

DELORES
FOSSEN

TRACE EVIDENCE
IN TARRANT
COUNTY



INTRIGUE ...

Delores Fossen

Trace Evidence in Tarrant County

Аннотация

Texas Ranger Sloan McKinney was hired to solve two different murders - with one eerily similar M.O. Sheriff Carley Matheson had her hands full: A sixteen-year-old unsolved murder and a strong hunch that the killer had resurfaced and struck again. As if things couldn't get any worse, the Texas Rangers had sent Sloan McKinney - the one man she'd always tried to keep at a distance - to spearhead the investigation. Now the only way to keep the citizens of Justice, Texas, safe - and solve two connected crimes - was to join forces. But someone resented Carley and Sloan digging up the past, and before long two of Texas's finest found themselves caught in the crosshairs of a murderer.

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“I was trying to catch a killer!”

Carley’s chin came up.

“How? By getting murdered?” Sloan couldn’t believe his ears. “Have you lost your mind?” He heard the raw emotion in his voice and for some stupid reason, he couldn’t make himself shut up. “You’re not bulletproof and I don’t want you taking those chances again. Understand?”

Carley stepped away from him just as Sloan shifted to the other side—and somehow they were practically touching. Suddenly he became very aware of that. She stared at him, as if she was waiting to figure out what he was about to say or do. Sloan started wondering the same thing himself. The eye contact made the air change between them. It created a steamy fog in his brain. Something he definitely didn’t need, because he knew he was about to make the biggest mistake of his life. Knowing it, however, didn’t stop him.

He lowered his head and touched his mouth to hers....

Trace Evidence in Tarrant County

Delores Fossen



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To Sgt. Marrie Garcia, Texas Rangers,
for answering all my questions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Imagine a family tree that includes Texas cowboys, Choctaw and Cherokee Indians, a Louisiana pirate and a Scottish rebel who battled side by side with William Wallace. With ancestors like that, it's easy to understand why Texas author and former air force captain Delores Fossen feels as if she was genetically predisposed to writing romances. Along the way to fulfilling her DNA destiny, Delores married an air force Top Gun who just happens to be of Viking descent. With all those romantic bases covered, she doesn't have to look too far for inspiration.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Sergeant Sloan McKinney, Texas Ranger—He returns to his hometown to investigate two murders—one cold and one red-hot. The outcome could tear his family apart.

Sheriff Carley Matheson—A rookie who feels she has a lot to prove, and solving two murders would be a start. What she hasn't counted on getting in her way is her intense attraction to Sloan.

Lieutenant Zane McKinney—Sloan's "golden boy" brother and the Ranger in charge of the murder investigation.

Jim McKinney—Sloan and Zane's father. He's a former Texas Ranger whose career and life were ruined when he was indicted for murder sixteen years ago. The charges against him were dropped, but Jim's name has never been cleared.

Stella McKinney—The long-suffering wife of Jim McKinney. Beneath that delicate exterior beats the heart of a woman who'd do whatever it takes to keep her husband out of jail.

Leland Hendricks—He'll do anything for money, even fake his own toddler's kidnapping and murder. But will he go so far as to kill his wife, stepdaughter and anyone else who gets in his way?

Donna Hendricks—Leland's bitter ex-wife.

Rosa Ramirez—The nanny who adores Leland and Donna's toddler son. Just how much does she know, and how long is she willing to stay quiet?

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Chapter One

Sgt. Sloan McKinney stopped cold when he heard the sound. A snap. Like someone stepping on a twig.

He eased his SIG SAUER from the holster belted around his waist.

That snap was a sound he shouldn't have heard since the wooded area and the back of the police station were off-limits, sectioned off with yellow tape that warned Do Not Cross. It was a crime scene and the very path that a killer had taken.

Not exactly a comforting thought.

Especially since that snapping sound might be a sign that the killer had returned.

Sloan lifted his head, listening. Waiting. He trusted his training as a Texas Ranger. He trusted his instincts. But a bullet could negate all training and instincts, and he had to be ready to defend himself.

"Drop that gun," he heard someone say. It was a woman. Her voice was raspy and thick, and she was behind him.

Hell.

How had she gotten so close before he'd heard her make that snap? And, better yet, who was she? She was no doubt armed. A person didn't usually make a demand like that unless they had something to back it up.

