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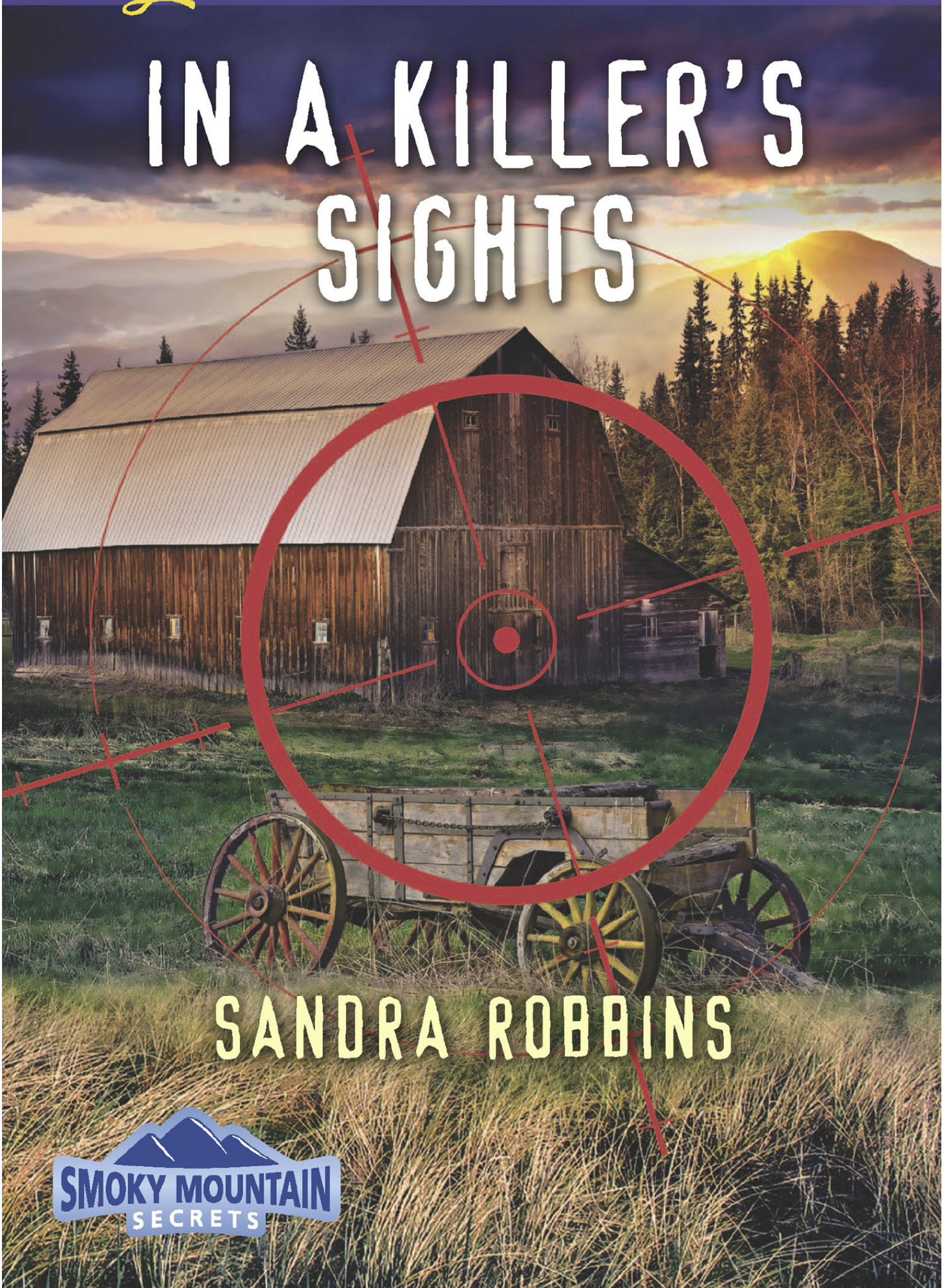

SANDRA ROBBINS

SMOKY MOUNTAIN SECRETS

Sandra Robbins

In A Killer's Sights

«HarperCollins»

Robbins S.

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WITNESS IN JEOPARDYWhen Gwen Harwell witnesses someone dumping a body into a Tennessee river, she knows she's the killer's new target. Far from home on a work assignment, she isn't sure where to turn—especially when her ex-husband appears. Five years ago, Dean Harwell's burdens from his police work tore their marriage apart. But now, he says he's changed. He's working as a rancher; he's put his problems behind him. And he's committed to keeping her safe until the killer is caught. With their troubled past, trusting him with her life is hard enough. Can she trust him with the truth about the child he doesn't know they have?Smoky Mountain Secrets: Love and danger collide in the southern wilderness.

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WITNESS IN JEOPARDY

When Gwen Harwell witnesses someone dumping a body into a Tennessee river, she knows she's the killer's new target. Far from home on a work assignment, she isn't sure where to turn—especially when her ex-husband appears. Five years ago, Dean Harwell's burdens from his police work tore their marriage apart. But now he says he's changed. He's working as a rancher; he's put his problems behind him. And he's committed to keeping her safe until the killer is caught. With their troubled past, trusting him with her life is hard enough. Can she trust him with the truth about the child he doesn't know they have?

Smoky Mountain Secrets: Love and danger collide in the Southern wilderness

"Gwen, are you all right?" Dean asked.

Gwen looked up at him with tear-filled eyes, and his stomach tightened at how often he'd been the cause of her tears in the past. She had once said she would never forgive him, and he believed her.

He wished he could let her know how he regretted that, but now was not the time to tell her.

She nodded. "When I smelled that gasoline, I was so scared. Then I thought I was the only one who'd survived the wreck."

Dean smiled. "But you called 911 anyway. That was quick thinking."

Her cheeks flushed, and a smile pulled at her lips. "I'm just glad that your cell phone fell out of your pocket."

Their stilted conversation reminded him of how different things were now between the two of them compared to what they'd been years ago. How he wished he could go back and tell that young police officer to do things differently, but he couldn't.

"Gwen, I—" he began, then stopped as someone approached them.

What was done, was done, and the past couldn't be changed.

But the present could.

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.

In a Killer's Sights
Sandra Robbins

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Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

—Isaiah 1:18

Dedicated to Kylie, who gave me the idea for
setting a story on a dude ranch in the Smoky Mountains

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ONE

Gwen Anderson planted her feet in a wide stance and stared down into the crystal clear waters of the Great Smoky Mountains stream twenty feet below. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the fall foliage, casting shadows across the water. Her position provided the perfect photo op for her research. In a few months, she would begin producing a documentary about the most visited national park in the country for WNT, a New York–based television network.

Her camera hung on a strap around her neck, and she raised it to her eyes. A strand of hair slipped out of her metal hair clip and wedged itself in front of the viewfinder. With a sigh, she adjusted the clip and tugged on it to make sure it was anchored in place. Then she raised the camera and peered through it, scanning the terrain below in an effort to get the best shot.

As she inched closer to the edge, she stepped on a loose rock she hadn't seen in the moss, and her foot slipped. With a scraping sound, the rock tumbled downward. She cringed at the sound of it knocking against the limestone face and releasing a small avalanche of other stones. For a moment she teetered on the edge of the cliff, thinking she might very well follow them, but then she steadied herself.

The thud of stones striking the ground reached her ears, but it was another sound that made her breath hitch in her throat. A surprised cry rang out from below. The thought that a hiker or camper had been on the riverbank and was injured by one of the falling rocks set her heart to pounding. Dreading what she'd see, Gwen stepped carefully to the brink and stared down.

Her eyes widened in shock at the sight below. A man dressed in camouflage, with a body draped over his shoulder, stood at the edge of the water and stared up at her. Although the black ski mask he wore covered his face, his eyes glared at her through the slits of his disguise.

Neither of them moved for a few seconds as they gazed at each other. Then, with a shove, he dumped the body into the rushing water. Gwen watched in horror as it bobbed a few times before the current carried it away downstream.

Instinct kicked in, and she raised the camera and snapped a picture, just as the man lifted his arm—with a gun in his hand. A moment later, the sound of a gunshot echoed in the valley. Pieces of shattered rock exploded around her as the bullet struck inches from where she stood, making her flinch back automatically and squeeze her eyes shut. She took a deep breath and peered through the viewfinder once more, but the man was no longer there.

