

Julie Anne Lindsey

THE SHERIFF'S SECRET



MILLS & BOON
HEROES

Julie Anne Lindsey

The Sheriff's Secret

Аннотация

A Sheriff with a secret – and a second chance at love! After being called to the site of a shooting, Sheriff West Garrett finds the only woman he's ever loved crying over the body and covered in blood! But Tina Ellet is the target of a crazed stalker and West is her only protection – he'll risk everything for her!

A sheriff with a secret

And a second chance at love

When Sheriff West Garrett is called to the site of a grisly shooting, he finds the only woman he's ever loved crying over the body and covered in blood. He never imagined this as their someday reunion! But Tina Ellet is the target of a crazed stalker and West is her only protection. When her infant daughter is abducted, West risks everything to save the child and prove to Tina their love is worth fighting for.

JULIE ANNE LINDSEY is a multi-genre author who writes the stories that keep her up at night. She's a selfproclaimed nerd with a penchant for words and proclivity for fun. Julie lives in rural Ohio with her husband and three small children. Today, she hopes to make someone smile. One day she plans to change the world. Julie is a member of the International Thriller Writers (ITW) and Sisters in Crime (SinC). Learn more about Julie Anne Lindsey at www.julieannelindsey.com.

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Dedicated to Tina.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Booklist](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extract](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Tina Ellet checked her watch for the tenth time in half as many minutes. Two of her seven patients had missed the entire group session, without so much as a text to let her know they weren't coming. Dedication and accountability to personal recovery was a must in her program, and the group had always taken the requirements seriously. Until now. So what were those two up to?

She rubbed goose bumps off her arms. Trouble was coming, she was sure of it. She just wasn't sure what form it would take. She approached her wide office windows and gave the empty sidewalk outside another long look. The forest of brightly colored

trees across the lot swayed with a wicked wind. It wasn't autumn in Kentucky until a storm tried to knock you down. "Please take it slow on your way home or to work." She turned to face the group with a forced smile. "It doesn't look good out there."

The men and women nodded in easy agreement.

"If any of you hear from Carl or Tucker, please let them know they were missed." Tina was certain many of them were worried, too, but there was nothing to be done about it for now. Instead, they flattened folding chairs and dropped disposable cups into the trash, making fast work of the cleanup and sending faint scents of cigarette smoke and coffee into the air. The scents of her childhood, minus the distinct sting of alcohol.

When the room was righted, she shouldered her handbag and collected the empty tray from her homemade blueberry muffins. Early morning sessions were popular with her group, and Tina tried to send a little hope and encouragement with each member when they left. At least enough to help them face whatever the day might bring. So far, this day had brought plenty of rain. The forecasted showers had come right on schedule, successfully soaking everything in sight. "I suppose we might as well make a run for it. The rain doesn't appear to be giving up anytime soon." In fact, the rain hadn't slowed since it began more than an hour before. "Does everyone have a ride?"

Steven, the newest member of her group, looked away as the others raised their car keys.

"Steven?" She tipped her head toward the sheeting rain.

“Would you like a ride home? I’m sure someone would be glad to drive you. No one should walk in this.”

Several members chimed in with offers, and Steven dipped his chin in agreement to the one made by Carol, an older woman standing near the door. Carol winked at Tina. She’d see Steven home safely.

Sometimes heading a recovery group for PTSD and trauma survivors was tricky. What one member saw as comfort, another saw as a threat, and so far, Steven saw most things as a threat. He’d joined the group after receiving an other-than-honorable discharge from the army last month. His severe emotional trauma had led to unbecoming behavior that garnered him a quick boot from the service, complete with truncated benefits and nowhere to turn for the support he needed. Luckily, Tina had found him, and she was certain she could help, if she didn’t scare him away first.

“All right. Here we go.” She swung the door open and held it for the group to pass. Together, they moved onto the sidewalk and waited beneath the large metal awning while Tina locked up. Hopefully, wherever Carl and Tucker were, they were safe, not caught in a flash flood or car accident or worse. She blamed her “mother’s mind” for the number of scary scenarios scooting through her head. Since the birth of her precious daughter four months ago, she’d begun to see potential danger everywhere and longed more than ever to wrap her arms around the entire world in protection.

Slowly, a few brave souls ventured into the storm, plodding through puddles toward their vehicles and prompting the others to follow. The lot was nearly empty this time of day, making Mountain Medical Plaza the perfect location for her private morning sessions.

Tina followed Carol and Steven toward a massive pickup truck whose lights flashed and locks popped up upon approach. Tina's car was the small sedan two spots away. Steven slowed his pace as he neared Carol's truck, suddenly unconcerned by the rain and wholly focused on a distant point in the morning sky.

"Steven?" Tina lifted her handbag overhead, a makeshift umbrella, and squinted through the rain. "Everything okay?"

He raised an arm, finger pointed at the building's rooftop. "Do you see that?"

The fine hairs on the back of Tina's neck raised to attention. She forced her eyes to focus through the downpour. "What do you see?"

A small shadow rocked into view. What appeared to be the long barrel of a rifle stretched out before it.

Ice coiled in Tina's gut. *It couldn't be...*

"Gun!" Steven yelled. "Get down!" He turned for Tina, arms thrown wide as one loud blast of gunfire cracked the air. Steven's head whipped back and his gait fell short. His legs crumbled beneath him and his body collapsed onto the rain-battered asphalt in a silent thud. Group members screamed and hollered around her, scattering between vehicles and running for the

building. Shattered glass rained over Steven, falling from the truck window at his side.

Tina's lungs burned as she struggled to breathe. She fell to the ground, barely perceiving what had happened. Wind whipped through her hair and mingled with the ringing in her ears. Voices warbled around her, distorted by the storm and panic beating through her head. "Stay down!" she screamed. "Get down and stay down!" She forced her eyes to search for the shadow once more, but it was gone.

Where did it go? She craned her neck in every direction, as if the shooter could be anywhere, beside her, behind her. Her chest ached and her mouth dried. How could she know who the next bullet would hit? Would there be another? Was the man finished shooting, or was he reloading? She dug her phone from her purse and dialed 911.

"911. What's your emergency?" a tinny voice echoed in her ringing ear.

Tina scrambled under the truck, counting pairs of feet moving through the lot toward the building. Four. Good. The rest were safe and together now.

"Ma'am? What's your emergency?" the voice repeated.

The world snapped back into focus then, the tragedy becoming unbearably clear. "There's a gunman at Mountain Medical Plaza." The words fell clumsily off her tongue, a line memorized for a play. Impossible to be real. "One man is down. I don't know." She stared at Steven's motionless form. "He's not

moving. I don't know where he was hit. There's so much blood."

"Where's the shooter now?"

"I'm not sure. He stopped, I think." Tina willed her mind into focus. Her group needed her. Steven needed her.

"Are you somewhere safe now, ma'am? Is there somewhere you can find shelter until emergency responders arrive?"

Her office door seemed miles away, but two group members were already there, crouched against the wall, and two others were steps away. She could help them. Get them inside.

Screaming tires drew her attention across the lot. A faded red pickup truck roared recklessly in the distance and fishtailed onto the county road beyond, barreling away like the devil was chasing it.

Tina pulled in a long gulp of oxygen to clear her brain. "I think the shooter is gone now. There was only one shot. Maybe two minutes ago. And someone's racing away in a pickup." She forced herself from beneath the truck and onto her knees, crawling over the broken glass to Steven's side. "A man's been shot. He's not moving." She stared at his motionless chest. "Not breathing." Tina pressed shaky fingers to his neck in search of a pulse that didn't beat, then tried again. "No, no, no, no." She set the phone on the ground at Steven's side, pressed the speaker option, then laced her fingers against his chest and said a silent prayer. Tina filled his lungs and pumped his heart for him until her arms shook uncontrollably from terror, grief and effort. "He's not breathing," she cried. "His heart isn't beating. CPR isn't

working.”

Behind her, the group bellowed for her to come to them. Above her, the thunder rolled.

Tina grabbed her phone and pushed onto her feet. In a torrent of desperation, she forced herself away from Steven. A round of ugly sobs pressed through her tightened lips as she hurried back to the group collecting outside her office once more. She wiped her hands on her shirt, smearing it with blood, then jammed her key into the lock and ushered the others inside. “One man is dead,” she reported to the woman on the phone. “The rest of us are...” Are what? *Fine*? None of them were fine. A man had just been murdered in front of their eyes. “No one else was physically injured.”

