brushed her teeth, and fell across the

bed. Knowing James was just in the other room allowed her to close her eyes and fall asleep.

TATE STUDIED HIS CEILING, then rolled out of the bed when no answers to his multitude of questions were forthcoming. He palmed his eyes and pulled in a breath.

He wanted to check on Steph. He couldn't get the woman out of his mind and that bothered him. For as long as he could remember, he'd avoided anything—including romantic entanglements—that would derail his push to become a police officer and now a detective.

Sure, he'd dated. He'd even had one fairly serious relationship with another career-minded officer. Thankfully, they'd both realized they were better off good friends than married to each other. It had been an amicable parting with no broken hearts involved. He'd been disappointed, of course, but had gotten over it fairly quickly.

He texted Cole, and the man said he'd pick him up, then they'd grab Steph before heading over to the Hudson home.

His phone rang and he swiped the screen. "Hi, Mom."

"How are you doing, Detective Tate Cooper?"

He smiled. "I'm doing okay, Mom. Thanks for checking on me."

"When are you coming for a visit?"

"Well, believe it or not, I started day one with a big case, so it might be a while."

"I understand. We miss seeing you, but your dad and I are proud of you."

Emotion grabbed him by the throat, taking him off guard. He'd always been close to his parents and he missed them. But the job was everything right now. "Thanks, Mom. I appreciate it." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "I've got to go. I'll try to find some time to come see you guys soon." They only lived forty-five minutes away.

"See you later, Son."

"Give Dad a hug for me."

"I will. Bye."

Tate hung up and, with a groan, headed for the shower. He dreaded talking to the new widower, but part of him was looking forward to seeing Steph again in spite of the circumstances.

Twenty minutes later, he hurried to meet Cole, who'd pulled in front of his apartment. Tate slid into the passenger seat and was greeted with the delicious aroma of fresh-brewed coffee with a hint of ... something. Hazelnut?

Two cups from the local café sat in the cupholder. "I don't suppose one of those is mine, is it?"

Cole shot him an amused look. "You know it is."

"You're the best partner a guy could ask for."

Cole laughed. "Glad to be of service." He pulled out of the apartment parking lot and aimed toward Steph's home. "Question for you."

"Shoot."

“You like Steph.”

Tate stilled and forced himself not to choke on the sip he’d just taken. After he swallowed, he looked at Cole. “That was a statement.”

“Okay. You like Steph, right?”

“Hm. I do. I mean, I’ve just met her, but she seems like a nice person. A person I might like to get to know should I not be totally focused on my career right now.”

“So, you’re not interested?”

“I don’t think I said that.”

Cole laughed. “All right, then. I’ll just say this. Steph is amazing, but you might want to keep in mind she has three older brothers who all know how to use a gun. And a knife if you count Keegan.”

“A knife?”

“He’s a surgeon.”

Tate chuckled. “Warning noted.” Then he sobered. “But honestly, right now isn’t a good time for romance. She’s grieving and I’m investigating her friend’s death. I don’t think it would be in good taste to ask her out in the near future.”

“Maybe not, but there’s no reason you can’t be her friend in the present.”

“That’s the conclusion I’ve come to. So you can stop your copycat-big-brother-James protective routine.”

Cole slanted him an amused look, then turned his attention back to the road.

“And frankly, I meant what I said. I’m focused on this job, you know? I just made detective. I can’t let myself get distracted no matter how much I might like her.”

“Well, there’s that, but honestly, Steph has been around law enforcement forever, so it’s not like she doesn’t know what your job entails.”

Tate nodded. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

“Then again, she may not be interested in going out with you, so it’s a moot point.”

“And there is that. So thank you.” He paused. “Did she say that?”

“No. I haven’t asked her and don’t think anyone else has either. Would you like me to?”

“No!” Tate cleared his throat. “No. Thanks for the offer, but I’m a big boy. I can handle my own love life. Or lack of.” He paused. “Just drive.”

Cole chuckled and two minutes later he pulled into Steph’s driveway. Tate’s heart lurched when she stepped out of her front door and joined them by climbing into the back seat.

“Hey,” she said.

They echoed their greetings, and she fell silent, her face a mask of sorrow.

Her grief reached deep into a place he thought he’d locked up nice and tight, but all he wanted to do was be there for her, comfort her while she processed the death of her friend. With each passing moment he spent in her company, she drew him to her,

making him want more than just friendship. He kept his sigh silent. Why now, God? Because in spite of all Tate's protests, his heart was hoping it wouldn't be long before he and Steph could possibly explore options that went beyond friendship. And now Tate was restless, impatient with his wishy-washy feelings. He wanted to turn again and look at her, but refrained. He'd wait. Right now wasn't about him or what he wanted. It was about Steph and being part of the support system she needed. He'd wait. Be patient and see how things played out. She would heal and he'd give her all the time she needed for that.

Which was okay. His gut was saying she was worth the wait. But would she feel the same about him?

SEVEN

STEPH WAS GRATEFUL for her big brother, truly. But if James hadn't left when Tate and Cole drove up, she was going to have to kick him and his helicoptering out. And now she was in Brenda and Greg's home, struggling to hold it together.

Her heart broke at the grief etched on Greg's face as he led them into the den. Once seated, Steph held three-year-old Magda on her lap while six-year-old Vince played with his toy cars in the adjacent playroom, visible from where she, Tate, and Cole were. Fourteen-year-old Mark was nowhere to be seen.

An open book lay face down on the end table next to her. A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. Brenda's.

Greg swiped his eyes and cleared his throat. "Sorry. I'm still in shock." He waved to his mother in the kitchen, and she came to take Magda from Steph. The little girl protested until she was given a cup of juice and a handful of animal cookies. Beau, the well-trained German shepherd, raised his head from his bed, but when no one offered him anything, he settled back onto his paws with a disgruntled sigh.

Steph turned her attention to Greg. "I don't even have the words to express my sorrow or how much my heart hurts for you and everyone who loved her."

He shot her a sad little smile. "No one does. It's okay. You don't have to search for them. You won't find any that will help." He drew in a ragged breath. "What will help is catching who did this."

“That’s why we’re here,” Cole said.

“Yes. Thank you. So, on the phone, you said someone ran her off the road. That there were traces of green paint on her white vehicle. I just washed her car the day before yesterday, and I assure you that wasn’t there.”

Tate nodded. “That’s helpful to know. We thought the paint looked fresh, but your confirmation is good to have.” He waved a hand to Steph. “She wanted to come along and offer support. She’s also the one who found a pink notebook that Brenda had been making notes in. Last night, someone broke into Steph’s house and then mine looking for it. They managed to steal it from my kitchen.”

Greg’s jaw dropped. “What?” he whispered.

“But I took pictures of it,” Steph said. She scooted closer to Greg and held out her phone so he could see one of the pages. “Do you have any idea what kind of code this is?”

He took her phone and studied the pictures. “That’s her handwriting, but I couldn’t tell you what it means or why she would feel the need to use code.”

“Do you know why she was on Youngstown Road at that time of night?” Cole asked.

Greg shook his head, then raked a hand over his short dark curls. “No. We had dinner and then she asked me to put the kids to bed because she had an errand to run. I tried to talk her out of going, but she said it was something that couldn’t wait. I fell asleep in the recliner. Only woke up when an officer rang my doorbell to tell me she’d crashed her car on that curve.” Tate and Cole exchanged a look. Greg caught it. “What?”

“We’ve come to the conclusion that it wasn’t an accident,” Tate said, his voice soft.

“We can’t prove it, but evidence suggests someone deliberately made her crash.”

Greg blinked. “Wait, what? How are you getting that from a side swipe? It could have been an accident.”

“If there had just been one area where there was paint, then yeah,” Tate said, “but there were two. Like Brenda managed to keep it on the road after the first one, so the person came back and tried again. This time succeeding in pushing her over the side.”

Greg stared and Cole cleared his throat. “The ME will have more information on her exact cause of death, but I’m sorry, Greg, it looks like Brenda was murdered.”

The man gasped and Steph’s heart broke for him.

He looked at each of them and spread his hands. “But ... but why?”

“We don’t know,” Cole said. “We think it may be related to something she was working on. Something she wrote down in that notebook, since someone went to so much trouble to steal it.”

“I have no idea.” Greg shuddered. “She never talked about her work much, but...”

“But?”

“But she was making and getting phone calls. Calls that she obviously didn’t want me to hear. I never suspected an affair. Brenda wouldn’t do that to me. Every time I asked her about the calls, she would just shrug and say, ‘Difficult client.’ Or ‘Work,’ and then go in another room to talk.”

“We didn’t find her cell phone in the vehicle. Do you have it?”

“No.” He tapped his screen and turned it for them to see. “I tried to check her location. The phone is offline.”

“Yeah,” Cole said. “It’s okay. Will you allow us access to her personal phone records?”

“Absolutely. I can print them off for you.”

“That would be a huge time-saver if we didn’t have to get them from the phone company. Can you go back three months?”

“Of course.” Greg rose, went to the desk in the corner of the room, and with the click of a few keys, sent the printer whirring.

While they waited for the pages to print, Steph let her gaze roam over the pictures lining the mantel. So many of Brenda and her family and friends. Steph was in a few. Tears threatened and she sniffed. “Greg,” she said, “are you certain the break-in a couple of weeks ago was Mark climbing back in his window and not something else?”

He frowned and rubbed his head. “I never saw any evidence that it was anything other than Mark. I’ll admit, Beau barking like he did was disconcerting, but I walked around outside and didn’t see anything or anyone else.”

“Hmm. Weird, but okay.”

“It was weird, but all was quiet up until ... well ... her accident.” Greg went to get the papers from the printer and handed them to Cole. “If you need to go back farther, just let me know.”

“Thanks.” Cole stood. “Appreciate your time. And I’m real sorry about Brenda. I

only met her a few times, but she was always so kind.”

Greg nodded.

Tate stepped forward. “If you think of anything else, please give us a call.” He handed the man his card and Greg slid it in his wallet.

Steph hugged Greg, then went to tell the children goodbye. Magda clung to her as expected, and she gave the little girl an extra hug and a tickle so she could leave her laughing. Magda ran to Tate. “Hug everyone goodbye?”

Tate smiled and dropped to his knees. “Goodbye, Magda. You sure are a cute little thing.” The child wrapped her little arms around his neck and squeezed, then did the same for Cole.

Greg swung Magda into his arms and kissed her cheek. He looked at Steph. “Thank you all.”

Steph, Cole, and Tate walked out to the car, and Tate looked at Cole. “Looks like we’re going to be going through some numbers for the next few hours. Your place or mine?”

“Cornerstone Café?”

“Perfect.”

“Is it okay if I come along?” Steph asked. “I can work on the code. And besides, I’m starving.”

The men exchanged a glance and Cole nodded. “Let’s go.”

THE THREE OF THEM sat in a booth in the back of the café with another table pulled up to make room for all the papers. The waitress, Jenny, had finally just left a carafe of coffee on the table and said to wave at her if they needed anything.

Steph had pulled out the papers containing the code. She knew her friend best, and if she kept going over the code, she might figure something out. Tate watched her from beneath lowered lashes. It was more entertaining than going over the phone list for the fifth time. Steph was beautiful inside and out. She'd been so kind and gentle with Brenda's family. And little Magda. His throat tightened as he remembered the feel of the little girl in his arms and her sweet hug.

