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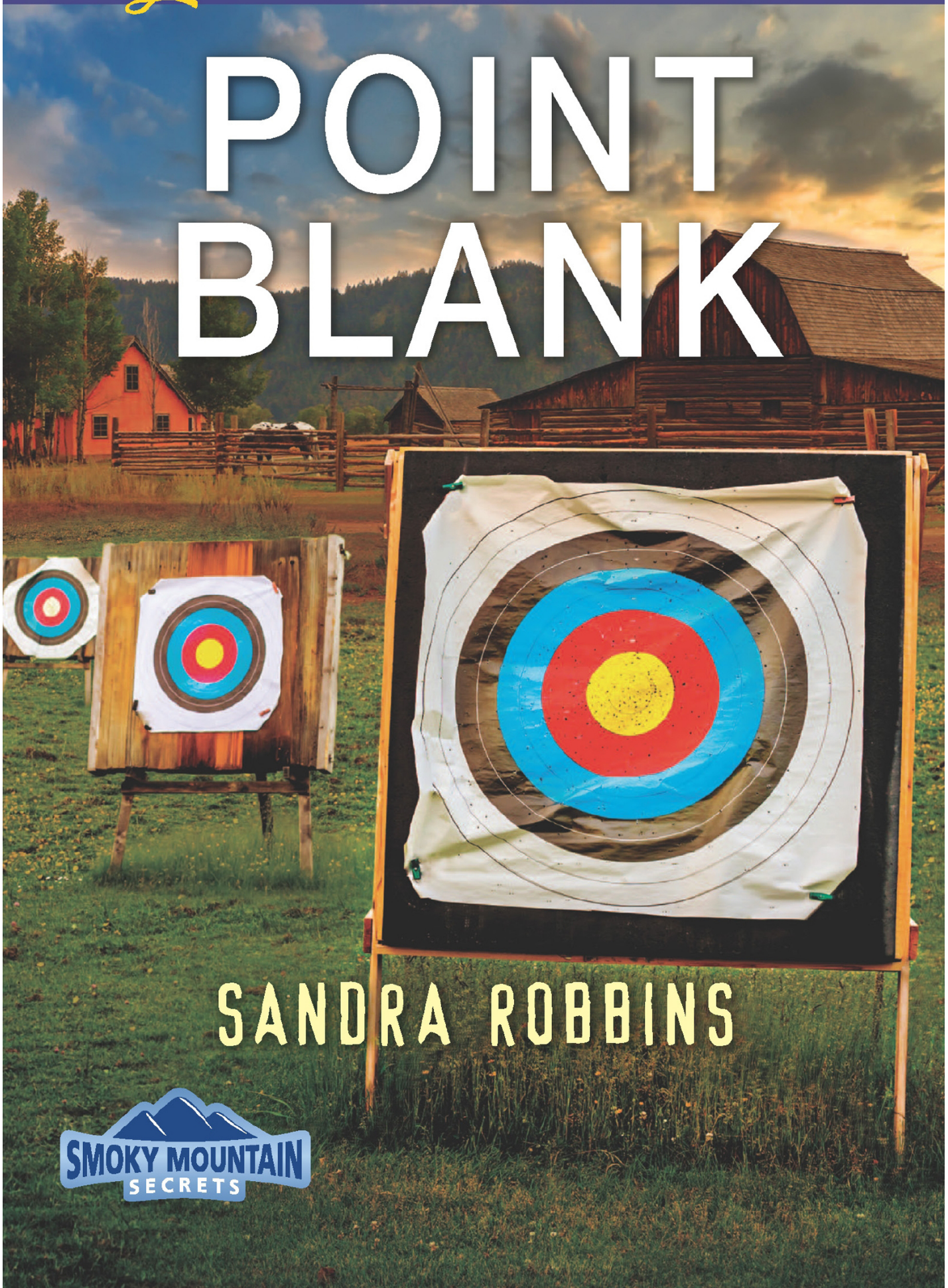
POINT BLANK



SANDRA ROBBINS

SMOKY MOUNTAIN SECRETS

Sandra Robbins

Point Blank

«HarperCollins»

Robbins S.

Point Blank / S. Robbins — «HarperCollins»,

FATAL BULL'S-EYEFor archery expert Hannah Riley and her daughter, nowhere on her Smoky Mountain ranch is safe with someone aiming to kill her. She’s not sure why they want her dead, but with the help of her best friend, Sheriff Ben Whitman, she won't give up until she knows—and stops them. Hannah’s comeback in competitive mounted archery is looming, though, and time is running out to uncover the truth. Years ago Ben promised Hannah’s late husband he'd watch over her. But guarding her proves more dangerous than the stalker when Ben is forced to confront his growing feelings for Hannah. He can't lose another woman he loves… but if Ben wants to save her and her little girl, every move he makes must be on target.Smoky Mountain Secrets: Love and danger collide in the southern wilderness

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FATAL BULL'S-EYE

For archery expert Hannah Riley and her daughter, nowhere on her Smoky Mountain ranch is safe with someone aiming to kill her. She's not sure why they want her dead, but with the help of her best friend, Sheriff Ben Whitman, she won't give up until she knows—and stops them. Hannah's comeback in competitive mounted archery is looming, though, and time is running out to uncover the truth. Years ago Ben promised Hannah's late husband he'd watch over her. But guarding her proves more dangerous than the stalker when Ben is forced to confront his growing feelings for Hannah. He can't lose another woman he loves...but if Ben wants to save her and her little girl, every move he makes must be on target.

"Will I ever be safe again?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I keep hearing what he said about payback, and seeing his face—"

Ben took her hand. "I've ordered a unit to stay outside until morning, and a crew is coming to install a security system then. About Faith...I'm not sure it's a good idea to send her to school tomorrow."

"You're always thinking of us." Hannah placed a hand on his cheek. "I'm so thankful for you."

As he was for her.

He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Go on to bed. You're safe for tonight."

"But what about all the nights after that? What am I going to do?"

He put his arm around her. "Let me worry about that."

Ben watched her go, her questions echoing in his head. How was he going to protect her? For now, all he could do was wait and see what else this guy had planned for Hannah and pray he'd be able to stop him.

Before it was too late.

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading Point Blank. The idea for this book is a result of my daughter's interest in mounted archery. It is a sport that combines excellent horsemanship with the accuracy of archery. Perseverance in learning these skills is of vital importance if someone expects to excel in this sport. So it is in life. Each day we must persevere if we are to live the life that God expects of us. Sometimes the mistakes we've made in our pasts come back to remind us of what we once were, but Jesus's teachings tell us that we must always look to the future and put away those things that are behind us. We must press on as if we are in a race and are determined to win. If you haven't accepted this attitude in your life, I pray that you will. He is waiting to give you the peace you're seeking.

Sandra Robbins

SANDRA ROBBINS is an award-winning, multipublished author of Christian fiction who lives with her husband in Tennessee. Without the support of her wonderful husband, four children and five grandchildren, it would be impossible for her to write. It is her prayer that God will use her words to plant seeds of hope in the lives of her readers so they may come to know the peace she draws from her life.

Point Blank

Sandra Robbins

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Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 3:13–14

To Marti,
for introducing me to the world of mounted archery.
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ONE

Hannah felt the gun pressed to her back the minute she returned the nozzle to the gas pump. She stiffened and glanced over her shoulder. A man, his face obscured by a black hoodie, nudged her with the gun again.

“Don’t make a sound, lady, or it will be your last.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him reach out with his left hand and open the driver’s door. “Get in and crawl over the console to the floor in front of the passenger seat,” he hissed.

Hannah’s body stiffened, but her legs went so weak that they threatened to collapse. She reached out and grabbed the top of the door to keep from falling. The thought kept running through her mind that this couldn’t really be happening to her. Robberies and car jackings were supposed to happen to other people—strangers she heard about on the news. But then the terrible realization hit her that this time she was the one people might hear about tomorrow.