Panic welled up in her. It was time to get to safety. Her car sat at the trailhead parking lot a mile away, and she needed to head there now. Careful not to slip on the mossy rocks, Gwen scrambled toward the trail as fast as she could. Once there she took off running, but she could hear the sound of someone sprinting behind her.

Knowing her life depended on it, she pushed her body to move faster, to outrun the killer, who sounded as if he was gaining on her with every step. The deserted trail stretched ahead, and she groaned, unsure she could make it all the way to the parking lot before she collapsed—or got caught by her pursuer.

What should she do? Continue on, or take her chances in the forest on either side of the path? Of the two, the forest seemed the better choice. Although the vegetation would slow her progress some, she might be able to find a hiding place in the dense woods. Before she could decide, another gunshot sounded, and bark on a tree to the right of the trail exploded in small fragments.

Her nostrils flared in fear as she realized he'd gained even more ground and it would be only a matter of time before he caught up to her. Already she was weakening, and her chest was heaving as she gasped for air. The better choice was to take her chances off the trail. Veering right, she plunged into the thick forest and wove among the tree trunks.

The heavy footsteps slowed a bit, but didn't stop. Now they were crashing over the fallen limbs and leaves that littered the ground. And worst of all, he was still right behind her.

There had to be somewhere she could hide. But where? The trees in this part of the forest were too small to conceal a figure behind them, and she wasn't close enough to the hillside to find a cave. Just when she was about to give up hope, she spotted a large rotting tree off to her left, a big hollow in its trunk. She didn't know if she could fit into it or not, but needed to try. Her pursuer would catch up to her any minute.

With a burst of speed, Gwen raced to the tree. Her research had told her that black bears in the Smokies liked to hibernate in hollowed-out trees, and if this was a bear's den, she hoped no one

was home today. Swallowing the bile that poured into her mouth, she dropped down on her hands and knees and scurried into the gaping hole.

She wiggled in and pressed her body against the back side of the trunk. With any luck the man from the stream wouldn't see her. The sound of approaching footsteps crashing through the forest caused her to stiffen and hold her breath. He came closer and then ran on by without stopping.

She waited a few minutes, catching her breath, before she crawled out and looked around. He was nowhere in sight, and she couldn't hear him running. Taking a deep gulp of air, she turned and ran.

What felt like endless moments later, she was back on the trail and racing toward the parking lot. If she could just get to her car, she could get away. Then she'd go to the sheriff's department and take her camera. She wasn't sure if the picture of a man's face hidden by a ski mask would be helpful or not, but there might be another way to identify him. And a way to find out who his victim was.

When the parking lot came into sight, she breathed a sigh of relief and urged her tired body to jog the last few feet to where her car was parked. She was almost there when she heard a shout behind her.

"Stop! Or I'll shoot!"

Gwen glanced over her shoulder, and her legs almost collapsed at what she saw. The man, still wearing the ski mask, ran from the woods, his gun aimed at her. Her car sat no more than twenty feet away. He was at least twice that distance. Should she stop or try for the vehicle?

Before she even knew what she had decided, she willed her legs into a new burst of speed and barreled toward her car. A shot rang out and struck beside her foot on the paved parking lot. She gasped, but didn't stop.

She was almost to the car when another shot rang out and bounced off the fender. The sound of the ricochet sent terror flowing through her, and she stumbled. Her arms flailed the air as she fell forward, landing facedown on the asphalt. The strap holding her camera around her neck broke, and the device skidded across the parking lot, out of reach.

Gwen scrambled to get up, but by then the killer stood a few feet away with the weapon pointed at her. His eyes blazed with anger through the slits of the mask, and his chilling laugh sent shivers up her spine. Without taking the gun off her, he slowly reached down and picked up her camera.

"Well, well," he snarled. "Thought you could get away from me? It looks like today's not your day."

Gwen pushed herself into a sitting position and scooted backward until she felt the door of her car behind her. "Please," she begged. "I don't know who you are, and I won't say anything. Just please don't hurt me."

He chuckled again and shook his head. "You should have thought of that before you became so nosy."

She raised her hands in front of her as if they could shield her from a bullet. "There's no need to do this."

"Sorry," he said and raised the gun.

Gwen closed her eyes to say a quick prayer for those she loved and would leave behind, but snapped them open again at the sound of a voice shouting from nearby. "What's going on here?"

Her assailant whirled and stared at the road to the parking lot. Gwen's heart slammed against her chest as she spied horses with riders in single file—a trail ride. The leader spurred his mount forward, and she cringed against the car, waiting to see what would happen next.

The man in the mask appeared to waver, uncertain. He retreated a step, pointed the gun at the rider and then back at her. He gave a strangled cry and then fired. Gwen sat there, stunned, as she felt something wet trickle down her face. Puzzled, she reached up, touched the side of her head and felt blood. With a groan, she toppled forward. The rough pavement scraped her cheek, and she heard the hoofbeats of a horse speeding past. Then darkness settled over her, and she slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

Dean Harwell hadn't counted on stumbling on a crime in progress when he'd led his dude-ranch guests on their first trail ride in the Smokies. But despite his surprise, he didn't hesitate to act.

Years of service as a police officer served him well as he spurred his horse toward the gunman in an effort to save the woman's life. His heart dropped to the pit of his stomach when the man aimed and fired at her. Out of the corner of his eye Dean saw her slump facedown on the pavement before the man turned and ran into the woods.

His foreman, Emmett Truitt, rode up beside him. "Did we just witness a murder, Dean?"

"Looks like it," he replied. "The shooter's gone into the forest. I can't risk injury to my horse by taking him in there. Call 911 for the woman, and I'll go after him."

He dismounted, threw the reins to Emmett and plunged into the forest after the fleeing gunman. After about a half mile he stopped and listened. No sounds came from around him. Even the birds had chosen to go quiet. He hadn't caught sight of the man even once since following him into the woods, and he couldn't hear anyone running.

It was time to admit he'd lost the trail. With a sigh, Dean turned around and retraced his steps to the parking lot. When he got there, emergency vehicles, their lights flashing, were scattered across the parking lot.

An ambulance with its back door open appeared to be ready to transport the victim. Sheriff Ben Whitman, Dean's friend since they'd met in middle school years ago, stood beside his police car talking to one of his deputies.

Even from this distance it was easy to see Ben's Cherokee heritage in his high cheekbones, coarse black hair and reddish skin tone. They'd played football together, double-dated and shared confidences since they were kids. But it was what Ben had done for him in the past five years that meant the most. He had been Dean's sponsor when he'd entered an alcohol rehabilitation program, and Ben was the main reason he'd been successful in overcoming his addiction.

When Ben spotted Dean, he hurried over. "Did you see where he went?"

Dean shook his head. "He disappeared as soon as he left the parking lot. He must know these woods well to get away so quickly." He glanced at the gurney where the woman lay, with EMT Joe Collins and another man in scrubs bent over her, administering aid.

Only her feet were visible. It was impossible to tell how badly she might be hurt. "Is she dead?"

"No," Ben said. "She's unconscious, though. The paramedics are about ready to transport her."

Dean craned his neck to get a better look at the woman, but still couldn't see her face. "How badly is she hurt?" he asked.

Ben tugged at the brim of his hat to straighten it. "Not nearly as bad as we thought at first. Emmett and your guests said they saw a man with a gun aimed right at her head when he fired. The only thing that saved her life was a big metal hair clip she had on. The bullet apparently struck it and bounced off. Grazed her head when it ricocheted and the wound bled quite a bit, but she's going to be fine."

"I guess God was watching out for her today," Dean said. "When I rode up and saw the guy about to shoot her, I thought it was a robbery gone bad. Was it?"

"That was my first thought, but I won't know until I can talk with her. The impact of the bullet knocked her out, and she hasn't regained consciousness yet."

"Have you ever seen her around before?"

Ben shook his head. "Probably a tourist. She's in a rental car. We found a wallet in her jeans pocket and her driver's license is from New York. I'm guessing she may have encountered her attacker on the trail or in the parking lot and was trying to get away from him when you arrived."