"Number, number, number, letter, letter, letter," she muttered. "Number number number letter, number number number, letter. And numbers with lines under them. What do the lines mean?" A groan slipped from her and she dropped her forehead to the pages in front of her. "It makes no sense. There's nothing consistent except the letters ENNB that are interspersed throughout the pages." She went still. "Wait a minute."

"What?"

She lifted her head. " ENNB . That's the initials for Bolin's Nature Nurture Expeditions, only it's backward. Maybe she did that as part of the code?"

Tate raised a brow. "Good observation. She worked there and they're one of her clients."

"Or it means something else entirely, but I'm going to play with that." Steph nodded and pointed to the page. "Then there are two letters together every so often and they all have a B in them. Like here"—she pointed—" BG . And two pages over, BH . And ... a lot on the third page with BB —Benji Bolin? Gage and Helen's son, maybe? Continuing with the reversed letter idea, BC could refer to Cherry Bolin, their

daughter. They all work at Bolin's and the reversed initials thing works for them all."

"You figured that out," Tate murmured. "You're brilliant."

She flushed and looked down. "Not really. Once I knew what to look for, it was easy. Also not sure if it's right, but it does work. I just don't know what the other letters are for. Or the numbers."

"Keep working. You'll figure it out."

Cole stood. "I'm not seeing anything on this list that's jumping out at me. Let's both take it with us and study it a little more at a later time. Maybe giving it some space will help. In the meantime, I think we might want to go talk to Gage and Helen. I know them in passing and have always thought they were good people. I have to admit I want to know why their initials are in a dead woman's coded note pages, though. I'll call them and see if they have a good time for us to come by."

"They may not be in town," Steph said. "They travel a lot. And I do mean a lot." She frowned. "Once Cherry and Benji were old enough, they dumped the business on them and started doing their own thing."

"How do Cherry and Benji feel about that?"

"Cherry's resented it from day one, but feels like she needs to be there to help Benji. She's always looked out for him and wouldn't think of abandoning him to run the place by himself."

Cole frowned. "I never knew all that."

Steph shrugged. "Cherry told me that a couple of years ago. I feel sorry for her. She's basically living her life for her parents and her brother. I tried to get her to take a trip

to the beach with Brenda, Lainie, Kenzie, and me a few months ago, and she said she just couldn't leave Benji alone, that he'd run the place into the ground with his immaturity."

"Whoa," Tate said. "That's a pretty harsh statement."

"I know. When I asked her about her parents, she just rolled her eyes and said some people should never have children."

"What!" Cole raised a brow. "I always thought they were great parents."

"I did too until she said that. Then she laughed and said she was kidding, she was just tired and ready for a vacation that she could never take."

"Sad," Tate murmured.

"Very," Steph said.

Tate stood. "Now I want to talk to them more than ever. I'll take Steph home and we can go pay them a visit—assuming they're there. Even if they're not, I'd like to see the place through the eyes that Steph just gave us. I want to watch Benji and Cherry interact and all that."

Cole nodded. "I do too."

While Cole made the call, Tate and Steph walked out to the car. She looked at the pages she'd printed out and bit her lip. "Actually, you know what? While you guys do that, I'm going to investigate a little idea I've got."

"An idea?"

“Something that just occurred to me. I’ll let you know if it pans out. I mean, don’t hold your breath or anything since it will probably go the way of all of my other ideas, but I’ve got to try.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You figured out the reversed initials thing.”

She shot him a small smile. “Thanks.” She hesitated, then said, “Like I said inside, Cherry and I are pretty good friends. Not as good as Brenda and I were, but she and I get together every so often for coffee and a chat. If you decide it would help to have me talk to her about anything, call me and I’ll come on over. I’ll be at the library. Bolin’s is just a twenty-minute drive from there.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Cole joined them. Tate filled him in on the plan, and they dropped Steph at her home so she could get her car and go to the library.

With a frown, he watched her open her garage and climb into her car. “You think she’ll be okay?” he asked Cole.

Cole rubbed his chin, a slightly concerned look in his eyes. But he said, “No reason to think otherwise. Whoever was after the notebook got it.”

“I know, but I don’t like leaving her alone.”

“Because you don’t think she’ll be safe or because you just like being around her?”

Tate snorted. “Both.”

“That’s what I thought.” Cole snagged his phone. “I’ll ask a couple of buddies on patrol to follow her home from the library.” He made the call, then looked at Tate.

“Feel better?”

“Somewhat. Thanks.”

Cole pulled away and headed up the mountain while Tate kept an eye on Steph for as long as she was in view. Keep her safe, Lord. I’m not sure I like this idea.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:48 am

EIGHT

STEPH SPREAD THE PAPERS on the table in front of her and pulled one of the books off the stack she'd spent thirty minutes agonizing over and creating.

"All right, my friend, you love the classics, so if I'm right about this, you would use one of these. Now, the two books found at your office were *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Oliver Twist*, so we'll start with those. Of course, you could have used digital versions, but knowing your preference for a hard copy we'll just start here."

She opened *Oliver Twist* and went to the first set of numbers and letters.

"472IH," she muttered. "All right then. Page four, seventh row, second word." She sighed. "The I maybe stands for a word?" She tapped the page. "But that one does not start with I. Okay. Next book. *The Old Man and the Sea*." She kept trying until she'd gone through all the books.

With nothing.

"Ugh." She tossed her pencil down and looked around at the other patrons. The crowd had thinned the closer it got to dinnertime, but one young woman at the table in front of her looked deep in her research. She had several books open and flipped over, holding her spot until she was ready to come back to them.

The image of a book on an end table flickered in her memory. The one on Brenda's end table. And one she hadn't pulled from the shelf.

A Christmas Carol .

She rose, hesitated, then gathered the papers. No need to leave them where anyone could come by and grab them. She went to the aisle, found the book easily, and discovered it was the same edition that Brenda had.

Steph snagged it and glanced around, trying to stay aware of her surroundings. And the people in it. A figure wearing a hoodie stood next to the water fountain examining the announcement board. He caught her attention, but she hesitated, waiting to see what he might do.

He lifted his phone and snapped a picture of the library calendar, then turned and headed for the exit. Steph let out a low breath. She was paranoid. And maybe being a little paranoid wasn't a bad thing. But not everyone in a hoodie was a bad guy.

While the crowd in the library was sparse, there were other people around and he was gone, so she wasn't afraid to stay put and finish what she was doing. She chewed her lip and looked at the young man behind the desk. A woman in her twenties loaded books onto a cart. An older man mopped the floor of one of the glassed-in meeting rooms.

The library didn't have a security guard, but maybe one of the workers would help her out. She returned to the table and opened the book to apply the same key she'd been so convinced would work. And found the letter I on the fourth page, seventh row, second word. "Okay, maybe we're getting somewhere," she muttered. On the same line was a word starting with H . Have . Excitement swirled. And then the next part was 10 12 9F . She flipped to page ten, counted down twelve lines, and over nine words. Find!

I have find.

Not exactly perfect grammar, but Brenda may have decided to pick words close enough to what she meant. She could have meant I have found ...

Maybe.

But as long as she appeared to be on the right path, she'd keep going. She figured out the next few words.

I have find evidence of stolen money...

Steph sat back. That was it. She'd figured it out. It was so simple but would be a painstaking process to decipher every page. "What in the world, Brenda? Who were you so afraid would see this?"

She texted Cole and Tate.

I have the key to the code. I think. I'm pretty sure. Anyway, I'm going to head home and if you want to come by, I'll give it to you.

She hit send. Then reconsidered. Maybe she should just take it to them. It was a twenty-minute drive...

Unless she took the shorter route. The dangerous one. She'd driven Youngstown Road before, of course. Very slowly and very carefully. And never in the dark. But she definitely didn't make a habit of it. Would it be worth the time saved to do so now?

Tate texted her back.

We're leaving now. Not much light shed on Brenda's death. They don't know why she was on that road. Said she always avoided it.

Exactly.

Unless...

She'd been pressed for time and decided to risk it? Steph had just considered doing so.

Had Brenda?

But what would have caused her to be in such a hurry like that? What would have been worth the risk? And who had known she'd drive that route and had gone ahead to lie in wait for her to hit the curve before they pulled the trigger?

All questions without answers.

She texted her boss, the only other person who might have a clue about what Brenda had been working on. Cole and Tate had already talked to him, and he'd declared he had no idea about any of it, but Steph wasn't so sure. Maybe they just hadn't asked the right questions.

Stan, are you home? Do you mind if I stop by?

While she waited for Stan to respond, Steph worked a little more on the cryptic message, gaining confidence as the words appeared on the page.

I have find evidence of stolen money. I have talked to BH and asked her how business was. She said slow but all right. Money is being taken but I don't know who is doing it yet. Talk to GS...

Steph stopped. GS ? If she reversed the initials that would be SG. Stan Gilchrest obviously. She checked her phone. Still no response from the man, and now she

wanted to talk to him more than ever.

She called his number and it went to voicemail.

“Come on, Stan, this isn’t like you. Call me back.” But ... it was a holiday weekend. One of his employees had been killed. Maybe he’d simply unplugged to hang out with his wife and any kids who were around. She couldn’t blame him.

And if he didn’t have any major holiday plans, Stan often liked to work in his garden on his days off. Maybe he was still outside in spite of the dark. He had floodlights. And his greenhouse was well lit. She’d just ride over there and see if he was available. But she wanted to decipher more and see what Stan had told Brenda. She worked on the next part.

SG said he would check probably mistake. I don’t think mistake. I think SG knows something about missed money. Seemed scared. Frightened. Feel sorry for him. Will talk to him again.

In disbelief, she tossed her pencil onto the table and stared at the words.

And now Steph wanted to know what Stan knew. She took a picture of the paper and sent it to Tate and Cole.

She had to track him down. Now.

Relieved to have a plan, she packed up the pages of the journal and her notes and grabbed her empty Yeti cup. It was dark outside, but the parking lot lights were bright and the area fairly busy, so she clicked the fob to unlock her car and hurried to it. The officers in the cruiser parked near the door waved, and Steph relaxed then slid behind the wheel of her Subaru. She drew in a steadying breath, hating the feeling of lurking danger in spite of her temporary bodyguards. She longed for the days where she took

her safety mostly for granted. Not that she didn't take precautions like any smart person, but she'd never felt that someone was out to do her bodily harm like she had over the last couple of days.

With the doors locked, she looked around and focused on the car in the corner of the parking lot. It was backed into a space, and she thought the driver was at the wheel. When he caught her looking, he cranked his vehicle, pulled out, and roared from the parking lot.

Steph frowned. While his features had been obscured by the glare on the windshield, she was sure it was the same guy in the library who'd snapped a picture of the bulletin board. Had he been waiting on her and, when he realized she saw him, gotten scared off?

But why? He had the book, so why keep tabs on her?

Unless he knew she had the printed pages and was working on deciphering them? She hadn't exactly hidden them while working on the code, and she'd been pretty absorbed in what she was doing, feeling safe at her little table in the library.

She swallowed hard, thinking she—and Cole and Tate—may have overestimated exactly how safe she was. Only the comforting presence of the police car behind her let her breathe normally.

TATE AND COLE had struck out with the Bolins, but Tate wasn't convinced they were being completely truthful in their protests that they had no idea what Brenda was doing on Youngstown Road or why she would have been headed to the facility at that time of night.

His phone chimed and he glanced at the screen while Cole drove.

““Going to see my boss,”” he read aloud. ““Stan knows something. I deciphered more of the code, and Brenda said she went to him with evidence of theft and he said he’d take care of it, but she thought he might know something.”” Tate shook his head and glanced at Cole. “Is she serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m going to call her.”

