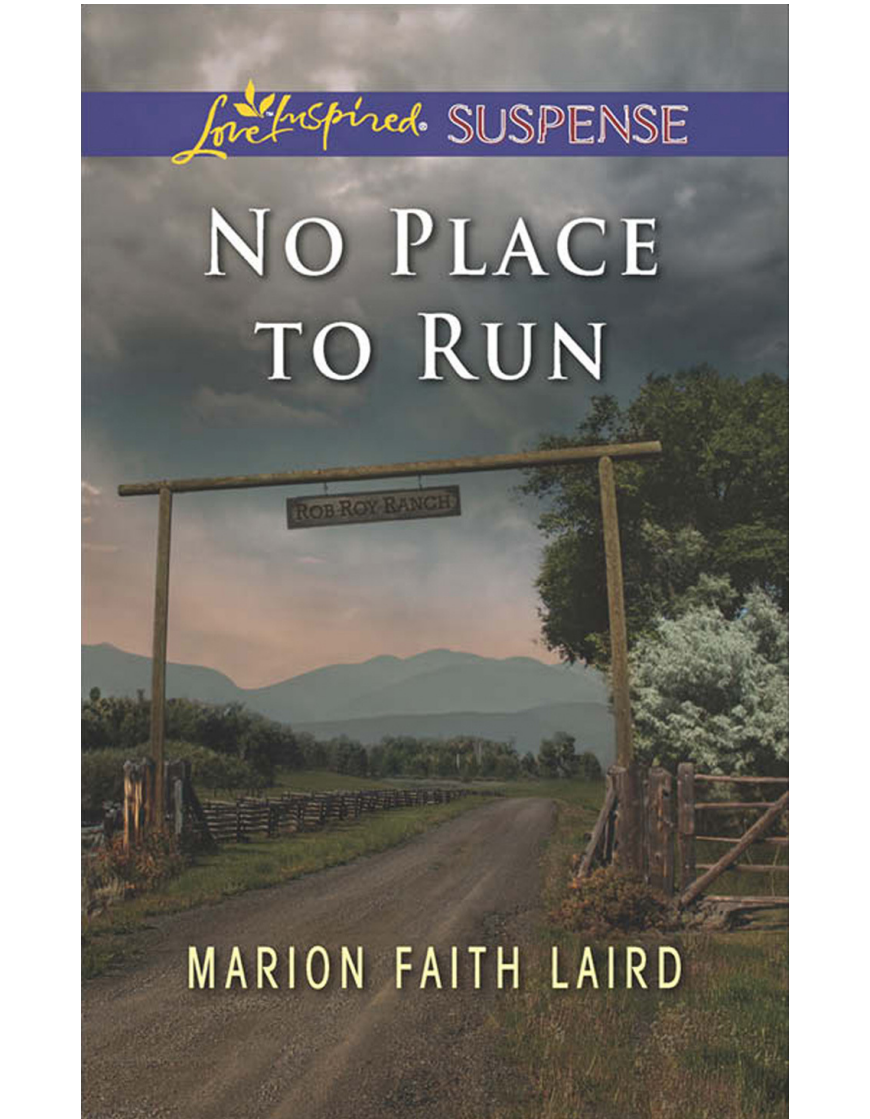




Love Inspired SUSPENSE

NO PLACE TO RUN

MARION FAITH LAIRD

Marion Faith Laird

No Place To Run

Аннотация

DON'T THINK YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH IT.Just when she started to feel safe, small-town librarian Lorie Narramore begins receiving threatening notes. They prove that her worst fears have come true—her dark past has followed her to Arkansas. And someone wants her to pay for what she's done. As the threats turn into full-scale attacks, Lorie has no choice but to rely on deputy sheriff Matt MacGregor's protection. But after her harrowing ordeal with the law, can she truly trust a cop? And can Matt trust her to tell him the truth when the threats claim she's gotten away with murder?

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“DON’T THINK YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH IT.”

Just when she started to feel safe, small-town librarian Lorie Narramore begins receiving threatening notes. They prove that her worst fears have come true—her dark past has followed her to Arkansas. And someone wants her to pay for what she’s done. As the threats turn into full-scale attacks, Lorie has no choice but to rely on deputy sheriff Matt MacGregor’s protection. But after her harrowing ordeal with the law, can she truly trust a cop? And can Matt trust her to tell him the truth when the threats claim she’s gotten away with murder?

Lorie’s cell phone rang.

Lorie checked the display, then looked at Matt. “I don’t know who this is.”

Matt flipped open the phone and hit the answer button, putting it on speaker.

“You have been a very naughty girl, haven’t you, going to the law like that. Shame on you.” The robot-processed voice was back.

Lorie turned pale. Matt put a finger to his lips.

“But then you know that, don’t you? I’m surprised at you, trusting a deputy. When he finds out the truth, you’ll finally be accountable.”

Combined with the call Gerhardt had fielded, all Matt’s dark suspicions came flooding back. Was she responsible for more than justifiable homicide? Lorie’s expression held no hint of guilt, just confusion and fear.

“Why are you tormenting me?” Lorie demanded. “What did I ever do to you?”

“Why, you killed Grayson, of course. You have to be punished for that, since the court let you go. You’ll finally get what you deserve. I hope your life insurance is up-to-date.”

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *No Place to Run*, the first of what I hope will be many novels set in my fictional county in beautiful Western Arkansas.

Books don’t happen in a vacuum, and that’s a good thing! So many things contribute to a story that sometimes it’s hard to know where to begin. This one began with a blank page and one sentence during that crazy time of year known as National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo. Once the note appeared on the page on Lorie’s desk, the rest began to take shape.

The book has undergone many changes since its first mad rush of creation, but its message remains the same: love and forgiveness are two essential things in life.

As far as I know, neither the city nor county library systems of San Diego has ever held a charity auction at the Hotel Del Coronado—or anywhere else—and I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that the interlibrary loan system has nothing to do with transporting illegal substances! I have the highest regard for not only the library systems and the Hotel Del, but also the Coronado Police Department and San Diego County Sheriff’s Department. All of the county’s law enforcement agencies, in fact! Lorie’s dim

view is colored by her experiences, and is in no way intended to make light of the fine work done by the excellent men and women in law enforcement!

If you'd like to know more about Dainger County, please visit www.daingercounty.com. You can write to me at marionlaird@gmail.com, or c/o Love Inspired Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279 U.S.A.

May the Lord bless you!

Marion Faith Laird

MARION FAITH LAIRD

shares a house with her mom and a gazillion books. She plays assorted musical instruments, including the organ at her church, composes and arranges music, sings, acts, and occasionally indulges in artwork. She's always had characters running around in her brain, and is glad she has a new way to share them with others.

In addition to the arts, Marion loves making things. She'd time-travel to the Renaissance if she could to study art technique, but she'd always come back home for her computer.

Growing up in a navy family, Marion has lived from one end of the U.S. to the other, and changed schools and curricula like some kids change shoes. Her peripatetic upbringing has given her a lifelong love of travel and learning, as well as awareness that while people's customs may differ, their hearts are the same.

Marion is a member of Romance Writers of America and American Christian Fiction Writers.

No Place to Run

Marion Faith Laird



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

—John 14:27

For Mom, who inspired me to read because she always was, and to write because she wrote and told amazing stories! I'm glad she's here to read this.

And for Dad, who always encouraged me to follow my dreams. I wish he could hold a copy of this book, but I'm sure he knows.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my friend Anne, who introduced me to Love Inspired books back when they were Steeple Hill. I believe I can safely say that if it wasn't for her, this book wouldn't have been written. She'll always have a special place in our hearts' albums.

I'm indebted to the generous writers who helped me fine-tune my first chapter and cover blurb entry in Mills & Boon's annual So You Think You Can Write contest, especially Laura Hamby, Valerie Parv, Rachel J. Stevens and Kathi Robb Harris. I also thank Danica Favorite, who assured me that the editors would contact anyone whose work they wanted to see, even if the manuscript didn't make it past the first round of voting. Many thanks to Tina James, who requested the full manuscript and a synopsis, Lynette Eason, who helped me improve my synopsis, and to Elizabeth Mazer, my editor, who called and bought the book! Through the revision process, she's helped make it so much better than it was in its beginning!

Thanks also to Cheryl Wyatt. I've started many a story from her writing challenges (although not this one). I also appreciate the writing challenges on the Community Boards at Mills & Boon, and the interactive novel writing at PanHistoria.com. It's been said it takes a village to raise a child. I'm beginning to think it takes a village to nurture a writer! Many thanks to all my "villages," and to more of my "villagers," (in alphabetical order) Diana Cosby, Margaret Daley, Nell Dixon, Rachelle McCalla, Shirlee McCoy, Camy Tang and Janet Tronstad.

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ONE

The note was unsigned.

Don't think you can get away with it.

The computer printout lay on the pile of library in-mail, as innocent as a rattlesnake ready to strike. Lorie stared at the words for one frozen moment as her heart began to race. She couldn't hear. Couldn't see anything except the note.

This couldn't be happening.

Not now.

Not after her prayers had been answered to let her begin rebuilding her life in Dainger County.