As the reality of her situation soaked in, a new fear swept through her. She was a single mother, with no family other than her daughter. What would become of Faith if something happened to Hannah? She had to do everything she could to make it out of this encounter alive. The problem was she didn’t know whether her safest choice was to obey her attacker or scream for help.

Still gripping the door, she took a deep breath and spoke in a shaky voice. “P-please, take m-my car. Take m-my money. Just let me go.”

He laughed, and this time he pressed the gun even harder. “Get in now,” he ordered.

Hannah cast a terrified glance toward Bart’s Stop and Shop, the convenience store where she always bought gas for her car, and prayed that Bart was watching his security cameras.

“I said get in the car!” the man growled.

Before she could respond, the store's door opened, and Bart stepped outside. "What's going on out here?" he yelled.

The attacker answered with a shot that struck the pavement a few feet from where Bart stood. He turned and ran back into the store, and her assailant muttered something that she couldn't understand before he gave her a hard shove. She fell into the car and then scrambled over the console as he had ordered until she was on her knees on the floorboard of the passenger side with her upper body on the seat. The car door slammed, and they roared from the parking lot.

As they sped down the street, Hannah started to push up. "Don't move!" the man shouted. "I'll tell you when you can get up."

"Why are you doing this?" Hannah cried. "You can have my car, just let me out."

He shook his head and chuckled. "Be quiet, and this will all be over before you know it."

His words struck a warning bell in her mind. All be over? What did he mean? She shuddered at the thought that she might be living the last few minutes of her life.

A pain stabbed her heart, and a tear rolled down her cheek at the thought of Faith, her little girl who'd already lost a father. It wasn't fair for her to grow up without her mother, too. Perhaps she could reason with her abductor.

"Mister, I don't know who you are or why you're doing this. I have a daughter who needs me. I'm the only one she has in this world. Please, if you have any compassion in your heart, let me go."

Hannah waited for him to respond, but his only answer was a grunt as he accelerated the car.

She waited a few seconds for him to say something. When he didn't, she raised her head just enough to look at him and tried again. "If you want money, I'll give it to you. I don't have much, but you can have it all if you'll just let me out of the car."

This time his answer was a swift slap to the face. "Shut your mouth!" he yelled. "I don't care about your daughter or your money or anything else."

She pressed her hand to the stinging spot on her face and stared up at him. "Then why are you doing this? I don't know you, do I? You sound as if you have some kind of grudge against me."

His sinister laugh made her skin prickle. "Grudge? I guess you could call it that. All you need to know is that it's payback time."

"Payback for what?"

"I'll tell you in my own time. For now, stay down on the floorboard and keep your mouth shut."

Hannah started to protest, but she changed her mind when one of his hands drifted from the steering wheel and clutched the gun that lay in his lap. If she provoked him further, he might decide to end her life right now. She had to bide her time and wait for an opportunity to escape. She didn't know how or when or even if that would ever be, but she needed to watch and take advantage of the first opportunity she had to get away from this man.

She glanced at him once more before she leaned her head against the car seat and looked up through the moon roof. Vivid colors of the afternoon sunset reminded her that she was never alone. She closed her eyes and sent a silent prayer to God.

Give me strength, Lord, to face what is to come. If I should die tonight, I pray that You would please take care of Faith. I ask You to provide people who will love her and give her a good home.

The prayer broke her heart. She couldn't stand to think about another woman tucking her child into bed at night, helping her with homework or doing any of the many tasks a mother performed. But she had just placed Faith's future in God's hands. All she could do now was wait and see what happened.

* * *

Sheriff Ben Whitman let his gaze drift over the bumper-to-bumper traffic inching along the highway through the middle of the small mountain town where he'd grown up. Things certainly had changed here since he was a boy. A town that had once been a wide spot in the road on a route into the Smoky Mountain National Park had now become one of the top tourist attractions in the Smokies.

Throngs of tourists showed up year-round, and souvenir shops and amusement attractions now lined the thoroughfare through the town. On nights like this, the streets were packed. Tourists who were fortunate enough to have found a parking place were ambling from one shop to another while the slow-moving cars hovered like vultures waiting to pounce on the first parking space available. He had lost count of how many fender benders they'd answered calls for this week because two vehicles vied for the same open spot.

Ben glanced over at Deputy Luke Conrad, who was driving the police car, and sighed. "Looks like a big night for the merchants."

Luke nodded. "Yeah. How about if I turn right up here at the next stoplight and get out of this traffic jam?"

"Sounds good," Ben responded. "If we don't, we may find ourselves boxed in somewhere if we get a call."

Luke turned on the car's blinking lights and maneuvered onto the side road that led to a street that ran parallel to the highway. Once they were out of the crowd, Luke smiled. "Where to now?"

Ben was about to answer when the radio crackled with a message from dispatch. "Abduction of a female identified as Hannah Riley at gunpoint from Bart's Stop and Shop. Victim last seen being forced into her white SUV, headed toward Wears Valley. Suspect armed and dangerous."

Luke jerked his head around and stared at Ben. "Does the Hannah Riley you know have a white SUV?"

Ben's heart had begun to pound at the message. All he could do was nod. He'd just seen Hannah that morning when he stopped by her ranch to check on her and Faith. She'd looked happy and was practicing her archery skills in the backyard. How could this have happened to her of all people?

He pushed his fears for his friend away, knowing he had a job to do. There had been a woman taken against her will, and they had to try to stop the culprit. He only hoped they were in time to save her life.

He spoke into his shoulder mic. "Copy that. Unit 1 in pursuit toward Wears Valley. Request backup."

"Ten-four, Unit 1. Backup on the way."

Ben gritted his teeth and exhaled. "Light 'em up, Luke!"

He'd no sooner spoken the words than Luke turned on the blue lights, and they were racing toward the highway that led to Wears Valley. Questions poured through his mind as they sped down the highway.

Did the attacker intend to kill his victim, or did he just want her car? If he'd wanted the vehicle, why did he force the woman to go with him? The possible answers to those questions made his stomach roil.

They passed the road that turned off and circled back to the national park entrance. What if the abductor had taken that turn? For a moment Ben debated telling Luke to go back and turn onto that road, but he didn't. Even at this time of late afternoon, there would still be tourists at the scenic stops along that route, and a speeding car would draw attention. If the suspect was smart, he would probably have made the decision to continue on the road on which they were traveling.

One thing bothered him, though. There were lots of turnoffs along this highway that led into the mountains with its many trails. They didn't have the time or manpower to efficiently search every one. If the kidnapper took one of those, he and his victim would be lost to them. If he decided to dispose of his victim, her body might never be found in that wilderness. They had to get to her in time.

Ben leaned forward and stared out the windshield in hopes of catching a glimpse of the vehicle. After a few minutes, he was about to think he'd made the wrong choice to stay on this road when he spotted a car in the distance. It was barely a speck on the horizon, but it looked like it was white.

He held his breath as Luke accelerated and shortened the distance between the two cars. "That's a white SUV!" Luke said as he pulled even closer.

Ben's heart seemed to jump into his throat as they neared the car. All hopes that there might have been a mistake in identifying the victim—that it might be someone other than Hannah—died when he caught sight of the familiar license plate on the back of the car. Hannah hadn't been content to settle for one of the regular state license plates and had bought one of the specialty plates the state offered. Hers was one issued to University of Tennessee supporters and personalized with the words VOLS FAN as a tribute to the football team she followed with a passion.

He had to face the fact that he'd been trying to deny ever since getting the call. Hannah was in jeopardy. But where was she? He could see the outline of a man's head behind the steering wheel, but there was no sign of anyone with him. Were they too late? Had he already disposed of her?

Luke switched on the siren as they bore down on the car, and Ben pulled his gun from its holster. The deepening afternoon shadows lit up as the flashing lights reflected across the area. The kidnapper had to have heard the sound, but his response was to increase his speed. Luke pressed down on the accelerator, and they sped after the car.

Suddenly Ben heard a sharp crack as a bullet whizzed past the driver's window of the squad car. Luke was too experienced to startle or swerve. Instead he frowned and pulled closer to the fleeing SUV. "You're not getting away from me," he muttered as another shot pinged on the bumper of the car.