“Excellent idea. Then give me the phone so I can yell at her.”

“I’ll put her on speaker so you can judge whether that’s necessary.” Tate tapped her name in his contact list, thankful she answered on the first ring. “First, you’re on speakerphone so Cole can hear, and second,” he said in lieu of a greeting, “we have our forensic accountants working on this. You don’t have to play amateur detective.”

“I know. I’m not really. But Brenda was my friend, and I can’t just sit on my hands doing nothing.”

“Doing nothing is precisely what you need to do,” Cole said, his voice slightly louder than necessary for her to hear it.

“And we need that key,” Tate jumped in. “There’s obviously a lot more she had to say by what’s left to decipher.”

“Well, then meet me there if you don’t mind. I’m closer to his place than I am mine.” She gave them the address, and Cole shrugged even though he shot a glare at the phone.

Tate frowned. “Fine, but if you think he knows something, it could be dangerous for you to confront him.”

“Stan?” She laughed. “He wouldn’t hurt a flea.”

“Stephanie Cross,” Cole said, “don’t make me call James.”

Another chuckle rippled through the line. “Is that supposed to be a threat? He doesn’t scare me.”

“Well, he scares me,” Cole snapped, “and if something happens to you because—” He closed his eyes for a brief second while he ground his teeth against what he obviously wanted to say, and Tate almost felt sorry for the man. “Just stay put,” Cole finally managed.

“I have my two watchdogs, Cole. They’re right behind me. I’ll be fine.”

“Steph...”

Tate bit the inside of his cheek to keep a smile off his face. He really shouldn’t be smiling. This was serious. But the interaction between these two was funny—and entertaining. James and Cole were best friends, so Steph had another older brother whether she wanted one or not.

She sighed. “Fine. I’ll be waiting in my car.”

“Thank you.”

“Sure. I’ll be there in about five minutes.”

“We’re closer to ten,” Tate said.

“I can be patient for five minutes.”

“Ten,” Tate said.

“Ha!” Cole snorted. “In what universe?”

“I heard that.”

“Wasn’t trying to hide it.”

This time Tate let his laugh break through. Cole shot him a scowl and Tate snickered.

“I heard that too, Tate Cooper. I’ll be waiting.” She hung up.

Tate laughed again and shook his head. “You think she’ll wait?”

“No.” Cole pressed the gas.

NINE

STEPH PULLED TO THE CURB of the very nice two-story farm-style home set on a two-acre parcel. Stan was married to Beth, and they had two sons in college and one married daughter.

Steph stepped out of the car, breathing in the scent of freshly mowed grass. Even though it was September in the mountains, it was still hot during the day. She gripped the driver's door and looked behind her. The driveway was long and winding, and the main road was empty. If anyone followed her—other than the two bodyguards right behind her—they were staying well back. She had to admit, knowing Tate and Cole were on the way eased her nerves. A lot.

Stan's garden was on the other side of the property at the back of the house. If he was here, that's where he'd be. The garage door was up, the lights on. Stan's weekday Mercedes was on the left side, and the right side that usually housed his wife's van was empty.

Where were the college kids' vehicles? Stan hadn't said for sure they were coming, so maybe they'd decided against it? And where was Stan's truck? He had an old beater that he used to haul stuff for his garden and yard. The sound of an engine caught her attention, and she turned to find Tate and Cole turning in. As they drew closer, she was able to make out Cole's surprised expression.

He likely expected her to be inside or with Stan. She refrained from sticking her tongue out at him and simply raised a brow because ... well ... she couldn't really blame him.

He smirked and Tate looked amused as well. Cole had probably told Tate all about her impatient nature, explaining that she wouldn't have listened to him to wait. She almost wished she'd proven him right.

Cole parked and the two men climbed from the vehicle. Her gaze was immediately drawn to Tate, and she blinked, forcing herself to look away and turn to Cole. "I waited."

"I'm shocked," Cole said. He waved to the other officers and they drove off. When he turned back to her, his expression had softened. "But I'm glad, so thank you."

"Sure. The lights are on and it looks like someone's home, but he's not answering his phone." Steph turned her back on them and headed to the side of the house that would take her around into the backyard. "Stan? Are you here?"

"Steph?" Tate joined her, with Cole three steps behind him. "Do you always go dashing into possible danger?"

"Of course not."

"Of course she does," Cole said at the same time, all softness gone from his face.

Steph scowled at him, then focused on Tate. "Stan wasn't answering his phone and I just figured he was working in his garden or the greenhouse." The lights lit up the area, and she swept a hand toward the immaculate space that contained just about every vegetable and herb known to man. But no Stan.

Tate let out a low whistle. "Nice."

"I know. He brings stuff in all the time to share." She pointed to the vehicle at the edge of the garden. "Well, that answers the question about his truck." He'd pulled it

around and looked like he'd been in the middle of unloading bags of mulch. "Wonder what interrupted him?" she asked.

"Maybe nothing," Cole said. "It's possible he simply stopped to go to the bathroom or take a phone call or get a drink or something." He clucked his tongue. "Always so suspicious. I'll check the house." He shot her a sideways glance. "Unless you've already done it and hightailed back to your car so I wouldn't know."

She rolled her eyes. "No, I haven't checked it, Mr. Smarty-pants." She'd had his friends watching her. Besides, there was no way she'd ever let on that she'd thought about it despite having eyes on her movements.

"But you thought about it," he said. Steph gave a short laugh and Cole shot her a knowing look, then nodded to Tate. "Ready?"

"I'm right behind you."

Her laughter faded quickly. The truth was, she was uneasy. Something just felt off.

Cole knocked on the door and they waited.

Steph shifted. Tate rang the bell.

Nothing.

"Stan?" Cole identified himself and Tate. "Steph's here too." He rapped his knuckles against the wood once more. "You home?"

No response.

Steph reached around Cole and twisted the knob. "It's unlocked."

“That’s all well and good, but we can’t go in there,” Cole said. “We don’t have a good enough reason.”

“Exigent circumstances?” she asked.

“There aren’t any.”

“Well, I’m not bound by the same restrictions you are.” Before either man could protest, she slipped past them and into the house. “Stan? Are you here?” She went right into the kitchen and noticed a pile of clothes on the kitchen table. Weird. But no Stan.

“Steph.” Cole’s exasperation rang clear.

She’d apologize later. She walked into the connecting den and gasped. “Stan!” He lay on the floor, next to a shattered glass coffee table. Blood had pooled beneath his head, the oriental rug stained dark.

Thinking he was dead, Steph nevertheless hurried forward and knelt by her boss to search for a pulse while Tate followed, and Cole called for an ambulance. Steph almost couldn’t believe it when a faint thumping pulsed against her fingers. “He’s alive. Y’all, he’s alive.” Barely. And not for much longer if he didn’t get help.

“Ambulance is on the way,” Cole said.

“What do we do now?” Because doing nothing wasn’t an option.

“Keep him warm for one thing.” Tate grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch and covered Stan. “Uh ... ABC, right? Airway, Breathing, Circulation. Is he breathing?”

She checked. “Yes.”

“And he still has a pulse,” Tate said. “So we wait for the ambulance and pray it gets here soon.”

Steph kept an eye on the clock. Three minutes later, paramedics arrived and got him stable enough to transport. Soon their taillights disappeared and the siren faded.

Tate returned to her side on the porch. “How did you know he was in trouble?”

“I didn’t. Not really. Things just seemed odd. He was more stressed than usual. Yesterday I was leaving the office and he was on the phone and pacing, upset about something.” She shrugged. “Individually, those don’t mean much. Everyone has bad days and clients can really stress you out. When you deal with people’s money, things can get hairy sometimes.”

“Right.”

“But just adding it all up and then Brenda’s notes in the journal made me want to ask him myself. See his face when he said he didn’t know what Brenda was working on, then show him her notes. The thing is, we always keep Stan up-to-date on stuff. He’s a bit of a micromanager, so I know Brenda would have talked to him.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this?”

“I don’t know. He said she didn’t, and at the time, while it seemed odd, I believed him. Then I kept thinking about Brenda and Stan and how we all worked together, and I just...” She shrugged. “I thought maybe now that some time had passed, he might have remembered something—or would be more willing to share what he knew.”

“Hmm.” Cole looked at his phone. “Do you have any idea where his wife and kids are?”

“Maybe her mother’s? I think she lives in Asheville. His sister-in-law lives in Black Mountain.”

“Thanks. Those are good places to start. I can find names and addresses with that.” He walked back into the house, dialing his phone on the way. The crime scene unit had taken over the den, and Steph was at a loss as to what to do next.

Tate started to say something, but Cole’s appearance in the doorway stopped him.

Steph frowned. “What is it?”

With gloved hands, Cole held up a black ski mask and hoodie. “I don’t suppose these look familiar?”

TATE SLID AN ARM around Steph’s shoulder when she swayed and gaped. “Are you kidding me?” she whispered.

Cole grimaced. “I wish I was. They were right there on the kitchen table.”

“Stan is the one who broke into my house? Tate’s? B-but why?”

A shudder rippled through her, and Tate tightened his grip. “Unfortunately, only Stan can answer that.”

She looked around, a slightly dazed expression on her face. “Then he’s the one who stole Brenda’s journal. It’s got to be here somewhere.”

“Assuming he didn’t pass it off to someone,” Tate said.

Cole nodded. “We’ll turn this place upside down looking for it as soon as the crime scene unit is finished—which will be a while because now we’re looking for anything that can give us a connection between him and Brenda that may not be work related.” He paused. “At the very least, we need to finish deciphering the notes. It may tell us what made him so desperate to get his hands on it.”

“I have a headache,” she said.

Tate shot her a sympathetic smile. “Explain the key to us, and we have people who can finish decoding it. Fast.”

She nodded. “All right.”

Once they’d given their statement, Tate called to let Lainie know that Stan was being brought in and he and Cole needed to talk to him as soon as he was awake. And coherent. In the meantime, they’d be heading back to Bolin’s for another visit first thing in the morning.

Steph pursed her lips and frowned. “I’m just confused. What was his connection to Bolin’s? Other than the fact that they were one of Brenda’s clients? Stan liked the outdoors, but he wasn’t an outdoorsman. He’d never ride the rapids or do zip-lining or anything else Bolin’s offers. Does that make sense?”

“Perfect sense,” Cole said. “We’ll figure it out when he wakes up.”

“If he wakes up,” she said. “What if he doesn’t?”

Tate sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe the crime scene unit will turn up something here at the house. In the meantime, we need to get out of the way.” Officers were doing as promised and tearing up the place, bagging evidence, and would let them know if the notebook appeared.

Steph continued to frown, then shook her head. “I just can’t believe Stan would break into my house. And yours, Tate.”

“What? You think someone is framing him by leaving the clothes?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I just would have thought I’d have recognized his voice or the way he walked or even just the shape of his body. Something .”

Tate honestly didn’t know what to think. He sighed. “You were scared. It’s possible it just didn’t register.”

“I guess that’s possible.” Her furrowed brow said she was still thinking about it. “But suppose someone else is involved and is throwing the blame on Stan. Where does that leave me? Am I safe? Or does the person still want to come after me? And why?”

Tate rubbed his chin. “Good questions. Whoever was in our houses wanted Brenda’s little pink notebook. And got it. If this was an attack on Stan and not a fall or an accident, then it’s possible the person knew Stan had the notebook, attacked him, and got what he was after, assuming officers don’t find it here.” He looked around. “And so far, they haven’t. I’m guessing Stan knew something and the person who attacked him—if it was an attack—wanted to shut him up. In that case, I’d think you’re in the clear and safe.”