Since he had no intentions of surrendering his weapon

or getting killed, he started with the basics. "I'm Sgt. Sloan McKinney, Texas Ranger. Identify yourself."

There was silence, followed by a loud huff.

Sloan hadn't recognized the person's voice earlier, but he could have sworn he recognized that huff.

"Carley Matheson?"

"Sheriff Carley Matheson," she corrected with absolute authority.

Sloan mumbled some profanity. Oh, man. He didn't need this. And he definitely didn't need her. He could already hear the argument they were about to have before he even turned around to face her.

It actually took him several moments to face her though. First, there was the already brutal morning sun that was spewing light from behind him and on her. Sloan had to squint and then he had to look past her .45-caliber Colt automatic to see her face.

Yep, she was squinting, too, because of the sun. And she was also riled.

And, yep, there would be an argument.

Since the argument was inevitable, Sloan decided to go ahead and start it.

"You're supposed to be in bed, resting," Sloan reminded her.

Less than a week ago, Carley had been shot while in pursuit of a killer and she wouldn't be cleared for duty for at least another forty-eight hours.

"I'm fine," she said as if that explained away everything.

Carley lowered her Colt. Not gently, either. Her movements were jerky and stiff, and she shoved her firearm into her leather shoulder holster.

She also winced.

Probably because that rough gun shove had pulled at her bandages and caused some pain. After all, the shooter's bullet had apparently sliced through Carley's right side and nicked a rib. She was lucky to be alive.

The shooter's other victim, Sarah Wallace, hadn't been nearly as fortunate.

In an eerily similar way to how her own mother had been murdered sixteen years earlier, Sarah Wallace had been strangled while staying at the Matheson Inn—just a stone's throw away from where they stood and in the very inn owned by Carley's family. The inn where Carley now lived in a converted attic apartment.

Murder on her own doorstep.

That couldn't have been easy for a peace officer to accept. Especially this peace officer.

Unless she'd changed a whole bunch in the past couple of years—and Sloan doubted that she had, Carley would have taken this crime personally even if she hadn't been shot. Justice was her town, and keeping it safe was her responsibility.

Sloan reholstered his own weapon, and because of that wince, he nearly moved closer to check on her. However, Carley's steely expression had him staying put. It'd be suicide to try to get a look

at her wound, especially since it would involve unbuttoning the shirt of her khaki uniform.

Definitely suicide.

So why did he even consider it?

Sloan gave that a little thought and he quickly figured out why. Despite the surly glower, Carley Matheson looked vulnerable.

Yeah.

A man didn't have to dig too deep to find it. The vulnerability was there, stashed beneath that khaki uniform, shiny badge and five-and-a-half-foot-tall lanky body. Her sea-green eyes were sleep-starved. Her normally tanned skin was shades too pale. Her brown-sugar hair was pulled back into a near haphazard ponytail that left stray wisps fluttering around her neck. She looked weary.

No, Carley hadn't fully recovered from her injuries and yet she was apparently on the job.

Part of him admired her for that.

The other part of him wasn't pleased that she was in his way. And she was definitely in his way.

"Why are you out here?" he asked.

For a moment Sloan thought she would fire that exact question right back at him. Instead she pointed to the eaves on the backside of the police station. Specifically to the surveillance camera that was mounted there. Or, rather, what was left of the camera. It had sustained some major damage and was no doubt disabled.

"I had it installed early yesterday morning," Carley explained.

She walked toward it, propped her hands on her hips and stared up at it.

Sloan lifted a shoulder. “Why? When I was sheriff, we didn’t have a surveillance camera.”

That earned him a glaring glance. “When you were sheriff, you also didn’t have anyone attempt to break into your office, now did you? Nor did someone try to kill two women right in this area. This is definitely a place that needs some 24-7 surveillance.”

He knew about the attempted murders. One was Carley’s own shooting that’d taken place in the parking lot of the inn adjacent to where they stood now. The other, the more recent one, involved his soon-to-be sister-in-law, Anna Wallace, and the attempt to kill her in the police station itself. Sloan’s brother, Zane, was still beyond riled that he hadn’t been able to catch the person who’d tried to murder the woman he loved.

Sloan had been briefed about those near deadly attempts but not about the camera or the first concern that Carley had addressed.