She wiped her eyes and nose, fighting the wave of panic determined to lay her in a useless ball. How many times had she called 911 as a kid? How many times had her drunken father taken his frustrations out on a mother too depressed to get out of bed? Broken limbs and noses. Cuts and bruises. Nothing like this. Never like this, and yet she’d felt exactly this way. Desperate. Afraid. And guilty. Always guilty. “I’m so sorry,” she wept. “So very sorry.”

The soft cry of an approaching ambulance registered in the distance, refueling her hope and drive. “I hear them now,” she told the dispatch operator. “Help is almost here.” She made the second announcement more loudly, aiming her words at the terrified group before her.

Tina slid her suit jacket from her shoulders. “You will survive this,” she told them, falling back on her training. “Understand?” They stared in variations of shock, anguish and despair. “You are survivors.” She forced the words from between clenched teeth, as much for her own benefit as theirs. “Help is almost here now. You’re going to be okay.”

Except Steven. Steven would never again be okay.

When she could find no more words, she carried her jacket through the raging storm and placed it over Steven. Fresh out of faux strength, Tina fell onto her bottom beside him, cell phone in hand, and bawled. What was wrong with this world?

* * *

CADE COUNTY SHERIFF West Garrett pressed a wide-brimmed hat over his head and levered himself out of the cruiser. A carousel of red-and-white lights illuminated the gruesome scene at a local counseling practice. Blood and glass covered the lot beside a newer model pickup truck. EMTs spoke with a cluster of people near one building.

A man lay motionless and partially covered by a tiny, bloodstained woman’s coat. This must have been the fatality Dispatch had announced. Presumably, the coat belonged to the woman curled up at the man’s side. Her arms were wrapped around her knees and her face was buried in the material of her ruined suit pants. Only the top of her blond head was visible, and it was shaking with each new sob she released.

West made his way, slowly, toward the woman.

The coroner dropped a black bag on the ground opposite the deceased.

“Ma’am?” West tugged the material of his pants and crouched beside her. “I’m Sheriff West Garrett. I’m afraid I need to ask you a few questions.”

The woman stilled. Her sobs ceased.

West rested his forearms on his thighs, allowing his hands to dangle between his knees. Rain dripped from the brim of his sheriff’s hat and the sleeves of his slicker. “Are you hurt, ma’am?”

She slowly raised her tearstained face, catching his gaze in hers. “No.”

“Tina.” His heart clenched and his gut fisted at the sight of her after all these years, her clothes smeared in blood.

“Hi, West,” she croaked. Her rain-soaked hair hung in clumps over her shaking shoulders.

The sound of his name on her tongue was a painful slap of nostalgia. “Hi.” West struggled to make her presence at the crime scene something other than ludicrous. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s my practice.”

West rubbed a rough hand over his mouth. He’d heard she worked at the medical center but had refused the details. This wasn’t the same girl who’d stolen his teenage heart and eventually destroyed it. That girl had left Cade County long ago. This was someone else. Someone he no longer knew. He pulled in a long

breath and refocused on the job. He gave her a more critical exam. “Is any of this blood yours?”

“No.” Tina pushed onto her feet with a whimper and wrapped trembling arms around her middle. “I’m not hurt. I want to help.”

He stood, as well. “All right. You can start by telling me what happened.” He motioned to a section of the sidewalk covered with an awning. “Let’s step out of the storm.”

She complied, shuffling toward the building, peeling clumps of sopping hair off her cheeks and forehead. “We were leaving the building. It was just after eight, and there was a shadow on the roof.” She stopped short and swallowed several times.

“We?”

“I have a weekly support group for PTSD and emotional trauma survivors.” She rolled her shoulders forward and squelched a sob. “Steven saw the figure on the roof. He told us to get down. He tried to get to me.” She pressed the heels of both hands against her eyes. “The gunman shot him before he reached me.”

West nodded toward the man on the pavement. “That is Steven?”

She removed her hands from her face with a sigh. “Steven Masters. He was discharged from the army about a month ago. He has a wife and little girl.” Her voice broke on the last word. “Oh, Lord. His poor family,” she whispered. Tina spun away from West, walking aimlessly into the lot, obviously in shock despite her efforts to look otherwise.

“Hey.” West jogged to her side and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Why don’t you have a seat while we talk?” He led her to a bench beneath the awning and released her at once. The instinct to comfort her was unprofessional and wildly outdated. “Better?”

She didn’t answer.

“Tina?” West knew firsthand that she wasn’t a sharer, but this time he needed her to open up. “I know this is tough,” he began.

Tina rolled glossy blue eyes up at him. “Someone shot Steven from that rooftop. I don’t know who. I don’t know why.” She shook her head roughly. “It’s just nonsense.”

“West?” His baby brother and current deputy, Cole Garrett, strode to his side. Cole was four years younger than West and twice as smart, but he’d been bitten by the law enforcement bug like the rest of the Garrett men and refused to go out and change the world like West and their older brothers had suggested. “I’m going to head out and see if I can get a bead on this guy.”

“What do you have so far?” West asked.

Cole gave Tina a wayward look. “Not much. Witnesses heard a car hightailing out of here. I’m going to head up the road and see if anyone saw a vehicle taking the state route in a hurry.”

“It was a pickup truck,” Tina said.

Cole’s sharp gaze locked on hers before drifting back to West. “Isn’t she—”

“Don’t,” West warned.

Cole whistled the sound of a falling missile and walked away.

Tina rolled her head against the wall behind their bench. “I suppose I’m not exactly the Garrett family’s favorite local.”

West grunted. That was a conversation he never wanted to have. The past was the past. He’d like to leave it there. “I need to know which member of your group could’ve made someone mad enough to do this?”

Tina’s soft expression hardened. She glanced at the coroner’s van. “The only person to blame is the maniac who did it.”

West raised an eyebrow. “I’m not blaming. I’m looking for bread crumbs. Which one’s the loose cannon?”

“All my patients are serious about their recovery. They’re employed. Paying bills. Contributing to society. They wouldn’t be here every week, carving out time before work, if they weren’t dedicated to the process.”

“Uh-huh.” West nodded. “I understand why you’d say they’re doing well, seeing as how you’re their therapist.” He gave a little smile, knowing he walked a fine line. “You look for the best in people, and that’s admirable, but can you tell me honestly that if one of your patients had gotten into trouble, you’d know? How can you be sure? Because I’m sitting outside an office where people suffering from emotional distress come for treatment, and one of them is dead. You want me to believe the location is a coincidence?”

She scowled. “Of course it can’t be a coincidence because you don’t believe in those.”

West regrouped and tried again before she shut him out

completely. “You’re right. You know these guys. I don’t. I’ll admit that, but I’m thinking distraught individuals tend to make poor decisions, and maybe one of them got tangled up with someone capable of doing this.”

“No.”

“No?”

She shook her head. “You’re wrong about my group.”

“How do you know?” West asked. “What do you talk about in your sessions? Has anyone shared anything out of the ordinary lately? Did they meet someone new? Make a friend? Take a trip?”

Tina rubbed her forehead. “That’s all covered under counselor-patient confidentiality.”

“Are you kidding me?” West bristled.

“You know I can’t tell you any of those things.”

West ground his teeth. “Even in the aftermath of all this, you still want to keep secrets?”

Tina looked away. “You can ask them anything you want to know. I’m sure they’ll tell you. And I’ll tell you anything I can about my day. About the moments before and after the shooting. About the figure. Anything that won’t break my patients’ trust, but I owe them that. I took an oath.”

West braced himself for a long day. Prying secrets from Tina was a task he’d never had any success with, and frankly she was right. What he wanted to know was covered under confidentiality laws, unless she’d suspected criminal activity. In

that case, she had an obligation to report it, but she'd already declared the group's united innocence and probably wouldn't change her story. "Okay," he conceded. "Fair enough. I'll ask my men to question the group members. What do you say about coming with me to the station while they do that? It sounds like you spoke to the victim just before the incident, and it seems you were also the closest to him by proximity." His gaze slid over the bloodstains on her rain-soaked blouse and pants. "I need to get an official report from you, and I'd like to continue the interview while the details are fresh. I imagine you'd like to get away from here for that."