By the time the other librarian, Jen Burkhalter, loped into the office and slung her denim purse onto the coatrack, Lorie was shivering.

"The weather's gorgeous. I think spring decided to stick around a little longer." Jen's head jerked in a double take, her short black hair quivering. "What's wrong? Are you cold? You look like a deer in headlights."

Lorie sent a silent prayer heavenward. Help! Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she shook her head. "I'm fine."

Jen stuck her fists on her generous hips. "Don't try to put one

over on a mom. If you're fine, I'm a sunflower in a cornfield. Now what's the problem?"

It took a moment for Lorie to calm down sufficiently to speak. "Have you heard any talk about my moving back to town?"

Jen looked surprised. "You mean trash talk? No. Why?"

You can do this. Taking a deep breath for courage, Lorie nodded at the note. "Look at the in-box. Somebody doesn't want me here."

Jen peered into the in-box, adjusting gold wire-rim glasses. "Oh, my. Get away with what?"

Murder.

But it wasn't.

An icy shiver of doubt skittered up Lorie's spine. What if someone thought it was?

Get a hold of yourself. This isn't San Diego.

Lorie pulled herself together. "Maybe they left it on the wrong desk."

"With your name on it?" Jen jerked her thumb in the direction of Lorie's Head Librarian plaque. "Stop grasping at straws. Everybody knows who the new head librarian is. You haven't touched the paper, have you?"

Lorie shook her head. "I've read enough mysteries to know that's the worst thing I could do."

"Then you also know we need to call the sheriff's department."

Call the law? Fear stabbed Lorie in the gut. "But what if this is just a prank?"

“What if it isn’t?”

Lorie winced.

“Grimace all you want to, but if you don’t call them, I’m going to.”

“All right.” Lorie’s sigh ruffled the papers on her desk. “We’d better use the phone at the main desk, in case there are fingerprints.”

“Good idea.” Jen followed Lorie out the door, closing it after them, the automatic lock clicking into place.

As she reached for the phone at the circulation desk, Lorie’s stomach roiled. Lord, why me? If she never had to talk with another person in law enforcement, it would still be too soon.

You can do this. Her inner pep talk wasn’t working. You have to.

She glanced back at Jen. “What’s the phone number?”

“You could just dial 911.”

“It isn’t an emergency. It’s just a—” What was it exactly?

“A personal threat.” Jen finished the thought for her. “Something you can’t afford to take lightly.”

“You don’t know the phone number, do you?”

“Here.” Jen punched in seven digits and shoved the beige receiver at Lorie.

“Dainger County Sheriff’s Department.”

The receptionist’s voice was warm, honeyed and very Southern. She also sounded vaguely familiar, but Lorie couldn’t put a name to the voice. Just hearing the words “Sheriff’s

Department,” Lorie swallowed hard and almost hung up. Jen, noticing her hesitation, glared at her.

Lorie cleared her throat. “This is Lorie Narramore at the county library. I’d like to report an incident.” There. She’d said it, as if the note were the only thing wrong.

“Why, Loretta Lee, is that you?”

Lorie rolled her eyes. A few years in California had eliminated Loretta Lee from her name. A few minutes in Daingerville brought the ponderous moniker back.

“Yes, it is.”

“This is Vangie Rae Sutherland. Used to be Vangie Rae McCormick, remember?”

Could she ever forget her old school nemesis? “It’s nice to hear your voice again, Vangie.” The Lord would forgive her for exaggerating. She hoped.

“Goodness gracious, I haven’t seen you in forever!” Vangie sounded delighted. “I’d heard you’d moved back. You’re at the county library, you said?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Reduced to wordless sounds? Really, Lorie, you’re a grown-up. You shouldn’t let her do this to you.

“That explains why we haven’t run into each other, then. Frank and I always go to the city library in West Bluff. How do you like being back here with your family?”

The unbusinesslike tenor of the conversation gave Lorie a headache, but she answered automatically.

“It’s been fine...” Lorie caught Jen’s Momzilla I’ll get you if

you don't 'fess up right this second face. "Look, when I went into my office just now, I found a threatening note on my desk."

"Ooh, that sounds serious." The threat might sound serious, but Vangie sure didn't. A clicking sound issued from the phone speaker, as if Vangie were making a note on her computer. "Are you still single?"

"What?" The sudden change of subject sent Lorie's brain reeling. What could her marital status possibly have to do with the case? If there was a case...

"We have several good-looking deputies I've been trying to match up with someone, but—"

Fear morphed into irritation. "Vangie, it doesn't matter. There's a threatening note on my desk."

"Well, of course it matters. If you're not divorced or anything, I've got a couple of good Christian boys I could send out."

Lorie sighed. Vangie Rae must not have outgrown her high-school matchmaking tendencies. Lord, preserve me!

"I'm not divorced. I've just been too busy to get married." Not to mention getting dumped twice by guys I should have known better than to date in the first place. And—No. Lorie refused to dwell on the main reason she hadn't had a husband or at least a fiancé when she'd left the West.

"Good." A few clicks issued from the line. "Now, tell me what this note said."

"Something like, 'You won't get away with it.'"

More clicking sounded on the other end of the line. "Can't

you see it?”

“No. I left it in the office. I’m calling from the checkout desk.”

“Oh, very good. It’ll be better if you haven’t got fingerprints all over the place.”

Yanking her attention back from the computer, Lorie switched the phone to her other ear. “We all share the office, so my prints are probably on everything except the note. At least, they shouldn’t be on it, unless the person responsible used my printer paper.”

“Now, now, don’t go looking on the gloomy side, Loretta Lee.” She still pronounced Lorie’s first name as though it were two words: Lo Retta, emphasis on the Lo. “We’ve already alerted one of our deputies.”

“Thanks, Vangie.” There was no sense in taking her frustration out on her old school frenemy. Getting on the wrong side of Vangie Rae had always had dire consequences, even before she was in law enforcement. “I never dreamed you’d grow up to work at the sheriff’s office.”

“Neither did I, but then I met Frank, and my entire career plans changed.”

Frank Sutherland. The Dainger County Sheriff. Duh. Vangie was Mrs. Lawman-in-Chief. Suddenly everything made sense. Vangie was bubbly enough to make the station a friendlier place. With her at the reception desk, crime in Dainger County had probably plummeted to an all-time low.

Until someone decided to threaten the new head librarian...

“Let’s see now. We have several single deputies, and I’ve put in a request for—”

“Vangie, I’m not angling for a date.” Lorie fought down her irritation. Especially not a deputy! “I just want to find out who sent the note and stop them from sending any more.” There. At least she sounded calm.

“Are you sure? Because after the men you probably dated in California, the fellows here are gonna be a whole lot more real.”

That’s right, Vangie. Diss the place where I’d still be living if my world hadn’t collapsed.

Beeping noises issued from the receiver.

“I have more calls coming in. One of our more eligible deputies should be there within an hour, unless there’s an emergency. I surely am glad to talk to you again, Loretta. We’ll have to get together real soon, okay? Bye now!”

Vangie disconnected. Lorie stared at the receiver for a moment before replacing it on the cradle.

“So?” Jen sounded like an overeager reporter.

“Vangie Rae.” Lorie rolled her eyes. “Why didn’t you warn me?”

Jen straightened the free bookmark dump. “I didn’t know you knew the Sutherlands.”

“I’ve only met the sheriff in passing, but I had several classes with Vangie. Now she’s threatening to set me up with one of the deputies. The last thing I have time for is a romance.” With a lawman, especially.

Jen clucked her tongue. “Honey, everybody needs love in their life.” Jen started straightening the brochures in the Summer Reading Program display.

Could her day get any worse? “I didn’t say I didn’t need love. I just don’t need romance.”

Jen shrugged. “Keep on believing that if you want to. Time to open the doors.” She took the library keys from her pocket and ambled toward the entrance.

As Lorie got to work, hushed voices discussing the latest offerings on the new-books shelf trickled through the inside return slot. The coiled spring wound around her insides relaxed. At least she was doing one thing right.

After checking in the returned books and arranging them on their respective shelves, Lorie returned to the office. The impulse to check the door to make certain it was locked almost overwhelmed her, but she squashed it, hoping she and Jen hadn’t already destroyed fingerprint evidence on the handle.

“Ms. Narramore?”

Lorie started, turned and collided with a solid mass of muscle in a tan uniform. A crackle of electricity jolted her. Was it that dry in here?

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Dispatch sent me. Threatening note?” The voice issuing from the strong face was a warm baritone.

Lorie met his incredibly blue eyes, shaded by a fawn Stetson. Whew. Okay. Calm down. This is the investigating officer.

Without meaning to, she checked his left ring finger. Bare. It's none of your business. He's the law.

Lorie cleared her throat. "Yes. It's right here, Deputy—" she glanced at his name tag "—MacGregor." Oh, my. Was this the MacGregor boy who'd been the top defensive linebacker for the Daingerville Diamondbacks when she was a lowly freshman? Glancing again at his face confirmed her suspicion. This had to be either Matt or one of his equally handsome brothers.

As Lorie started to insert the key into the lock, the door swung open of its own accord.

"What—"

"Don't touch it." Deputy MacGregor drew his sidearm and clicked off the safety as he motioned her away.