“Right.”

“We’ll see what the lab says about the clothing. If they can pull some DNA off of it, then we’ll have something to work with.”

She nodded.

“I’m going to have a chat with Matt over there,” Cole said. “I need to tell him to be

looking for the journal.” He nodded to Tate. “I’ll meet you at the car in just a few.”

Cole walked off, and Tate led Steph back to her vehicle. She swiped a tear from her cheek, and he laid a gentle hand on her arm. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” he asked.

A sigh slipped from her. “I’m in shock right now. And I may have been betrayed by a person who I thought was not just my boss but my friend as well. I’ve had lunch with his wife, they’ve given me Christmas and birthday gifts, and so on. I’m just ... angry too.” She ran a hand over her hair. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to dump that on you. I normally vent to my girlfriends, but they’re not here, so you’re the lucky recipient.”

“Hey, I’m here anytime you need to vent.” He took her hand and gave it a light squeeze. “Steph, this may not be the best time to ask, but now that it looks like you’re in the clear, would it be all right if I came over after I’m done at the hospital?” He ducked his head but looked up at her. “I’d like to get to hang out with you without the threat of someone trying to kill you.”

She smiled at him. “I’d like that.”

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TEN

SUNDAY MORNING, Steph texted Cherry Bolin and asked to meet with her. While Tate and Cole had come up empty-handed after visiting the company again and were on the way to the hospital, Steph wanted to talk to Cherry personally. Now that the person who'd likely been after her was lying unconscious in the hospital, she felt safer driving to Bolin's Nature Nurture Expeditions without an escort or self-appointed bodyguard. Safer, but not completely relaxed. She'd keep her guard up.

Cherry texted right back and said she was at work and to come on by. They'd talk in the café.

Twenty minutes later, Steph checked the café and found it empty except for a young couple huddled over a laptop in the back corner. She went to the counter and ordered a mocha. Once she had the drink, she looked around. Still no Cherry.

Taking a seat, she considered whether to wait or let Cherry know she was there. She finally texted her.

Give me ten minutes , came her friend's reply.

"Fancy meeting you here."

She jumped and turned to see Benji Bolin, Cherry's brother. He was in his midthirties, tall, and in good shape, thanks to his physical lifestyle. He wasn't what she would consider good-looking, with the scruffy beard and shaggy hair, but he had a nice smile. "Hi," she said. "I'm just waiting on Cherry."

“She said you were coming by. Hold on a sec.” He went to the counter and grabbed a water from the bucket, turned, and walked back to drop into the chair opposite her. “She got held up by a customer. I told her I’d keep you company.”

“Well, it’s good to see you. I hear you’ve taken over most of the operations of the place in addition to your guided hikes and rafting.”

“I have. Mom and Dad wanted to slow down a bit, so I said I’d handle the business.”

“Good for you.” That all seemed kind of weird to her, though, because Cherry was the one who was more business oriented and stable while Benji ... wasn’t.

“Any news yet on what happened to Brenda?” he asked. “The detectives were here this morning again asking questions, but they didn’t have much to share.”

“No, they don’t know yet, but they’ll figure it out before too long. Brenda left a notebook that will probably lead them to her killer.”

“Yeah, that’s what the detectives said. You know what was in it?”

She raised a brow. Should she say? Probably not. She didn’t want to lie, but... “Well, it was in code.” Which was true.

“Oh right. They said something about that. They also said Bolin’s was in it and that’s why they wanted to talk to us. Wanted to know why Brenda thought she needed to write the information in code. It was all very weird. And kind of insulting.”

She shrugged. “I don’t think you should find it insulting. Brenda loved this place. She loved you and your family. I’m not surprised she would mention this place. Whatever she said in her notes might not be negative.”

“Huh. Yeah, I guess.” He sipped his drink and seemed about to say something more when Cherry rushed in.

“I’m so sorry, I got held up. Benji, your rafting party is ready to go. They’re waiting on you.”

Benji stood and saluted her with his drink. “Duty calls. Nice to see you again, Steph.”

“You too.”

He left and Cherry took his seat. “I’m so glad you called and came over. I hear you had quite the incident the other night. Someone broke into your house?”

“Someone did. Oddly enough, it turns out it might have been Stan, my boss.”

“What! How do you know that?”

She sighed. “It’s a long story—and I don’t even know all the details—but I went looking for Stan and found him in a pool of blood on the floor. He’d hit his head on his glass coffee table.”

“I’m so sorry to hear he’s dead. That’s terrible. Stan was a frequent customer here. He loved the zip line.”

Steph stared at her. “He’s not dead, but he’s in the ICU. Cole and Tate are just waiting for him to wake up so they can question him. But hold on. Let’s circle back to Stan and zip-lining. He hated that kind of stuff. What do you mean he loved it?”

Cherry frowned. “Well, he was here like clockwork every Sunday morning, signed up for the two-hour zip line package.”

Steph groaned and dropped her head into her hand. “I’m so confused.”

“Never mind that. Why on earth would he break into your place?”

Steph looked up, making a note to come back to Stan and zip-lining. Maybe his wife would know. “He was looking for a notebook I’d found hidden in Brenda’s desk, but I’d already given it to Detective Cooper. And then Stan broke into his place and managed to steal it.”

Cherry gaped and Steph sighed. “I know. It’s all a bit much, isn’t it?”

“A bit much for sure. And Brenda...” Tears welled in Cherry’s eyes and she sniffed. “I don’t even know what to think about that one.” She brushed away a stray tear. “So they think she was killed because of the notebook?”

“It’s just speculation, of course, but I can see it being the case if she was looking for something, found it, and recorded it.” She paused and narrowed her eyes. “But it was a notebook no one probably knew about—not even her husband—until I found it and showed it to Stan.” Stan, who’d been desperate to get his hands on it and had called someone immediately after their conversation. Well, Stan had gotten the book. But what about the phone call right after she’d shown him the journal? Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe his call had spurred the incidents that followed. Like her stalker in the garage and at the library. Because that person hadn’t been Stan. And she still wasn’t a hundred percent sure the person in her house had been Stan.

Steph grabbed her phone. “I’m sorry, Cherry, I need to make a call.”

“Of course.”

TATE’S PHONE RANG, flashing Steph’s number. He tapped the screen. “Hello?”

“Hey, I just thought of something and it may be nothing, but I figured better to be wrong than right and say nothing. Right?”

He blinked. “What?”

“I’m at Bolin’s—”

“What!”

“Uh ... why are you shouting at me?”

Tate closed his eyes and counted to three. “Because,” he said in a much calmer tone, “we’re investigating the Bolins, remember?”

“I remember you came up here to chat with them, but I didn’t realize you were doing a full-on investigation.”

“That’s because I can’t tell you everything about what we’re doing, but you need to leave there and don’t go back until I or Cole give you the all clear. Can you do that?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll just say goodbye to Cherry and text you when I’m on the way.”

“Good.”

“But first, I need to tell you about a phone call Stan made.” She went on to explain about what she’d witnessed after Stan saw the journal. “It may be nothing,” she said, “but I don’t know. At the time, I didn’t think much about it, but knowing what I know now...”

“Right.” It wasn’t a bad idea. “I’ll see if we can find who he called around that time. Thank you for that. Now get out of there.”

“I’m getting, I promise. I’ll text when I’m in the car.”

He hung up and said a quick prayer for the woman. He’d only known her a short time but was far more interested in spending time with her than he should be. Could he date her and still focus on his job? On climbing the ladder of success? Balance a relationship without sacrificing everything he’d worked for to get to this point?

He honestly wasn’t sure, but for the first time since he could remember, he thought he might want to try.

He checked his phone. No text from Steph saying she was on her way home. He tapped on the screen.

Steph, please. Leave. While I think Stan was the one causing all of your problems, we’re not sure what role—if any—Bolin’s played in Brenda’s death. Or if someone from there was involved in Stan’s “accident.” Let me know you’re away from there.

He hit send, then waited for the three little dots to appear.

How long did it take to walk to your car, climb in, and lock the doors?

ELEVEN

STEPH WALKED toward her car. She hated having to rush away from Cherry, but investigating Brenda's death wasn't her job. It was Tate's and Cole's and she was—apparently —interfering with that. “Not that I did it on purpose,” she muttered. Her phone buzzed and she ignored it for the moment. She could check it once she was in the car with her seat belt on and the doors locked.

“Talking to yourself?”

Steph jerked to a stop three steps from her Subaru. “Benji, what in the world? You really have to stop sneaking up on people.”

He laughed. “No sneaking involved. You were too busy having a conversation with yourself to notice me. Hope it was a good one.”

She ignored his teasing. “I thought you were taking a team on the river.”

“I was, but for the past two weeks, one of our new workers, Lila, has been insisting she's ready to go solo. After thinking about it, I agreed, so I sent her on her way.” He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and walked toward her. “And if you're finished talking to yourself, maybe we could continue our conversation.”

She shrugged. “Okay.” There was something to continue?

“Walk with me?” He gestured toward one of the hiking trails.

She glanced at her phone. Tate was getting impatient, and she needed to answer him before he had a coronary. She looked up at Benji. "I'm sorry, I really need to go."

"Just give me five minutes. Please?"

Steph hesitated. "Okay, but I need to text someone. He's waiting on me to let him know I'm leaving."

"Sure."

She tapped a quick text.

I'm leaving in just a few. Talking to Benji for a minute and then I'll be on my way home.

When she finished, she tucked her phone into her back pocket and focused on the man in front of her. "Okay, what can I do for you?"

"I was just thinking. Brenda had a locker in the staff room. I don't think anyone has looked in it or cleaned it out yet. Maybe you can look and see if there's anything there that the cops might want?"

Steph raised her brows. "And you just now thought of that?"

He flushed. "I know." He shrugged. "But in my defense, I wasn't even on the property when the cops came the first time. The second time I was on the zip line."

"They talked to your parents. Why wouldn't they mention the locker?"

He gave a small shrug. "They, uh, don't know about it. It was just a couple of weeks ago that she asked for one. I got her a key and told her which locker to use."

“Okay. Why tell me? Why not call the cops?”

He spread his hands and sighed. “Because there was an envelope in there with your name on it.” He ducked his head and shuffled his feet a bit. “I think she was having an affair, and if there’s evidence in there to prove that, then I thought you could get rid of it when I gave you the envelope. I mean, the woman is dead. Why hurt her family by bringing all that to light?”

Steph gaped. “No way.” He wasn’t making a bit of sense. “Why not get rid of it yourself?”

“I thought about it but figured you could do it when I gave you the envelope.”

“Benji, if you think she was having an affair and there’s evidence in the locker, then the cops need to know. I’ll call Tate right now and—”

She lifted her phone and stopped when he stepped forward, a scowl on his face. “No. Brenda was a friend. A good woman. She always treated me with kindness, and I don’t want her name smeared. I only told you about this because of the envelope. Now, do you want it or not?”

She did, but Tate’s warnings were echoing in her ears. “Does Cherry know about this?”

His frown deepened. “Cherry doesn’t need to know everything.”

“Why don’t I wait here while you get the envelope for me?”

He hesitated, then scoffed. “Okay. Whatever.” He walked away and she felt slightly guilty at her immediate assumption that he was trying to lure her into the locker room for ... whatever purposes. But someone had killed Brenda and that someone may or

may not have been Stan. If it wasn't Stan, then—

Cherry came out of the café, spotted Steph, and walked toward her. “Everything all right? You make your call?”