"Yeah."

"Well, then, Miss Ellet, let me walk you to my car."

Chapter Two

Tina climbed inside the sheriff's cruiser, shaking off memories of similar rides as a girl. Every time her dad had caused a scene at a park or ball game and was hauled in for a night in the drunk tank, Tina was escorted home by a nice deputy, often by the former sheriff. West's dad. Eventually, she'd smartened up and steered clear of her dad before he could insist they go anywhere together.

She buckled in and winced as the condition of her hands and clothes registered. "Oh." She rubbed her stained fingers against the ruined material of her pants, but it was no use. A tremor rocked through her as memories of the gunshot came rushing back. Tina shook her hands out hard at the wrists and released

a shuddered breath. “Can...” She swallowed against the painful lump in her throat. “Can we make a pit stop at my house? I’d like to get a dry change of clothes before we go to the station. I don’t think I can concentrate like this.” She bent and stretched her fingers in the air above her lap. “Please.”

West gave the gas pedal a break, seemingly torn between giving her what she wanted and following his protocols. West had always been a stickler for doing the right thing, and that probably didn’t allow for a trip to an old girlfriend’s home before taking her formal statement.

“Which way to your place?” He dropped his sopping wet hat between them, then ran a hand through his hair.

She raised her brows in surprise. Maybe she wasn’t the only one who’d been changed by time. “Left on Canyon Drive. We’re in the River Park neighborhood.” She balled her shaking hands into fists and set them on her lap.

“Who’s we?” West asked, sweeping his gaze to her naked ring finger.

“Just Lily and I,” she said. “My daughter.” A hot tear stung the corner of one eye. Lily had come too close to being an orphan today. She pushed her focus beyond the passenger window. “And Ducky.”

“Ducky?”

She sighed. “The dog.”

“No Mr. Ellet?” he asked. “Or maybe you have a new last name?”

Tina touched the bare skin where a wedding ring had briefly dared to dream. “We weren’t married long enough for me to get it changed. I hadn’t realized there was a hurry.” She turned her stricken face to his, chin up, jaw tight. “I met him about two years ago, right after I moved back to town. We were married after a few months, and he died four weeks later. I never got to tell him about Lily.” She silently cursed her chattering teeth for betraying her show of strength.

West gave her a long, silent look. “How old is Lily?”

“Four months.” Tina had seen the expression West was giving her before, though never from him. *Pity*. “It’s fine. We’re okay. He was here and gone like a dream. Sometimes, I think if it wasn’t for Lily, I’d wonder if he was real.” The pain was real. The loss. But it was true: her short time with Thomas had felt more like a movie she’d seen long ago than an adventure she’d truly been part of.

“I’m sorry about your loss. Lily’s, too. Is she home now?”

“No.” She batted stinging eyes. “She’s at Mary’s. That’s the sitter.” Somehow West’s condolences to her daughter meant more to her than anything else he could have said.

“What happened?” West asked. “I’m not trying to pry. I’m just getting caught up. It’s been a long time.”

“I don’t mind.” It was strange being on the other side of a confessional for a change. Her spilling her troubles and someone else nodding patiently as the story unfolded. “Hunting accident.”

“You didn’t know him long before you married.” A hint of

agitation edged his voice. "Then he just died?"

"Basically," she answered. "He went up to the mountains for the weekend and never came home." He'd asked her to go along on that trip, but she wasn't feeling well enough to make the hike to the cabin. It wasn't until after he'd left that a pregnancy test confirmed the reason for her fatigue and nausea. Lily was on her way. Tina had had big plans for springing the news when Thomas returned, but fate had other ones. "Two State Highway Patrol officers came to my door."

"I'm sorry," West said again, before she went any further. "I wish you hadn't had to go through that."

"Me, too."

When he glanced her way again there was curiosity on his brow. "How'd you meet him? If you don't mind me asking."

"It's okay," she said. "He spoke to me at the garden center a few days after I moved back here. I was buying redbud trees." A small smile touched her lips. "He helped me plant them in my backyard."

West grunted. His eyes narrowed, but he kept them focused on the road.

"I asked him once if he knew you," she said, feeling a little guilty for having asked one man in her life about another.

"And?"

"He laughed. He said he'd never had any reason to run into the sheriff."

"Lucky guy," West muttered.

Tina tried not to wonder if there was a dual meaning behind his words.

The pair rode in silence for several long blocks. West turned sharp blue eyes her way from time to time, rubbing the dark shadow of stubble on his cheeks without speaking.

“What?” she asked.

He shot her a small smile. “I shouldn’t be surprised you’ve done so well despite it all. Remember that time you dared me to jump off that old rope into the swimming hole on New Year’s Eve?”

“Like it was yesterday.” She’d goaded West endlessly, daring and challenging him to be reckless, testing his stock. But West wasn’t reckless, not even as a teen. He’d been the first man to show her they didn’t all become monsters when the mood struck. West was as sensible as the day was long and a Garrett through and through. Hell-bent on saving the world. Garretts were soldiers and law enforcement officers. If rumor served, one of West’s brothers was a federal agent and the other was a US marshal.

The cruiser took a slow turn into her neighborhood and stopped at the first crossroads. The rain had stopped, and muted sunlight streamed from behind thick gray clouds. Emerald green lawns stretched before them, lined in newly blooming mums and anchored in elaborate pumpkin arrangements showing off for Halloween. Lily was too small to know, but she was going to be a princess this year. Every year, if Tina had any say in it.

River Park had been an up-and-coming neighborhood when Tina was young. She'd stared through dirty school bus windows for years as classmates poured on and off with clean clothes and new shoes every fall, and she'd dreamed of living there. Now, the homes were older and in her price range as long as she budgeted. Lily would have safe streets to ride her bike on and neighbors who knew her name. Maybe even a few folks who cared where she went and who she was with.

"Here?" West asked at the next intersection.

"Two blocks up, on the left. The white farmhouse."

West accelerated to the posted speed limit. "I think you should see a doctor before we go to the station."

"No." She watched her unsuspecting neighborhood crawl past. Did the neighbors have any idea what had happened today? Was it on the news? Steven was dead. Pointlessly murdered by a coward with a gun. How did a community move on from that?

"I'll swing by the hospital on our way to the station. Better to be safe."

"No," she repeated, a little more forcefully this time. "I wasn't hurt, just shaken, and every minute counts right now. I want to be helpful."

West huffed, but didn't argue.

"Here. This one," Tina said as her little home came into view, all country with a wraparound porch and a tree in the front. "I won't be more than five minutes."

Confusion pinched her brow as Ducky, her golden retriever

pup, jogged toward the car, tail flopping.

“You know that guy?” West asked, watching the happy dog outside his window.

“He’s mine,” Tina whispered, “but I left him in his crate when I went to work this morning.” Her heart jammed into her throat, making it impossible to swallow. “Someone let him out.”

* * *

THE CRUISER JERKED to a rocking stop. West was on his feet and striding toward her home a moment later. He notified Dispatch of a possible break-in, then unholstered his sidearm. A break-in and a shooting involving the same woman on the same morning wasn’t a coincidence.

Tina was on his heels, teeth chattering intensely behind him.

He stopped her at the front door. “Wait in the car. Lock the doors.”

“I can’t.”

The terror in her voice tugged his heart, and West weighed his options. Taking her along could be dangerous. Leaving her alone could be deadly. He turned the knob, and her door opened. “Stay behind me.”

Her small fingers slid against the material over his back, and he hated the pleasure it gave him to be near her again.

Inside, the house was silent and spotless. “Cade County Sheriff,” West announced, edging past about a hundred pairs of shoes by the front door.

“Woof!” Ducky called from Tina’s side.

West reached around Tina and let the dog in.

Ducky barreled through the house, barking and protesting. He slid around a corner and out of sight.

West motioned for Tina to wait as he followed Ducky down a short hallway toward the back of the home. The dog stopped in the mudroom, pawing and barking at a narrow closet door.

“Cade County Sheriff,” West announced again, stepping carefully into the small room. He moved into position, gun drawn and faced off with the door. “Come out with your hands up.”