Ben rolled down his window and hesitated before sending an answering shot. What if his aim wasn't true? He could shoot Hannah if she was still in that car, or he could cause the car to wreck, which might leave her dead or injured.

He'd been in similar situations before, but never in a circumstance like this. Hannah wasn't just another victim whose life had been placed in danger. This was his friend. He'd known her since she'd come to live with her grandfather in the Smokies after she graduated from college. He'd also become friends with her late husband, and he was godfather to her daughter. How could he risk her life? On the other hand, who knew what she would face at her abductor's hands if he allowed them to get away?

Another shot whistled past, and he took a deep breath as his decision was made. "Hold the car steady, Luke," he said as he stuck his arm out the window and aimed for one of the back tires of the car.

For a moment he closed his eyes and prayed. Make my shot count, Lord.

Then he opened his eyes, refocused his aim and fired at Hannah's SUV.

* * *

Hannah, her hands covering her head, crouched on the floorboard of the car. She heard the sirens behind them and saw the reflection of the flashing lights in the mirror on the side of her vehicle. Could Ben be in that squad car? She had no doubt he would come if he knew what had happened to her.

Suddenly she didn't have any fear. God had answered her prayer already. She had asked him to send Faith to someone who loved her, and now she knew who that would be. Ben had been a dear friend to her for years, and he loved her daughter as if she were his own. If she was to die today, she knew that Ben would see that Faith was cared for.

No sooner had the thought flashed in her mind than she saw her abductor raise his hand with the gun. She sucked in her breath and waited for him to shoot her. Instead he rolled down the window and fired at the police car. The sirens and lights continued to follow them. Then he shot again.

She lost count of how many times he shot, but she was afraid that sooner or later he would disable his target. Then she heard an answering shot as it hit the back of her car. The police were answering the fire!

She crouched even farther and tried to roll into a fetal position, but there was barely enough room on the floorboard to get her head below the seat. Another shot hit the back of the car, and she bit down on her lip to keep from crying out.

Her kidnapper cursed under his breath and fired toward the car again. Almost immediately there was the sound of an answering bullet striking its target, and her car ran onto the shoulder before it careened back onto the highway. She knew right away that the pursuing officer's bullet had struck one of the back tires. The relief she felt at knowing someone was trying to help her died quickly as the car began to swerve out of control back and forth across the highway. Her abductor wouldn't be able to get away with her...but they seemed to be headed for a crash that could kill them both.

"No!" Her abductor yelled and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands as he struggled to gain control of the car.

His gun dropped from his hand and landed on the car's console. Before he could react, Hannah grabbed the gun and pointed at him. "Stop this car!" she yelled.

He turned his head toward her, and the hoodie slipped back on his head. For the first time she saw his eyes, and she recoiled at the pure hatred in them. He grasped the steering wheel with one hand and gritted his teeth as he reached over and hit her in the jaw with his fist.

The force of the blow sent her head spiraling back against the door. The impact blinded her for a moment, but she was determined not to let him wrest the gun from her hand. She placed her finger around the trigger and tightened her grip on the pistol.

"Stop this car!" she ordered.

His lips curled into a sneer, and he pulled one hand away from the steering wheel. He doubled it into a fist and snarled at her. "Give me that gun before I make you sorrier than you already are!"

Hannah knew it was now or never. She could cower on the floorboard and let him kill her, or she could fight for her life. If she shot him, the car would probably wreck and she might be killed. On the other hand, if he gained control of the gun, she could still be killed—and he'd probably try to make her death as painful as possible. She had the choice, and she wasn't about to give the gun to him.

Gritting her teeth, she wrapped both hands around the gun, aimed at him and fired. The driver's window shattered at the impact, and he screamed. "You crazy woman, what do you think you're doing?"

He reached toward her again. This time his fingers wrapped around the gun and jerked it from her hand. Determined that she wouldn't give up, she clawed at his hands in an effort to get the weapon back. For the first time she noticed that he wore disposable gloves, and she dug her nails into them.

With a cry of rage, he pulled free of her and aimed the gun at her. Before he could fire, another shot from the police car struck the other back tire. The car veered toward the right and hit the loose gravel on the shoulder of the road. Hannah screamed as the car hurtled down the embankment, crashed through a fence and slammed nose-first into a tree. Her last conscious thought was that she hoped the police got to them in time to save her life.

* * *

Ben watched in horror as Hannah's SUV careened off the road and became airborne for a moment before it crashed. Luke pulled the squad car to a stop on the side of the road, and they both jumped out. In the distance sirens screamed the approach of another police car.

Please let her be all right. Please let her be all right.

The prayer echoed over and over in Ben's head as he and Luke ran toward the SUV that had smoke pouring from underneath it. He still couldn't see Hannah's head, and the fear that he was about to find her body inside the car that had folded like an accordion upon impact against the tree filled his mind.

He'd already unholstered his gun, and Luke pulled his out as the driver's door of the wrecked car opened. A man wearing dark jeans and a black hoodie jumped out and spun to face them. He had a gun in his hand.

"Put the gun down!" Ben yelled.

The man answered with a shot that kicked up dirt a few feet away from him. Ben didn't slow as he returned fire. The man ducked behind the open door to gain cover and fired again. This time the shot hit near Luke's feet.

Ben and Luke both dived for cover behind the car and pressed their bodies against the hatch. "You can't escape!" Ben called out. "Don't add more charges to those you're already facing."

Two bullets in quick succession blazed past Ben's hiding place, and then he heard movement. He raised up enough to see the man running toward the forest at the back of the field. "I'm on it!" Luke called out as he jumped to his feet. "You stay here and see if Hannah's inside."

Before Ben could stop him, Luke took off in pursuit of the fleeing man. The sheriff ran around to the passenger side of the car and jerked the door open. His heart plummeted to the pit of his stomach when he saw Hannah crouched on the floorboard with her head resting on the seat. The windshield's shattered glass covered her and the seat. She didn't move as he touched her arm.

Blood poured down the side of her face from a cut at her hairline, and he raked the fragments of glass off the top of her head. He held his breath as he placed his fingers on her neck. The steady thump of her pulse sent a wave of relief coursing through him.

Ben turned his face to his shoulder mic. "Unit 1. Officer in pursuit of fleeing suspect. The victim is secure, but unconscious and in need of medical attention. Requesting more backup and an ambulance on highway at Wears Valley."

"Ten-four," Clara the dispatcher replied. "Ambulance on the way. More backup en route."

Ben wanted to examine Hannah more thoroughly to see if he could detect any other injuries, but with the risk of spinal injuries, he was afraid to move her. He leaned over and whispered to her in hopes that she could hear him. "Hannah, it's Ben. I'm here. Everything's going to be all right. You're safe now, and help is on the way."

She stirred, and he held his breath as she lifted her head and stared up at him. "Ben," she whispered. "Is it all over?"

He squatted and returned her gaze. "The guy who kidnapped you ran off, but Luke is after him. The important thing right now is whether you're okay. Are you hurting anywhere?"

She lifted her hand to her forehead, frowned as she touched the blood and pulled her hand away to stare at it. "My head hurts, but I think I'm okay otherwise."

She started to push up, but he put a hand on her and restrained her. "Don't move. I want the EMTs to examine you first. Just try to relax until they get here."

Tears pooled in her eyes, and the muscles in her throat constricted as she swallowed. "I think he really meant to kill me. I was so scared, Ben. Not for myself, but for Faith. She has no other family than me, and I prayed that God would give her a family to love her. Then I thought of you, and I knew you would never let anything happen to her."

His chest tightened, and he took a deep breath. "You know I love Faith like she's my own daughter. As long as I'm alive, I'll be there to take care of her and you, too."

"You're a good friend, Ben," she whispered as she let her head drop back to the seat.

Ben started to say something else, but the sirens that had been wailing in the distance had now grown louder. He glanced up to see an ambulance and a squad car, their emergency lights flashing, stop beside his patrol car on the highway. Joe Collins, and another EMT who Ben hadn't seen before, jumped from the ambulance and ran with the backup officers to where he stood.