Dean nodded. "That makes sense. Maybe she just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"That's what I'm thinking," Ben said before he stared off into the woods. "I'm going to call in some guys to help us search this area on the chance that we might find something that points to our shooter. Want to come along?"

Dean nodded again. "I'll be glad to. I'll take my guests to the ranch and come on back."

"Good. There's not a guide around that knows these mountains like you do," his friend stated. "I sure am glad you came back home to live. Now, if you'd give up that dude ranch and come work for me, I'd be perfectly happy."

Dean frowned at that. "My days of being a police officer are over. I loved it until I..." He paused and stared down at the wedding ring he'd never been able to take off. "Well, you know some of what happened. It ruined my life for a time."

"But you overcame everything."

Dean sighed and raked his hand through his hair. "Not everything, buddy. There are some people I never will get the chance to make it up to. People who I've had to learn to live without. One especially."

Ben clamped his hand on Dean's shoulder. "You know I've always been glad to listen to you about what happened, but I know there's a lot you've never told me. When you're ready, I'm willing to hear."

Dean smiled briefly. "Thanks. I'll remember that." Then he took a deep breath. "Now I'd better get these guests home so I can come help you with the search."

"See you later," Ben said before he turned and walked to his cruiser.

Dean started to head to where Emmett stood, but noticed the EMTs were about to load the woman in the ambulance and detoured to check on her. He walked over and stopped behind Joe. "How's she doing?" he asked.

The paramedic glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "Still passed out, but she's going to be fine. If that bullet had been a half inch to the left of that hair clip, we'd be taking her body to the county coroner's office instead of the hospital."

"That's what Ben said. And he said she's from New York."

Joe nodded. "Yeah. She's a long way from home. I wonder what she's doing in the Smokies all alone."

Dean frowned. "Maybe she isn't alone. Did Ben find anything that would tell where she's staying while she's here? Maybe a key card from a hotel or a receipt from a cabin rental company?"

"Not that I know of."

Dean glanced to the far side of the parking lot. Emmett and two of his employees seemed to have everything under control with the horses and guests, but it would be dinnertime soon. They needed to get back to the ranch for the cookout that was planned for the evening. "Well, I'd better get these folks back to my ranch, and you need to get her to the hospital. I hope everything turns out well for her." He stepped around Joe and was about to leave when he glanced down and saw the woman's face for the first time.

His eyes opened wide, and a strangled cry came from his throat as a shock like an electrical current raced through his body. His legs wobbled, and he staggered and would have fallen if Joe hadn't grabbed his arm and steadied him.

"Dean! Are you okay?"

He could hear Joe's voice, but couldn't respond. The words Dean tried to say got tangled in his throat, and a strange gurgling emerged. He stared down at the woman, his heart pounding as if he'd just run a marathon.

No! It can't be.

Joe clasped his arm more tightly and shook him. "Dean! Dean! I asked if you're all right."

He bent over and propped his hands on his knees, gulping great breaths of air in an effort to calm his racing pulse. "No, I'm not," he rasped.

With a strangled cry, he dropped to his knees and touched the bandage that covered the wound on her head. Just a few inches and she'd be dead. And he'd run right past her when he'd rushed into the woods. Why hadn't he stopped to see if she needed help?

She looked so pale. Blood matted her blond hair, which he gently smoothed back from her eyes. "Gwen," he crooned. "Can you hear me? It's Dean."

Her left hand rested on the sheet that covered her body. He grasped it and rubbed his thumb down her ring finger. He could still feel the indentation at the base where she'd once worn a ring, but it wasn't there now.

Ben must have seen his reaction, because he dropped down beside him. "Dean, do you know this woman?"

Guilt and sorrow welled up and flooded his soul like a tidal wave. Dean closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "Ben, it's Gwen. It's my wife."

TWO

Ben gasped and a shocked look covered his face. "I saw on her driver's license that her name was Gwen Anderson, but I didn't think about this being your ex-wife. You know I was in the army when the two of you married, and I never met her. In fact, I don't think you ever showed me a picture of her." He stared at Gwen for a moment and exhaled. "So she took back her maiden name?"

Dean swallowed and squeezed her hand tighter. "Yeah. I guess she didn't want anything to remind her of me."

Ben dropped his palm on Dean's shoulder. "Man, I know this is a shock, but don't let it throw you too badly."

Before he could answer, Joe interrupted. "We need to get her to the hospital so the doctor can check her over."

Dean didn't want to let go of Gwen's hand. It had been so long since he'd touched her, and once she regained consciousness, she wouldn't allow him that privilege. But she needed to get to the hospital. With a sigh, he released it and backed away from the gurney so the EMTs could get her inside.

"Okay, but I'm going in the ambulance with her."

Joe glanced at the other paramedic, who shrugged in agreement. "Okay," Joe said, "but move out of the way and let us get her loaded. Then you can climb in with her."

Ben patted Dean on the back. "I need to check on the search my deputies are doing, but I'll see you at the hospital later."

He nodded and then motioned to Emmett, who hurried across the lot, a perplexed expression on his face. "You look like you've seen a ghost, boss. Is something wrong?"

Dean bit down on his lip and debated how much he should reveal to his foreman. After a moment he sighed. "Yeah." He hitched in a breath. "I know the woman who was hurt, and I'm going to the hospital with her. Will you take my horse back to the ranch? I'll call you when I'm ready to come home, so somebody can come get me."

Emmett glanced toward the gurney, then back to Dean. "Okay. Anything else?"

"I won't be there for the guest cookout tonight, so you'll need to help my grandfather with it. Is that a problem for you?"

"No problem. We can handle it. But how long do you think you'll be?"

Dean had no idea. He might not be at the hospital long. It all depended on what Gwen had to say when she regained consciousness, whenever that might be. "I'm not sure. I'll phone and let you know."

Before Emmett could say anything else, Joe's voice rang out from the rear of the ambulance. "Dean, if you're going with us, come on. We're ready to leave."

He nodded and climbed into the vehicle. The gurney took up more than half the space inside, and Dean squeezed in beside Gwen as Joe moved to close the ambulance door. When it was secured, he yelled to his partner, "We're ready to go back here. Are you sure you wouldn't rather I drive?"

"No, thanks. I've got this," the man called back.

Joe shrugged and tried to control the smile that pulled at his mouth. "Wilson is new, and he's not used to navigating these mountain roads yet, but he really wants to prove himself. Still, I'm a little concerned about him taking this one. You know how those steep curves can cause a driver to lose control, and there aren't any guardrails."

Dean nodded. "Yeah, I've heard some horror stories about this stretch. But if this guy is going to work around here, he'd better get used to it. No getting around the fact that we live in the mountains."

Joe chuckled. "You're right about that." He picked up the blood-pressure cuff, leaned in and wrapped it around Gwen's arm. When he'd finished the procedure, he nodded. "Looks good."

Then he scooted out of the way, leaving Dean access to Gwen again. He took her hand in one of his and stroked his thumb across her knuckles as his other hand brushed her hair back behind her ear. For a few seconds all he did was stare down at her, quenching the longing he'd had to see her again. She hadn't changed much in the past five years. Her hair wasn't as long as it used to be, but still felt as silky as when he'd first met her.

Pert was the word he and her friends had used to describe her back then. He wondered if she was still that sassy girl he'd loved or if the years had jaded her as they had him.

Eight years ago she'd been an assistant to the news staff at WLMT radio in Oxford, a town near Nashville. He'd been a police officer then. He remembered so well the night he first saw her. He'd been working on a case involving a serial killer who had chosen Gwen and her friend C.J. as his next victims. Dean had found her at the radio station locked in a closet waiting for the killer who'd left her there as he attempted to dispose of her friend. When he'd opened that door and seen how terrified she was, she had become more than a victim to him.

But it was her strength afterward, her determination not to let her horrible experience wear her down, that had won him over. Her vibrant spirit refused to be dimmed, and it had dazzled him. She had stolen his heart.

They'd been married six months later. And over the next two years, even though it was the last thing he ever would have wanted, he'd succeeded where the killer had failed and crushed some of her bright optimism.