A blinding pain split the back of his head and loosened his grip on the weapon. Flashes of light splintered his vision. His knees buckled and he tumbled forward against his will. One palm landed against the floor in support.

The back door swung wide and a figure dressed in black bolted into the yard.

“Damn it.” West shoved onto his feet and forced himself through the door. He slid in the wet grass on uncooperative legs. “Freeze!” he hollered.

A fresh blast of pain punched through his skull at the sound of his booming voice. He pressed one hand to the back of his head and groaned. The goose egg was already forming, and his palm slid against something warm and slick. A quick look confirmed the substance as his blood.

West angled between the next set of homes, hoping to get a glimpse of the getaway car or a look at the man’s face. The figure had doubled the distance between them, clearing the next hill and

vanishing before West could manage to gain any speed.

West holstered his sidearm and radioed Dispatch. "Suspect is fleeing on foot, moving southwest toward Main from River Park Estates." He'd be lucky if a deputy was anywhere near his location. The Cade County Sheriff's Department was small, just six including himself, and not everyone was on duty. Those who were had their hands full with the shooting.

He paused to curse and allow his vision to clear. What the hell had he been hit with? And what was the dog barking at if not the intruder?

West climbed the steps to Tina's front porch slowly and with a little effort. "He got away," he said, sliding inside and forcing his posture straighter. "Got any ice?" He scanned the empty living room. "Tina?"

Ducky jumped at his feet, a leash in his mouth. "Now you want to go out?" He sidestepped Ducky and fought an irrational wave of fear. "Tina?"

"West." Her trembling voice sent him in the direction of her kitchen.

He cut through the living room, taking in as many details as possible. Everything smelled like Tina. Vanilla and cinnamon, warm and inviting. There wasn't much in the way of furniture, but the baby seemed to have more than any one child could ever need. Infant seats, swings and play sets dotted every inch of space he passed, accompanied by a barrel of stuffed animals in the living area.

Tina stood alone in the kitchen's center. The table had been set for two, complete with hot pads in the middle, as if standing in anticipation of a meal yet to come. She shook her head, clearly baffled. "I didn't do this."

West's muscles tightened. "Don't touch anything." He dialed Cole as an icy swell of fear rose through him. West knew exactly the kind of person who'd break into a woman's home and stage a scene like this. A dangerous one. Maybe even someone capable of shooting a man right in front of her just to get her attention. He turned away from Tina as he relayed the situation to his brother. The pain in his head grew by the second. West checked again to see if the blood flow had slowed.

Tina gathered ice into a dish towel and pushed it his way.

He gave her a sour face, but accepted the offer. "This is the opposite of not touching anything."

"Yeah, well, you're hurt," she said. "Don't bleed on my carpet." The attempt at levity was lost with the crack in her voice.

Tina was scared, and West needed to fix that.

He cleared the rest of the house, room by room, then took a break to let the ice do its work. "Any idea who'd pretend to make you dinner?" He winced as the towel slid against his hair.

"None."

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"No."

"I think you'd better pack a bag. I need to get a team out here to pull prints off the dog's crate, your doors and everything in

the kitchen.” He gripped the back of his neck. “As soon as they finish at the medical center parking lot.”

Tina followed him into the bathroom and retrieved a first-aid kit from under the sink. “The house is clear. Now hold still and tell me what happened.”

“Ducky was barking at the closet door, and someone jumped me while I was distracted.”

The pup appeared at the sound of his name. “*Woof.*”

Tina took the lead from his mouth and set it aside. “We keep his leash in the closet. I take him for a walk when I get home.”

West rolled his eyes and regretted it. “Ow.”

“Here.” She tossed a bloodied cloth into the sink and handed him a bottle of aspirin. “I don’t think you’ll need stitches.”

“Great. I wasn’t planning on getting any.” He tossed a pair of pills into his mouth and scooped a handful of water from the bathroom sink.

He led her to her bedroom and made a slow circle through the room. “We know someone has been inside. We don’t know for how long or how often.” West peered through the curtains into the back and side yards. “Crimes like this are predominately orchestrated by men. Are you sure there isn’t anyone you can think of who might have some fixation on you or infatuation you weren’t aware of?” He ignored the fire burning in him at the thought. He couldn’t let this get personal. Couldn’t afford to have clouded judgment.

“I haven’t dated since I met Thomas. That was two years ago.

There was nothing serious before that.”

West ignored the strike to his chest. He thought that they had been plenty serious once, but then again, she'd already made it clear he was wrong.

Tina wrinkled her nose. “There was a man at the hospital who asked me out a few times while I was pregnant. I thought that was weird, but he eventually took no for an answer.”

“Who was that?”

“Chris something. He worked at the pharmacy on the main floor.”

West released the curtains in favor of his cell phone. “Go ahead and gather whatever you need,” he instructed, tapping the tiny screen. “You can shower and change at the station if you'd like. Your soiled clothes will need to be bagged as evidence. We can come back for Ducky once we finish there.”

“How long will I be gone? How much should I pack?” Her mind raced with questions. Where should she and her daughter go? Was anywhere safe?

“Take enough to last you a couple days, Lily, too.”

Tina braced her hands against the bed's edge. “Do you think the shooter did this?” Her ivory skin whitened further.

West sent a quick string of orders to his deputies via text message before turning his attention back to Tina. “We can't know for sure. Not yet.”

“Was it him?” She choked. “Could the shooter from my office have been *here*? Inside my home?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

“Damn it, West!” A flush of frustration bled across her pale cheeks. “Stop dancing around and just tell me what you really think happened here.”

West wedged his hands against his hips, struggling to deliver the impossible truth. As if playing witness to murder wasn’t enough horror for her to experience today, the psychopath had to invade her home and do *who knew what* while she was trying to save the life of her patient. “I don’t think this is a coincidence.”

She nodded her head, an expression of disbelief on her brow. “So, this is about me? The shooting, too? Steven died because of me somehow? It’s insane! He’d barely begun his recovery.” She stopped. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’re probably in shock.” West offered a hand to help her onto the bed. “Sit back. Put your head between your knees and breathe.” He waited for her to comply. “You okay now?”

“No.”

West turned to lean against the bed at her side. “None of the things that have happened today are your fault. None of them. Whoever’s doing this is unstable. Deranged. He could’ve picked anyone to unleash his anger on. It had nothing to do with you. It could just as easily have been the neighbor, or the grocery clerk, or the librarian. Understand?”

She sobbed against the back of her hand, but nodded her agreement.

West stepped away from the bed. He needed to get her out of

there. “Do you want me to pack the bag?”

Tina slid onto her feet. “Don’t you ever get tired of bossing people around?” she grouched.

“No. Where are your bags?”

“Oh, my gosh! Lily!” She dug into her purse and brought out her phone. “I have to call the sitter. If this is about me, then Lily’s in danger!”

West moved into her line of sight. “That’s not a guarantee, and I’ve already sent a deputy to check on her.”

“How did you know where she was?”

He smiled. “There’s a giant pink heart on the refrigerator with Lily’s schedule and Mary’s contact information. I saw it when you got me the ice.”

Her lips lifted into a small smile. “Right. Thank you.” She adjusted the phone against her cheek. “Mary? This is Tina. How’s Lily?” Tina’s voice cracked on the last little word. Tears rolled over her cheeks as her smile widened and turned to laughter. “Thank you. Okay. Thank you.” When she disconnected, Tina looked weightless, as if everything awful in her day had been forgotten. “Lily’s okay. Mary saw what happened on the news. She’s been worried about me, but they’re both fine. They’re eating applesauce and blowing bubbles. She said I should take as long as I need. She knows I have things to sort out, but I just want to end this awful day and pick up my baby. The sooner I have her back in my arms, the sooner something might make sense again.”

She stuffed her things into a bag from the closet then looked

at the bathroom door. “Should I bring a towel for the shower?”

“No.” West marveled at the way the promise of seeing her baby had rejuvenated and refocused her. “We have towels at the station.”

“Okay.” Tina rolled her shoulders back and hiked the bag over one shoulder. “Let me grab Lily’s things, and we can go.”

Chapter Three

Tina touched her hair nervously as she entered the bustling sheriff’s department. West hadn’t made a big deal out of her appearance, but she knew exactly what she looked like. Death.