“I did and I’m not sure if everything’s all right or not.”

Her friend frowned. “Cryptic.” Then her attention focused on a spot over Steph’s shoulder and her eyes widened. “Benji? What are you doing? You’re supposed to be on the river.”

“Change of plans. Lila’s got it covered.”

Cherry groaned. “Are you kidding me?”

“Chill. She’s got the sat phone and she’s ready. It’ll be fine.”

A muscle jumped in Cherry’s jaw, and she pulled in a deep breath. “Benji, I’m so tired of cleaning up your messes. If something happens—”

“Nothing’s going to happen! Just let it go!”

“I’ve called Mom and Dad!”

Her brother stilled. “What?”

“They’ll know how to fix this.”

He called her an unflattering name, then stomped toward the office.

Steph turned raised brows to Cherry. “What messes are you having to clean up?”

Cherry ignored her and caught up with her brother, grabbing him by the arm and yanking him around to face her. “You can’t run away from this.”

“Watch me!”

TATE WALKED to his car and climbed in. He sent a text to Cole and let him know he was heading back up the mountain to bring a stubborn woman down it. She still hadn’t texted him to let him know she was on her way home and she wasn’t answering her phone.

He called her number once more and it went to voicemail on the fourth ring. At least the phone was still on.

His phone rang. Cole. “Hey, don’t worry, I’m on the way to get her.”

“Yeah, I’m on the way too. I just got the rest of the decoded contents of Brenda’s book. She overheard part of a conversation between Benji and someone else. She said she had a hard time hearing the other person, but sounded like she was saying he needed to get his act together. In response, Benji said he had the money lined up, he just needed a couple more days to actually get it in his hands.”

“What money?”

“Bolin’s money. It’s all here on the pages from the little pink book. Forensics found two sets of books for the company. One legit set and one that was tracking money being stolen and other money being laundered. It seems like Benji has a nice little drug operation going. Brenda found some wonky transactions—deposits and withdrawals that weren’t actually made and other issues where the numbers didn’t add up. Purchases of equipment, returns that were made but the refund was never deposited, et cetera. She went to talk to Helen and Gage, but they were out of town. She left messages on their voicemails that weren’t returned. She finally said she was

going to confront Benji and ask him to figure out a way to return the money so she didn't have to report anything to the police."

"Oh no," Tate said, his voice soft. "And Steph's up there with him."

"Try to get her on the phone. I'll meet you there."

Tate voice dialed her number and pressed the gas.

TWELVE

STEPH HAD LEFT the siblings alone for a few minutes, but now the argument had turned hushed. She was torn between leaving and trying to hear what they were saying. She drew closer to the locker room and hovered outside.

Silence.

Her phone buzzed, but she ignored it. It was probably Tate, Cole, or James, and they would be livid at her not answering, but right now she needed to figure out what was going on with her friend. She opened the door and found Cherry with her head bent, pulling in slow, deep breaths and letting them out through pursed lips.

“Cherry?” She placed a hand on the woman’s bicep, and Cherry finally looked up, her jaw tight. “What’s going on?” Steph asked. “What’s Benji gotten himself into? What messes are you cleaning up?” She swallowed. “Did Benji have something to do with what happened to Brenda?”

Cherry slammed a hand against the nearest locker and Steph flinched. Cherry spun to face her. “You’re the youngest of the kids in your family. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“For as long as I can remember it’s been, ‘Cherry, you have to watch out for Benji.’ ‘Cherry, don’t let anything happen to Benji.’ ‘Cherry, Dad and I are going out with friends, keep an eye on Benji.’ All day. Every day. Even when I was at school—Lake City Private Academy—I had to keep an eye on him and report back to my parents

when I got home.” She dragged in a ragged breath. “Do you know how much I came to hate my brother?”

“Oh, Cherry, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“You hate me?” Benji’s low voice brought gasps from both women as they spun together to see Benji in the doorway, eyes wide, face pale. “Wow.”

Cherry groaned. “No! I mean I did. Yes.” She waved a hand. “But not now. Now I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do. What’s my role? In trying to protect you, I...”

“You what?” Steph asked.

“Nothing.”

“Something,” Steph said. She slinked toward the back entrance, eyes bouncing between the siblings.

Benji’s gaze swung to Steph and he scowled. “You just couldn’t leave things alone, could you?”

Steph froze. “What are you saying?”

He took a step toward her and Cherry lunged in front of him. “Benji, don’t.” He pushed his sister aside and advanced. Cherry grabbed his arm and swung him around. “Benji, stop! What are you doing?”

He jerked out of her grip, and something fell from his jacket pocket.

A small pink notebook.

Steph let out a sharp cry, then snapped her lips shut.

But it was too late.

He grabbed for her, but Cherry was in his way, causing him to stumble, giving Steph just enough time to shove open the door and race out the back into the space between the locker room area and a large building that she had no idea what it held.

But the door at the end on the corner was open, so she bolted for it while reaching for her cell phone. She couldn't help a quick glance back over her shoulder. No one was coming after her at the moment, but she had to get away.

She slipped through the open door, looking for another exit that would enable her to route around to her vehicle. The place was an auto repair garage. Of course Bolin's would have their own mechanics. She glanced at her phone. She had service and—

A clatter up ahead sent her scurrying behind one of the Subarus. At least they had good taste in SUVs. She tapped a message into her phone to Tate.

Still here. Benji and Cherry had something to do with Brenda's accident. Benji had the pink notebook.

So, how did Stan fit into all of this? The two had obviously been working together, but...

She hit send. Then dialed 911.

Then noticed neither her text nor her call had gone through.

The metal building. It was blocking the signal. Fabulous.

One worker went in the garage, but so far no one had spotted her. Heart pounding, she scurried across the floor, heading to the exit opposite the one she'd entered. At the very back, just before the door, she came to one of the SUVs that had been damaged.

White paint marred one side, along with a dent and broken headlight. "No," she whispered. "No, no, no." She checked the wheels and found one missing a hubcap. This was the vehicle that had sent Brenda plunging to her death. She needed to call Tate or James or someone and she had to get out of the metal warehouse to do that. Once she was outside, she lifted her phone to check the signal and found three bars.

Something hard pressed into the base of her skull and she froze. "Just keep walking," the voice behind her said. "Give me the phone."

She passed it to him.

"Walk."

"Where?"

"To your car."

The pressure on her head had moved to the vicinity of her left kidney. "Don't try to call out or alert anyone."

"You can't kill everyone here."

"I don't need to."

Meaning just her? Who was it? She didn't think it was Benji. It definitely wasn't Cherry.

“No!”

At her yell, he jerked her to a stop. She took advantage of his momentary surprise to yank out of his grasp and run for her car.

“Hey!” His shout echoed behind her.

“Someone help me!”

Only the place was a graveyard. Where was everyone? She continued her race toward her vehicle but took a circuitous route, dropping behind other cars and darting around anything that could offer her cover. When she finally made it, she threw herself into the driver’s seat, locked the doors, and pressed the button to start the engine. The Subaru roared to life and she jammed the gas, spun the wheel, and aimed for the exit.

As soon as she was through the gate, she headed for Wilkins Gas station. She needed a phone. She’d have to take Youngstown Road, but it was the closest place to find help and—

She nearly jammed on the brakes.

Was this what happened to Brenda?

When she came to the curve, she glanced in the mirror and slowed almost to a crawl. It took mere seconds to get around it, but only when she was past it did she breathe again.

Another glance in the rearview mirror brought a scream to her throat.

The masked figure in her back seat pressed a gun against her shoulder. “Thank you for getting around that death trap. Now, here’s the plan.”

No, there wasn't going to be a plan. She stomped on the brakes and twisted the wheel away from the mountain drop-off. The sudden jerk sent him slamming back against the door and he let out a harsh scream. The car shuddered to a stop, and she shoved open the door, pushed out of the driver's seat, and headed for the tree line.

SHE WAS IN TROUBLE. Tate's gut screamed at him to hurry and he aimed his vehicle toward Youngstown Road. He hated that route as much as the next person, but shaving ten minutes off his time to get to Steph seemed like a good idea. Please take care of her, God. She has people who love her and need her in their lives. I need her in my life too, God. Don't let me lose her when you've just introduced us. Let me get to know her. Please?

Cole was about five minutes behind him, telling him more information, and James was bringing backup. "How is Stan involved in this?" Tate asked, taking another hairpin curve a little too fast. He pressed the brake and gripped the wheel tight enough for his knuckles to glow white.

"That's not clear. I'm hoping he can tell us when he wakes up. Also, I got a call from the lab. Stan's DNA is not on the clothing found in his kitchen. Then again, they were freshly washed so that's not surprising."

"You think someone set him up? Left the clothes there to redirect the investigation?"

"I'm leaning that way. I went back for a second look and couldn't find any other clean clothes. The dirty clothes basket in his bathroom was full."

"Could have just decided to wash those and not the others."

"True. How far away are you?"

Tate slammed on the brakes. "Found her car. This side of the curve on Youngstown

Road. Doors are open. Front driver and back driver's side. I think she's on foot going through the woods somewhere."

"I'm almost there."

THIRTEEN

STEPH CRASHED through the underbrush with a quick glance behind her. The man who'd taken her was familiar, but she couldn't place him. The mask hadn't helped, but his voice...

It was the same man who'd spoken to her when he'd broken into her home. Definitely not Stan. And not Benji. She let her gaze bounce from tree to tree, desperately searching for something. Anything that would give her shelter from the man chasing her.

"Stephanie, stop! You're making this so much harder than it needs to be!"

She almost laughed through her terror. Should she apologize that she was making him work to snuff out her life? The ridiculous question flitted through her mind—a testament to her borderline panic.

Gulping a deep breath, she finally emerged from the trees and came to a wooden fence. She threw herself between the rails and beelined to the barn fifty yards away. She looked back and didn't see her pursuer, but that didn't mean he couldn't see her. Pulling on all her reserves, she put on a burst of speed and rounded the side of the structure. She paused, hands on knees while she thought. He'd expect her to go in. The structure was falling down, with rotting boards on the ground and the door hanging by one hinge.

And there were probably rats inside. And bugs and snakes and...

She shuddered.

Footsteps from around the corner hitched her breath in her throat, and she scurried around the opposite side, opting to stay out of sight and pray he thought she went in to hide.

“Come on, Stephanie,” the voice said. “You don’t want to be in here. You might get hurt. Just come on out and let’s talk.”

If she didn’t get her pulse under control, all he was going to have to do was follow the thud thud of her pounding heart. And then she spotted the deer stand just beyond the barn and inside the tree line. If she climbed up and he spotted her, she’d be trapped, but she had nowhere else to go or hide. She was at a ranch that spanned at least thirty acres. But the deer stand was attached to the tree trunk and an idea took shape.

While he was busy looking for her in the barn, she raced across the open field and grabbed the ladder. It tilted back at her, and she gasped, then managed to steady it and scrambled up to sprawl across the wooden flooring. Gulping air, she peered through the rectangular gap that ran from one side to the other.

And saw him heading her way.

No, no, no.

She bit her lip. Okay then. She waited. Watched him get closer and closer. She climbed through the open space on the wall next to the tree, gripped like a true tree hugger, and inched down until she was between the open area and the bottom of the stand. Her long sleeves protected her forearms and her jeans her thighs, but she had no idea how long she could hold on because her biceps were already complaining.