Dean should have known better than to have subjected her to the problems in his life. As much as he'd loved her, he hadn't been able to keep the demons of his past from destroying the best thing that had ever happened to him. She'd tried to save their marriage, but at the time he couldn't meet her halfway. Now, for some reason, he'd been given the chance to see her again, and he didn't know if this was what he wanted or not.

Gwen stirred on the gurney, and Dean tightened his grip on her hand, silently willing her to wake up. The thought had no sooner entered his head than he questioned his decision to get in the ambulance. He had no idea if she would be happy to see him. Probably not. The day their divorce had been finalized, she'd told him in no uncertain terms that she didn't want to ever hear from him again. She'd said she was leaving Oxford and that he should never try to find her.

He'd agreed and for the past five years had kept his promise. Now she'd suddenly reappeared, in the last place he would have expected.

As the ambulance sped along the mountain road, he said a prayer of thanks that she'd come through her ordeal alive. Dean wanted to pray that she would be happy to see him when she woke up, but that probably wasn't going to happen.

Suddenly her eyes blinked open. "Wh-where am I?" she whispered.

Dean released her hand and scooted out of the way so Joe could lean over her.

"Miss Anderson," he said, "you're in an ambulance. We're on our way to the hospital. A doctor has been alerted and is waiting for us. Just relax, and we should be there in a few minutes."

She closed her eyes. "My head hurts," she murmured.

"I know. The doc will take care of that when we get to the hospital. Now just lie still."

She swallowed and looked up at him again. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Joe. I’m one of the EMTs taking care of you.”

Her eyes opened wide and she swallowed hard. Her body trembled as she tried to push herself up from the gurney. “Th-that man...”

Joe put his hands on her shoulders and eased her back down. “Don’t think about that right now. The sheriff will want to talk to you later about what happened. For now, just relax and don’t worry. You’re safe.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. You’re very kind.”

Joe glanced over his shoulder at Dean, who’d been holding his breath in suspense. “There’s somebody here who wants to see you,” the EMT said.

A frown pulled at her forehead. “Who?”

Joe moved out of the way, and Dean eased in next to the gurney. “It’s me, Gwen.”

For a moment she didn’t move, and then a dazed look clouded her eyes. “No,” she gasped. “This can’t be real.”

Dean smiled and covered her hand with his as he leaned closer. “Yes, it’s real, Gwen. I’m here.”

At his touch, her fingers stiffened. Then she pulled her hand free and turned her face away. “No, no, this can’t be happening,” she moaned.

* * *

She had to be dreaming. Dean had been out of her life for five years. How could he be staring down at her in the back of an ambulance? She closed her eyes in hopes of clearing his image from her mind and groaned again.

“Miss Anderson!” The EMT’s voice penetrated the thick fog that seemed to be rolling into her brain, and she glanced up again. Dean no longer hovered over her. Now the young man who’d said his name was Joe was there. “Settle down, Miss Anderson. Don’t get upset.”

She tried to peer past him, to determine if she had really seen Dean’s face or just imagined it, but Joe’s body blocked her view. Her lips felt as if they were made of sandpaper when she licked them. “Dean?” Her voice wobbled as if she was begging the young man to assure her he was the only one with her.

Instead he smiled and nodded. “Yes, Dean’s here. He says he’s your husband. Is that right?”

“Ex-husband. Why is he here?”

Joe glanced over his shoulder and frowned. “I think you might need to answer that.”

The paramedic stepped back from the gurney, and Gwen’s stomach clenched when Dean maneuvered next to where she lay. “It’s really you!” she said weakly. “I thought I was dreaming.”

“No, you weren’t dreaming.”

He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away. The muscles in his throat constricted as he swallowed, his gaze raking her face.

He looked the same as he always had, yet different. Healthier. His face wasn’t as bloated, nor was his complexion as red as the last time she’d seen him. His lips quirked up at the corners in a smile she remembered so well.

“I was leading a trail ride when I saw a man about to shoot you. Of course, I didn’t know it was you at first. But he...but he—” Dean’s voice cracked as if the words were lodged in his throat.

Her heart pricked at the way his eyes darkened. “I know. I remember him pointing the gun and firing. How could he have missed? He was so close to me.”

“He didn’t miss,” Dean said. “There was a metal clip holding your hair back. The bullet hit it and bounced off. It saved your life.”

She closed her eyes and shuddered. “I’m alive just because I put it in before I left the motel this morning?” She raised her hand and ran her fingers through her hair. When she didn’t feel the clip, she frowned. “Where is it now?”

“The police took it for evidence.” Dean leaned closer. “Had you ever seen this man before? Had he been following you, or did you just happen across him on the trail?”

She shook her head. “He was wearing a mask, so I can’t be sure, but I don’t think I’ve ever laid eyes on him before I saw him dumping a body in the river. When he spotted me, he chased me back to the parking lot.”

Dean’s eyes grew wide with shock. “Dumping a body?”

“Yes. I took a picture of it, but then dropped my camera when I fell in the parking lot. Did the police find it?”

“No. It wasn’t there.”

She sighed. “That’s too bad. I had a clear angle from where I was standing on the cliff above the stream.”

Dean gasped. “Did this guy see you take the picture? Is that why he followed you?”

“Yes.”

Dean raked his hand through his hair and gritted his teeth. “Gwen, you should have gotten out of there right away. You were married to a police officer long enough to know what happens when someone is witness to a crime.”

She stared at him for a moment, the memory of how scared she’d been as she ran through the forest welling up in her mind. Her nostrils flared, and she tried again to push herself up from the gurney. “I think I learned a lot during that time,” she spit out. “Maybe we should just say I was married to you long enough, and leave it at that.”

Joe reached out and grasped Dean’s shoulder. “Take it easy, man. She doesn’t need to get upset.”

Dean closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I wasn’t criticizing you, Gwen. It scares me to think what almost happened to you. I’m sorry.”

She blinked to keep tears from rolling down her cheeks and pressed her palm against her forehead. “I’m sorry, too, Dean. I shouldn’t have reacted as I did.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment, and then he sighed. “So, what are you doing in the Smokies?”

“I work for a television network in New York. We’re going to do a documentary that features the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. I had hiked up to the stream to take some pictures for research.”

He smiled. “New York, huh? You finally made the big time like you wanted.”

“It’s a good job,” she said. “But what about you? I didn’t think you’d ever come back to the Smokies.”

He sighed and a sad smile curled his lips. “After the divorce, I decided I had to change something about my life. It was either get sober or die, and I chose to get sober. I turned my life over to God and got in a program for alcoholics. I haven’t had a drink in four years.”

Her mouth fell open in surprise. “That’s wonderful, Dean! I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m happy, too,” he said. “I decided to come back where I grew up. My grandfather needed some help with his farm, and I found I missed the mountains. And it felt great to be sober. So I moved in with Granddad, and we decided to turn the farm into a dude ranch. It’s doing very well.”

She smiled. “It sounds like life has been good for you.”

A sad expression darkened his eyes again. “My one regret was that you didn’t know about it. But now you do.”

“Now I do,” she whispered.

Dean opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, a loud pop exploded outside the ambulance. The driver gave a startled cry as the vehicle swerved to the right, hit the loose gravel on the shoulder and veered back across the road.

“Wilson!” Joe yelled. “What’s the matter?”

“I think we’ve been shot at!” he shouted, just as a second pop sounded.

Dean jumped to his feet and stared through the window that divided the back of the ambulance from the cab. “Are you hit?” he yelled.

“No, but I think a tire was. I’m losing control!”

The ambulance careened across the pavement, reached the other shoulder and plunged down the mountainside. Joe fell to the floor as compartments flew open and medical supplies tumbled out. Gwen screamed, and Dean grabbed her as she rolled from the gurney. They both dropped to the floor as the vehicle, picking up speed, bounced past trees and low-hanging limbs on its journey down the slope.

Gwen felt Dean’s arms tighten around her as they crouched there, his body shielding hers. Then, without warning, the ambulance came to a jarring halt as it collided with something solid, most likely a tree or a rock.

The impact shook the vehicle with such force that she, Dean and Joe flew as if they’d been shot from a cannon into the walls and then back to the floor. She could hear the paramedic moaning near the panel at the front, but Dean lay next to her unmoving.