The cluster of deputies and administrative staff huddled around a desk straightened to welcome their leader. Cole broke away from the group as West and Tina approached. The others stopped to stare.

“Tina Ellet,” West said, “I’d like you to meet the Cade County Sheriff’s Department. Team, this is Miss Ellet.”

The group offered warm smiles, but their gazes traveled the circuit from her to West and then to Cole. He’d clearly filled the group in on her history with their sheriff. Ridiculously, her cheeks heated.

Cole greeted West with a handshake, then turned an apologetic expression on Tina. “I’m sorry this is happening to you.” He barely resembled the gangly teen she remembered. No more acne or braces. His undeniable Garrett genes had brought him through puberty with a gold star. Exactly like his brothers.

She pulled the bag higher on her shoulder and gripped it with

one hand. “Thanks.”

Tina scanned her new surroundings with curiosity. Miraculously, she'd never been inside the station before. It wasn't the way she'd imagined. Based on the horror stories her father had told, she'd assumed the place was dark and scary. Full of people like him in handcuffs. Instead, the building was open-concept, bright and clean. The walls were lined in diplomas, Don't Text and Drive posters and a cluster of community boards with fund-raising flyers pinned to them.

West lifted a hand in Tina's direction, but dropped it quickly with a frown. “There's coffee and hot water for tea in the break room, and there's normally something to eat on the counter. Fruit. Bagels.” He stepped away from the little group, and she followed.

She hurried behind him down a long hallway lined with closed doors. Her stomach twisted into painful knots at the thought of food. “Just a shower, I think.”

He stopped at a door marked Locker Room. “We'll need to put your clothes into an evidence bag, so leave them out when you're done.” He pushed the door open and held it for her. “I'll flip the in-use sign so no one bothers you. Small building. Everything's coed.”

Tina hesitated. Police station or not, the empty room was frightening. “Will you be here when I get out?”

West looked over his shoulder. “I'll try. I need to touch base with my team and see what's been done. If no one's visited the

two men who missed your group this afternoon, then I'd like to get over there myself. I've got a limited number of deputies and a vested interest in this case."

Tina tried not to wonder if that "vested interest" was her. "Has anyone tried calling the men who missed the meeting?" Why hadn't she thought to do that? "I have their numbers in my phone." She dug nervously through the giant bag on her shoulder and nearly dumped the contents.

"Hey." West's steady hand fell upon her fluttering one. "Stop." He gripped her fingers until she looked his way.

She pulled in deep breaths, borrowing strength from his touch. "What if the gunman visited them before coming to our session? Maybe that's why they weren't in group today."

"It's unlikely," West said, "but we're going to find out. Plus, I have questions for them. We really don't know what's going on in the big picture yet." He lowered his face to her level and searched her with kind eyes. "Can you think of any connection between the victim and yourself beyond your recent professional relationship?"

Tina considered the way she'd found Steven asleep at a bus stop outside the hospital last month. They were strangers until then, and had only seen each other at group sessions since. "No. None. Why?"

"I'm still trying to figure out how the shooting and the break-in are related. The crimes are vastly different, but the timing has my flags up. If the shooter is the same man who attacked me

at your home, understanding the link between the three of you would be helpful. I'll be back once I drop in on your absentees, then we can finish our interview. I still need a formal statement from you."

Tina straightened. "Take me with you."

He followed her lead, returning to his full height with a snap. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"West."

His expression changed, ever so slightly.

"Please." The stubborn sting of emotion bit at her eyes and nose. "I need to know the rest of my patients are safe. If they don't answer their phones, I'm going to pay them visits myself. Seems like I'd be safer with you."

"I need you here making a formal statement."

"I'll write it while you drive. I promise." She hoped the desperation in her heart came through in her tone. "Please don't leave me behind."

West ducked his head and gripped the back of his neck. "You shower. I'll try to reach the men by phone before I leave. We already have their numbers." He turned on his heels and walked away.

"Does that mean I can go with you?" she called after him.

"You've got ten minutes."

Tina ran for the shower. Ten minutes wouldn't have seemed like long enough time to get wet before Lily was born. Since then, Tina had learned to do almost anything in a quarter of the time

it had once taken.

She folded her stained clothes and stacked them on a bench for evidence, tucking her underthings carefully between the pieces, unsure if she was meant to turn those in, too. These were things a person should never have to wonder. The things that had happened today didn't belong in Shadow Point, Kentucky. They were fodder for television crime shows or the headlines of a city she'd never visit.

Tina doused her hair with shampoo and lathered her body from neck to toes in seconds, scrubbing harder than necessary, until the water ran clear. Ironic, because she doubted the stains from her day would ever truly be gone. She shook off the heavy wave of emotion and concentrated on the ticking clock. The damp towel was in the communal hamper and she was re-dressed with four minutes to spare. Tina grabbed her things and yanked open the locker room door. Hopefully, West had really waited. If he hadn't, she wouldn't blame him.

She'd always hated the way she'd left things with him after high school. When the college scholarship she'd applied for came through, she'd packed up and asked him to understand. It wasn't an opportunity anyone could pass up, certainly not her. She'd needed to get out of Shadow Point like she needed oxygen. West had wanted to get married. He'd wanted a house and some land, a perfect replica of what his parents had, but Tina didn't believe in fairy tales, and at eighteen, she couldn't see past her escape. She'd picked up the phone a thousand times over the years to

tell him the truth about why she had to leave. Her family was a train wreck. Her father was in jail now, probably for the rest of his life, and her mother had run away in his absence. Tina was broken because of it, and West deserved better. Without her to hold him back, West had enlisted in the military, served overseas and come home to be the county sheriff. She had been baggage for him, but she could never find the strength to say those things out loud, so she didn't. Pride was vindictive that way.

* * *

WEST PRESSED HIS palms to the desk, scanning the map before him. Cole and the other Cade County deputies had compiled a list of viable reports about a man in a dark jacket and jeans spotted near the crime scene. Though no one outside Tina's group had witnessed the attack, several had heard the gunshot and called to report it. A handful had confirmed Tina's claim about the old pickup truck. "You can't throw a stone without hitting an old pickup in this county," West groaned.

"Someone thought it was a faded red Ford," Cole said. "That's something."

West rubbed his eyes. Let Cole be the optimist for a change. Someone had to be because West wasn't finding a lot of hope in the reports he had in front of him. The descriptions were in agreement, but the locations were all over the place. "So he either went north or south?"

Cole sighed. "Yep."

West strained upright and shook his head. "Did we catch a

lead on the assailant at Tina's home?"

"No." Cole lifted his brows. "How's your head?"

West frowned. "Hurts. What else do you have for me?"

"We found a standard 30-06 shell casing on the building's roof at the crime scene."

"I guess that's something."

Cole didn't look hopeful. "It's the same ammo we'd find in half the homes in Cade County. Hell, I've got the same stuff at my place."

West adjusted his hat over the tender lump. If Cole saw it, he'd try to administer first aid, and he'd had enough of that from Tina. "See if ballistics can get a match. Maybe the gun's been used in another crime. We might be able to find him that way." He pulled his shoulders back, trying and failing to alleviate the tension there. "Have we been able to reach either missing group member?"

Cole pressed his lips and shook his head. "No. When I couldn't reach them at their home numbers, I called their places of employment. One man went to work on schedule last night and left this morning without incident. The other called off before breakfast."

West grabbed his keys. "So, both whereabouts are unaccounted for. I'm heading out to see what kept them away from the meeting. Let Tina know—"

"Let Tina know what?" Her voice startled him into a spin. "By my watch, I have two minutes left on the ten you gave me."

Cole smiled against one fist, then failed to cover his humor with a cough. “You want to split the work, boss? I’ll hit one, you take the other?”

“I’d like to speak with them both,” Tina said.

Cole cast a quizzical look in West’s direction.

West shook his head. “Why don’t you take the guy who went to work last night? I’ll take the guy who called off this morning.”

Cole ducked his chin and made for the door.

West turned to address the remaining deputies. “Call me direct with anything new. I want to be kept up to the minute on this, and when they’re done collecting prints over at Miss Ellet’s home, have someone stay put until I get back.”