“Someone tried to break into the police station?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, yes.” She slapped at the yellow crime-scene tape that the breeze was batting against her side. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard. It’s all over town.”

“I only arrived an hour ago.” But Sloan was a little miffed that he hadn’t already been informed about this from his brother, Zane—the Ranger who was heading the investigation into Sarah

Wallace's murder. Zane had certainly been thorough in his updates about the murder itself and the subsequent attacks, but he'd apparently left out this little detail. It made Sloan wonder if and how it fit into the grand scheme of things.

"You think this busted camera and the attempted break-in are related to Sarah Wallace's death?" Sloan asked.

Her icy glare melted away. "Maybe. The killer might have thought your brother stored evidence inside. After all, Sarah's sister, Anna, did find those papers, the ones that Sarah had hidden. Zane put them somewhere, and the most logical place would be here at the police station."

Since her inflection made it seem as if she had something to add to that, Sloan stared at her.

Their eyes met.

The morning sun was still haloing around her, and despite the khaki polyester attire, she looked...interesting. She smelled interesting, too. Like fresh coffee, cream and honey. Because he was a male and therefore driven by totally stupid urges that could never be logically explained, he felt that punch of interest that he often felt when he was looking at an attractive woman.

And Carley was attractive, no doubt about it.

She was also hands-off.

Because in a bottom-line kind of way, they were enemies. Not just regular enemies, either. Big-time enemies with a feud that'd been going on for sixteen years, since Carley was barely thirteen years old. He'd only been fifteen at the time, but time

didn't matter when an issue like this was at stake. Even lust and basic attraction weren't enough to make him forget that this was a woman who would do anything within her power to have his father arrested.

Carley had been the primary witness against his father sixteen years ago. Jim McKinney, a decorated Texas Ranger, had been accused of murdering his lover, Lou Ann Wallace Hendricks. If it hadn't been for Carley's statement that she'd seen his father drunk and disheveled leaving Lou Ann's room at the inn, there probably would have been no arrest. No trial.

No total meltdown of his family.

Sloan's family had been ripped apart because of the questionable eyewitness account of a teenage girl. Carley Matheson.

Remembering that certainly cooled down Sloan, and it got his mind back where it should be—on that damaged surveillance camera and her need to have it installed in the first place. In addition to Carley's theory of a break-in to search for evidence, Sloan had a theory of his own.

"The camera overlooks the wooded area where the killer likely escaped," Sloan explained. "That could be the motive for destroying it."

She turned and stared out into the thick woods. "You mean because there's almost certainly some sort of evidence out there."

"You bet, and maybe the killer wanted to look for it without the camera recording it." And that included evidence regarding

Carley's own shooting.

Judging from her slight shift of posture, she considered that, as well.

"So how exactly did you end up in the line of fire of a .38?" Sloan wanted to know. Zane had briefed him, but he wanted to hear what had happened from Carley herself.

Carley eased her hands into her pockets. "I was in my office, working late. I saw something move outside the window. Or, rather, I saw someone wearing dark pants and boots run past the window and into the woods. I grabbed my gun and hurried out to see what was going on, to see if I could catch up with the person."

"At this point you didn't know Sarah Wallace had been murdered?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I had no idea. It'd probably only happened minutes before I saw this person. Anyway, I went in pursuit, but by the time I got to the parking lot of the inn, he or she had disappeared into the woods. And then bam. Next thing I knew, I was face-first in the dirt and it felt as if someone had set fire to my ribs." She drew in a hard breath. "I really want to catch this SOB."

Oh, man. More vulnerability. She didn't quiver or tremble. There was no deep level of emotion in her voice. But that bullet had robbed Carley of something that Sloan understood all too well.

Peace of mind.

"You'll heal," he told her.

She angled her eyes in his direction. “The voice of experience?”

He nodded. “Eighteen months ago, while chasing down a kidnapper, I took one in the shoulder.”

The silence settled uncomfortably around them.

Carley looked away, cleared her throat. “The surveillance disk is in my office. I was just about to review it, but then I heard someone skulking around out here, so I came outside to check things out.”

Sloan frowned. “I wasn’t skulking.”

“Then what were you doing?” She didn’t give him a chance to answer. “Oh, wait. This was a trip down memory lane, wasn’t it? You’re reliving the good old days when you wore this badge and had the town at your feet?”