"In here!" he called out to Joe.

He backed away as the paramedics swooped in to examine Hannah, then turned to the two deputies who'd just arrived. "Luke has gone after our suspect," he said. "Let's go give him some help."

The two men nodded and followed Ben as he ran in the direction that the kidnapper and Luke had gone. They were almost to the tree line of the forest when Luke stepped out into the field and jogged toward them.

He halted in front of them and wiped sweat from his forehead. “I lost him,” he said. “There are a lot of trails that lead into the mountains hidden in those trees. It was impossible to find one he might have taken. It was as if he just disappeared.”

Ben stared at the forest for a moment before he nodded. “That doesn’t surprise me. There’s some rugged country in this area. If we want to catch this guy, I’d better get a search team out here.” He pulled his shoulder mic toward his mouth and requested a canine search team at Wears Valley, informing dispatch that there was an escaped suspect in area.

“Ten-four, Unit 1. Will advise ETA as soon as possible.”

Ben glanced back at the car, which was still smoking, and saw that the EMTs had brought a gurney to the scene and lifted Hannah onto it. He turned to Luke. “I’m turning the search party over to you so that I can go to the hospital with Hannah. Clara will radio back with the estimated time of arrival for the team. Keep me posted on what’s happening.”

Luke nodded. “I will.” His gaze went to the EMTs who were preparing to push the gurney toward the ambulance and then back to Ben. “You go on and take care of Hannah. We’ll make out fine here.”

For a moment the awful thought of what might have happened to Hannah washed over Ben. If their suspect had chosen to turn onto another road before Ben and Luke got to him, he would have disappeared with Hannah. Thankfully they’d arrived in time, but there were still lots of unanswered questions.

What had prompted the man to abduct Hannah? Was she a random victim, or had there been a motive behind his actions? Random acts of violence were fairly rare—attackers usually had a reason and a specific victim in mind when they chose to lash out. But could Hannah truly have been targeted? Ben couldn’t believe that anybody would want to deliberately hurt her. Everyone in town knew her as a dedicated mother who had worked hard since the death of her husband to provide a good life for her daughter and herself.

Even those who didn’t know her well knew of her larger-than-life husband who had charmed everyone in town when he’d married Hannah and moved there six years ago. In a community such as theirs where horses played an important role, Shane had been the celebrity in their midst as the World Mounted Archery League champion. He hadn’t missed an opportunity to cash in on his fame and had been in demand for conducting clinics and judging competitions all over the world. That was, until one night in Houston when he was mugged and killed while returning to his hotel.

Now Hannah was raising their child alone, and had become one of the leading experts on mounted archery in the country. People came from all over the world to attend her training sessions. Today, all that had almost come to an end. The thought made Ben’s stomach roil, and he hurried to catch up with the EMTs as they approached the ambulance. “Joe,” he called out. The paramedic turned and stopped as Ben ran toward him. “How is she?”

“I can’t find any broken bones, but you never can tell about internal injuries. We need to get that checked out and attend to the cut on her head. We’ll know more when the doctor can run some tests at the hospital.”

Ben glanced at the squad car he and Luke had arrived in and back to Joe. “Could I ride to the hospital with you? I need to leave my car here for Luke.”

“Sure,” Joe said.

Ben followed behind as the two EMTs pushed the gurney to the waiting ambulance and loaded Hannah inside. When Joe had Hannah settled and ready to be transported, Ben climbed in. Hannah looked up at him and smiled when he sat down next to her.

“Are you okay, Ben?” she asked.

The question surprised him. “Me? I’m fine. It’s you we should be worried about. You’re the one who’s just been through a terrifying experience.”

She reached out and clasped his hand. “I know you, Ben Whitman, and I know you care about every victim. You always put your whole self into righting every wrong you encounter, but it leaves you drained afterward. I’m afraid the stress of your job is going to get to you after a while, and I don’t want that to happen. The people of this county need you, and I think I just realized today how much Faith and I need you, too. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

He smiled and gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m glad you think of me that way—as someone you can count on. I always promised Shane that I would look after his girls while he was away, and I’ll never break that promise. You can count on me.”

She smiled and closed her eyes. After a moment he realized she had drifted off to sleep. He glanced over his shoulder at Joe. “Is it okay for her to sleep?”

Joe nodded. “Yeah. We used to think that anyone with a head injury should be kept awake, but that theory has been proven untrue. Now doctors believe healing starts when the patient is asleep. She’s hooked to a monitor that’s checking her blood pressure and heart rate. So I’ll let her rest until we get to the hospital.”

Ben turned back to Hannah, but he didn’t let go of her hand. He held it as he watched her sleep, all the way to the hospital.

TWO

Hannah opened her eyes, but she couldn’t figure out where she was. She felt pressure on her hand and turned her head to see Ben sitting beside her with his hand wrapped around hers. A frown pulled at her forehead, and then the memory of what she’d endured returned.

Noticing her open eyes, Ben leaned forward and smiled. “We’re at the hospital, Hannah. Joe is getting ready to take you into the emergency room, but I’ll be in the waiting room while the doctor examines you.”

She smiled and nodded. “Thanks, Ben. Would you do something for me?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I had only intended to run a few errands before going home. Valerie is with Faith. She must be worried by this time. Will you call and let her know what happened and ask her to stay with Faith until I can get home?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“We’re ready to take you in, Hannah.” Joe’s voice from the back of the ambulance interrupted them. “Ben can come back to the exam room as soon as the doctor is through checking you out.”

Hannah smiled up at Ben. “Then I’ll see you later.”

He nodded. “Later.”

Ben looked as if he wanted to say more, but he turned and climbed from the ambulance. Joe and his partner pulled the gurney out, and she caught one last glimpse of Ben before they rolled her through the emergency bay of the hospital.

Inside they were met by a nurse who ushered them to an exam room. As soon as they had her situated in a bed, Joe gave the nurse the information about her vitals and the extent of her noticeable injuries, and then he disappeared into the hallway. The nurse leaned over the bed and smiled. “Hi, Hannah. My name is Cindy. The doctor will be with you in a moment. Are you feeling pain anywhere?”

Hannah touched the cut on her head that Joe had placed a temporary bandage on. “This cut on my head stings, but that’s the worst of it.”

Cindy examined the cut and nodded. “That doesn’t look too bad, but I’m sure it stings. I’ll get that cleaned up before the doctor sees you.”

Hannah winced and bit down on her lip as the nurse began to wipe at the cut. The pain subsided as a cool ointment of some kind was spread across her forehead and then a gauze pad applied. Before either one of them could say anything, the door opened, and a middle-aged man wearing a white lab coat and a stethoscope around his neck walked into the room.

He stopped at the side of the bed and waited for the nurse to move out of the way before he smiled and stepped closer to her. “Hello, Mrs. Riley. I’m Doctor Denton. I hear you’ve had quite an experience this afternoon. Are you in pain anywhere?”

Hannah shook her head. “Nothing serious—just some soreness from cuts and bruises.”

“That’s good.” He glanced at the monitors beside her bed and nodded before turning back to her. “Your vitals look good, but you do have the cut on your head. Let me look at it.”

Hannah didn’t move as he pulled the bandage back and examined the cut. “Is it very deep?”

He shook his head and pressed the gauze back in place. “No, it should heal very cleanly. Of course, we need to make sure there aren’t any other injuries you haven’t yet noticed. I’ve ordered a CT scan to determine if you have any internal injuries. As soon as I’ve looked at it, I’ll be back to examine you further. Do you have any questions?”

“No. I did wonder, though, when I’ll be able to see my friend.”

“Sheriff Whitman? I talked with him in the waiting room. He’s very anxious to find out if you’re okay. I’ll let him come back soon.”

For the moment there was nothing else Hannah could do but accept the doctor’s decision. If she’d had her way, Ben would have been with her every minute since she got to the hospital. He was the only person she’d been able to depend on since Shane died. He had been there the minute he heard and hadn’t left her side during the days leading up to the funeral. Since then, he’d done everything he could for her and Faith whenever they needed him. She didn’t know what she’d done to deserve a friend like Ben, but she was thankful for him.