A round of “Yes, sirs” drifted through the electrified air. West’s chest puffed with pride. His deputies were the best in the state. He’d made a habit of reaching out to the most dedicated and promising rookies as early as possible, and when positions arose within his team, he gave those men and women a call. It was a practice he’d learned from his father, the sheriff before him. Stacking the deck in Cade County’s favor was a Garrett family tradition, and one more reason the son of a gun who did this would soon be sorry.

He shoved the front door open and held it for Tina to pass.

She stopped to face him in the narrow threshold. “You were going to leave me?” Her steel blue eyes nailed him to the wall.

West swallowed long and slow. The energy building between them in the small space was more of a distraction than he could

allow. A fitted sweater and jeans clung to her youthful figure, reminding him of the many times he'd personally helped her out of them. He extended one arm into the dreary day. "You're here now, so let's go."

* * *

THE RIDE TO Carl Morgan's house was long and slow. The heater vents circulated scents of Tina's shampoo and perfume around his head in a hurricane of distraction. "Tell me about this guy," West said, flipping his headlights on to illuminate the gloomy road.

Tina shifted in her seat, angling toward him. "Carl's a nice man. He's about our age, originally from Florida. He works at Franklin's Garage. Lives alone. He's quiet and a little detached. It's common with trauma survivors. Tender hearts hurt deeply, and we live in a world where growing tough skin is practically a survival requirement."

"Could he have gotten himself into trouble? Maybe ticked off a homicidal maniac?"

Tina's head was shaking before West stopped talking. "No. Carl's a people-pleaser, but he'd avoid intimidating individuals."

"Not every shooter is an intimidating individual. Look at school shooters and others who've committed similar crimes. They're a lot of things, but dangerous-looking isn't one of them."

She glanced his way, then back at the road.

"Given that you are well aware of the profile for someone who'd pull a stunt like this, can you tell me unequivocally that

neither Carl Morgan or Tucker Bixby fit the mold?”

“No, but I can tell you there isn’t a mold, and that the number of patients in therapy is far smaller than the number of folks who need it but aren’t getting it. There are probably a hundred people in Cade County who psychologically fit the bill that we don’t know about. So you have no hard evidence to support your theory that the shooter is connected to my group.”

West gripped the wheel tighter, unable to argue and unwilling to upset her further by playing devil’s advocate. The truth was, he had no idea what was going on in his county today. “Is there anything else you can tell me about Carl before we get there?”

“No. Just that he’s doing phenomenally in group, so please don’t upset him if you can help it. News of the shooting will be tough enough—badgering him could set his progress back, and I don’t want that.”

The country road rose and fell before them under a covering of gray clouds. Green reflections of little eyes blinked along the roadside, considering a test of their fate.

It was late in October and nearing lunchtime already. Barely six hours of sunlight remaining. West had enjoyed autumn as a kid, but he’d learned to see it as a hindrance after joining local law enforcement. Shorter days meant fewer hours to look for clues and missing people. It also gave criminals more time to hide under the cover of night.

Tina fidgeted with the hem of her sweater. “Where do you think the shooter is now? Do people like that just go home and

have dinner? Do they kill themselves? Leave the state?"

"Depends." West slowed the cruiser to a crawl at the end of a narrow dirt road. Peeling numbers on the battered mailbox suggested that they'd arrived. "This it?"

"I don't know. I've never been here."

West spun his wheel, navigating a sharp right into the unknown. No Trespassing signs were nailed to posts on either side of the road. A trailer stood fifty feet back, bookended by trees and a picnic table. An aged blue car sat in a bed of gravel out front.

"That's his car," Tina said, unbuckling her belt.

"Wait." West stretched a hand across her middle like a guard gate. "It's dark under all these clouds and trees. I want you to stay put until I give you a signal."

"Why?" She dropped her voice to a low, ragged whisper. "Do you think the killer's here?"

He gave the dark trailer another long inspection. "Not necessarily. There's only one vehicle, and it's not a pickup, but I'd rather be safe, so wait here until I give you an all clear. Understand?"

"Okay."

He popped his door open and flashed her a warning look when the interior light came on. "I mean it this time."

She made a show of fixing her hands on her lap.

West flipped his bright lights on and locked her in the car. The cruiser's headlights illuminated a path to the trailer. West

scanned the ground for signs of a struggle as he moved. Nothing unusual, no fallen items, drag marks or drops of blood. He stepped with care onto the makeshift wooden deck outside the front door, and a motion light snapped on.

West's heart rate sprang into overdrive. He reseated his sidearm, unleashed on instinct at the unexpected flick of the light, and rapped on the trailer door. Surprisingly, the shock hadn't increased his headache. The aspirin must've finally taken effect. He braced his free palm against the butt of his gun. "Cade County Sheriff, Mr. Morgan," he boomed.

The trailer rocked slightly. Interior lights flashed on one by one from the back to the front. West moved away as the silver door swung open.

A heavy-lidded man in worn jeans and a faded blue T-shirt squinted at the cruiser's lights. "Hello?"

"Over here, Mr. Morgan," West said. "Do you know why I'm here?" He examined Carl slowly for signs of a weapon.

Carl blinked long and slow, scrubbing calloused hands over his thick brown hair. "Was there an accident on the road?"

"No, sir." West took a more relaxed stance, but kept the distance. "You want to tell me why you aren't at work?"

"I had a migraine." He pressed a palm to one side of his head in evidence. "I've been in bed."

"You get migraines often?"

"Sometimes." Carl's gaze drifted back to the cruiser. "Is someone else in there?" He shielded his eyes with one hand.

West ignored the question. “You’ve been home all morning?” Carl dipped his chin, still preoccupied with the cruiser’s lights. “Any visitors?”

“Not until you. Why? I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“You missed your group session. Don’t you usually call ahead if you’re not coming?”

“I—I’ve never missed. I d-didn’t know I had to call.”

The stutter gave West pause. Tina’s words came back to mind. Much as he’d like to continue questioning Carl alone, he didn’t want to be the reason the man relapsed or whatever Tina had just warned might happen. He lifted a hand without taking his eyes off Carl and opened and shut his palm, beckoning Tina from her place of safety. He changed positions as she approached, putting the trailer’s wall at his back and everything else within his line of vision, peripheral or otherwise.

The passenger door opened, and Carl took a step backward, arm extended toward the trailer door.

“Stop,” West ordered, and both people froze. He motioned to Tina again, attention fixed on Carl. “Keep your hands where I can see them, Mr. Morgan.”

He didn’t have to guess when Tina came into focus for Carl. The man’s eyebrows stretched into his hairline, and his mouth dropped open. It was the reaction he expected most men had when they first saw her. Having been the onetime recipient of her rejection, West might’ve felt bad for the guy if there wasn’t a shooter in town with his sick mind set on Tina. As far as West

was concerned, all men were suspects until proven otherwise.

Chapter Four

“Hi, Carl.” Tina spoke carefully as she climbed onto the wooden platform outside the trailer. Water dripped from the ragged awning stretched overhead, remnant drops from the recent storm. “I missed you at group today.”

Carl’s eyes darted between her, the headlights and the brooding sheriff at his side. “I—I’m a little surprised you felt the offense required an intervention by l-law enf-f-forcement.” His expression softened with the joke.

Tina smiled, thankful to see Carl at ease. She flicked West a meaningful look. “Maybe we can cut the spotlight.”

West leveled Carl with a no-nonsense expression before finally stepping away.

Carl moved closer to Tina the instant West abandoned his position as watchdog. “This isn’t really about me. Is it?”

“Not at all.” Tina shook her head, hoping to look less on edge than she felt.

“Are you okay?” Carl asked. “Did something happen to you? To Lily? Is there anything I can do? If you need a place to stay, I—I have plenty of room.”

“No. Nothing like that, exactly. Something happened after group today, and we wanted to check on you. Make sure you were okay.”

His mouth curved into a small smile. “You were worried about m-me?”

“Yeah.” Memories of the moments outside her office flashed back to mind, stinging her eyes and drying her mouth.

The blinding headlights extinguished, and Tina blinked several times to readjust her vision. “There was a shooting.”

West returned to them slowly, watching with careful cop eyes, one hand resting on the butt of his gun. Tina doubted that he missed much as town sheriff. He’d missed very little as a teen. She could only imagine his power of perception had grown keener with training and maturity.