Lorie's heart threatened to stop. They had locked the door...hadn't they?

"Hands up in there. Sheriff's department." Deputy MacGregor kicked open the office door and scanned the room for intruders.

It was empty.

He glanced over his shoulder at Lorie. "Is there another exit?"

"Just the window in the bathroom, but it's a little small.... Although they assured me it does meet fire safety standards—"

Deputy MacGregor had already moved to the door leading to the minuscule restroom. He nudged it with the toe of his shiny black work boot.

A breeze fluttered through the open casement and into the

office, riffling through the papers on the desk.

“Was the window open when you arrived?”

Lorie shook her head. “I don’t think so—but I didn’t really think to look.”

He took a step into the tiny space, enough to bring him close to the frame inset with frosted glass. Examining it, the deputy frowned.

“Screen’s been sliced open.” The deputy poked at it and then peered at the area around the lock. “Window’s been jimmied.”

Lorie could hardly hear him over the pounding in her ears. The harassment was starting again, and this time, she had no place to run.

“Wow, look at those scratches!”

Jen’s voice made Lorie jump, as she hadn’t heard her approach. Lorie glanced at Jen’s feet. She would be wearing silent-soled cross-trainers today of all days.

“You didn’t notice the window before?”

Lorie shook her head. “We keep that door shut most of the time.” Maybe whoever had left the note had still been inside the bathroom while she was in the office.... Panic welled up inside her, but she managed to swallow the scream.

“And you’re certain you locked the office door?” Deputy MacGregor sounded as if he wanted to get the whole picture.

Lorie shook her head, wishing she had a glass of water. Her mouth had gone completely dry. The proximity of the attractive deputy was not helping, either. “No, I’m not completely sure. I

meant to, but I was pretty rattled. I might have forgotten.”

“I locked it.” Jen put her hands on her hips again. “I felt it catch.”

“Right. Let’s see the note.”

Lorie moved to the desk and waved a hand at the in-box. “It’s right—wait a minute.”

“Is something wrong?”

No. Where was it? “The note. It isn’t here.”

“Come again?” Deputy MacGregor’s sharp tone could have sliced through granite.

Lorie faced his unbelieving stare head-on.

“S-someone must have taken it.”

* * *

Great. Just great. Matt’s day was complete. First the lead on the meth-lab investigation dried up, and now this. Missing evidence.

Matt clicked the safety on and shoved his silver Colt 1991 back into the holster with unnecessary force.

“Where was it?”

“Right there.” Lorie waved a pale, fine-boned hand over the in-box. “On top. It looked like a computer printout.”

“Laser, ink-jet, dot matrix?”

“Ink-jet, I think. Full color, anyway. The letters were a deep tomato-red.” Her voice wavered almost imperceptibly.

Matt took out his incident notebook and scrawled the information. “And it said...?”

“Something like ‘You won’t get away with it.’”

Jen piped up, “Don’t think you can get away with it.”

Matt wondered whether Jen knew more about the note than she’d told Lorie. She was practically another sister to him ever since she’d married his best friend, but Matt had known her since her prankster days in junior high. Was this another one of her stunts? Matt fixed Jen with his best law-enforcement stare.

“And you know this because...?”

Jen sniffed. “I pay attention. And don’t think this is some sort of ‘let’s fix Matt up with the new librarian’ scheme Vangie Sutherland and I cooked up. Because it isn’t.”

Matt took stock of his old friend. According to J.T., she had stopped pulling pranks on people, but Matt wouldn’t put writing a mysterious note as a joke past her. Still, actually threatening someone who seemed to be her friend was unlikely. And besides, she wouldn’t be dumb enough to damage library property for a joke. Jen would never commit even a misdemeanor unless she’d lost her mind in the past few weeks.

Lorie appeared to be having her own doubts. Having been three grades ahead of her, Matt hadn’t really known Lorie when he was growing up. She’d been one of the brainy kids, scrawny, with braces. Looked as though she’d turned out well, except for her lack of color. Closer inspection indicated her pallor hadn’t come from makeup. Whether the note was legit or not, she was frightened.

“Jen couldn’t have moved the note.” Lorie’s voice had grown

steadier. “She’s been with me since I spotted the note. And you saw the window.”

Matt’s old classmate nodded gravely, but she had a “so there” twinkle in her eye. This might have started as a serious call, but, from the look of things, Jen intended to go along with Vangie’s eternal attempts at matchmaking. No way he’d put up with that. He’d phone J.T. and then drop by the house after work.

Matt tucked the notebook back into his pocket and turned to go.

“Aren’t you going to dust for prints?” Lorie sounded disappointed. More, still frightened.

Matt looked back at Lorie. “On my way to the unit now for the kit. Be right back.”

He headed out the door to Unit 5 and took a moment to radio in a report. “Dispatch, this is MacGregor. Looks like a B and E at the library. I’m processing the scene now.”

“Ten-four, Unit 5.”

Snagging the fingerprint kit, Matt headed back toward the library. Detouring by the bathroom window, he scanned the vicinity for footprints. Nothing showed on the concrete. Little chips of metal scraped when the window had been jimmied were the sole physical evidence.

Matt frowned. The perp knew enough to be careful. That boded ill for the investigation. Very ill, indeed.

TWO

When Matt returned to the library office, Jen and Lorie were

tampering with the scene.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?” Their mad scramble through papers made the answer obvious. He had to stop them before they accidentally destroyed more evidence.

“Trying to find the note.” Lorie sounded as though she were attempting to cover fear with defiance. Somehow he had to convince her he wasn’t the enemy.

Her voice had that California crispness which years of watching television had led him to expect. She didn’t sound like an Arkansan anymore. Matt wondered how long it would take her to get her accent back. Not that anybody local had an accent.... It was people in other areas.

Matt smiled at the thought, and Lorie returned it, this time minus the fear. Hello. Really great smile... Looking into her eyes like this, he hadn’t expected to feel a bolt of attraction. Judging from the surprised expression on her face, he hadn’t been the only one.

“Is this it?” Jen reached behind the potted sago palm in the corner. “Ouch. I always forget how scratchy that thing is.”

She stood up, bringing a sheet of paper with her. Glancing at it, Jen blanched. “Oh. No. This isn’t it.”

“What did you find?” Lorie sounded hopeful.

“It isn’t important.” Jen crumpled it up and started to stuff it into a pocket.

Matt held out his hand. He kept it extended, giving her one of his looks until she put the now-wrinkled printout into his

outstretched palm.

The paper was an invoice for new books. Only Jen's attempt to hide it made it suspicious. One more thing to add to his list of questions for later. After a cursory inspection, he handed it back. Jen squashed it into her pocket.

"I'll need you two to clear out while I dust the office."

Jen chuckled. "Wish you'd sweep while you're here."

"Jen, come on." Instead of sounding amused, Lorie's voice held a tremor.

Matt encompassed them both in a look as they moved away from the desks. "Don't leave the library. I'll call you when I'm done."

Lorie practically shoved Jen out the door and left him to his solitary task. Outside, people moved around. Library business as usual.

Matt frowned as he dusted the in-box on the head librarian's desk. Why would anybody threaten someone like Lorie Narramore? She seemed an unlikely target. Of course, you could never tell. Anyone could have secrets.

Matt finished gathering the prints, concentrating on the job at hand so fully that Lorie's sigh startled him. He looked up to find her at the door.

"Sorry this is taking so long."

Her answering smile was wan. "It takes as much time as it takes."

Matt grinned, trying to make her feel better. "Most civilians

don't get that."

"I'm not most civilians."

Why did she look so sad when she said that? There was more to Lorie Narramore than met the eye. Although, despite trying not to notice, he liked the parts that did meet the eye.

"I'll need to print you and Jen, too, to eliminate yours."

Fear flashed in Lorie's eyes. Hmm. Why?

After a moment, Lorie nodded. "All right. I guess I'd forgotten that part."

Forgotten? Interesting.

"No need to be afraid. It doesn't hurt, you know."

"I know. It's just... Never mind."

She knew? Matt looked into her eyes more deeply, as if he'd be able to see what was troubling her. She looked as though she felt...guilty.

"I'll just get Jen." Lorie whirled and was gone before Matt could stop her. The idea of being fingerprinted seemed to alarm her way more than it should. He'd definitely have to do a background check on her the minute he was back at his office computer.

As Jen walked through the door, she was already speaking. "Do mine first. We have two patrons ready to check out." She held out both hands in a parody of arrests in old police movies.

Matt grinned as he quickly took Jen's prints, teasing and joking with her all the while. When he was done, Jen walked out the office door and Lorie came back in, hesitation in every step.

Odd. He could think of only one reason why she'd be so uneasy.

"You aren't just pulling my leg with this note business, are you?"

"No."

Lorie Narramore might not have written the note, but she felt guilty about something. He'd been in law enforcement long enough to recognize the signs. This situation was making her extremely uncomfortable, and Matt itched to know the reason why. Of course, he could just wait and run her prints. That would bring anything up through the system.

Why was he sure he'd find her there? And why did the thought bother him so much?