Thirty minutes later, the tests were completed and Hannah was settled back in the bed in the emergency room as she waited for the doctor. He didn’t keep her waiting long. When he walked in, he was smiling, which she took to be a good sign. He didn’t waste time telling her what the results of the tests were.

“Well, Mrs. Riley, the CT scan shows no internal injuries. You’re a very fortunate young lady to have survived a car crash like that with nothing worse to show for it than cuts and bruises.”

“I know,” Hannah said. “I’m very thankful. Everyone here has been extremely nice to me, but I hope you’re going to let me go home now. I have a daughter I need to see about.”

He nodded. “I know. Sheriff Whitman told me. I’m not going to keep you, but I suggest you take it easy for a few days. Come back to the emergency room if you have any problems, though.”

“I will.”

“Now, I’m going out to tell the sheriff he can come back to see you. The nurse will be in to discharge you.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said as he turned and walked from the room.

She lay back on the bed and waited for a few minutes, and then she heard Ben’s footsteps in the hallway. She smiled at how she had come to recognize the sound his boots made as he walked. The doctor had left the door open, and Ben stopped before he entered and let his gaze rake over her.

He held the Stetson hat he always wore in his hands, and his fingers clutched the brim. He almost looked as if he was afraid to enter. She pushed up in bed and smiled. “Are you going to stand there, or are you coming in?”

The muscles in his throat constricted as he swallowed. Then, without taking his eyes off her, he walked over to her bed. “How are you feeling?” She smiled and reached for his hand. He wrapped his fingers around hers and held them tightly. “I’ve been going out of my mind in that waiting room,” he admitted. “I was afraid you were hurt badly and they weren’t telling me.”

The rasp in his voice surprised her, and she let her gaze move over his face. She’d known Ben for years, but she’d never seen the look in his eyes that she saw now. It was so much more than just concern. It looked like he had just experienced agony, and her heart pricked. Had he really been that worried about her?

"Ben," she said as she squeezed his hand, "I'm okay. The doctor says there are no serious injuries. So quit worrying."

He released a long breath and closed his eyes for a moment. "Hannah, when that car went off the road, I knew if you died it would be my fault because it was my bullet that hit the tire. I don't think I could've lived with myself if I was the cause of you being killed."

She smiled and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "I prefer to think that you saved my life. If it wasn't for you, that guy would have killed me." When she was standing in front of him, she put her arms around him and gave him a hug. "Thank you for being there again for me, Ben."

Slowly his arms encircled her, and he gave her a quick hug before he pulled back. "Anytime, Hannah. All you have to do is call."

She laughed. "That's good to know. Now could you do something else for me?"

"What?"

"Take me home. I'm ready to get out of this place."

He opened his mouth to speak, and then a look of horror flashed across his face. "I can't."

She stared at him and frowned. "Why not?"

"Because I left my car out at the crash scene for Luke, and yours is still smashed into that tree. We don't have a way to get either of us home."

She laughed and shook her head. "Did it not occur to you to drive your car and let Luke ride back with one of the other deputies?"

He grinned and shook his head. "All I was thinking about was getting you to the hospital, and I didn't want you out of my sight. So Joe let me ride in the ambulance."

She placed her hands on her hips and arched an eyebrow. "Well, what do we do now?"

Ben turned his mouth to his shoulder mic. "Officer needs a squad car at the hospital emergency-room door to transport a victim home."

The radio crackled, and the dispatcher's voice answered. "Ten-four. Escort on the way. By the way, how is Hannah?"

Ben grimaced. "Clara, this is an official channel. It's not for personal use. Over and out."

Hannah couldn't help but laugh. "You're going to have to give up on trying to make Clara more professional. From what my grandfather told me, she's always been the biggest gossip in these hills."

"I know," Ben grumbled. "But she doesn't need to be spreading gossip about you right now. We need to keep you out of the spotlight as much as possible until we catch this guy who kidnapped you. Until that time, I'm going to keep a closer check on you."

His words startled Hannah, and she gasped. "You think this might have been more than a random abduction?"

"I don't know, but until we find out one way or the other, you have to watch your back. I'll be there to help." He glanced at his watch. "Now let's go to the emergency-room entrance and wait for our ride."

Hannah nodded and walked from the room with Ben right behind her. For a moment there she'd felt relief and a sense of security that her ordeal was over. But Ben had just reminded her that it wasn't.

She frowned as she tried to remember the words of her kidnapper when she'd asked him why he was doing this. Her heart raced as she recalled what he'd said. All you need to know is that it's payback time.

Payback for what? She hadn't gotten a close look at his face, just his eyes. They hadn't seemed familiar in that moment, but now she knew she would recognize them anywhere as she would the sound of his voice.

If someone had a grudge against her, then Ben was right. Her kidnapper wouldn't give up after one failed attempt. He'd be back, and the next time she might not be rescued as she'd been today.

From now on, she needed to be on guard every minute of the day.

* * *

Ben and Hannah reached the entrance to the emergency-room door just as the squad car pulled into the parking lot. He recognized the vehicle right away. It was the car he and Luke had been in when he received the call about the kidnapping. He frowned and glanced at his watch. It had been only two hours since the car crash. If Luke was back, that meant the search around the crash site was over. Why were they done so soon? Did they have the suspect in custody?

Luke pulled to a stop at the door, and Ben and Hannah stepped outside. As they approached the car, the passenger-side window rolled down. Ben leaned over to peer inside. Before he could speak, he noticed another vehicle driving into the parking lot. It was his truck.

"What's going on, Luke?" he asked. "Why aren't you out at the crime scene?"

Luke exhaled and shook his head. "The dogs lost the scent at a road on the other side of the woods. The handlers tried to find it again, but it looked hopeless. We figured he must have had a car waiting there."

Ben didn't like the sound of that. If the suspect had a car parked, or a getaway driver waiting, then Hannah's abduction had been planned in advance. Perhaps the plan had been to drive onto a mountain trail and kill her before escaping in another car that the police wouldn't be looking for. Chills raced down his spine at how easily that could have happened if things had gone just a little differently.

"So they've given up the search?"

Luke shook his head. "No. We may not be able to catch the guy tonight, but there's still a chance he left some evidence behind—something we can use to track him down. I came into town to get some more equipment for the search. I happened to be at the station when you called in. I'd already told Andy Walker to go back with me to join in the search, so I thought we could drop your truck off here, and he could ride out there with me."

Ben glanced at the newest deputy on the force as Andy climbed from his truck and walked toward him. "Evening, Sheriff," he said as he came to a stop beside him. "I left your truck running."

Ben nodded. "Thanks, Andy." He turned his attention back to Luke. "I'll see that Hannah gets home safely, and then I'll join you out there."

"Take your time, Sheriff. We've got it under control," Luke said as Andy got into the car.

They waved as they drove out of the parking lot. Ben turned to Hannah and took her by the arm. "Let's get you home."

She smiled. "Thanks, Ben. I'm beginning to feel tired."

He helped her into the truck before he walked around and got in on the driver's side. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her lay her head back on the headrest and close her eyes. He turned his head and stared at her for a moment.

He remembered the first time he'd seen her. He'd stopped by her grandfather's ranch to check on him that day, and she'd arrived just after he'd gotten there. She was fresh out of college and excited about her future. He could still remember the blue sundress she'd been wearing and how her eyes lit up when she caught sight of her grandfather. She'd run to him and thrown herself into his arms.

Ben had stood there, watching the reunion, unable to move. He didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful woman, and for a minute he couldn't speak. Then she'd turned to him, her dimple winking at him, and smiled. "You must be Ben Whitman. Grandfather has told me so much about you. I know we're going to be great friends."

She'd been right. Over the years they'd grown close. He'd been there for her when she lost her grandfather, and then again when she'd lost her husband. He'd loved her daughter as if she were his own. But she'd been there for him, too. When his mother passed away unexpectedly not long after Hannah was widowed, she had put aside her own grief to be by his side. Her positive attitude and encouragement had helped pull him through those dark times. The thought that he might have lost her in his life today hit like a punch to the stomach every time he thought about it.