Carl’s gaze traveled quizzically over Tina. “You weren’t hurt.”
“No. Not me.”

West shifted his weight, drawing Carl’s attention. “Another member of your group was murdered today. Steven Masters. How well did you know him?”

Tina narrowed her eyes on West. He could’ve been a little tactful about announcing a person’s death.

Something in his expression said he’d been intentionally harsh. Too much tightness in his jaw and rigidity in his stance. West didn’t trust Carl. Why?

Carl pointedly ignored him. “I only kn-kn-knew Steven from gr-gr-group.”

“You don’t seem too choked up,” West said.

“I guess I’m stun-stun-stunned.”

Cold wind whipped through the trees and rattled the tattered awning over their heads. West was right. Carl didn’t seem to care at all. She fell back a half step. Did it truly not matter to him that

a man he knew was murdered, or hadn't the shock registered yet?

Carl stepped closer, erasing the bit of distance she'd created.
"Are you cold? Do you need a c-coat?"

"No. I'm fine. We're here to check on you."

"Yeah, but this must b-be awful for you." He angled his back to West. "You and Steven were getting p-p-pretty close."

"How so?" West asked, moving into the space at Tina's side and blatantly hovering over her patient.

Carl stiffened. "They spent extra time together before and after sessions. She does that with new members." He touched Tina's sleeve gently. "If you n-need someone to talk to..."

Tina wrapped shaky arms around her center and attempted to stifle her recoil. How well did she know the members of her group? Could one of them truly be a killer? Could Carl? "Thank you. I'm sure this is something we'll be talking about for months to come at our sessions."

His eyebrows tented and he shoved both hands deep into his pockets. A flicker of something dark flashed in his eyes, and Carl's suddenly heated expression fell on West. "I'm still not sure why you're here. I wasn't at group today, s-so I can't give a statement."

"Carl," Tina started softly, "can you think of anyone who'd want to hurt Steven? The shooter only took one shot. I've seen the two of you talking before. Did he tell you about anyone who was upset or holding a grudge against him?"

"No."

West sucked his teeth and continued to eyeball Carl. “Can anyone verify your whereabouts between seven and nine this morning?”

“No.” Carl grinned. “I’ve been here all day.” He opened his arms, as if to showcase the trees and silence around them.

“Is that right?” West asked. “My deputies tried calling. You didn’t answer.”

“I had a m-migraine. The ringer was off.”

Tina’s phone buzzed with Mary’s signature tone. She peeked at the incoming message. A photo of Lily wearing a fancy hat with feathers and the caption *Playing dress up*.

Her eyes teared at the sight of her daughter’s bright, toothless smile. The day had been too dark. She needed to cuddle Lily against her chest, inhale her sweet scent and feel her strong little heart beating against her own. Tina had told West that she wanted to visit both Carl and Tucker, but now she just wanted to be with her baby girl.

West pulled a buzzing phone from his pocket and barked a few monosyllables into the receiver, startling her from her thoughts.

“Carl—” Tina shot him a pleading look “—can you think of anything that might help us find the person who did this?”

“No.”

“Okay.” She nodded her acceptance. “I’ll arrange a new location for next week’s meeting while we all work through this loss. We’ll talk more then.”

West stretched his hand out to Carl, a business card stuck

between his fingertips, cell phone put away. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Morgan.” He caught Tina’s hand in his. “If you think of anything that might be useful, give me a call.”

Carl fixed his attention on West’s hand over Tina’s. “Will do.”

Tina turned for the cruiser, thankful for the escape. She wasn’t cut out for questioning people as if they were criminals. And Carl’s response to her news wasn’t at all what she’d expected. It left her feeling confused and uneasy. She could only hope his apparent indifference was a result of shock and not something far more gruesome.

* * *

WEST KEPT HIS eyes on Carl as he closed the passenger door for Tina, shutting her safely inside. The fragile and uncertain man she’d described wasn’t the one who stood outside the trailer. His smooth transition between hostility toward West and concern for Tina set off all West’s internal alarms. Not to mention how precisely his behavior had mimicked the day’s crimes. A cold-blooded murder outside the medical complex, and a thoughtfully planned meal at Tina’s home.

West folded himself behind the wheel and radioed their position to Dispatch.

He reversed down the gravel drive and pulled onto the country road, making plans to run a thorough background check on Mr. Morgan.

“Was that phone call back at the trailer more bad news?” Tina

asked. “Did something else happen?”

“No. That was one of my deputies. Mary and Lily are doing fine. He’s patrolling the neighborhood until you can get there, making a circuit and keeping watch on the streets around her home. If you don’t see him when you arrive to pick Lily up, wait for him. He’ll be back on his next loop, then he can follow you to your place and wait while you get Ducky.”

Tina nodded slowly. “Will the deputy stay with me until I decide where to go? How much time do I have to decide?”

“I asked him to process your home while he’s there, so you can take a minute to breathe, but limit the number of things you touch. I’m hoping he can get a good print from that dinner setup in the kitchen. My other men are finishing up at the medical complex, then following leads on the shooter and faded red pickup seen leaving the scene. Tucker Bixby wasn’t home when Cole got there, so Cole’s looking into his whereabouts. I imagine you’d like to get to your daughter now.”

Tina blew out a long, labored breath. “Yes. Very much.”

“I’ll take you back to your car now,” West said. He fished a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it her way.

She accepted the offering and pressed it to the corner of each eye. She twisted the thin white fabric in her hands. “I can’t believe you still carry this.”

“Grandpa’s handkerchief? We all do. I’m a little surprised you remember it.”

Tina rolled wide eyes in his direction. “I remember that

funeral like it was my own grandfather's. I remember each of your brothers with these hankies in their jacket pockets. Four brokenhearted pallbearers." She balled the fabric in one hand. "Hundreds of people came that day and filled every moment with love and kindness." She swiped a tear off her cheek. "It was beautiful. He would've been so proud."

"I'm sure he was." West turned his face to the road. "Grandpa told us regularly how important it was to build relationships. He touched a lot of lives." Next to his father, West's grandfather was the best man he'd ever known. His brothers and uncles came in a tight cluster for third. Love, pride and honor were always on tap at the Garrett house. "You okay?"

"I will be."

He tapped his thumbs against the steering wheel. "I hate to push this, but I still need a formal statement. You promised to write it while we were en route, and we're nearly back to your car."

Tina pulled the notepad and pen from her purse and began to write. Tears fell in fat drops onto the page as she worked.

West kept his mouth shut as long as possible, but he hated seeing her cry. "How did you feel that interview with Carl went?" he asked. "Is he always so..." What was the word? She surely wouldn't approve of *creepy*.

She wiped the wet paper with his hanky. "I don't know."

"Based on your description before we got there, I'd expected a television-grade nerd or a little harmless guy afraid to make

eye contact.” Not the lean and borderline hostile man who’d answered the door.

“Whose fault is that?”

He ignored the question. West had heard it from her before, and the answer was always *West’s*. Making assumptions might not have been his best attribute, but as a sheriff the practice had proven indispensable more times than he could count. “Do you think he had a problem with you spending extra time with Steven?”

“No. That’s standard practice. Carl’s been with the group long enough to know that.”

“Do all the members have the same problems?”

Tina shot him a knowing look. She’d already made it clear she wouldn’t divulge her patients’ personal information. “They’re all dealing with PTSD and severe emotional trauma for various reasons. Some members are former military. Some are abuse survivors.”

“How did you spend the extra time you had with Steven?”

Tina sighed. “Occasionally I’d use the time to educate and encourage. Other times, he’d tell me things he wasn’t ready to share with the group. It was all very up-and-up.”

West repositioned his grip on the wheel, relaxing his hands and leaning back against the seat. “I didn’t mean to imply otherwise.”

“You didn’t. I just want it stated for the record.”

He cocked a brow. “This isn’t going on a record. We’re just

two old friends talking.”

She turned her face to his, a sad smile on her full pink lips. “Is that what we are, West?”

“I’m not sure what we are now,” he admitted, “but I was engaged once to a girl who looked a lot like you.”

She dropped her gaze to the handkerchief briefly before pinning him with a powerful stare. “I’m not that girl anymore.”

“No,” he agreed. “Clearly, that girl has been upgraded by time and experience.” He reached across the seat to give her knee a playful push. “I think the girl I knew would be proud.”