* * *

Lorie could almost see the wheels turning in Matt's brain. She hated the thought of telling him, but surely she didn't have to confess the whole, sordid story. Maybe she could get by with the least possible amount and still tell the truth.

"I was arrested once." The words left Lorie's lips before she could stop them. When was she going to learn how to keep her mouth shut?

Caution mingled with curiosity in those intense blue eyes of his. "For?"

Lorie took a deep breath. "Murder."

To do him credit, his expression grew concerned. "I'm assuming you were released or acquitted, or you wouldn't be

standing here now.”

“You don’t have to tell me how blessed I was not to have been convicted, because I know. Even the thought of county lockup scares me silly.” She plucked at her light blue shirtsleeves, twisting them, just barely conscious of the action but unable to stop.

The deputy’s expression grew serious. “The note—‘Don’t think you can get away with it’—you think it’s referring to what happened?”

“It could. I don’t know.” Lorie bit her lip. “After the trial and the publicity, doing my job at home became impossible. Then the harassment started. Notes, like this. Anonymous phone calls. It went on for months. When my family told me there was an opening for head librarian here, I jumped at it.”

“Does the board know?”

Lorie nodded. “I had to give them full disclosure. It was only right, in case the bad publicity followed me. Thankfully, they decided to take a chance on me, in spite of attempts by some to quash the deal. I’m determined not to let the county down. Or my fellow librarians, either. They’ve stood by me from the first. They don’t even think about it anymore. Only now...”

“Only now someone is making life difficult for you here.”

Lacing her fingers calmed her. “If only that’s all it is. I can probably live with poison-pen letters.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Matt instantly looked alert. "What do you mean?"

Here goes, Lord.

"The man who died?" Lorie swallowed hard. "I shot him."

* * *

Matt's defenses clanged into place. She'd shot and killed a man?

Judge not, lest ye be judged. The verse popped unbidden into his thoughts. Okay. There had to be extenuating circumstances. If he was patient, maybe she'd tell him.

He waited with the quiet expression that often got people to confess. Yet Lorie Narramore stood next to her desk, eyes filled with sadness, and said nothing else. Matt cleared his throat and, without stopping to reason why, pulled out one of his business cards and handed it to her just as Jen came to the door.

"In case you need anything else, my extension's on there."

"Thank you."

Her fingers brushed his as she accepted the card. A tingle shot up his arm. Never had Matt found keeping his professional calm such a struggle. Not good. Especially not with her confession still trembling on her lips.

"No tremble." Oops. "Uh, no trouble."

Matt fled. He made sure his steps were slow and steady, but in his heart, he knew the truth. It was flight.

He didn't feel secure again until he was safely in the patrol car.

* * *

"Well, that was certainly peculiar." Jen stood, arms akimbo,

staring at the spot Deputy MacGregor had vacated.

“What?”

“Matt. I’ve never seen him so bowled over. I think he likes you.”

Great. That was the last thing she needed. Lorie rearranged the neat piles of folders on her desk to avoid meeting Jen’s eyes. “Don’t be silly.”

“I’m not. I’m being practical.” Jen walked over and leaned on Lorie’s desk, making herself impossible to ignore. “You’re single. He’s single. You’re a Christian. He’s—”

“Let it go, Jen. I’m not in the market for a man.” Especially not one in law enforcement.

“But he’s cute.”

“So are puppies, but that doesn’t mean I want another one.” Giving the folders one last tweak, Lorie straightened up. “We have a library to take care of, or have you forgotten?”

Jen sighed, but gave in. “Okay. I’ll make sure nobody makes off with the teen horror books.”

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

Lorie waited until Jen was gone, and then searched the tiny room from one end to the other, looking under papers, under books, anywhere the note could have gone.

After fifteen fruitless minutes, Lorie tried to dismiss the note from her mind.

Getting some of the hobby wire she kept in her desk for the summer craft program, Lorie tied up the bathroom window the

best she could. Winding the wire around the handle and the broken lock might not do much to keep anyone out, but it made her feel marginally better. Still, the door had also been unlocked. Had it been from the inside out, or was the window merely a distraction? However it had happened, the intruder also had gotten access to her locked office.

A shudder took her by surprise. She reached for the phone. Paging through the phone book, she found three listings for locksmiths, one of whom had married into her family.

Even if she had to pay for the installation herself, she was getting her office lock changed and the window repaired. Today.

* * *

Matt spent the rest of his patrol trying not to think about the new librarian. Filing his report from the car's computer, he entered "breaking and entering, intimidation, stalking" in the reason-for-call box. He longed to go back to the office and see what leads he could scare up, but that would have to wait until after his patrol.

To think someone might actually have it in for Lorie Narramore gave Matt a stomachache. She seemed sweet. Of course, you couldn't always tell by looking, but Matt believed she was what she seemed to be: a victim of circumstances forced into taking a life. It was obvious the experience still weighed on her, and he hated the thought that someone was deliberately making it worse.

Driving back on his normal patrol route through the lunch

break traffic, he wondered where the new librarian went to church. Or whether she went to church. If she didn't, he had one more reason not to consider seeing her socially after this case was closed.

He knew from experience that a relationship where faith wasn't shared would only lead him astray. Back in high school, he'd been more optimistic. Lorene had been so vulnerable, so sweetly tempting that he'd ignored everything he'd ever been taught. She'd ended up breaking his heart, and he had no guarantee "Lorie" Loretta Narramore was any different from "Lorie" Lorene O'Hara.

Nope. He had to keep his head on straight and his heart under control. There was no way he was allowing another attractive Lorie to get under his skin and wreck his good judgment. The first one had nearly ruined his life.

The radio crackled. "Unit 5, there's a fender bender on Highway 21. What's your location?"

Matt grabbed the mike and keyed it. "Dispatch, I'm eastbound on Hackberry approaching the intersection of Van Buren."

Another burst of static... "Paramedics are already at the scene, but we need you for crowd control."

"On my way."

Matt switched on the lights and siren and was at the scene in less than three minutes. Setting up orange traffic cones and diverting cars to an alternate route helped to get his mind off the librarian. He managed not to think of her for at least ten minutes,

until the paramedic van took off for Lucius Dainger Memorial Hospital in nearby West Bluff.

As he put the stacked cones back into the trunk, another memory of Lorie Narramore drifted up from his memory. She'd been in the Diamondback Marching Band, playing the glockenspiel on the edge of the gridiron, when a tackle had tumbled him into the band. He'd ended up knocking her over and helping her up. Her glasses had rendered her light brown eyes enormous. Hmm. She wasn't wearing glasses these days, but her eyes were still amazing.

What was it about Lorie Narramore? He wasn't the kind of bachelor who was drawn to every attractive female in sight. Especially one who by her own admission had shot and killed a man. It wasn't damsel-in-distress syndrome, either. He had the impression she could handle herself in a tricky situation. So why exactly was he having trouble concentrating on work?

Maybe it was because someone had threatened the librarian. Once he ran the prints, maybe he could match them up with someone in AFIS and this case would be over.

Unfortunately, when he got back to the station, the prints from the office were not in AFIS. Lorie's prints, however, brought up a large file.

Her mug shot looked strained rather than fearful or defiant. Huge purple shadows bordered her eyes. Her mouth was drawn.

The case had been through the San Diego County courts last year and had made quite a splash. Matt was surprised that it

hadn't made the local news, but if it had, he'd missed it.

Grayson Carl, the man Lorie had shot, was a suspected drug lord, with ties to a network in Colombia and Panama. If she'd been sent to prison, the Orgulloso cartel would have had her assassinated before the year was out. Could they have been the ones behind the harassment in San Diego—and today's note?

Threatening notes and phone calls seemed a bit mild for them. Drive-by shootings were more their style.

The file was too long to absorb in one sitting. Matt sent it to the printer, including the court transcripts, to read at home.

“Working late, Mac?”

Matt looked up from his computer to see the sheriff's broad frame filling the doorway.

“A little. Getting some homework on that case your wife sent me on this morning.” The laser printer spat out pages at breakneck speed. “What do you know about Lorie Narramore at the county library?”

Frank's sandy eyebrows rose. “I looked over your report. On the surface, the note doesn't sound like much, but, given her background, I don't like it. I was hoping she'd left her troubles in San Diego.”

“Do you really see an international cartel coming after someone in our little county, Frank?”

“I wish I could say no and mean it.” The sheriff ambled into Matt's tiny office and plunked down in the blue upholstered visitor's chair. “The way things have been going lately on the

illegal-drug front, I'm not so sure."

Matt leaned on his desk. "I'm not going to find anything in here about Ms. Narramore that I won't like, will I?"

"Depends on what you don't like."

Matt wasn't happy with the answer, but knew Frank wouldn't say any more until Matt had had a chance to read through the file and come to his own conclusions. But what would he find? True, she'd been acquitted, but the nagging question remained.

If she'd truly been innocent, why had she ever been tried for murder?

THREE

Just as Lorie was about to depart for the day, her desk phone jangled.

"Leave it, why don't you?" Jen slung her purse over her shoulder and held out Lorie's. "You know it's past closing time."

"It might be Mom. Her church is getting ready for Vacation Bible School, and she has some idea I can help."

"Why wouldn't she call your cell phone?"