As they approached the turnoff to Tumbling Creek Ranch, she roused, blinked and sat up. “Oh, we’re almost home. I’m sorry I wasn’t better company on the ride.”

“No problem,” he said. “I wish I could come in and see Faith, but I need to get out to Wears Valley and see if the search team has found anything. I’ll check in with you tomorrow to see how you’re feeling.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine, but you know it’s always good to hear from you.”

“You be sure and follow the doctor’s orders. You know he wants you to get all the rest you can. So take it easy for a few days. You have Valerie to take care of Faith, and you can turn the horses over to Dusty.”

She nodded. “I’m going to try. It’s good that I have backup I can count on. Valerie’s only been with us a few weeks, but she’s doing a great job as Faith’s nanny. As for Dusty, he was with Grandfather before I came, and he knows how this ranch is run. I was fortunate to have him after I lost my grandfather.”

“Yeah. Then he really took on more responsibilities when Shane died.”

He sensed, rather than saw, her posture stiffen. “I guess you could say that.”

There was a harshness in her tone that he’d never heard before, and he could tell it had something to do with Shane. She must be exhausted—when she was at full strength, she usually kept a tight lid on her emotions whenever she talked about Shane. He’d always assumed that was because it was too painful for her to remember him. The fact that he’d been murdered in Houston one night after teaching a clinic had been a shock to all of them, and he didn’t think she’d ever recovered.

He cut his eyes toward her. “I hope I haven’t brought up some painful memories for you. I don’t want to cause you to go back to that place you were in right after Shane’s death.”

She sighed. “I don’t want to go back there, either. I guess everything that happened today brought it all back to me. When I thought that man was going to kill me, all I could think of was how Faith was going to suffer. She’s already lost her father. If I’d been killed, she would have had to grow up without a mother, too.”

“But the important thing is that you didn’t die. You’re still here for her. You need to focus on being thankful for that.”

She turned her head away and stared out the window. “Don’t pay attention to me. I’m still shaken from what happened earlier. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

The tone of her voice told him that there was something else bothering her. When she didn’t explain further, he was tempted to ask more about what she’d just said. However, her silence made it evident she didn’t want to discuss it. After the ordeal she’d already been through, he didn’t want to upset her any further. He directed his attention back to the road and didn’t say anything else.

Within a few minutes, they had arrived at Hannah’s house, and he pulled to a stop in the circle driveway. He switched off the engine and turned to face her. “Well, here we are. Do you want me to see you to the door?”

She shook her head. “Valerie is here. She’ll get Faith ready for bed, and then I’m going to try to get a good night’s sleep.” She hesitated for a moment and then placed her hand on his arm. “Thank you again for rescuing me today, Ben.”

He swallowed and stared into her eyes. “Hannah, I hope you know I’ll always be there for you.”

She smiled. “I know you will, but I’m afraid I’ve relied on you too much since Shane died. Sometimes I think you put your life on hold just to help me out.”

“You would do the same for me. That’s what friends do.”

She nodded. “I know, but it’s time for me to stand on my own two feet.”

“What do you mean?”

She stared out the windshield for a few moments before she turned back to face him. “I had a lot of time to think after I got to the hospital, and I made some decisions.”

Her tone of voice alarmed Ben, and he frowned. “Decisions about what?”

"There are things that I've wanted to do but held off because I didn't have the courage to tackle them. Shane's celebrity in the sport of mounted archery has cast a shadow over everything I've achieved for myself. I was competing when I met Shane, but after we were married, he discouraged me from continuing. He said I wasn't good enough to really make it to the top. Every time I brought it up, he would rattle off all my weaknesses that made me an unlikely competitor. He made me doubt my ability, and I gave up the idea I'd ever compete again."

"I'm sorry, Hannah. I never knew that."

She shrugged. "Well, it's not something you talk about. In my heart I knew I was a good rider and an excellent archer, but Shane's criticisms made me doubt myself so that I became afraid to enter competitions. That all changed when I thought I was going to die. A few weeks ago I was invited to participate in the World Horseback Archery League's competition, but I'd decided I wouldn't go. Now I've changed my mind. I'm going to do it. I can't live in the past. From now on, I'm going to make a good life for Faith and me because we're all the family that either of us has."

"Good for you. I'm glad you've decided to return to competing. Where is the competition being held?"

"Korea."

He didn't expect to be stunned by her answer, but he was. "Korea?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He gave his head a slight shake and frowned. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Because I didn't think I would go, but now I am."

"But...but... Korea," he stammered. "That's a long way from home."

She smiled, reached over and patted him on the hand. "Don't worry. We won't be gone long. As soon as the competition is over, we'll come back."

"You're saying we, so I guess you're taking Faith with you."

"I am. I'll talk to her teacher, and we'll work something out. She's only four and in kindergarten. It's not like I have to worry about her missing tests or important homework. It will be good for her to see a different culture, and it will give us a chance to spend some time together. Don't worry. We won't be gone long."

He swallowed the sick feeling he had at the thought of Hannah and Faith being away from him and nodded. "Okay. If that's what you want. I'll do anything I can to help you finish training and prepare for your trip before you leave."

She smiled. "I appreciate that Ben. I have a lot to do before I leave. There are passports to get and travel to plan. And I need to find out if we need special visas or vaccinations, but I think this trip is going to be good for us. It will give me a chance to reevaluate my life and see what I want to do in the future."

Having said that, she climbed from the truck and slowly made her way up the steps to the front porch. Ben sat in his truck for a moment as he thought about the things Hannah had said. He'd sensed a new determination in her tonight that hadn't been there in a very long time. She wanted a new life for herself and her daughter. If that's what she wanted, he was going to do everything he could to make it happen. He'd been doing that for years, and he'd keep on as long as he had breath in his body.

Before she could get on with her life, however, there was still the question of why she'd been kidnapped today. If she and Faith were to have a secure future, he had to find out who had a reason to hurt her. From the things she'd hinted at but left unsaid tonight, he realized that there might be a lot of secrets in the past that could hold the answers. If there were, he intended to find the answers.

THREE

Faith came running to meet her the minute Hannah walked in the door. Her blond ponytail swung back and forth as she hurled herself at her mother. "Mommy! I thought you'd never get home."

Hannah caught the child and swung her up in her arms. For a minute she stood there with her arms wrapped around her daughter with her eyes closed and said a prayer of thanks for coming home safely. This day could have had an entirely different ending.

Faith straightened in her mother's arms and was about to say something when her eyes opened in alarm as she stared at the bandage on Hannah's head. "What's wrong with your head, Mommy?"

A feeble smile pulled at Hannah's lips. "It's nothing, darling. I just cut my head, but it's all right. Ben took me to the hospital, and the doctor fixed it. He said I was fine."

Faith tilted her head to one side and continued to stare at the bandage. "Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore," she said as she stared into Faith's blue eyes. "But enough about me. How was school today?"

Faith looked at the bandage once more before she smiled and patted her mother's cheek. "It was a good day. It's still my turn to be the teacher's helper. It made Janie Culver jealous because I got to do more than she did when it was her turn."

"Well, did you remind Janie that her turn will come back around when Miss Morris draws her name again?"

Faith nodded. "I did, but she still wouldn't play with me."

Hannah kissed Faith on the cheek and set her down so that she was standing in front of her. "What do we always say when someone's not nice to us?"

Faith tilted her head to one side and put her finger up to her chin, looking as serious as it was possible for an adorable four-year-old to look. "We treat them like they're a friend and keep on being nice to them."

"That's right," Hannah said as she glanced up and saw Valerie coming into the entry where they stood. Although she'd been with them only a few weeks, Hannah had come to depend on her.

Over the past year, her classes in mounted archery had increased to the point that she'd often found herself in need of someone to help out with Faith. Her ad in the local newspaper had attracted several applicants for the job of Faith's nanny, but none of them had impressed her like Valerie had. From the first day she'd fit in like she'd always been at their ranch, and Hannah had found herself depending more and more on her assistance.