Frantic, she grabbed his shoulder and shook him. “Dean! Are you okay?” When he didn’t answer, she shook him again. “Dean! Dean! Wake up.”

A low moan came from Joe’s direction. She tried to raise her head to see if he was conscious, but Dean’s body blocked her view. “Joe! Are you okay?”

No answer. She tried calling out to the driver, too, but there was no response.

She pushed Dean’s body off her and knelt next to him. A cell phone lay beside him, probably knocked from his pocket when he was thrown against the wall. She scooped it up and punched in the necessary numbers.

An operator answered right away. “This is 911. What is your emergency?”

“I need help!” Gwen screamed. “The ambulance that answered the call to White Oak Creek has crashed down the mountain. There are three others with me, but I’m the only one conscious right now.”

“I have the ambulance on our GPS, and I’ve notified responders. They should be there soon. Who’s there with you?”

“The driver. I think I heard that his name is Wilson? There’s also an EMT named Joe, and Dean Harwell. Please tell the responders to hurry. I’m afraid the men are hurt badly.”

“They’re on the way. Stay on the line with me.”

“I will, but please tell them...” The words froze in her throat at the smell that filled the ambulance. “Gasoline!” she screamed. “I smell gasoline.”

“You need to get out of the ambulance now, ma’am.” The woman’s voice crackled over the cell phone.

“I can’t leave them all here!” Gwen cried.

Before she could move, the back door of the vehicle opened. She recoiled at the sight of a man dressed in camouflage with a black ski mask over his face. He held a gun that he instantly aimed at her.

“Well, we meet again,” he sneered, his words muffled by the mask.

“What do you want?” Gwen cried.

“What I don’t want is for you to live to tell what you saw up on that mountain,” he snarled.

Gwen held her hands in front of her and tried to scoot backward, but Joe’s body blocked her. Beside her, Dean began to stir. “I don’t know anything. I can’t even see your face. Please put that gun down,” she begged.

He laughed and took a step closer. “I can’t take a chance. Sorry, lady.” He slowly reached in his pocket, pulled out a cigarette lighter and flicked it on. Then he backed away a few feet and tossed it toward the vehicle.

THREE

A man's voice penetrated Dean's mind, and he opened his eyes. He pushed himself to his knees and turned his head toward the sound just in time to see a figure clothed in camouflage drop a cigarette lighter to the ground. Immediately, a flame shot up.

Dean jumped to his feet and faced the man behind the flames. "What are you doing?" he yelled.

The man took a step backward, raised his gun and pointed it at Dean. "Harwell? Why are you here?"

Beside him Gwen gasped and coughed from the smoke. The man jerked his attention to her, and that gave Dean the opportunity he needed to find a weapon. A cardiac monitor, jarred from its place on the ambulance wall, lay next to him, and he grabbed it by the handle. With all his strength he heaved the piece of equipment at the man, who sidestepped with a startled cry. Then he turned and ran up the mountainside.

Dean grabbed Gwen's arm and pulled her to her feet. "We've got to get out of here. Right now!"

She looked back at Joe, who was beginning to stir. "I can make it," she said. "Get Joe and the driver out!"

Ignoring her demand, Dean pulled her toward the back door and held her elbow as she scrambled to the ground. She'd taken only a few steps before she stumbled and fell to her knees. Dean wheeled around, grabbed Joe in turn and helped him rise. Together they jumped from the back of the vehicle.

As soon as they were outside, he told Joe, "Get Gwen away from here before the fire reaches the gas tank."

The EMT nodded, pulled her to her feet and half dragged her up the steep slope away from the wreck. Dean could hear her screaming his name as he ran around to the driver's side door. Inside, Wilson was slumped over the wheel. Dean pulled on the handle, but the door refused to open. He tried again, with no success. A glance toward the back of the ambulance told him the fire was spreading underneath. He had to get Wilson out, or they were both going to die in an explosion.

Praying that he could be fast enough, Dean ran to the rear doors and jumped back inside. It took him only a few seconds to find the fire extinguisher, still mounted in its case on the ambulance wall.

Praying that it hadn't been damaged during the wreck, he pulled it free and leaped out. His heart pounded and his hands shook as he remembered the word a trainer at the police academy had taught him: PASS, an acronym for pull, aim, squeeze, sweep. The temptation was to aim for the fire, but that only made the extinguishing agent fly through the flames without doing any good.

Thanks to his training, it took Dean only a few minutes to extinguish the fire that had spread beneath the ambulance. When he was convinced it was out, he ran back to the driver's door and hammered at the window with the base of the fire extinguisher. After a few blows it shattered, and he reached inside to unlock the door.

Blood was pouring down the side of Wilson's head. Dean placed his fingertips on his neck and was relieved to feel a weak pulse. With the fire out, he debated whether or not to pull Wilson from the cab. Before he could decide, he heard the sounds of sirens and brakes screeching as the first responders came to a stop on the road above.

"Down here," Joe yelled to the firemen and EMTs who jumped from their vehicles and hurried down the embankment toward the wreck.

Dean backed away and let the emergency workers take control of the scene, then walked to where Joe and Gwen stood. Her worried gaze swept over him as he came closer. "Are you okay?" she asked.

He grimaced. "Yeah. How about you?"

"The wound on her head has started to bleed," Joe said. "I'm going to get a new bandage for it."

Dean watched his friend walk away, then turned back to Gwen. She stared at him for a moment before she dropped to her knees and covered her face with her hands, her shoulders shaking with

sobs. Unsure what to do, Dean hesitated before he squatted beside her. He started to put his arm around her, but thought better of it. Finally, he braced his hands on his knees and leaned close.

"Gwen, are you all right?" he asked.

She looked up with tear-filled eyes, and his stomach clenched at the memory of how often he'd been the cause of her tears in the past. She had once said she would never forgive him, and he believed her. He wished he could let her know how he regretted everything he had done that had torn their marriage apart, but now was not the time.

She nodded. "When I smelled that gasoline, I was so scared. Then I thought I was the only one who'd survived the wreck." She glanced at the ambulance. The first responders had removed Wilson from inside and were bent over him, administering aid.

Dean smiled. "But you called 911 anyway. That was quick thinking."

Her cheeks flushed and a smile pulled at her lips. "I'm just glad your cell phone fell out of your pocket to make me think of it."

The stilted conversation between the two of them reminded him how different things were now than they'd been years ago. He wished he could go back and tell that young police officer to do things differently, but he couldn't. What was done was done, and the past couldn't be changed.

"Gwen—" he began, but stopped when a familiar voice interrupted him.

"Dean, I was nearly back to town when I got the message to return. What happened?"

He looked up to find his friend the sheriff coming down the embankment. Dean placed a hand on Gwen's elbow and supported her as they rose to their feet. Ben Whitman stopped beside them and glanced from one to the other.

Dean nodded toward the wrecked ambulance. "I guess our guy wasn't through for the day."

Ben frowned and pushed his hat back on his head. "You think the shooter at the trailhead caused this wreck?"

Dean nodded. "Yeah, I saw him." He turned to Gwen. "This is Sheriff Ben Whitman. He's a good friend of mine. You need to tell him your story about what happened by the stream. Then we can fill him in on what went down here." He glanced back at Ben. "This is Gwen."

"It's a pleasure to meet you!" Ben told her. "I've heard a lot about you."

"About me?"

He nodded, a smile curling his lips. "Dean and I have been friends a long time." He glanced at the ring on Dean's hand, and Gwen's mouth dropped open. From her surprised look, Dean guessed she hadn't noticed it before. He wondered how she felt about it.

Her face flushed and she jerked her gaze away. "Then I suppose you know our history."

"Some of it, but right now I'm more interested in what happened when you were attacked. Why don't you tell me about it?"

Dean listened as Gwen recounted her tale of being pursued through the forest by a man wearing a ski mask and how terrified she'd been when he'd leveled the gun and shot at her. When she'd finished, Dean described the shots that had caused the ambulance to go over the side of the mountain and what had happened after that.

"This guy knew me," Dean said. "When I got to my feet, he called me by name. Not long after that, he turned and ran. He'd already started the fire by that time, though."

"Did you recognize his voice?" Ben asked.

Dean shook his head. "No. It was muffled by the ski mask, but there was something familiar about it."