Lorie shrugged. "I'd better get it." She lifted the receiver. "Dainger County Library, Lorie Narramore speaking." Mom's cheery voice would pipe up any second.

A slight hissing was the only indication anyone was on the other end of the line.

"Hel-lo, Dainger County Library."

Lorie's repeated greeting brought no response. "Is anybody there?"

Jen made “hang it up” gestures with her free hand. She’d give it five more seconds. “Five, four, thr—” “Murderer.”

Lorie froze. “What did—”

“Murr-dererrrrr.” The whisper was hoarse, drawn-out.

Not again!

Lorie slammed the receiver into the cradle. Her heart thundered against her ribs.

“What’s wrong?”

Lorie shook her head, unable to speak.

Jen’s eyes grew huge. “It wasn’t Matt with bad news about the fingerprinting, was it?”

Lorie’s mouth opened, but no words came out. Shaking her head, Lorie shivered.

“Okay, that settles it. You’ve coming home with me for supper.”

“But—”

“No arguments.” Jen shoved Lorie’s purse at her until she took it. “It’s just takeout from Old West Pizza, but you don’t need to be alone.”

The phone’s ring shattered the stillness. They stared at it. Another two rings would take it to voice mail.

Jen’s hand reached out before Lorie could stop her.

“Dainger County Library, this is Jen. How can I help you?”

A split second later she held out the receiver so Lorie could hear the dial tone.

Shuddering, Lorie clutched her purse to her chest. “You’re right. I don’t need to be alone.”

* * *

Matt drove back to the Dainger County Library when his shift was over but one glance at the parking lot told him he’d already missed her. He’d forgotten; that was right. The library was open late only on Fridays.

He pulled the pickup into the empty parking lot and phoned J. T. Burkhalter. The voice of the family’s four-year-old answered. “Bookhawtew wesidence.”

“Hi, Bobby. Put your daddy on, please.”

“Okay. DAD-DEE! TEWEPHONE!”

Matt jerked the cell phone away from his ear at the first bellow, so he wasn’t totally deafened when J.T. picked up.

“Hey J.T., it’s Matt.”

“What’s up, bro?”

“Something strange happened at the library today. I wondered if Jen had mentioned it.”

J.T. chuckled. “You mean the ‘Puzzle of the Purloined Poison Pen?’ She did bring up the subject a time or twelve.”

“Could I swing by and ask her a few questions?”

“Sure. Come for supper. Jen brought home pizza.”

Matt smiled. He hadn’t been angling for an invitation, but pizza sounded good.

“I’ll see you then.”

Five minutes later, Jen opened the door when Matt arrived.

“Come on in before it gets cold.”

Matt keyed the automatic lock on his red F-150 SuperCrew and walked into the organized chaos that was the Burkhalter house. Bobby immediately tackle-hugged him around the knees.

“Unca Matt!”

“Hey, Uncle Matt’s here!” Not to be left out, eight-year-old Kevin raced toward his honorary uncle, holding out his latest freebie from the fast-food kiddie meal.

“Ooh, scary dinosaur!”

His comment earned Matt an instant grin from Kevin, who growled and waved the green plastic tyrannosaurus in Matt’s face.

Chrissy typed something on her phone, giggled and put it into her pocket before waving at Matt.

“New boyfriend?”

Chrissy shook her head. “Oh, no, Uncle Matt.”

“Good. You’re too young to date.”

Chrissy giggled again. It was such a normal sound. How old was she now? Matt had lost track.

“I’m thirteen. All my friends are dating.” Her phone buzzed again, and she snatched it out of her pocket to check the latest text.

“All the more reason.” Matt thought of himself at thirteen, a mass of pimples and hormones. He shuddered. He was so thankful he didn’t have kids. He wasn’t sure he could take the stress.

“Jen, where do you keep the soda glasses?”

Matt started. Lorie Narramore was here? Alarm bells clanged in his brain. He whirled to face Jen.

“Upper cupboard over the counter next to the refrigerator.” Jen rolled her eyes at Matt. “Turn off that expression, Deputy. I invited Lorie before J.T. asked you over, so you can stick your suspicion right back in your detective kit.”

Lorie emerged from the kitchen carrying two glasses in each hand.

“Chrissy, put the phone away and help Lorie.”

Chrissy barely missed colliding with Matt on her way to help. She snatched the glasses from Lorie just as Lorie spotted Matt. Good thing. It looked as though she’d have dropped them if Chrissy hadn’t intervened.

“Deputy? Why are you—did Jen phone you?” Lorie still looked alarmed. Had the note been that disturbing?

Matt put a smile on his face.

“Nope. Just called to catch up with J.T., and he invited me for supper.” Noticing that Lorie’s expression hadn’t changed, his trouble radar kicked in. “Why? Has something else happened?”

Before Lorie could answer, Jen called the rest of the family to the table. J.T. brought the two Old West Pizza family-size to-go boxes from the kitchen and set them in the middle as the thundering herd of children took their places.

“I want to sit by Miss Lowie!” Bobby announced.

In the table shuffling that followed, Matt ended up on Lorie’s

other side. J.T. held out his hands to Bobby and Kevin, who were seated next to him. The prayer circle quickly formed around the table. Lorie's hand was soft but firm. Matt wondered if she still played an instrument. He ignored the warmth that traveled up his arm at the contact.

"Lord, thank You for the guests You've brought us, and thank You for keeping us all safe today. Please bless this food and our fellowship, in Jesus's name. Amen."

A round of hearty "Amens" preceded an immediate scramble for pizza slices. Matt felt a gentle tug and realized he hadn't let go of Lorie's hand.

"Oh. Sorry." He released her.

"No problem." Lorie concentrated on the slice of pizza in front of her, effectively cutting off conversation.

The Burkhalter children chattered about upcoming church camp and dozens of other subjects. Matt could barely keep up. He did keep a surreptitious eye on Lorie, noticing as color slowly returned to her fine cheekbones.

Matt waited until after the kids had scarfed down their pizza and scattered to their rooms before bringing up Lorie's distress.

"Something else has happened since that note."

Lorie turned to look at him. She nodded slowly.

"What?"

"Somebody called." Jen spoke before Lorie could. "Just as we were leaving for the day."

"And...?"

Color drained from Lorie's face.

"She wouldn't tell me what he said." Jen sounded irked. "But it must have been pretty bad."

Matt waited until Lorie turned to him. Her anguished expression revealed more than words.

"You should have notified us immediately so we could put a trace on the call. Was it the person who sent the note?"

Lorie gulped. "I don't know. Maybe. Probably."

"So I insisted she come home with me." Jen took another swallow of sweet tea.

"Good idea." Was Lorie going to tell him voluntarily, or would he have to drag the information out of her? "Well? What did he say?"

Tears formed in her eyes, making them glisten. She blinked them away.

"Just one word. It was enough."

Matt raised both eyebrows in a question.

Lorie took a deep breath, and, as she let it out slowly, breathed her answer. "Murderer."

Jen's hand flew to her mouth. "You didn't tell me! Oh, you poor thing! No wonder you were so shaken. Do you think that's what the note meant?" She reached over the table and patted Lorie's hand.

Lorie nodded.

"You were cleared completely." Matt's words were firm. "There's no reason you should have to put up with this kind of

harassment.”

Lorie flashed him a grateful smile.

Matt turned to look at Jen. “Speaking of the note, what was the story with the invoice you tried to hide from me?”

J.T. got the expression of a foxhound that had just picked up the scent. This was apparently news to him.

“It was for an order of books from a new publisher. One of the patrons put in a request. Unfortunately, he happens to be on the library committee in the county board of supervisors, so we had to order them.”

What books would Jen find so objectionable? “Smut?”

“No.” Jen sighed. “Worse. Books claiming the Holocaust never happened.”

The pizza and salad soured in Matt’s stomach. His grandfather had been among the troops that freed the prisoners at Dachau. He’d shown Matt the photographs, pictures of things he’d never imagined one human being could do to another. Then again, that had been the problem. The Nazis hadn’t considered their victims to be real human beings. He fought against the rising indignation and managed to keep his voice calm.

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know if I should—”

“Who?”

Jen sighed. “Supervisor Pitt.”

Ouch. Joseph Pitt was a prosperous businessman who not only had friends in high places but was headed there himself. His

radical beliefs hadn't kept him out of office. He always managed to gloss over the more controversial aspects of his beliefs when not among his fellow extremists. But, after a long conversation with the man at a social event when Pitt had been much the worse from whiskey, Matt knew way more than he ever wanted to about the repellant way the man's mind worked.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I was embarrassed." Jen picked up her plate and headed toward the dishwasher with it, even though it still had leftover pizza on it. "I detest having that hate-filled propaganda in our little county library. But I need the job."

Matt looked at Lorie again. "Did you know about this?"

"Yes. When he explained why he wanted them, he said it was just to present both sides of the issue."

"And you believed him?"

Lorie straightened up. "Mr. Pitt has been nothing but good to me since I came back to Dainger County. He swayed the library board in my favor after they had second thoughts about hiring me. He even gave my Mustang a free tune-up at the Pitt Stop. I'm trying to give him the benefit of the doubt."