Valerie held a dish towel, and she wiped her hands on it as Hannah came to a stop. A frown puckered her forehead as her gaze quickly scanned Hannah's face. "How are you feeling?"

Hannah glanced down at Faith, frowned and shook her head. She didn't want to discuss what had happened earlier in front of Faith. "I'm fine," she answered. "What's that wonderful smell?"

Faith grinned as if she had a big secret. "Maria had to leave early, so I helped Valerie make spaghetti, and it's good."

Hannah frowned. Maria, the cook who had begun work at the ranch years ago when her grandparents were alive, hadn't said anything to her about needing to take off early.

"Why did Maria have to leave?"

"Her sister called and said she was sick. Maria wanted to go check on her, and I told her not to worry. Faith and I could make dinner tonight," Valerie said.

Hannah started to make a comment about the sister who seemed to always suffer from some ache or pain. Instead she let her mouth drop open and bent over so that she was staring into her child's eyes. "You helped Valerie make dinner? Then it must really be good."

Faith's chest puffed out with pride. "We saved you some."

Hannah closed her eyes and smacked her lips as if she was getting ready to devour a feast fit for a king. "I can hardly wait."

Valerie smiled and started to turn back toward the kitchen. "I'll warm up your plate. You must be starved."

Hannah reached out and stopped her before Valerie could leave the room. "I can get it. I know you're in a hurry to get home. I've kept you later than usual."

Valerie cast a quick glance at Faith before she replied. “I don’t mind. Anytime you need me, I’m glad to help out. I’d rather be here with you two than watching TV alone in my apartment.”

Hannah studied the young woman for a moment. Valerie Patrick was only a few years younger than Hannah, but something about her made her seem much older. Perhaps it was the way her eyes appeared to fill with sadness sometimes when she looked at Faith. Hannah had never questioned Valerie about her past, but she had confided in her before she’d come to work at the ranch that she’d had a miscarriage several years ago when her husband died unexpectedly. She had come to the Smokies in hopes of starting a new life and was grateful to Hannah for giving her the opportunity to make a living doing something she enjoyed.

Sometimes, though, Hannah thought she asked too much of Valerie. She had taken on more and more responsibilities since coming here, and Hannah felt guilty about taking up so much of her time. “I keep telling you to get out more. Maybe if you’d go to church with us Sunday, you could meet someone near your age.”

Valerie seemed to consider it for a moment before she smiled. “I think I’d like that. Let me know what time you’re leaving, and I’ll be here to go with you.” She reached for Faith’s hand. “But for now, why don’t I go help Faith through her bath and get her ready for bed while you eat? Then you can come up and tuck her in for the night.”

Suddenly Hannah felt so tired. It had been a long day. She was exhausted and hungry, and that spaghetti smelled really good. “Thanks, Valerie. Go on upstairs with Faith, and I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

Hannah watched as her daughter grabbed Valerie’s hand and dragged her toward the stairway. Her eyes sparkled, and she giggled in her little girl way as they climbed toward the upstairs. “Can I have some bubble bath tonight?”

Her excited voice made Hannah smile. She heard Valerie’s muffled agreement as they disappeared down the second-floor hallway. Smiling, Hannah walked into the kitchen. A plate covered in aluminum foil sat on the table.

She removed the foil, placed the plate in the microwave and within minutes was sitting at the kitchen table practically inhaling the food. She hadn’t eaten much lunch, and now she realized how hungry she was. The thought of Faith telling her how she’d helped cook the spaghetti flashed in Hannah’s mind, and she suddenly put her fork down and covered her face with her hands.

For a moment she let the tears flow as she thought about how differently things could have been tonight if she’d been killed. Thankfully, Ben and Luke had come to her rescue.

Ben’s warning echoed in her mind again, and she swallowed the fear that rose in her throat. If someone had a grudge against her, it had to have something to do with Shane. Ben and everybody else in town thought of him as the bigger-than-life local hero. If only they knew what she’d endured, they would be shocked at the real Shane Riley she’d come to know. But to reveal the ugly truth would only make their family the target of public gossip and ridicule. That would hurt Faith in particular, who didn’t remember her father and who believed in all the stories she’d heard of what a good man he’d been.

Even after all these years, Hannah couldn’t figure out how she could have been so naive to fall for such a con man. Mounted archery competition was an expensive sport. Most competitions, even international ones, required high entrance fees as well as travel and transportation for a horse, and the prize most of the time was a trophy or medal, not money like rodeo competitions. His fees for the workshops he conducted didn’t start to cover the expenses of the sport.

Shane had played the loving and attentive boyfriend until they were married and he gained access to the money the ranch brought in. At first she’d been happy to help him until she discovered that most of the money was spent on his extravagant lifestyle and the women he met while competing and teaching workshops.

Even after she found out about the women, she'd held out hope he would settle down when she became pregnant, but he'd been furious at any attempt she'd made to curtail his activities. By the time he was killed, their marriage had been over for several years but she had hung on to it in public to save face. Sometimes she wondered how she'd been able to do it.

The whole experience had taught her a lesson, though. She didn't intend to fall in love again. She'd seen how a man could pretend to be one thing and be entirely different. She didn't intend to go down that path again.

"Faith's in bed and waiting for you to come up."

Valerie's voice jerked her from her thoughts, and Hannah looked up to see her standing in the door. "Thanks for getting her ready. Now you go on home, and don't worry about coming to get Faith ready for school tomorrow. I'll tell Dusty to take care of the morning chores, and I'll drop her off myself. But I'd like for you to pick her up from school as usual."

Valerie looked as if she was about to object but then changed her mind. "If you're sure you don't need me to take her to school, it would help me out. I have some errands I could take care of in the morning."

Hannah pushed up from the table. "I don't plan on getting out or doing much tomorrow, so I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

Valerie smiled and turned toward the front door. Hannah followed her and watched until she had pulled away from the house. Then she locked the front door and climbed the stairs to Faith's room.

She was already in bed, propped up on two pillows, and held the book they'd been reading. "Mommy, read me some more."

Hannah smiled and snuggled up in the bed with her daughter. They'd read only a few pages when Faith yawned, and Hannah set the book down. "You're getting sleepy," she said. "Why don't you say your prayers, and I'll tuck you in."

Faith nodded, laced her fingers together and held them under her chin. Then she closed her eyes and bowed her head. "God bless Mommy, and Valerie, and Dusty, and Ben, and Miss Morris. And God bless Janie Culver and help her to be my friend again. Amen."

Hannah reached for the covers to tuck Faith in, but she suddenly closed her eyes again and prayed the ending that she'd been adding for the past few weeks. "And please make Mommy let me get a new puppy."

With a grin on her face, she opened her eyes and burrowed down into the covers. Hannah laughed as she leaned over and kissed her daughter good-night. "Sweet dreams, baby girl. I love you."

"I love you, too, Mommy."

Hannah walked to the door and turned out the light. The Winnie the Pooh night-light that they always left on cast a glow across the bed. Hannah smiled once more before she slipped from the room and headed back downstairs.

Once in the kitchen, she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the table drinking it as she thought of how thankful she was for her child. When the cup was drained, she set it in the sink and walked to the back door.

She locked it and then flipped off the overhead lights. Only the hall light filtered into the kitchen as she stared out the door toward the barn. She was about to turn away when movement in the shadows caught her eye.

She stood still as if she were frozen and watched as a figure emerged from beside the barn and eased toward the house. In the dark she couldn't make out any features, but from what she could see of the height and build, it had to be a man.

He crept closer until he was about halfway between the barn and the house. He stopped and stood still as he faced toward her. She knew he couldn't see her standing in the darkened kitchen, but she couldn't stop the chills that ran down her spine.

After a few minutes, he turned back toward the barn and melted into the shadows. She stayed there watching for the next ten minutes, but he never reappeared. Could that have been the man who kidnapped her earlier? If so, what did he gain by spying on her house?