Thank goodness for her twice-weekly workouts at the gym. She bit her lip and listened. When his feet hit the wood floor of the deer stand, he cursed. “Steph! Where are you, you brat? I don’t have time for this.”

His voice. She knew that voice. But who did it belong to?

She inched down the tree, whispering prayers, knowing he was looking out, searching for her. Thankfully she landed on the ground beneath the structure so he wouldn’t be able to see her. She crept over to the ladder and knocked it over. His scream of rage followed her as she took off once more through the woods.

TATE AND COLE stomped through the underbrush, following the trail left by Steph and the person after her. At least Tate didn’t need a degree in tracking to know which way they went.

“Left,” Cole said.

Tate was already heading that direction. “You think it’s Benji?”

“That’s the way I’m leaning.”

“He had help.” Tate ducked under a low-hanging branch.

“Yeah. Stan.”

“No, this has to be a whole ring. Brenda indicated she thought it was a whole group of people who worked at Bolin’s that were involved.”

“I’ll admit that it occurred to me. Embezzlement, money laundering. What else?”

“Stan liked to grow things,” Tate said. “What if he was growing more than veggies

and herbs?”

“You mean like pot?”

“Yeah. It’s still illegal here, but the demand is high.” He paused. “No pun intended.”

Cole snorted and Tate let his gaze roam the area. Come on, Steph, where are you?

“There,” he said, pointing, “through those trees.”

Cole pulled up. “Wait. Look. That deer stand.”

He hurried over to it and Tate followed. Cole nudged the ladder. “That’s been recently moved. Look at the ground.”

“Yeah, and footprints. Two sets leading away from here heading that way.” He pointed to the tree line just beyond.

“Let’s go.”

FOURTEEN

STEPH WASN'T SURE how long she'd been hunkered down behind the large oak, but she no longer heard her pursuer and that relieved and worried her at the same time. She hadn't gone far from the deer stand, figuring Tate would come looking for her when she didn't check in. She just had to be smart and stay alive until he found her.

And that meant getting into the house that was about twenty yards in front of her. Twenty yards of immaculate and wide-open space all around the perimeter of the house. She'd had no idea this home was in the area, but someone lived there. And they had kids, judging by the play set and sandbox.

Which was why she was still sitting where she was.

She had no idea if the man had managed to climb down like she had or if he'd jumped or if he was still in the deer stand, but she was just about convinced no one was home, and if she broke inside, she wouldn't be putting a family in jeopardy.

She finally took a deep breath, pushed away from the tree, and bolted toward the house. Every second she was out in the open, she expected to feel a bullet slam into her. When she made it to the deck, she scrambled up the steps and tried the knob on the French door. To her amazement, it twisted, and she swung it inward, shut it, and locked it.

For a moment she stood in the den, taking in the emptiness of the home. No sounds of children playing or a parent in the vicinity. She went straight to the kitchen, looking

for a landline phone.

Nothing on the wall.

“Home office?” she muttered. It didn’t take long to find the room upstairs at the end of the long hallway. She pushed through the cracked door and scanned the mahogany desk. No landline phone. “Ugh!”

A floorboard creaked and Steph swung toward the open door to find herself staring down the barrel of a gun. She gasped and held her hands in the air and scurried backward behind the desk. “Don’t shoot. Please.”

“Who are you and what are you doing in here?” The man was in his early thirties with spiky, sleep-mussed hair, pajama bottoms, and bare feet. He held the weapon like he knew how to use it.

“I’m Stephanie Cross. A man tried to kidnap me and I got away. I ran through the woods and saw your house. The door off your deck was unlocked, so I came in. I didn’t think anyone was here. I was looking for a phone. I ... I...” She snapped her lips shut to stop the flow of words and took a deep breath.

“Steph Cross?” he asked. “Your brothers are Dixon, Keegan, and James?”

“Yes.”

He lowered the gun and she sent up a prayer of thanks.

“I went to school with them. I’ve already called 911.” He pulled a phone out of his pajama pocket. “They’re on the way.”

A shadow flickered behind him. Movement. She opened her mouth to warn him when

there was an audible thud. He crumpled to the floor.

Steph grabbed a paperweight from the desk and threw it at the attacker's head. It slammed into his chest. A sharp gasp escaped him and he dropped his gun. Steph raced from behind the desk and jammed her fist into his throat. He went to the floor gagging. She zipped past him, but he swung a leg out and caught her foot, sending her sprawling to the polished hardwood with a pained grunt. When she rolled, she kicked the weapon and it slid under the armoire.

He growled a curse, snagged her leg, and yanked her back to his side. Then with a quick move landed on top of her, his hands around her throat. She reached up to grab his wrists while the pressure increased.

TATE SCANNED the property line, seconds ticking past while he made sure the figure who had entered the home a few seconds ago was alone. "That's the guy who broke into Steph's house and mine." He started forward, racing across the open backyard.

Tate and Cole came up on the guy just after he'd slid a hand into the hole he'd cut in the glass. Within seconds he was inside. Sirens echoed in the distance. Backup was close.

"He's the one who tried to frame Stan," Cole said.

"Yep."

Tate stepped through the door the guy hadn't bothered to close, the hole in the glass mocking him. Too bad the homeowners hadn't had an alarm on that door.

"Police! Show yourselves!" Cole and Tate called out twice.

“Tate! Cole! Up here!”

Tate’s heart lurched. “Steph!”

FIFTEEN

STEPH GASPED FOR AIR. Somehow she'd managed a well-placed knee that had him howling and loosening his grip. Then Cole's and Tate's shouts had frozen him long enough for her to snag the paperweight she'd thrown from the desk and slam it into the side of his head. Now he lay on the floor, stunned but not unconscious.

She scrambled away from him and swept her hand under the armoire, just as Tate entered the room, his weapon on her attacker. She found the gun and shoved it to the side, not wanting to pick it up in front of two cops—regardless of who they were—whose adrenaline was probably flowing as fast as hers.

Cole went straight to the masked man, cuffed him, and ripped the mask off.

Steph gaped. "Gage Bolin!"

He glared at her while Tate checked on the unconscious homeowner. "Pulse is strong," Tate said. "But he's going to have a nasty headache when he wakes up."

"At least he'll wake up," Steph said, still gazing at her attacker while her pulse thrummed in her ears and her throat ached. "It was you all along?"

"I want a lawyer."

Paramedics hurried through the door while Cole grabbed Bolin's arm and passed him off to a uniformed officer. "Make sure he gets his lawyer." He looked at the man. "And go round up his kids. Maybe they'll talk if he won't."

The flash of fear in Bolin's eyes made Steph believe Cole might be onto something. She cleared her sore throat and walked over to Gage. "I saw the vehicle in the warehouse," she said. "That wasn't you who ran Brenda off the road, because Cherry said she didn't call you until the day before yesterday. So who was it? Benji? Or..." She hesitated. "Cherry?"

His shoulders twitched.

Cherry.

Her heart plummeted. "No."

"It was an accident," Bolin muttered, his voice low.

"Sure it was," Cole said.

"Cherry killed her? She wouldn't. No." Her sore throat tightened even more and tears gathered. "I don't believe you. You're a liar!" She backed away.

"Steph..." Tate held out a hand, but she ignored it and shoved out of the room. She needed space, room to breathe, to process that one of her friends had killed another. She made it outside to the front yard and bent double, hands on her knees. No, God ... not Cherry.

A gentle hand on her shoulder pulled her up and around. She looked up through her tears to see Tate's compassionate gaze, and she leaned her forehead on his shoulder while silent tears dripped down her cheeks. "I want to hear her side of this."

"Of course."

"I don't believe him."

“I know you don’t.”

She wanted to punch him for sounding so pacifying, but deep down she realized he was just trying to offer some comfort. And while she appreciated it, she pulled back and swiped her palms across her cheeks. Paramedics loaded the homeowner into the ambulance.

Steph stopped the nearest one. “How is he?”

“He’ll be all right as far as I can tell, but a CT scan is probably a good idea.”

“Any idea who he is?”

“His ID was in his wallet. One of the officers called his wife. She’s meeting us at the hospital.”

“Oh good.” When the ambulance pulled away, she turned to Tate. “Okay, now what?”

“Now we—as in Cole and I—go find the other three Bolins and figure the rest of this thing out.”

TATE COULDN’T LEAVE Steph without a way home. At least that’s what he told himself when he led her to his unmarked vehicle. She climbed into the back seat, buckled up, and rested her head against the headrest. He still wasn’t sure she shouldn’t go to the hospital, but she refused and he wanted to keep an eye on her. The fact that Cole didn’t argue said he felt the same.

While she rested, he and Cole mapped out a plan, alerted SWAT and other backup, then made their way across the mountain to Bolin’s Nature Nurture Expeditions.

Cole parked just outside the entrance. “All right, Steph. You stay put, and I mean that.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she muttered. “I’m done playing investigator.”

“Good.” Cole popped the trunk and went to don his SWAT gear.

Concerned at the ring of defeat in her tone, Tate turned to look at her.

She met his gaze and narrowed her eyes. “But if you need me, I’m here. You know. Just if you need me to talk to Cherry. I think she’d listen to me. Benji won’t. You have to take him first. If you do that, Cherry will want to protect him.”

Tate nodded, relieved her momentary surrender to the stress seemed to be gone. “Noted.” Reluctantly, he left her and followed Cole through the open gates. They headed for the office, keeping in contact via comms. Tate joined Nathan Carlisle, one of the other detectives, and waited until everyone was in place. Steph’s brother James was there with his team and gave the signal that they were ready.

“Benji’s in the back office,” he said. “We have eyes on him through the window.”

“Copy that. Where’s the sister?”

“Reported to be on the grounds near the zip line tower. Can I get an affirmative?”

That came and Cole said, “Take the brother in the office first. Once he’s contained, on my signal, take the sister.”

“Copy.”

Tate and Nathan walked up to the office door and Tate tried the knob. Once it

twisted, he pushed the door open, then swept inside with Nathan right behind him. “Hands in the air.” He kept his voice low, not wanting to alert the man in the back room.

The woman at the desk gasped and shot her hands up while her wide eyes darted to the closed door that had been confirmed to be Benji Bolin’s location. Tate held a finger to his lips and motioned for her to come out from behind the desk and join him.

She gulped, nodded, and did as told. Nathan moved to the door and glanced at Tate. Tate nodded. Nathan pushed the door open and Tate swept inside, weapon on the man at the desk.

Benji yelped and jumped to his feet, backpedaling toward the exit behind him.

“Police, Benji! Freeze!”

But he kept going, throwing open the door only to come to an abrupt halt when he stared down the barrels of the officers there. “What is this?” He spun back to Tate and Nathan. “What’s going on?”

“On your knees. Cross your legs at the ankles and put your hands behind your back. Now!”

Benji looked like he might run, but after a few seconds of hesitation, lowered himself to the ground and did as instructed.

“You’re under arrest for the murder of Brenda Hudson, conspiracy to commit murder, and a host of other charges,” Cole said.

“No, wait, you don’t understand.” He looked up over his shoulder at Cole. “No one meant for Brenda to die. It was an accident.”

“Of course it was. That’s what your father said too.”

The man paled. “My father?”

“Yep.”

“Where’s your mother?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t heard from her since they got back from Aspen. She hates this place. Only tolerates it because it pays for her lifestyle.”

“Fine. We’ll find her with or without your help. Let’s go. Your sister will be joining us shortly.”

“Cherry?” He laughed. “Are you kidding me? She won’t tell you anything.”