A smile bloomed on her lips. “Thank you for saying that.”

“I meant it.”

She caught his fingers in hers and squeezed. “I know.”

West released her to pull his cruiser into the lot outside her office.

The crime scene was roped off now, and two members of his team worked their way through a rain-soaked lot, careful not to miss anything that might lead them to the shooter’s identity. Plastic yellow teepees with bold black numbers anchored the shattered glass and polka-dotted the surrounding area.

Tina shuddered beside him.

“I’ll be by to check on you and Lily as soon as I can, but I’m going to pay the hospital pharmacist a visit now.” The one who’d asked her out multiple times during her pregnancy. “What did you say his name was?”

“Chris.”

West itched to tighten his fingers around hers once more, but he wasn't sure how many times he could force himself to let go.

Tina rolled her head against the back of the seat, turning sharp blue eyes on him. "Tell me this wasn't because someone thought I was spending too much extra time with Steven." Her body tipped slightly toward his. The change was small, nearly imperceptible. So much so, Tina probably didn't even realize. But West did.

He felt the too-familiar pull at his core, an urge to meet her in the middle.

No amount of time would change that about them. He and Tina were human magnets in need of connection. Being near her without being *hers* was a new and ugly sensation. He didn't like it.

West cleared his throat. "We'll know more soon." His thoughts drifted back to Carl Morgan. The timing of Carl's absence with the shooting today was highly suspicious, and West didn't like the way Carl had looked at Tina. Definitely not the way a patient should look at his therapist, and it had taken all of West's self-control not to smack Carl's grubby hand away when he'd reached for her arm. The look in Carl's eyes when she recoiled was satisfying, but delivering the weirdo a solid right hook would've been even better. "We'll see what my team turns up and what Tucker and Chris have to say once we find them. We've got to follow the facts." Lucky for Carl, being creepy wasn't against the law, and West's gut instinct wasn't grounds to hold him.

Tina rolled her eyes, instantly looking a decade younger. She nudged his arm with a grin. "You still do that, huh? Answer my

questions with random truths when you don't want to lie or upset me with the one I'm asking for."

Her hand lingered on his arm, warming him to the core.

West fought a budding smile. "Would you prefer I lie?"

"As if you could." She cracked the door open and swung her legs into the brisk autumn wind.

He circled the car and met her halfway to hers, toting the bags she'd packed at home earlier. "Slow down." He caught her wrist in his fingers, cursing himself instantly for the thrill it gave him. "Hey. Take a minute before you drive. You've had one hell of a day. You're worried about your baby, your safety, your group."

She stopped to face him. Her shoulders drooped. "I'm okay to drive."

"Okay, then tell me you have a plan before you shoot out of here. If you're planning to get a hotel room, you'd better change cars and register in cash under a different name. I'm going to need your contact information regardless, in case we have reason to believe you're in danger."

Her face went slack. "Maybe I could take Lily to Disneyland for a week. Or the beach. We can go somewhere far away for a while."

"Maybe." He'd like to think he'd have the son of a gun behind bars before dawn, but the odds certainly weren't in his favor, and he couldn't promise he'd have him caught in a week, either. "How long can you afford something like that?"

"I don't know." Her voice ratcheted an octave as fear changed

her expression to something panicked and feral. “I’ve never been stalked, or hunted, or anything like this before, if that’s even what this is. You’re the expert. What are we supposed to do?”

West couldn’t give her an answer. He didn’t have one.

He ached to fold her into his arms and kiss her head like he used to. He wanted to fix this. All of this. He’d never wanted anything more than to keep her safe and make her smile. And ten years apart hadn’t changed a damn thing.

Tina groaned and rubbed her eyes. “I need coffee. I need to fix my face, paste on a smile and make sure Lily doesn’t pick up on any of the horrific things rolling through my head.”

She pried her keys from her handbag and beeped her car doors unlocked. “I’ll get Lily and Ducky, then I’ll figure out where we’re going before your deputy leaves my place. I’ll call you as soon as I know.”

He shifted his weight. “I’ll head over to your house as soon as I can.” He passed her the bags, and she tossed them onto her passenger seat.

Tina slid her hand down the length of West’s arm, catching his fingers in hers. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Always,” he said, returning the gentle squeeze.

They stood in palpable silence for a long moment, evaluating one another, it seemed. There was obviously something more Tina wanted to say.

She didn’t.

Instead, she dropped behind the wheel of her car and motored

away.

They were beginning to make a bad habit of this.
Her leaving, and him watching helplessly from behind.

Chapter Five

Tina turned onto the main road with a sigh of relief, thankful to put a little distance between herself and the man causing her already shocked and broken heart so much unnecessary confusion. She dialed Mary and set the phone to speaker.

Thankfully, the call connected on the first ring. “Hi, Tina,” Mary answered. “How are you? Is everything okay?”

Tina checked her mirrors and adjusted her defrost vents. “I’ve been better. How are you and Lily?”

“Lily’s sound asleep, and a strapping young deputy is patrolling my neighborhood, so I’m not doing too bad, either.”

“Great.” A smile edged over Tina’s lips. Mary was Tina’s first friend after moving back to town. She wasn’t much older than Tina’s mom, and she missed caring for children, so the arrangement with Lily was perfect all around. “Well, I’m finally on my way. Can I bring you anything?”

“You don’t need to do that. You’ve had an awful day. Besides, Lily and I ate lunch before she went to sleep.” Mary gave a sad laugh. “Considering what you’ve been through, I should probably be making you lunch.” She paused. “Do you want me to make you lunch? Maybe pour you a glass of wine? I’m a great listener if you need someone to talk to.”

“No.” Tina almost laughed. She didn’t drink, and it was barely

past noon, but after the morning she'd had a glass of wine didn't sound half bad. "How about I buy you a fancy coffee instead? Cup of Life is on the way to your place from here."

"Fine," Mary agreed. "I will accept your coffee, but only if you agree to stay a few minutes before you take off again. I worry about you. Sometimes I think you get so busy taking care of everyone else that you forget to take care of yourself."

Tina didn't have the energy to argue or confess all that had happened today. Like the possibility she may have been the reason for Steven's death. Or that, even if she wasn't, someone had still been in her home. Touched her things. Pretended to make her dinner.

An involuntary shiver coursed down her back. "I've got to go. I'll see you soon."

Tina disconnected, then loosened her grip on the wheel, bending and stretching her fingers in a futile attempt to relax. She needed a better headspace before holding her baby again. Lily was sure to pick up on the anxiety pouring off her mother in buckets.

Tina closed her eyes at the red light, and West's deceptively gruff image appeared. She popped her lids open and cursed herself internally. Given all that had transpired today, it was ludicrous she couldn't concentrate on anything but memories of his determined face.

She eased her foot off the brake as the light turned green.

She'd been back in town for nearly two years, and had

managed to date, get married and have a baby, all without running into a single Garrett. Now, after just a few hours at his side, she was seventeen all over again, wondering when she would see him next, and if his heart still beat as fast as hers when they touched. More important, could he forgive her for the way she'd left things between them all those years ago?

West's opinion of her had always mattered. As much today as it had when they were young and wildly in love. She groaned inwardly at the thought. It had been unfair for her to let him love her then. Back when she had been a lie. She'd put up a nice show. Smoke and mirrors to distract from what she really was. He gave her his all, but she'd never really let him in. She'd kept the real things to herself.

She'd known what people said about her, of course. She fed on the gossip, imagining her life was something other than it was, letting people believe anything, so long as it wasn't the truth. She'd pretended to be rail thin by choice, instead of half starved, pretended to wear too-short shorts for attention, when the truth was that she kept getting taller, and clothes were expensive.

No more.

Now, she had a stack of jeans in her closet, all the right size, and Lily had more clothes than one child could ever want, whatever the season. Tina would never be that helpless child again, and her daughter would never know the humiliation of a life without a mother's love.

Possibly the only thing she loved more than knowing how

much she had changed was knowing that West hadn't changed at all. He was still strong and certain, reliable and steadfast. All the things she'd fallen in love with long ago. Even being with him again for a short time had made her miss the family she never had and long for a husband to cradle their daughter. She wanted someone she could find strength in when hers was gone.

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