She bit down on her lip and tried to calm her shaking body. Maybe it really was time to get a dog, one that could alert them when someone came around—and a security system, too. She'd check on that first thing tomorrow.

For now, though, she had to get through this night, and something told her sleeping was going to be difficult. She slipped from the room and into the den where her grandfather had built a wall safe. Her shaking fingers misdialed the combination twice before the door finally opened.

She reached inside and pulled out her grandfather's handgun and the clips of ammunition he'd always kept there. Then she closed the safe, and clutching the gun to her chest, she sank down on the couch.

Reason told her that the man who'd been spying on her house would have broken in then if he'd meant to, but she couldn't take a chance that he might return to try to harm her or her daughter. She had a gun. It was loaded, and she was ready if trouble came.

It was going to be a long night.

* * *

At six o'clock the next morning, Ben pulled into the driveway at Little Pigeon Ranch, the dude ranch owned and operated by his best friend, Dean Harwell. He headed for the barn, knowing Dean had probably been up for an hour and was getting ready for another busy day. When Ben pulled to a stop, he saw his friend leading a horse out of the barn.

Dean threw up his hand in welcome when he caught sight of Ben's truck coming down the driveway. Grinning, he stopped and waited while Ben climbed out of the vehicle. "You're out kind of early, aren't you? I thought you told me yesterday you were going to take a few hours off today and do some trout fishing. Did you change your mind?"

"I had everything arranged for Luke to fill in for me today, but we had some excitement yesterday afternoon."

Dean pulled on the lead attached to the horse's halter and started toward the corral. "Let me put this horse up, and you can tell me all about it."

"That's why I came by," Ben called out as Dean walked away.

As Ben waited for Dean to return, a slight smile pulled at his lips. He knew this ranch almost as well as he knew his own. He'd become friends with Dean soon after Dean had come to live with his grandparents when they were both still kids. They'd been inseparable through school as they explored the trails in the mountains they both loved. By the time they graduated from high school, they'd become valuable members of the search and rescue teams that helped find missing persons in the vast wilderness of the Smokies. Then they'd drifted apart when they had gone to separate colleges.

He had moved back home while still in his midtwenties, and Dean had arrived back at his grandparents' home a few years later. They'd both returned to the mountains they loved, and each had brought his own baggage with him. Maybe that's why it was so easy for them to resume their friendship after not seeing each other for years. They needed the support of each other as they battled the addictions and overcame the grief that had driven their lives for too many years.

They'd hung in there, though, and had been there for each other during the darkest time of their lives. Their struggles had paid off. Now Little Pigeon Ranch was not just a prosperous business, but a happy home for Dean, his wife, Gwen, and their daughter, Maggie.

Ben still couldn't believe at times that he was the sheriff in the community where he'd grown up. But most of all he often thought of how he and Dean had struggled to get where they were today. He knew their achievements wouldn't have been possible if they hadn't shared a deep faith in God that guided them to the lives they had today.

"Now tell me what happened yesterday."

Ben jerked around and frowned as Dean stepped up beside him. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I was lost in thought and didn’t hear you.”

Dean chuckled. “You must have really had a bad day yesterday. What happened?”

Ben pulled the hat from his head and rubbed the back of his neck. “The day had been fairly routine until I got the message that Hannah had been abducted from Bart’s Stop and Shop.”

Dean’s eyes rounded like saucers. “Hannah Riley? Your Hannah Riley?”

Ben frowned and pushed his hat back down on his head. “Yes, Hannah Riley, but she’s not my Hannah Riley,” he growled.

Dean tried to smother the grin that pulled at his lips, but he wasn’t successful. Ben straightened his shoulders and glared at him. Why did Dean always act like this whenever Hannah’s name was mentioned? Ben had explained to him over and over that he and Hannah were just friends, but Dean always appeared to read more into the relationship than what it really was.

Dean waved his hand in dismissal, but his grin didn’t disappear. “Whatever you say. Now tell me what happened.”

As quickly as he could, Ben gave Dean all the details of the abduction yesterday, Hannah’s trip to the hospital and the search that hadn’t turned up any clues to the identity of the suspect.

“The good thing,” Ben said, “is that Hannah wasn’t seriously injured, and she’s safe back at home.”

Dean rubbed his chin and frowned as he mulled over what Ben had just told him. Dean had been a big-city detective for a number of years, and when it came to tracking down criminals, Ben trusted his instincts without reservations. “Do you think this was random or maybe planned?”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know, but I’m leaning toward the idea that it was planned. His escape was planned in advance, with a car waiting for him. This wasn’t just a crime of opportunity. Besides, the guy told her at one point that it was for payback.”

“Payback?”

“Yeah. She had no idea what that meant. She couldn’t think of anyone that she’d had a disagreement with.”

Dean was silent for a moment before he spoke. “Do you think it could have anything to do with her dead husband? He probably had a lot of people who were jealous because of his success.”

Ben nodded. “That thought crossed my mind, but there’s no way of knowing at this point. For the time being I’m going to keep an eye on her just in case this guy has something else planned. I don’t intend for anything to happen to Hannah or Faith if I can help it.”

Dean’s eyebrows arched, and his grin grew larger. “And she’s just a friend, huh? It sounds like she might be more than that.”

Ben shook his head and scowled at Dean. “Cut it out. You know I’m not going to ever go there with another woman. I learned my lesson a long time ago.”

Dean sighed. “Ben, when I came back here, I didn’t think there was a chance that Gwen and I would ever get back together. My police work had me so messed up that I was a danger to her—she was right to walk out on me. And even after I left that all behind and came back here, I knew I had a long way to go before I could be the man she fell in love with again... If she was even willing to ever give me another chance. But you kept after me and encouraged me, and look where we are today. We’re married again, we have a daughter and are happier than I could ever imagine being. I want the same for you.”

As it did every time Dean brought up the past, Ben’s heart constricted, and pictures of a long-ago night filled his head. “The difference is that you didn’t kill Gwen like I did Laura.”

“You didn’t kill Laura,” Dean said. “She was driving the car that ran off the road and hit a tree.”

Ben’s eyes watered as they did every time he thought of Laura, the vivacious blonde who had stolen his heart in college. “But she wouldn’t have been driving in that awful storm if I hadn’t been so wasted. She kept begging me to leave that party, but I thought I was having too good a time drinking

and smoking pot with my friends. When she finally convinced me to leave, I was in no condition to drive, and the storm that hadn't been so bad an hour before made the roads downright treacherous. I failed her that night. I lived, and she died. I can't forget that."

Dean took a step closer to him. "I've told you over and over that we both have things in our pasts that we'd like to change, but we can't. That doesn't mean we have to let them ruin our lives. It's time you forgave yourself. I want to see you as happy as Gwen and I are, but only you can decide to take that step."

Ben shook his head. "I will never take a chance on hurting another woman. I worry all the time that something will happen that will send me spiraling back to where I was then. I can't take a chance on hurting another woman, and especially one as wonderful as Hannah."

"Then all I know to do for you is to pray. I want you to find happiness. You deserve it. If it wasn't for you, I would never have kicked my addiction."

Ben reached out and bumped Dean's shoulder with his fist. "Thanks, buddy, but you give me more credit than I deserve. You'd already made the decision to turn your life around by the time you left the force and moved back here." He glanced down at his watch and frowned. "I didn't realize it was getting so late. I need to run by Hannah's house and see how she's doing this morning. Then I think I'll grab a few hours of sleep before I go to the station. I'll talk to you later."

Dean nodded. "Later," he said as he slipped his hands in the pockets of his jeans. Ben was almost back to his car before Dean called out to him. "And tell Hannah that I'm glad she wasn't hurt yesterday. Gwen and I'll go over later today and check on her."

"Thanks," Ben called as he waved over his shoulder.

"And while you're at it—" Dean's raised voice caused Ben to stop in his tracks "—if you really want to cheer her up after her ordeal, why don't you ask her out to dinner?"

"You know we go out to dinner all the time," Ben called back.

"Yeah, but you always have Faith with you. No one can relax with a four-year-old tagging along. Why not try doing something just the two of you?"

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