“Not a bit kidding. And guess we’ll find out if she has anything to say or not.”

“I’m not saying anything more. I want a lawyer.”

“Smartest thing you’ve said so far.”

SIXTEEN

STEPH BOLTED OUT of the car when she spotted officers escorting a handcuffed Cherry to the nearest cruiser. Other workers had been rounded up, but she'd ignored them. There were only a few customers and they'd been cleared and escorted to their vehicles to leave the area.

"Cherry!"

Her friend looked up, caught Steph's eye, and burst into tears.

Steph started to run to her, but Tate appeared and snagged her arm. "Not right now, Steph."

She jerked away from him and shot him a hard glare. He frowned but didn't flinch. Steph backed down. He was just doing his job.

His stance softened. "Come on, I'll take you home."

"No, please. I want to go to the station with you. I know I can't talk to her, but maybe it will help if she knows she's not alone. That I'm there. That I believe in her."

He sighed, then offered her a faint smile. "You're a good friend."

"Thanks."

It didn't take long to arrive at the station, where Tate escorted her inside and allowed

her to sit outside the interrogation room Cherry had been led to.

Benji was next door, their father in yet another room. Their mother had yet to be found.

Tate and Cole had disappeared into the room with Cherry fifteen minutes ago. Steph reached for her phone, only to remember Gage Bolin had taken it and probably tossed it somewhere. She sat back with a huff, then leaned her head against the wall and prayed.

She wasn't sure how much time passed, but she might have dozed mid-prayer because the next thing she knew Tate was calling her name. She blinked and stood. "What is it?"

"Cherry insists she will only talk to you."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're her friend and she needs to tell you what happened. According to her."

"Oh. Okay. Is that allowed?"

"It is. Follow me."

When Steph stepped into the room, Cherry brought her handcuffed wrists up to swipe her cheeks. Steph walked around to hug her, and Cherry let loose with a sob followed by tears that seemed to have no end.

But finally, she stopped, drew in a deep breath, and took the handful of tissues that Steph gave her, compliments of the box on the table.

“Okay,” Steph said, “I’m here. Talk to me.”

“They want me to tell them where my mother is, but Steph, I promise I don’t know. She and my dad have been cagey my whole life, but I never knew about their illegal activities until about three weeks ago.”

“But Benji knew.”

“Yes. Apparently.”

“How did they hide it all from you?”

“I guess it all started after I went to college. Then when I came home, they were knee-deep in it. To be honest, I knew something hinky was going on, but just ignored it. I was so busy trying to keep the business going that I convinced myself I didn’t have time to worry about people on the property after hours. Or strange calls in the middle of the night. Or my parents constantly traveling.” She shrugged. “Maybe I just didn’t want to see it.” She scoffed. “You can’t imagine how stupid I feel.” Tears welled once more. “But they’re my family,” she whispered. “I love them.”

“I know,” Steph said. “I never would have thought they’d be involved in anything illegal.” She hesitated. “Well, Benji maybe, but not you or your parents. They were always involved in charities and—”

“Charities that they used for money laundering.”

Steph sighed and raked a hand over her hair. “I’m sorry, Cherry.”

“I am too.”

They fell silent a moment, then Steph bit her lip, pondering how to approach the next

subject. She reached out and squeezed her friend's fingers, always aware that Tate and Cole and who knew who else were watching from behind the two-way mirror. "Cherry, tell me what happened with Brenda."

Cherry drew in a sharp breath and gulped air. "That was all just a horrible accident. Horrible and no one will believe me. They won't." She hiccuped and dropped her face into her palms.

"Tell me."

"I can't," she whispered.

"You have to." Steph sat for a moment, thinking. Then took a wild stab. "Cherry, you've protected him your entire life. You've always put his needs ahead of your own. Always. Truthfully, you've basically sacrificed your life for his. It's time to reclaim your life."

"At the expense of his?" She mumbled the question.

"He hurt, probably killed, someone. If you continue to protect him and don't tell the truth, he's going to hurt someone else. Can you let that happen?" Steph didn't bother to add that Benji probably wouldn't be hurting anyone for the rest of his life if convicted of all the charges against him.

After a few seconds, Cherry lifted her head, her tears gone, but grief still in her eyes. "She'd discovered everything. The crazy numbers in the accounting, the fake sales to various customers, the return of equipment but the refund was never deposited. Everything. She was suspicious for a while, but she took her time and put together hard evidence against my parents and Benji—and brought it to me. I didn't know what to think. I told her she was out of her mind. That she was making it up or lying or ... I don't know. While I yelled at her, she just sat there, this sad expression on her

face. One of indecision and pity. Benji overheard the argument and stormed in. He grabbed Brenda and locked her in the office closet.” Cherry shook her head, her eyes wide with the memory. “I didn’t know what to do. I reached for my phone to call the police and Benji grabbed it from me. He was furious, in a panic, unsure what to do.” She swallowed hard. “But he wasn’t letting Brenda go, that was clear.”

Steph gritted her teeth hard enough that her jaw ached. “Go on.”

“He left, never thinking I’d go against what he planned.” A low scoff escaped her. “I admit I’ve protected him and covered up a lot for him since he was a child, but murder? There was no way I was going to let him do that to Brenda. To our friend. The person who came to me, begging me to get Benji to do the right thing so she didn’t have to turn him in.”

“Oh, Cherry...”

“A couple of hours passed. Benji paced the office, tossed threats in my direction, but he wouldn’t leave. He even cut the cord to the phone line. And I didn’t dare try to go anywhere to find another phone or involve one of the innocent guests. I worked the front desk—minus answering calls—until closing, knowing that time was running out for Brenda. Benji canceled all of the activities that would involve him leaving the area—and me. But finally, he stepped outside to talk to someone, and I hurried to let Brenda out of the closet. I shoved her out the office’s back door and got her to her car. She was practically hysterical. I told her to go to the police and tell them everything and I’d back up her story. Just as she was leaving, Benji came back and realized what had happened. He raced to the nearest vehicle, one of our SUVs, and climbed in. I knew he was going after her. Unfortunately, I had no way to call for help, so I jumped in the passenger seat, begging him to stop, but...” She shook her head and tears tracked her cheeks once more. “He was determined and took off after her. I was horrified to see her go in the Youngstown Road direction. I guess she was hoping that Benji would be too scared to follow.”

“Benji took her phone?”

Cherry nodded.

Of course. “Then help was closer. The store at the bottom of the hill.”

“Yes. I thought about that too. Anyway, Benji bumped her car toward the drop-off, but she managed to stay on the road. I grabbed the wheel and he pushed me off, screaming at me he was going to kill me next. My head hit the window, and it dazed me for a few minutes. He took advantage and bumped her one more time. That time she went over.” Cherry lowered her head to her hands and wept. When she regained control, she sat for a brief second, pulling in gasping breaths. “Then he stopped,” she said into the table, “got out of the car, and fired a gun at her.” She sniffed, lifted her head, and grabbed another handful of tissues. “I didn’t even know he had a gun on him. The rest of that evening is a blur. I was screaming at him that he’d crossed a line and I wasn’t going to be a part of it. He put the gun to my head and told me to shut up. So I did. Then we drove back to the office and he told me to think good and hard about reporting him to the police. Because our parents would go down too. It was then that I realized my whole family were crooks. And now ... killers.”

TATE LOOKED AT COLE, who couldn’t seem to take his eyes from the drama unfolding in the interrogation room.

James had come from Benji’s room just in time to hear the full story. “Wow,” he said. “Benji wouldn’t say a word and Cherry can’t seem to stop talking.” He glanced at his phone.

“Shows which one of them has a conscience,” Tate said.

Cole nodded. “Must have been killing her keeping all that bottled up inside.”

James glanced at his phone again. Tate raised a brow. “You expecting a call?”

“Lainie’s coming by. She said she’d text when she got here.”

Tate shoved his hands in his back pockets and nodded to the two in the other room. “Cherry would have come to us eventually.”

“You believe her?” James asked.

“I do.” He pursed his lips. “She won’t walk away from this without some consequences, though. I’m guessing she’ll have to face some charges for covering up a crime.”

James crossed his arms after another look at his phone. “Maybe she can get those reduced for testifying.”

“You think she’ll do it?” Tate asked.

Cole shrugged. “Only one way to find out. Let’s see if we can get a deal worked up fast while she’s still getting all of this off her conscience.”

“Cherry.” Steph’s soft voice reached them once more. “What was Stan’s role in all of this?”

“I asked Benji that after the detectives left. He found out about the money laundering before Brenda did and came to Benji, wanting in on everything . . . especially the profits. He demanded a percentage for his silence.”

“Ohhh, I see. So, all of his zip line adventures...”

“Yeah, just a cover-up. He never paid for that stuff, but it was a way to account for

some of the money coming in. Just a small part, of course, but..." She shrugged. "It kept him quiet, according to Benji. And culpable should he ever decide to turn." She swiped a hand over her hair. "I can't believe this," she whispered. "I just can't."

James nodded. "I'll call the ADA."

He left to contact the assistant district attorney, and Tate turned to focus on Steph. She was sitting quietly while Cherry continued to weep. He couldn't imagine it. Finding out your whole family was involved in something so awful. And then trying to cover up the murder. He sighed. "I'll get Steph. We'll let Cherry sit there and get herself together while James gets in touch with the ADA."

"Works for me."

Tate went to the interrogation room, opened the door, and motioned for Steph to join him. When she did, the grief in her eyes hit him. She'd suffered too much of that over the past three days. But at least Brenda and her family would have closure. He touched Steph's cheek. "I'll call you and keep you updated, okay?"

"Sure."

"I was invited to the lake house. Do you think you're going to go after all of this?"

She shrugged. "Yes. As much as I might want to hide under the bed at the moment, I won't do that."

He offered her a faint smile. "Good for you."

"See you there." She headed for the lobby.

Tate watched her go for a brief moment, then walked back to let Cherry know they'd

have some information for her soon.

He stepped inside. “Hey.”

She kept her gaze on the table.

“I just—” An alarm sounded, cutting him off.

A gunshot followed somewhere beyond the room.

Cherry jerked her head up. “What’s going on?”

Tate ran from the room and locked it behind him while James and Cole rushed past him, headed to the front lobby.

“Stay with her,” Cole said over his shoulder.

“Where’s my family!”

Tate was opening the door to the interrogation room just as the scream ripped through the building.

Cherry jerked. “Mom? Mom!”

“Put the weapon down!”

“Put the gun down!”

“Drop it!”

The shouts echoed over the blaring alarm.

“I want to see my daughter! Just let me see Cherry and I’ll drop the gun!”

Cherry turned pleading eyes on Tate. “Don’t let them kill her.” She yanked at the handcuffs attached to the table. “Let me talk to her! Please!”

After a split second’s worth of hesitation, Tate unlocked her from the table but kept her cuffed. He led Cherry down the hallway, stopping just beyond the lobby where James and Cole were covering the situation, out of the way of any stray bullets.

“Shut that thing off so we can hear,” James said into his radio. The blaring alarm stopped seconds later.

Just beyond them, officers were hidden behind anything that might offer cover. James looked like he wanted to puke. Cole didn’t look much better. And finally Tate saw why.

Helen Bolin stood just inside the front door, her eyes wild, gun clutched in her right hand. The gun rested against Steph’s temple. Officers had closed in behind the woman, blocking her, but she had the upper hand at the moment.

Cole looked at Tate. “You heard all the commotion?”

“Yep. So did she.”