J.T. snorted. Matt flashed him a warning glance. Retreating behind his napkin, Jen's husband turned the snort into a cough.

"Supervisor Pitt has always been careful to stay on the right side of the law." Matt turned to Lorie again. "But I wouldn't get too close to him if I were you."

"Why not?"

Matt gave the obvious answer. "He's a politician. Isn't that reason enough?"

Lorie smiled, the first relaxed smile he'd seen since they'd parted earlier at the library. A surge of elation rose in him at the sight of it, and he squashed it. Lorie Narramore was a citizen, and he'd protect her as he'd protect any other citizen.

He had absolutely no reason to get carried away with emotion. None.

* * *

Lorie was still sorting the books from the overnight drop when Jen arrived for work the next morning. She joined Lorie in the cubbyhole where they stored supplies.

"Any more notes?" Jen took a stack of books from Lorie and put them onto the rolling cart.

"No, thankfully. I'm beginning to hope it was just somebody's idea of a joke."

Jen snorted. "Pretty sick joke if you ask me. And what about that phone call?"

Lorie rubbed both hands up the sides of her face and through her hair, messing it up thoroughly. "I know. Yesterday seems like a bad dream." She scraped her hair back into a ponytail again.

"I hope you were careful driving home."

"Extra careful." She'd watched every driver with exaggerated caution, but there hadn't been any problems. Still, her dog and cats were nowhere close to being as happy as she was when she arrived home.

“Sleep okay?”

Lorie shook her head. “I kept hearing noises, but it was nothing, every time.”

“Every time?” Jen’s eyebrows rose. “How many times?”

“I don’t know. Four or five.” Lorie rubbed at her sleep-deprived eyes. “I’ll be okay.”

“I knew you should have stayed in our guest room. Then if you’d been woken up, you’d have known it was only one of my hooligans.”

Lorie nodded. “I appreciate it, but in case things get ugly, I don’t want your family in the middle of it.”

Jen muttered something as she rolled the book rack out the door. It sounded like, “Things are already ugly.”

Wednesday at the library lasted forever. A few regulars came looking for their favorite authors, but up till three o’clock, it stayed quiet. Lorie busied herself going through the stacks, checking to see whether any books needing repair had sneaked past returns.

As she was in the 799s, she noticed a book spine sticking out at a crooked angle. She reached up to shove it back into place.

Just as her fingertips touched the spine, she spotted a scrap of white sticking out of the top.

Fingerprints.

Lorie snatched her hand back. Could it be the vanished note from yesterday?

“Jen!”

“What do you need?” Jen appeared at the end of the row of shelving.

Lorie looked at her. “Do you see anything out of place?”

“No.” Jen glanced around the stacks. “Wait, what’s that?”

“I’m not sure. I think it might be the note. The book didn’t look like that when I shelved it this morning.”

A frown crossed Jen’s face. “Was the paper sticking out when you found it?”

Lorie nodded. “I did touch the spine before I saw the paper, but I haven’t moved it.”

“Call Matt. Or Vangie.”

Lorie reached into her pocket for her cell phone. “Could you get me my purse? I stuck Matt’s card in there.”

“Good choice.” Jen grinned. “I’ll be right back.”

While she was away, Lorie looked at the book title. Hunting and Gun Safety by Oswald Smith. Her stomach twisted. Had the note been left in that book on purpose, or had it just been an unhappy coincidence?

Lorie fought against the rush of memory threatening to overwhelm her. Not now, Lord, please.

Jen returned with Lorie’s brown leather purse slung over her arm. She tossed it, and Lorie caught it before it could smack her in the ribs.

“Thanks.”

She found Matt’s card in a side pocket and punched in the number with trembling fingers.

His phone rang once, twice—

“MacGregor.”

“Matt, I mean, Deputy MacGregor, this is Lorie Narramore. I think I’ve found the note.”

* * *

A jolt of electricity smacked Matt’s middle when he heard the suppressed fear in Lorie’s voice.

“Where?”

“Tucked into a library book that was put back crooked.”

“Have you touched it?”

“I shelved it this morning—the note wasn’t there then. When I spotted it just now, I only touched the spine, before I realized the note might be there. I hope I haven’t messed up any fingerprints.”

“I’ll be there in about ten minutes. Don’t let anyone else touch it.”

“Thank you.”

After reporting the call to dispatch, Matt drove toward the county library.

The parking lot was about a third full. Matt made a mental note of the vehicles. Three pickup trucks in various states of disrepair, plus one shiny new Dodge Ram belonging to the mayor’s first cousin and a gunmetal-gray Mercedes-Benz.

Matt parked next to Lorie’s car, a sporty blue Mustang convertible that looked as though it would be happier cruising down the Pacific Coast Highway than winding along the curves of Dainger County’s hilly roads.

Matt locked his car door and headed inside. Jen stood behind the checkout desk, scanning a patron's mile-high stack of books.

"She's by the seven-ninety-nines," she said, before he even had a chance to ask.

"Thanks."

Lorie looked up as he rounded the stacks. Was that relief in her eyes?

"Thank you for coming."

Matt nodded then followed her glance to the book sticking out of the shelf.

"Is that the culprit?"

"Yes. Aside from the initial mistake, I haven't touched it. I have no idea whether that's the note, but it seems a little coincidental if it isn't."

Matt reached into his pocket for the fresh set of latex gloves. He slipped them on, pulling them in place with a snap.

Surprised by its weight, Matt nearly dropped the tome as he pulled it off the shelf. Recovering it like a fumbled football, he opened it to the sheet of paper. Crimson blood-dripping letters in font size 72 screamed at him from the page. He lifted his eyes to Lorie's.

"What was it the original note said?"

Lorie started. "Original note? You mean—" She took a deep breath. "It said, 'Don't think you can get away with it.'"

"That's what I thought. Can you explain this, then?" He held the page where she could read it.

Lorie went deathly white and staggered against the bookshelf. BANG! HE'S DEAD, read the top of the note.

Halfway down the page, it continued: YOU'RE NEXT.

FOUR

No, Lord. This can't be happening.

Swallowing the bile that rose in her throat, Lorie struggled to find words. Matt would expect her to say something, not just stand there like a pillar of salt. First she had to keep from throwing up.

"Take a deep breath." Matt's voice penetrated the ringing in her ears.

Lorie tried, and had a fit of coughing. When she recovered, she took in as deep a breath as she could.

"Slowly. That's it. We don't want you to hyperventilate."

His right hand reached out to steady her, but pulled away almost instantly. That zap she'd felt at his touch must have been static electricity.

Please, Father. Please.

She couldn't even form a sensible prayer.

"You're not going to faint, are you?" Matt's voice was filled with concern.

"I don't think so."

Matt turned his head as a library patron turned the corner. Recognizing the man as Supervisor Pitt, Matt blinked. What were the odds of his showing up the day after he'd discussed the businessman-turned-politician with Lorie and the Burkhalters?

“Can you give us a moment, please?”

“Of course, Deputy.” The stately, graying supervisor moved down the next aisle.

“Do you want to go sit down while I print this area?”

Lorie knew she was in shock. She needed a cup of oversweetened hot tea. She put a hand to her face. Cold. So cold. Like that night—

No. She wouldn't let herself fall apart again. She needed to be stronger than that. It was the only way she'd get through this.

“Is it okay if I stay? I'll sit right over here on the step stool out of your way.”

“Fine. Wait here while I get the incident kit.”

Lorie nodded.

Matt left, carrying the book and that bloody-looking note with him.

Supervisor Pitt reemerged from around the corner. He gave her the same encouraging smile he'd had for her when he convinced the library board to hire her.

“Has the deputy finished investigating the shelves, Miss Narramore?”

“I'm sorry, sir. I think it's going to be a while.”

Supervisor Pitt straightened his shoulders in a way that made him look much more vigorous than a man in his sixties ought to appear.

“I'm in a hurry, Miss Narramore.”

Lorie knew exactly how Mr. Pitt felt. She was frustrated,

herself.

“What book are you looking for?” The words came out of her mouth against her better judgment.

The look on his face went from impatience to satisfaction in an instant. “The Art of the Decoy.”

“Do you know the call number?”

“745.4.”

Lorie looked for the book, just down the aisle a bit from where she’d found the note.

Forget the note. Concentrate on the patron.

The trade paperback was stuck between two oversize hardbacks. Lorie worked it loose and handed it to Supervisor Pitt just as Matt came back.

“What are you doing?”

“My job. I didn’t think you’d want anyone else in here until you’d—what do you call it—processed the scene.”

“Exactly why I don’t want anything to be moved.” Matt held out his hand for the book.

Supervisor Pitt got a sour look on his face. “Young man, do you know who I am?”

“Yes, sir.” Matt stood his ground. “Joseph Pitt, County Board of Supervisors, an elected official.” The emphasis he put on “elected” was subtle, but it was enough to raise the man’s blood pressure, if the rising color in his complexion were any gauge.

“Miss Narramore was simply handing me the book I want.” He raised one impeccably groomed gray eyebrow. “If I am forced

to stand around all day, I can't get back to my meetings and reports that allow me to allocate funds for this library and your salary."