The sheriff sighed. "If you come up with anything that could help us, let me know. Looks like our guy has had a busy day. Instead of a search for just a shooter, now I have to let my deputies know we're looking for a body in the stream, too."

He turned and walked a few feet away before he took out a cell phone. Dean could hear him talking to Dispatch, giving orders to change the focus of the hunt. He'd just finished the call when Joe came to stand beside them.

"How's the driver?" Gwen asked.

A troubled look flashed on Joe's face. "He must have hit his head on the steering wheel when we crashed. He's still unconscious, and we're getting ready to leave with him for the hospital. Sorry, but both of you have to come, too. We want to make sure you don't have any internal injuries."

"And what about you?" Dean asked.

Joe chuckled. "I'll get checked out, too. They're taking Wilson up to the ambulance right now." He glanced at Gwen. "Miss Anderson, you need to lie down on the stretcher so we can get you up the incline, too."

"I don't need a stretcher," she protested. "I can walk."

Before Joe could answer her, Dean stepped closer. "You've been through a lot this afternoon, Gwen. Joe and the paramedics are just doing their jobs, so do what they say, please."

She opened her mouth as if she meant to argue further, but then closed it and nodded. "Okay, I don't want to be difficult."

Two of the first responders appeared beside them with a stretcher and lowered it for Gwen to lie down. She huffed out another exasperated breath and rolled her eyes before she complied.

Dean couldn't help but chuckle. "I see you haven't changed a bit. You're just as determined and independent as you were when we were married."

Her forehead wrinkled as she studied him. That was the same look she'd given him many times in the past when she was trying to figure out the answer to a burning question. He couldn't help but wonder what she was pondering now.

The EMTs picked up the stretcher and began the trek up the mountainside to the road, where a new ambulance waited. They'd taken only a few steps when Gwen pushed herself up on her elbows and called out to him, "Dean, will I see you at the hospital?"

He raised his hand and waved to her. "You can count on it," he called back.

She took a deep breath and lay back down on the stretcher. "Good."

The word was spoken so softly he wondered if he'd heard her correctly.

Gwen hated him, and he couldn't blame her. He'd come to realize what living with an alcoholic must have been like for her. There was no way he could ever make up for the unhappiness he'd caused her, and no way he would allow her to be hurt more in the future.

She wasn't safe in this mountain community. A killer had tried twice to kill her and would probably try again. She needed to give up the idea of filming a documentary here and put as much distance between herself and this place as possible. Now all Dean had to do was convince her of it.

* * *

Gwen sat on the edge of the exam table in the emergency room, her feet dangling over the side and her cell phone pressed to her ear. For the past ten minutes she'd been talking with her mother and explaining what had happened today. To say that her mom was upset was an understatement.

She had always been protective of Gwen, more so than most mothers. Gwen had chalked that up to the fact that she was an only child. Since her divorce from Dean, her mother had made it her mission to try to control Gwen's whole life. Sometimes to the point that Gwen felt she was about to suffocate.

It wasn't the fact she'd twice almost been killed today that had her mother so riled up, though. It was Dean's presence that had unleashed all her mama-bear instincts. "Mom, please," Gwen said for perhaps the tenth time, "there's no need for you to get upset."

"No need?" her mother practically yelled. "That man made you miserable when you were married. He almost destroyed you. As it is, he's turned you into somebody who distrusts every man you meet."

"Mom, let's not go there right now."

"And why not?"

Gwen pulled the phone away from her ear and rolled her eyes in frustration. She'd never yelled at her mother but sometimes felt pushed to the limits. With only a curtain covering the opening into the room, she tried to lower her voice so no one could hear her conversation.

"Because I don't want to talk about that. I just wanted you to know what happened to me today."

She heard her mother's short intake of breath, and then her voice became gentler. "I'm sorry, darling. I'm upset because you were hurt and threatened, but it's more than that. You know what's at stake here."

The guilt she'd carried for the past five years surfaced, and Gwen bit down on her lip. "I know. Don't tell Maggie about this, okay?"

A loud gasp rippled in Gwen's ear. "You don't think I'd tell her that her mother was almost killed, do you? I wouldn't frighten her like that. I love her. And I certainly wouldn't tell her that her mother's now with the father who doesn't even know she exists. Do you have any idea what that would do to a four-year-old child?"

"Of course I do, Mom. You don't have to worry. She's my main concern, and I'll do whatever it takes to protect her."

"Then keep that in mind. No matter what Dean says, don't let him worm his way back into your life. Remember how his drinking almost destroyed you. He'll always be an alcoholic. Don't let him mislead you into believing any differently."

"Mom, please—"

Her mother interrupted before she could finish her sentence. "Let me remind you that when you made the decision not to tell Dean you were pregnant, you said you never intended to see him again. Now you have, and there's no telling what he'll do if he finds out about Maggie."

"I know that, Mom," she whispered.

"Good. Maybe this is the push you need to rethink your relationship with Rick."

Gwen gritted her teeth. "Please don't bring up Rick today. I've told you over and over that we're just good friends. We work together and enjoy going out every once in a while, but that's where it ends."

Her mother sighed. "I know he cares about you, and he's a good man. At least you could give him a chance."

Gwen closed her eyes and rubbed her hand across them. How many times had she had this conversation with her mother? Lately she'd found her resolve slipping, and sometimes it seemed her life would be simpler if she'd just do as her mother asked and try to think of Rick as more than a friend.

"Mom..."

"All I'm asking is that you think about it."

Gwen tightened her grip on the phone and gritted her teeth. "Mom, please, I can't do this now. My head hurts, and I don't want to talk about Rick. We'll talk about it more when I come home."

"You're right," her mother said. "Right now you need to get yourself checked out and make sure you don't have any injuries. You take care of yourself, and I'll take care of Maggie. She's very eager for you to come home. When do you think that will be?"

"As soon as I finish my research. It should be a few more days."

"Let me know, and we'll meet you at the airport."

"I will. And, Mom, thank you for everything you've done for me. I love you."

"You don't have to thank me. Just promise me that you'll think about Maggie's future. She needs a father."

"I know that."

Her mother was silent for a moment before she spoke again. “I hope you know that I only want what’s best for you because I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mom. I’ll talk to you later.”

Gwen ended the call and laid the phone beside her on the table, then scrubbed her hands over her face in an effort to relieve the anxiety talking with her mother always provoked. The curtain over the door moved, and Dean called out from the other side, “Gwen, may I come in?”

She glanced back at the phone with wide eyes. How long had he been standing there? Had he heard her speak about Maggie or Rick? She shifted on the table and crossed her arms over her stomach.

“Come in, Dean.”

He pulled back the curtain before he stepped into the room. A sad look shadowed his dark eyes, making them stand out in his pale face. His gaze traveled over her before he inhaled. She tried to determine if he had heard her conversation or not, but couldn’t tell. He held her gaze for a few seconds before she glanced down.

“I was just talking with my mother.”

“And how is she?” he asked.

“She was concerned about what’s happened today.”

He slipped his hands in his pockets and took a step closer. “I suppose that means she’s upset that I’m here with you.”

Gwen shook her head. “Dean, please...”

“It’s okay, Gwen. I understand how she feels about me, and I don’t blame her. But neither you nor your mother have anything to fear from me. All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy. I wouldn’t do anything to interfere with that.”

She blinked back the tears that filled her eyes and smiled. “I believe you, Dean. No matter what your problems were, you never lied to me.”

He took a step closer. “No, I never did, and I’m not going to start now. I’ve been talking with Ben, and we’re both concerned about the attempts on your life today. We think you need to go home while Ben searches for this guy. When he’s caught, you can come back and finish your research.”

Her eyes widened. “I can’t do that. I’m on a schedule to get this project under way. I can’t wait while the police look for a murderer they may never find.” She shook her head. “No, I’m going to finish my job, and then I’ll leave.”

“Gwen, listen to me,” he said. “You’re still in danger. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

She eased off the table and walked over to face him. “Thank you, but I have a job to do. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

He glared at her and raked his hand through his hair. “I’m not going to let you do this.”

Her mouth gaped open and she shook her head. “Are you serious? Do you really think you can order me around? We aren’t married anymore. I don’t have to listen to you.”