Cherry stepped forward, stopping only when Tate wouldn’t let her go any farther. “Please,” she whispered.

“You think you can talk her down?” James asked, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

“I don’t know. All I know is I have to try. You have to let me try.”

They didn't let family negotiate with family except in extremely special situations. This might qualify.

"Cherry!"

Cole nodded to her.

"I'm here, Mom!"

At the sound of her daughter's voice, the woman froze. Steph stayed perfectly still, her eyes searching. Finally, her gaze landed on Tate and almost instantly, the fear in her eyes lessened. He suppressed a shudder. She trusted him to get her out of this. Her family, James, was right there. Tate couldn't let him watch his sister die. Live with the grief, the regrets, the what-ifs. Oh, God, help me...

He could hear Benji banging on his door. The father was quiet.

"Mom, please, don't do this," Cherry said. "You know Steph. Please."

"Where are Gage and Benji?"

"They're here. They're just answering a few questions."

"Don't lie to me! Where are they? Get them out here."

"They're in the rooms here. Just answering some questions."

Tate had to admit he was impressed with Cherry's composure. He wouldn't have thought she had it in her after the breakdown with Steph. Her gaze clung to his and her pulse thrummed visibly in her throat.

“I saw them get arrested,” Helen said. “I want them released! Now! Or I’m going to start shooting people. Starting with this one!”

Steph closed her eyes and Tate’s breath hitched.

“No, Mom! She’s my friend!”

Cherry broke away from Tate and rushed toward the lobby.

“Stop!” Tate yelled.

She stopped several feet from her mother and Steph. Tate and the nearby officers held their fire. The officers at the glass doors behind Helen and Steph wouldn’t shoot for fear of the bullet going through Helen and into Steph. A head shot from a sniper could cause her to jerk her finger in reflex and send a bullet into Steph’s brain.

Panic swirled. How could he help resolve this?

Steph’s eyes were open and locked on Cherry.

Cherry walked forward. “Mom, I need you to put the weapon down.”

“Cherry...”

She ignored James’s tone full of warning. This was about the worst situation Tate could imagine playing out. Nothing was going according to the rules. Well, it didn’t matter at the moment. Right now, they had to get Steph away from the woman—and Cherry might be their best chance of making that happen.

Cherry’s mother hesitated. “What are you doing? Stop right there! I’m your mother. You do as I say!”

“I want to help you, Mom. I want to help Steph. Do you understand? I want to help. Steph, she’s not going to hurt you. Are you, Mom?”

Cherry took another step, and Steph gave a faint nod at whatever she saw on Cherry’s face. Cherry finally stopped about three feet away, and Tate grabbed a breath into air-starved lungs.

“You told me to take care of Benji,” Cherry said. “All my life, you’ve told me to take care of him. But I can’t do that if I’m in prison, can I?”

Confusion flickered on Helen’s face. “What? I...”

“Drop, Steph!”

Cherry’s cry sent Steph down like her legs had turned to wet noodles. The weapon slid away from Steph’s temple and time slowed. Cherry launched herself at her mother and the two women joined Steph on the tile floor.

Tate bolted toward them.

A gun went off.

Everyone went still.

“Steph!” His shout echoed in the split second of silence, then chaos erupted.

Steph rolled one way. Cherry the other. A red stain on her green business shirt.

Then time sped back up. Cherry’s mother had a matching red stain on her abdomen, only hers was growing. But her hand still searched for the weapon, closed her fist around the grip, and yanked it up to aim it right at Tate.

Cherry threw herself in front of him as two shots sounded. One hit Cherry and she dropped.

The other hit her mother right between the eyes.

Cherry slapped a hand to her side and met his gaze while tears slid down her cheeks. “I had to make it right,” she whispered. Then her eyes closed and she went limp.

SEVENTEEN

One Month Later

STEPH WAITED while Tate pulled to the curb of her home, then went to join him. He hugged her. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks. So do you.” A wave of shyness swept over her. Which was incredibly weird because she’d never been shy a day in her life. She pulled her coat tight and slid into the passenger seat. He waited until she was buckled to shut the door.

Gentlemen did still exist.

Tate settled into the driver’s seat, his leather-gloved hands gripping the wheel. “Sure is nice of James to have us all over again.”

“The weather’s been so good I’m sure he wants to take advantage of it.”

“He and Lainie set the date for their wedding, did you hear?”

“Of course.” She shot him an amused look and realized he was slightly nervous as well for some reason. “New Year’s Eve. I can’t think of a better way to spend the evening.”

“Yeah, me too.” His fingers flexed on the wheel, and he aimed the vehicle toward the road that would take them up the mountain to the lake house. “Cherry coming?”

“She is.” Could this conversation get any more awkward? What was going on with him? She didn’t think he did nerves. “This is her first outing since ... everything. Thank goodness Lainie was there. She and her medical expertise are the only reasons Cherry lived.”

“I heard.”

More stilted dialogue. Steph decided to just go with it if it made him feel better. “Anyway, she’s finished with her rehab and ready to start living again. I think she’s excited and terrified all at the same time.”

“I know the feeling,” he muttered.

“Sorry? What was that?”

He cleared his throat and shot her a sideways glance. “Nothing.” He paused. “I know she visits Benji and her father—or tries to. They still won’t see her?”

“Not since they heard she was going to testify at their trials. She still has a hard time reconciling that her father was the one in the parking garage looking for a way to attack me. And was also the guy at the library. And the one who attacked Stan, trying to frame him. Talking about all of that on the stand ... well, it’s safe to say she’s dreading it.”

“I’m sure that’s hard for her.”

“Terribly, but she’s determined.”

“Tell me about Stan. How’s he doing?”

Steph often visited Stan in the rehabilitation center and was touched that Tate asked about him when he knew she’d been to see her former boss. “Recovering. He’s still

got some memory loss. I honestly don't know what's going to happen to him." The man had basically been a stooge, but he'd also made his choices.

"Time will tell."

They fell silent, but finally, it wasn't awkward or uncomfortable. Quite the opposite. She found she enjoyed being in Tate's company whatever they were doing.

Except dodging bullets and people trying to kill her. "When you texted last night, you said you wanted me to meet your parents. Tell me a little more about them. What are they like?"

"They're awesome. Mom's a high school science teacher and Dad's a financial advisor." He glanced at her. "I can't believe we haven't already had this conversation."

"We've been a little busy."

"True. Anyway, I believe you'll really like them. They're good people and they're very excited for me to introduce you."

Her stomach fluttered at the thought and what it all could mean. But she was excited too.

He cleared his throat. "I have a question."

"Sure."

"I know we haven't seen much of each other since the ... event, but I keep wondering how you knew to drop like you did when Cherry was talking to her mother."

That was his question? Maybe the silence was more awkward for him than it was for

her. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just felt like she was trying to tell me something even while she was keeping her mother mostly calm. Then when she said ‘drop,’ I dropped. I had no idea she was planning on tackling her and wrestling with the gun, but I think she saved me.”

“She definitely did.”

“So now I have a question. How’d she get away from you?”

He cleared his throat. “Ah, well...”

She studied the flush creeping up his neck and into his cheeks. “You knew she was up to something, didn’t you? You let her go.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that.” He paused. “But yes, we needed to calm Helen Bolin down and give her something to make her believe we were listening.”

“Well, it worked. So thanks.”

He finally pulled into the lake home driveway, parked, and came around to open her door. Then he took her hand, his warm and endearingly a little damp, and led her down to the dock.

“Wait,” she said. “Where’s everyone else?”

“They’re coming. I wanted to get here a little early so we could talk.”

“Okay, sure.”

On the deck, the wind was chilly coming off the water, and she pulled her gloves from her pocket.

“Too cold?”

“No, not at all.” She walked over to the firepit and cranked it up. “We have it all to ourselves.” She chose the cushioned love seat–sized swing hanging from the wooden structure James and Cole had built last month. He sat next to her as she’d hoped he would.

He turned to face her and took her gloved hand in his. “I’m not very good at small talk, Steph. You probably noticed that in the car.” She chuckled and he quirked a small smile at her. “So I’m just going to throw something out there.”

“Throw it.”

“I like you. A lot.” He drew in a deep breath.

“I like you too, Tate.” Then she stayed quiet, letting him figure out how he wanted to say what he wanted to say.

“For what seems like my entire life, because of what happened to my friend, I’ve been focused on making detective. I’ve been determined nothing would derail my plan and I’ve sacrificed a lot. Including personal relationships. And since I’ve met you, I’ve realized something.”

“What?” She kept her voice low, almost a whisper.

“That I don’t want whatever might be there for us to be part of that sacrifice.” He cleared his throat and squeezed her fingers. “The last few weeks have been so busy I haven’t had time to really see straight, but when the day is done and in those moments before I drift off to sleep, you’re on my mind. I think about you, I want to see you, to talk to you. More than can be said in a few short texts. And I wonder about you.”

“You wonder about me? What do you wonder about?” This she had to hear.

He laughed. “What you’re doing, who you’re with, if you’ve had a good day. How you’re doing processing Brenda’s death and everything else that went on.”

“I see.”

“Full disclosure?”

“Absolutely.”

He pushed stray hairs behind her ear, leaving a trail of heat that had nothing to do with the flames from the firepit.

“Mostly, I wonder what it would be like to kiss you.”

She let a smile curve her lips and leaned toward him. “Then why don’t you find out, because I’ve been wondering that too.”

Apparently, that was all the encouragement he needed, because his lips were on hers almost before she finished the sentence. His kiss was sweet, respectful ... and hot. Definitely hot. Holy wow. She kissed him back, feeling his simmering passion and restraint while they both reveled in discovering the wonder of that first kiss and all the questions it answered.

Like she could do this for the rest of her life and die a happy woman.

He finally lifted his head and let his eyes lock on hers. “That was better than what my limited imagination came up with.”

She laughed, a sound that came from her soul. “Same.”

“Think we need to do that again and make sure it was real?”

“For sure.”

He started to pull her in for another round when the sound of footsteps on the dock stilled them both. “Later,” he whispered.

“Later.”

James and Lainie stopped next to the swing. “Glad you feel comfortable enough to make yourself at home,” he told her. But the look in his eyes said he was happy for her.

Lainie elbowed him and he caught her to him and kissed her forehead. “I’m going to get stuff for the s’mores.” He eyed Steph and Tate. “You two don’t look like you want to move, so...”

“Yeah,” Steph said, “why don’t you and Lainie go get the goodies while Tate and I finish our conversation.”

“That’s what it’s called these days?” He narrowed his eyes at Tate. “Remember that’s my baby sister.”

“A baby sister who’s about to start telling all of her brother’s secrets if he doesn’t go away.”

James frowned. “Now, see here—”

Lainie giggled. “Stop it. Both of you.” She dragged her fiancé back toward the house. “Oh, look, Jesslyn, Cole, and Kenzie are here. Let’s go keep them away from the dock for a few more minutes.” She looked back at Steph and mouthed, “You’re welcome.”

Steph laughed and Tate chuckled, then gazed down at her. “Now, where were we?”

“Winding up a conversation if I recall correctly.”

“Ah yes.” He kissed her again. Long seconds later, he tipped his forehead to hers. “I like conversing with you.”

“I see. So how should this conversation end?”

“With, ‘Where would you like to go on an official first date?’”

“I don’t care as long as it’s with you.”

He grinned, and Steph couldn’t wait to see how the rest of their story unfolded. If it should end with “and they lived happily ever after,” filling in the details sounded like a lifetime she could look forward to.