"The library and I are both grateful for your support. We'll be even more grateful if you'll let us do our jobs. This is a crime scene."

"A crime scene? Here?" Pitt managed to infuse the maximum amount of incredulity and disdain into his tone. "Where's the body?"

In California. Lorie squeezed her eyes shut against the memory, but it didn't help. She could still see the man lying there, bleeding out, hear his last words, cursing her, cursing—

"Just because there's no body doesn't mean there hasn't been a crime."

Jolted back to the present, Lorie watched as Supervisor Pitt forked over the book, still looking as though his face could curdle milk. Strange. He'd always been so polite when speaking to her. After one last cold glare at Matt, he left. They could hear his complaint to Jen as he stalked out of the library without checking out any books. Lorie ran both hands through her hair but stopped short of pulling it out.

"Of all the times for him to want to check out a book—"

"He's a blot on this county, even if he does own the best auto-body shop in the area."

Lorie blinked at Matt. He sounded so...angry. She knew he didn't like Supervisor Pitt, but his reaction seemed way out of

line.

“A few more disgruntled patrons like the supervisor, and I won’t even need my poison-pen pal.”

“Let’s deal with one thing at a time.” Matt applied fingerprint dust to the area surrounding the book’s place on the shelf.

Lorie covered her mouth and nose to avoid breathing the few particles that became airborne. It was like watching a crime show on television. She’d never liked them. Not after the arrest and—Don’t go there.

Her thoughts turned back to the note, and its contents. Who here could know about California? Aside from Supervisor Pitt and the rest of the library board, her fellow librarians, her immediate family and closest friends...unless they’d told their friends...

Who could hate her so much? More importantly, how far were they willing to go?

* * *

Matt had an idea for the next step he should take—but he decided he’d better consult Frank first.

Frank answered the tap on his open door with a beckoning nod.

“What’s the follow-up on the meth lab?”

Matt shook his head, frowning in frustration at the thought of the other case on his desk—the one that was going absolutely nowhere. “Gone. Nothing left but the smell in the air, a couple of empty propane bottles and a bunch of trash in the abandoned

house. We did manage to lift some prints, but so far the computer hasn't been able to find a match. Probably amateurs."

"That's the problem with meth. It's too easy to cook." Frank closed a file on his desk. "And nothing to connect it to our old friend Leonard Adderson?"

"Nope." Frank and Matt agreed that the real-estate mogul was probably behind the meth labs popping up all through the county, but they hadn't been able to prove it. "Once again, it was on one of his rental properties, but we can't find evidence linking him to the actual operation. I keep hoping he'll slip up and be on-site when a call comes through." It was unlikely to happen. Adderson was as elusive as the snake his name resembled, and just as poisonous.

"So what do you need?"

"I want to ask Supervisor Pitt a few questions about the threats to Lorie Narramore."

Frank's fuzzy eyebrows shot toward the ceiling. "Your life insurance paid up?"

"I need to do this, Frank. There was another threatening note today—the kind of thing where you'd expect the perp to hang around and enjoy seeing the victim's reaction. Pitt was the only one around. What if he's the one behind the notes at the library?"

"And you're basing this suspicion on...?"

"Proximity. And he's run into some conflict with the librarians lately when he insisted that they order pro-Nazi literature. Maybe he doesn't like that they challenged his authority. Something to scare Lorie—Miss Narramore—might be his way of getting her

back under his thumb.”

“If he is responsible, we’ll get him. In the meantime, you do your investigating quietly, from a distance. All right?”

“Yes, sir. And, sir...do you know Lorie Narramore’s family?”

“I surely do. Her dad, Ben, and I play golf together and share a men’s Bible study class at church. I don’t really know Lorie, but I heard about the trouble she had out in California.”

“She admitted to me she shot Carl.”

Frank nodded. “When you read the file, you’ll find all the extenuating circumstances that brought back the justifiable homicide ruling. I’m glad you’re being thorough.” After a moment’s hesitation, Frank motioned for Matt to take a seat.

“You’ve already printed the note.”

Matt nodded.

“Let’s see it.”

It was in the file he was carrying, so Matt passed the note, securely sealed in an evidence bag, to his boss.

“Plain and to the point. This is bound to be driving her nuts.” Frank’s expression was grave.

“She did seem frightened. I thought when I first showed it to her that she might faint, but she held up.”

“If she’s anything like her dad, she’ll be made of strong stuff. Looks as if that’s going to be needed.” Frank stood. “Keep an eye on her, Matt. I have an uncomfortable feeling this may be just the beginning.”

* * *

All Lorie wanted to do was forget the hateful note, but thoughts of it plagued her on the drive home from Daingerville. Before she hit the curves on Highway 21, she switched on the radio. Dainger County's own KDNJ sent a bouncy bluegrass tune into the updated classic Mustang. Lorie would have preferred silence, but her brain was too active for comfort.

After-work traffic made the drive home a challenge. The narrow two-lane highway was long overdue for major work, but Dainger County was low on the Arkansas Highway Department's upkeep list.

Thanks to all the traffic crowding her, Lorie was nearly to Buffalo Crossing before she noticed the car sticking close to her bumper. The heavily tinted windows of the Chevy Camaro looked out of place. She'd seen them often in San Diego, but seldom since returning to Arkansas. She tried to see if the black car had a front plate that might indicate if it were from out of state, but the driver stuck too close for that.

Tailgaters. It'd serve him right if I jammed on my brakes. She'd never do that on purpose. She loved her car too much. Maybe the driver just liked muscle cars, or was crowding in on her because he resented the traffic and poor road conditions slowing him down. Maybe. Or maybe not.

Lord, please, if he means any harm, stop him.

Heart racing, Lorie jabbed at the radio and shut it off. Light and shadow filtering through the branches made the road flicker like an old movie. Ordinarily, the wavering light didn't bother

her, but her tailgater was making the drive extra nerve-wracking.

The Camaro edged closer as some of the traffic turned onto Highway 48 to Steeleytown. Lorie glanced in the rearview mirrors again. The car looked mean.

Don't let me panic. Lorie swallowed hard, fighting the rapid breathing that came with the adrenaline rush.

She couldn't let this clown follow her home. Not after the second note. Senses on high alert, billions of nerve-endings prickled her skin as the black car stuck to her bumper.

As she started down Rattlesnake Hill, the car edged over the double yellow line.

No, he can't pass me. Not here!

A booming blast from an approaching semi's air horn forced the car behind her again. Lorie's heart raced. One more trick like that and he'd shove her off the hill.

Not taking any chances, hands clutching the wheel, Lorie concentrated on getting back onto mostly flat ground. If she could just make it to Cartwright, she could pull into the bank's parking lot and let this road hog have the whole highway. Unless he wasn't just a road hog...

Show me what to do, Lord.

Slowing as she wound around the hill bordering the eastern end of Cartwright Valley, Lorie drove into the small village, pleased to note that the car behind her eased off the gas, falling back.

Lorie turned into the bank's parking lot. As the car started to

follow her, the town's lone black-and-white pulled to a stop at First Street. Lorie's heart pounded as the Camaro's driver headed on down the highway. She checked the license plate, but it was covered in an uncharacteristic amount of mud. No way to tell whether it was an Arkansas plate or not.

As the black-and-white settled in to watch for speeders, Lorie waited to let all the after-work traffic pass. After twenty cars and trucks had come down the hill, slowing noticeably as they spotted the police car, Lorie turned back into traffic.

Exhaustion tugged at her. She wasn't far from the turnoff to Wolf Hollow. Only a few more miles, and she'd be home.

For the rest of the drive, she scrutinized the traffic ahead of her, fearful of spotting her tailgater. When she reached AR Highway 14, she turned onto it without signaling. The small highway was practically empty.

She'd escaped.

Lorie slowly let out her breath. Most likely the driver had just been impatient, and glad to get out from behind her. That must be it. No connection between the tailgater and the missing library note.

If she could manage to convince herself of that, she'd sleep a lot better tonight.

After feeding her menagerie, Lorie debated whether or not she was too shaken to attend prayer meeting at Wolf Hollow Community Church. Everyone would understand if she didn't show up, knowing how exhausting her job could be. Still, she

hated to miss it. Physically, she was well enough to attend, and spiritually, she needed all the help she could get.

Deciding she needed the fellowship more than rest, if she even could relax after being nearly run off the road, Lorie locked the dog and cats securely in the house and headed for the small town she called home.

Few people attended prayer meeting these days, but the ones who did were solid. Of the half dozen couples in attendance, one was her cousins the Tubbys, Tammy and her locksmith husband, Ike, whom Lorie hadn't been able to reach on the phone the previous day. Tammy pulled out a chair at the table in the fellowship hall. Lorie headed toward them, a human homing pigeon.

Tammy reached over and gave her a hug. "You look like you've been through the mill. Rough day at work?"

"Doesn't even begin to describe it." Lorie laid her worn Bible on the table and slung her purse onto the back of the chair. She launched into a brief description of the notes, the phone call, the broken window and the unlocked office door that they had firmly locked.

Ike frowned. "That doesn't sound good, but I can't say I'm surprised the locks didn't hold up. Those old locks should have been changed decades ago. Windows, too. A kid with a bobby pin could unlock them. You want me to come by tomorrow and have a look?"