He couldn’t have looked more shocked if she’d slapped him, and she immediately regretted her harsh words. His shoulders sagged and he nodded. “I know I don’t have any right to control what you do, especially after what I just overheard.”

Panic ripped through her, and it was all she could do not to run for the door. She clasped her hands together and tried to keep them from shaking. “What did you hear?”

He jammed his hands in his pockets again and rocked back on his heels. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I walked up just as you were saying something about a guy named Rick. Are you involved with him?”

She breathed a sigh of relief. If that was all he’d heard, then he still didn’t know about Maggie. Gwen nodded. “No. My mother wishes I was, though. He and I work together, and we date some. He’s a good man, and I enjoy spending time with him.”

Dean's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "I see," he said. "I realize you have another life now, and I'd like for you to be able to return to it safely." They stared at each other, neither speaking for a few seconds, and then he sighed and rubbed his hand across his eyes. "So, if you won't go home, how about this? Stay at my dude ranch until you're through with your assignment. I'll have one of my employees accompany you to all the locations you want to visit. That way I'll know you're being protected."

She frowned. "You want me to stay at your ranch? I can't do that."

"Why not? I have other guests there. You'll have your own room with a private bath, and you can have as little to do with me as you want. I promise I'll leave you alone."

"I'm not worried about being around you. Our marriage ended years ago, and we both know we can never get back what we once had. I'm just afraid it will be uncomfortable for us."

He smiled. "Then we'll have to make sure to keep things pleasant between us. No rehashing what can't be changed. Just an attempt to be friends. What do you say?"

She thought about it for a moment. It really would make her feel safer if she had someone to accompany her on her research trips. And she had to admit she was curious about the life Dean had made for himself. If she did this, she would have to be careful, though, and guard against letting any word or action give away the secret she'd kept hidden.

Finally, she smiled and nodded. "Thank you, Dean. I'd like to stay at your dude ranch."

A big smile pulled at his lips. "Good. I promise you won't regret it."

Gwen's stomach clenched at his words, and she almost groaned. Something told her Dean was mistaken. She had just made a decision that she might regret for the rest of her life.

FOUR

An hour later Dean stood in the doorway of Gwen's motel room and smiled at the sight of her on her knees, looking under the bed. He tried to push the memory of earlier times like this from his mind, but it was no use. He chuckled, and she glanced up at where he leaned against the doorjamb, his arms crossed.

"Are you sure you have everything?" he asked, a smirk pulling at his lips.

She pushed herself to her feet, brushed her hands against the knees of her jeans and glared at him. "You're not going to bring that up again, are you?"

He smiled and straightened. "I can't help remembering how no matter where we went, you always managed to leave something behind. Do you recall the time you left your makeup case in the bathroom of that St. Louis hotel, and you made me drive two hundred miles back to get it?"

She arched an eyebrow and shrugged. "Only because it was cheaper to pay for the gas to go back than to replace everything that was in that bag."

"So you said." He smiled again. "But I didn't mind."

She started to reply, but the expression on her face suddenly changed to one of uncertainty. With a sigh, she sat down on the bed. Her chin dropped to her chest and she shook her head. "I can't do this, Dean," she said.

He walked over and stared down at her. "Can't do what?"

"I can't go with you if you're going to bring up the past all the time. I've moved on, and I don't want to look back at what we once had."

He nodded and looked at the floor. "I'm sorry. It's just that I thought I'd never see you again, and then all of a sudden you're here and there's a guy pointing a gun at you. In all my years in police work I was never so scared as I was when I woke up on the floor of that ambulance and thought he was going to shoot you."

"I know. I was scared, too."

There was a time when he'd been the one she'd turned to when she was frightened or upset. Then his drinking got bad enough that he became the one who was scaring or upsetting her most

of the time. No doubt this Rick guy was the one who comforted her now. The thought left a sour taste in Dean's mouth.

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck as he eased down to sit beside her. "And I'm sorry for dredging up the past. I guess the news that there's another man in your life was a bit more difficult to take than I thought. But you're correct. I don't have any right to remind you of what used to be. I promised you that I wouldn't do that if you went out to the ranch with me, and I won't." He stood and stretched out his hand as if to help her up, but then thought better of it and curled his fist at his side. "I'll wait for you outside. Come when you're ready."

Without another word he headed toward the door. Once out in the sunshine, he blinked and pulled a pair of sunglasses from his pocket. His mind whirled with a hundred different reasons why he shouldn't take Gwen to his ranch. He wasn't over her—probably never would be—and it would be incredibly painful to see her regularly and know that he wasn't welcome around her anymore. She might say she'd moved on, but she still resented him for how he'd ruined their lives, and he couldn't blame her.

However, there was one overriding reason she should go. Someone had tried twice to kill her, and she'd be safer with Dean than she would be left alone in that motel room.

He turned at the sound of her walking from the room and closing the door behind her. She headed toward her rental car, which one of Ben's deputies had delivered to the hospital. Dean had just stepped over to open the door for her when he heard a man's voice ring out.

"Gwen! Wait!"

They both turned to see a man jogging across the parking lot toward them. The T-shirt and running shorts he wore were wet with perspiration. His sun visor looked drenched, and sweat poured down his face. He grinned as he stopped in front of Gwen, gulped for breath and leaned over with his hands on his knees.

She smiled in welcome. "Mark, how far did you run today?" she asked.

He took a few more breaths before he answered. "I did five miles. I thought you were coming with me this afternoon. I checked before I left, but you weren't in."

Dean's heart did a nosedive into his stomach at the way the man's eyes raked her face, but Gwen only tilted her head to one side, smiled and stared up at him. "I'm sorry. I got involved in scouting locations and was detained."

His forehead wrinkled. "Nothing serious, I hope."

She shook her head. "No." Dean stepped up behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder at him. "Dean," she said, "this is Mark Dyson. He's in the Smokies for a few days." She turned back to Mark. "And this is Dean Harwell, an old friend I ran into today. He owns a dude ranch outside of town, and he's invited me to stay with him for the rest of my visit."

Mark wiped his sweaty hand on his shorts before he stuck it out. "Nice to meet you, Dean."

Dean studied him for a moment before he nodded and shook his hand. "You, too, Mark. So you're a visitor to our mountains, like Gwen?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I guess you could call me that. I live in Knoxville and come here every chance I can. I spend a lot of time hiking the trails around here. I thought Gwen was going to go with me up to Clingman's Dome this afternoon. But when I couldn't find her, I went on a run by myself."

Dean narrowed his eyes a bit and let his gaze travel over Mark, taking in all the details he'd been trained as a police officer to notice. Mark's well-toned body told Dean that this guy must spend a lot of time in the gym. His hands with the manicured fingernails said he didn't do any kind of manual labor, but that wasn't what caught Dean's attention. The indentation on the ring finger of his left hand did. Dean knew what that was from his own experience: Mark was used to wearing a ring. Could it be a wedding ring?

"So, Mark," he said. "You live in Knoxville. Have you lived there long?"

"I got a job offer there when I graduated from college, and I took it. I really like the city and plan on staying."

"College, huh? Where did you graduate?"

Mark fidgeted from one foot to the other and glanced at Gwen before responding. "Harvard Law."

Dean's eyebrows arched. "Wow! That sounds impressive. I don't think I've ever met anyone who graduated from there."

Mark wiped at the sweat that trickled down the side of his face. "It's a great school."

"What kind of law do you practice?"

A slight frown puckered the man's forehead. "Mostly corporate stuff. Too boring to talk about." With a smile, he turned back to Gwen. "So you're checking out of the motel?"

"Yes, but I'm not going home. I'll still be here for a few days."

"Good. Then maybe we can do that climb to Clingman's Dome another day."

"Maybe. It depends on how much work I get done."

He cast a quick glance at Dean, who had inched closer to Gwen. "So, I guess if you're leaving right now, this means we aren't going to have dinner together tonight."

She smiled. "Not tonight. I'm too tired, but you have my cell-phone number. Call me, and we'll see about another night this week."

"I will. I'd like to hear more about that TV special you're working on." He looked back at Dean. "Nice meeting you. Maybe I'll see you again while I'm here."

Dean nodded. "Maybe."

Mark dropped his gaze to his watch and then back at Gwen. "I need to get going, but I'll see you later."