"I was hoping you'd offer." Lorie leaned back in the

uncomfortable blue plastic chair as Pastor Enoch headed for the wireless microphone. Maybe she could relax, after all.

* * *

The next morning, Lorie arrived at work earlier than usual to meet her cousin-by-marriage. She showed him the damage outside then took him inside to the office.

Ike scrutinized the door handle. "It doesn't look like it was tampered with. Unlike the window, which I got to replace." His slow drawl sounded like home. The home where she'd forgotten she belonged.

"So how many keys are you gonna want for the office?"

"One."

"You should at least have two, so you'll have a spare. What if you lost it?"

"I'd call you."

Ike grinned. "The lock comes with two keys, anyway."

"Okay. I guess I can live with that."

"You know, if you really want security, you should get a different type of door. One without a window in it." Ike tapped the gold-painted OFFICE with a tan index finger. "Good blow with a hammer on this plain glass and they'd be right in there."

Lorie shrugged. "Technically it isn't my door. I'll have enough explaining to do to the county library board when they find out I authorized the changes."

Ike set his toolbox down onto the pinewood floor with a resounding clang. "You need somebody to back you up, just give

us a call. Tammy and I'll speak up for you. Now, I'll get the measurements on the window after I fix the door. Should have it in for you by the end of the day."

"Thanks, Ike."

She left him to the work, the whirl of his battery-powered drill driver reminding her of the leaf blower that used to stalk her neighborhood in San Diego. That noisy monstrosity was one thing she hadn't heard a lot of in Dainger County. She hoped that would never change.

The reminder of the place she used to call home turned her stomach to acid. Would she ever again be able to think of her dear city without raw memories of death's aftermath?

Only God knew.

FIVE

Jen arrived a few minutes later. Lorie met her at the door with the rolling book cart.

Tilting her head to one side, Jen scrutinized Lorie. "Something else happen?"

Lorie chuckled. "You should be a detective, not a librarian."

"Comes with the mom job description." She headed toward the office, but Lorie put out a hand and stopped her.

"Okay. Tell me."

"Somebody tried to run me off the road yesterday. I think."

"What!"

"I'm okay, car's okay, everything's okay. Not a scratch on either of us."

“But what happened?”

“It could’ve been just a tailgater with a death wish. He was way too close for miles, and then he tried to pass me on Rattlesnake Hill. A semi scared him back into his lane. I pulled off near a cop car and waited for him to go. End of story.”

Jen let out a sigh. “I’m glad.”

“Me, too.” Lorie handed off the book cart to Jen.

“Okay, I’m on my way to the hardware store for that window. As for the door, you’re all set.” Ike moseyed back to the circulation desk, rusty red toolbox in one work-hardened hand, a set of keys in the other. He dropped them into Lorie’s outstretched palm.

“Thanks, Ike.”

“Tammy told me to tell you to come for supper Sunday night after church.”

“Tell her thanks. I’ll see y’all then.” Lord willing. Odd how she’d gotten out of the habit of adding on the scriptural phrase while she was living in San Diego. “Lord willing.”

Ike nodded, then headed out the door.

Moving the squeaky book cart toward the stacks, Jen stopped and looked back at Lorie. “What was that all about?”

“Ike just changed the lock on the office door. He’ll be taking care of the window once he gets everything he needs.”

Jen’s jaw dropped. “When did you have time to get approval from the library board?”

“I didn’t.”

Her eyes widened further. “You did this on your own?”

“I won’t charge them for it.” Lorie fought the defensiveness rising inside her. Surely as head librarian, she was entitled to a few judgment calls.

“Those locks haven’t been changed since 1958.”

Lorie straightened her spine and placed both fists on her hips. “All the more reason. I had Ike put in a dead bolt.”

“How’m I supposed to get in there?”

Lorie pulled one key off the tiny twist of wire and handed it to her. “Guard it with your life.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Seriously, just put it on your key ring and don’t lose it. We only have the two. I guess we’ll have to have another made for Mitzi’s weekend shifts. Come on, let’s check out the dead bolt and make certain both these keys work.”

Lorie locked and unlocked the shiny brass lock with her key, and had Jen do the same.

The sight of the lock gave Lorie’s spirit such a lift, she broke into a grin. “That looks like it should keep out all but the most determined burglar.”

Her good mood lasted only until closing. Lorie’s heart began to race the moment she locked the door behind the last patron of the day. Soon she’d have to go home. Would the car that had almost driven her off the road be waiting for her again?

God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Yep. That was true. But He also expected us to use the good sense He gave us.

Magnolia blossoms scented the summer air as Lorie and Jen reached the parking lot.

“See you tomorrow.”

Lorie waved at Jen as she keyed the lock on her Mustang. It opened with a friendly chirp. Letting out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding, Lorie climbed into the car.

Lord, I can’t keep reacting this way. Please help me.

Driving home, Lorie kept glancing in her rearview mirrors. She’d know that mean-looking car anywhere. If it followed her again—

It didn’t. Her afternoon commute was completely uneventful. Her dreams were another story.

* * *

Friday morning dawned with streaks of pink and purple daubing the horizon. Cardinals, white-throated sparrows and a persistent mourning dove greeted Lorie right after the three cats jumped on her bed and reminded her it was time for breakfast.

She blinked at them blearily. “All right. I’m up.” Lorie shoved off her mamaw’s multicolored story quilt and swung out of bed.

Colleen, the sable-and-white rough collie, wagged a bushy tail.

Mornings in Wolf Hollow were an entirely different species from mornings in suburban San Diego. Here, no motorcycles vied to see which could be the loudest. That contest was reserved for the birds, whose chirping and calls made her glad she was here. Mostly.

After feeding the menagerie and herself breakfast, Lorie

noticed the rural postal delivery pickup stop at her mailbox. Hannah was early today.

“Want to go to the mailbox?”

Colleen wagged and pranced by the door.

Throwing on a straw cowboy hat, Lorie opened the door for Colleen. The three cats raced outside, almost tripping her. Winken, Blinken and Nod had been impulse names that seemed to fit when she first met them, but proved to be appropriate only half the time. When they were awake, they were in constant motion. Off on a critter hunt now, no doubt. As long as they didn't bring home any rodents or birds, Lorie had no objections.

The morning air smelled of Old Blush China roses and magnolia blossoms. The tree-lined lane was alive with birdsong.

Then, suddenly, it wasn't.

Stopping in the middle of the lane, Colleen growled.

“What is it, girl?”

Nerves heightening, Lorie scanned the lane and the road for signs of intruders. Straining her ears to listen, Lorie could hear only the distant whine of a semi changing gears on Bobcat Hill.

No crashing in the underbrush. Only silence, with Colleen's low growl an undertone.

Lorie was halfway to the mailbox. Glancing back at the house, the sensation of being watched grew too strong to ignore.

“Colleen. Come.”

Heading back toward the house, Lorie broke into a run. Something loud buzzed near her ear as her hat flew off her head.

A split second later, she heard the report of a rifle.

Lord, help!

Lorie ran, Colleen keeping pace.

Another gunshot ripped through the meadow, a bullet thudding into the magnolia. Lorie ducked behind an oak. Why had she left her cell phone on the nightstand?

After darting from tree to tree, Lorie hesitated. There was little cover in front of the house. Could she make it inside without getting shot?

Wishing she had more experience with dodging and running, Lorie prayed and dashed for the front door. As she tripped on the step, a bullet struck the door frame where she should have been standing and ricocheted into the porch overhang. Lorie threw open the screen. Colleen bounded inside with Lorie on her heels.

Slamming the front door and locking it, Lorie raced to the phone and dialed 911. The emergency operator sounded rational and calm.

“I’m being shot at!” Tossing grammar to the wind, Lorie explained the situation in a few terse words.

“Can you see the shooter?”

“No. Please send someone soon.”

“Relax, ma’am, and stay on the line. I’ve already notified the sheriff’s department, and they have a deputy en route.”

Lorie barely heard the reassurance, straining every part of her to listen for another shot. Colleen padded over to the window and looked out. Noticing, fear stole Lorie’s breath for a moment, but

she forced herself to speak.

“Colleen, come!”

The dog hurried to her side by the phone table and leaned into her.

The 911 operator was saying something else.

“What? I’m sorry.”

“I asked if you have anyone with you.”

Lorie reached down to pat Colleen’s elegant head. “Just my dog. The cats are outside.” The realization of their danger slammed a blow to her stomach. “Oh, no, my cats are outside.” Please, Lord, keep them safe.

In the distance, the sound of a siren reached her ears. Please protect the deputy, Lord. The metallic slam of a door up on the road preceded a motor suddenly roaring to life.

“Tell the deputy I think the shooter is headed his way.”

* * *

Matt was near the southern end of his regular patrol when the call came in from dispatch. The address on Wolf Hollow Trail didn’t strike an immediate chord, but earlier in the month, he’d busted a marijuana growing operation south of there, in Oak Hill. Wondering if this call of shots fired was related, Matt turned left onto the Trail.

Moments later, Dispatch crackled over the radio again.

“The shooter may be headed your way. Do you copy?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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