"I'll talk to you soon," Gwen called as he walked away.

When Mark was out of hearing, she spun to face Dean and glared at him. "What was that all about?" she demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"You questioned Mark like he was the suspect in a murder case. It was embarrassing."

"You're overreacting. I just wanted to get a better handle on who he is. He seemed mighty friendly. Have you known him long?"

"No, I met him in the motel lobby the day after I checked in. Then I ran into him at a restaurant the next night. Since we were both alone, we ended up having dinner together, and he asked me if I'd like to go to Clingman's Dome. You know as much about him as I do, but he seems like a nice man."

His shoulders sagged, and he exhaled a long breath. "I'm not criticizing you. I just want you to be safe. Have you forgotten that you were almost killed today? You need to know someone before you get friendly enough to go for a run or have dinner with him."

She propped her hands on her hips. "And how should I go about getting to know someone better? It seems like having dinner in a public restaurant would be the ideal place to talk and get acquainted."

"Gwen, I was only trying—"

She took a step nearer. "I know what you were trying to do. I've seen you in cop mode before, and you need to stop. I'll remind you once again that we're no longer married, and if this is what it's going to be like with me at your ranch, I can't go."

"You misunderstood me, Gwen. I know we're not married, and I know I'm not a cop anymore. But neither one of those things keeps me from wanting you safe. Please be patient until Ben has a chance to catch whoever this is that tried to kill you today."

She was silent for a moment, and then the anger in her eyes faded. "Okay, but you know this isn't going to be easy. We may try to tell ourselves that we won't dwell on the past, but we can't just forget that we were once married and very much in love."

"I know."

She reached out and grasped his arm. "But we need to put our marriage in perspective. We've been divorced for five years now, and I've built a new life. I don't want my old one to intrude on what I have now."

His heart pricked at her words. He glanced down at her hand and then back to her. "I've always known you'd marry again, but it kind of threw me off guard when I heard you talking to your mother about another guy."

Gwen sucked in her breath and released her hold on him. A look of something close to fear flashed in her eyes, and he frowned. "What else did you hear?" she asked.

"That's all. Was there more? Maybe about how much you love him?"

She breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief and shook her head. "No, I didn't say that."

He struggled to keep from smiling at the satisfaction her words produced in him. He didn't want to think about her married to another man, but he had to finally come to grips with the fact that there really was no going back. She had someone waiting for her in New York, and his life was here now with his grandfather. He took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "I want you to be happy. That's all I've ever wanted. I'm sorry I didn't make you happy when we were married."

She blinked to keep tears from flooding her eyes. "Dean, please don't."

He opened his mouth to respond, but his cell phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and stared at caller ID before he spoke. "Ben, what's up?"

Gwen inched closer. "Is that the sheriff?"

He nodded and frowned as he turned his attention to what his friend was saying. He heard the words, but his mind couldn't accept them. He sagged against the side of her car and covered his eyes with his hand. "No," he muttered over and over.

"Dean, what is it?" she whispered.

He didn't look up at her but continued shaking his head. "I'll be right there," he finally said, then lowered the phone from his ear and slipped it back in his pocket.

After a moment he straightened and lifted his gaze to her. "Gwen," he whispered. He tried to say more, but his voice refused to cooperate.

Gwen stared at him wide-eyed. "Dean, tell me what's happened."

A shudder shook his body, and he closed his eyes for a moment. "They found the body you saw being dumped in the river."

"And you know the person?"

He nodded. "Yes. It was my grandfather."

* * *

Gwen wished Dean had let her go with him into the exam room to identify his grandfather's body, but he had insisted he didn't want her to have to experience that. She'd sat for the past few minutes on a bench in the hallway outside the room and waited. She still couldn't believe that James Harwell was dead.

The memory of the first time Dean had brought her to the mountains to meet his grandfather made her smile in spite of her heavy heart. They'd hit it off right away, and Dean had been happy knowing that the man he loved so much approved of the woman he wanted to marry.

For the past five years she'd often thought of Gramps, as she'd called him, and had wanted to get in touch with him. But she couldn't. She didn't want Dean to know where she was or the secret she had hidden from him. Now it was too late for his grandfather to know that he'd left behind a great-granddaughter.

Through the years she'd told herself that by hiding her child from Dean she was protecting Maggie from the horror of having an alcoholic father. In the last days of their marriage, it had been agony for her trying to cope with his constant drinking, his drunken hallucinations and the uncaring attitude about everything in his life. The final decision to leave had come when she'd awakened one

night to find him thrashing about in bed from one of his nightmares. When she touched him, he'd attacked her and nearly choked the life from her before she managed to escape.

He'd been repentant the next morning and vowed it would never happen again, but she knew it was a promise he wouldn't be able to keep. In her heart she realized that she couldn't subject the baby she'd just found out she was carrying to a life like that, and she'd left that day. Knowing she had kept Maggie safe had helped to push away the guilt she felt for never telling Dean about his daughter.

Now that she'd seen him again, Gwen couldn't help but wonder if she'd made the right decision by keeping Maggie from Dean and his grandfather. Dean seemed so different, so much closer to the man she'd first fallen in love with, rather than the man who'd frightened her into running away. He'd been sober for four years—four years that Maggie could have had a loving daddy. Gwen shook the thought from her head. What was done couldn't be changed, and there was no need to dwell on it.

The door to the exam room opened, and Dean stepped into the hall. He stopped and stared at her for a moment before he took a hesitant step. She rose as he came toward her. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He nodded. "As much as I can be after seeing the only family I have left lying on a table in the medical examiner's office."

Tears filled her eyes at the pain she saw in his, and her lips quivered. "Ever since I've been here, I half hoped I'd run into him somewhere. I knew he still lived in the same place, but I didn't think he'd want to see me."

"He always loved you, Gwen. In fact, he told me not too long ago that he still prayed for you every day. He said he might not know where you were but that God did, and he prayed that you were safe and happy."

"He was a good man." A tear rolled down her face, and she wiped at it. "I know you'll miss him so much."

Dean nodded, and they sat on the bench where she'd waited. He propped his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together. He stared down at the floor and shook his head. "I wish you could have seen him at breakfast this morning, Gwen. He had on the Western shirt that was his favorite, and he was so excited about the new colt that had been born last night. Now his lifeless body is in the next room on an exam table."

Gwen closed her eyes for a moment and remembered how scared she'd been when she'd looked down and seen a masked man dumping a body in the river. Now that she knew who it was she was even more troubled. "Dean, evidently the man who tried to kill me is the same one who killed your grandfather. Can you think of anyone who might have a grudge against him or you?"

Dean swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment before he spoke. "I can't think of anybody. I've lived a quiet life since I came back home, and everybody loved my grandfather. He was such a good man, the best I've ever known. He and my grandmother took me in when my parents were killed, as you know. Then after Grandma died he raised me all by himself. The proudest I've ever seen him was when I graduated from college. No one in our family had ever done that. Then when I became a police officer, he couldn't brag enough about me to his friends."

Gwen smiled. "I remember. When he'd come visit us, all he wanted to talk about were the cases you were working on."

A slow smiled pulled at Dean's lips. "Yeah, he kept up with all my cases, even followed the trials I had to testify in. He was always there to support me when things didn't go so well." His face suddenly darkened, and Gwen knew what he was thinking.

"You mean like the Trip King case?" she asked.

Dean exhaled a deep breath. "Yeah. That was one that troubled me more than any of the others."

"Does it still keep you awake at night?"

“Sometimes. I regret how I spiraled into alcoholism after that case.” He darted a quick glance at her. “And how it ultimately cost me my marriage. I couldn’t have gotten through that time if it hadn’t been for Granddad.”

She squeezed Dean’s hands, then released them. “He did all that because he loved you. Now you need to focus on helping Ben find out who killed him.”

“And who tried to kill you, too.”

She nodded. “Yes. So concentrate on that. Now tell me what the sheriff said. Does he have any clues to who the killer might be?”

Dean shook his head. “No. They’re not even sure what the cause of death was, so they’re sending his body to the state lab for an autopsy. It’ll be a few days before they get a report on the findings. In the meantime, Ben and his deputies will continue to look for any evidence.”

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