That last comment set his teeth on edge. “Sure. I do that all the time. Relive the past. Reminisce about that badge.” He made sure the sarcasm dripped from his drawl.

“Then I’ll leave you to it,” she said with dripping sarcasm, as well. Carley started for the back door but then stopped, turned and faced him. “If you’re looking for your brother, Zane’s not here.”

Oh.

She didn’t know.

He figured this was about to get real messy.

“Zane’s tied up with the grand jury,” she added. “Probably won’t be back for days. Maybe even weeks.”

Sloan didn't think it was his imagination that Carley seemed smug and pleased about that. She no doubt thought that meant there'd be no Texas Rangers around to interfere with her investigation.

He caught onto her arm to prevent her smug exit. "The mayor and the D.A. don't think you're a hundred percent."

She blinked and took her hands from her pockets. "Excuse me?"

"Neither does Zane. By all rights, you should be in your apartment, recovering."

Carley threw off his grip. "Is this leading somewhere or are you trying to undermine my authority? Because you're no longer sheriff of Justice." She hitched a thumb to her chest. "I am."

Sloan searched for the correct way to say this and decided there wasn't one. The only thing he could do was lay it all there, even though he was dead certain it would cause the argument to escalate.

"It's leading somewhere," Sloan told her. "Since Zane is busy with the grand jury, someone needs to take over the investigation."

That got her hands back on her hips. "That's why I'm here at work, so I can do just that."

"You're on the case, Carley." This was about to get even messier. "But only to assist."

She shook her head, opened her mouth, closed it and shook her head again. Her confusion and denial morphed into anger.

“Assist whom?”

Sloan braced himself for the inevitable fallout. “Me. I’m in charge of the case now. For the remainder of this investigation, I’m your boss.”

Chapter Two

Carley figured it was physically impossible, but she thought her blood might be boiling. She certainly felt something fiery-hot racing through every inch of her body.

“My boss?” she repeated. Not easily. She nearly choked on the words.

Sloan nodded. “Zane is leader of the task force for this murder investigation.”

He didn’t need to add more to that. Carley quickly got the picture, and it wasn’t a picture she liked very much at all. It’d been Zane’s call as to whom to put in charge and he’d chosen Sloan.

Not her.

To an outsider, Zane’s decision would seem like nepotism or even cronyism, but Carley knew for a fact that Zane and Sloan were brothers in name only. They hadn’t been real siblings since their father’s arrest sixteen years ago. That arrest had parted them like Moses had the Red Sea, with Zane refusing to get involved in anything but his own sterling career. Sloan, on the other hand, had involved himself to the hilt so he could convince everyone, including his brother, that their father was innocent.

“Zane must really be desperate to ask you for help,” she mumbled.

Sloan stood there in his crisp Ranger outfit: a white western-cut shirt, jeans, hip holster, snakeskin boots and his shiny silver-

peso badge. He was studying her and probably trying to interpret her reaction. Carley didn't have to interpret her reaction to him. She didn't want him back in Justice and she didn't want him meddling in her investigation.

Why Sloan McKinney of all people?

Their history wasn't pleasant—and it wasn't all limited to her testimony against his father. Seven years ago, he'd beaten her out for the deputy's job. That still stung, even now. Carley had wanted that job more than she'd wanted her next breath. And why? Because it was a stepping stone to the next rung in her career ladder: being the top honcho—sheriff.

Something that Sloan had accomplished in record time by becoming the youngest one in the entire county.

He hadn't changed in the handful of years since Carley had last seen him. The same short and efficiently cut dark brown hair. The same sizzling blue eyes.

Bedroom eyes, the girls had called them.

He still had that athletic physique on that six-foot-three-inch body of muscles and, well, good looks. That was his problem, she decided. Sloan McKinney had always been too sexy for his own good. It had opened doors for him. Plenty of them.

"I know you're upset," he commented. "But Zane thought that folks around here would be more likely to talk to me than him. Or you."

Sloan had probably used that leisurely Texas drawl to soothe her, the way he used to soothe horses on his granddaddy's ranch.

It. Did. Not. Calm. Her.

“Zane and you think folks are more likely to talk to you because you used to be sheriff,” she clarified through clenched teeth.

Sloan gave her a yep-that-about-sums-it-up nod. “And there’s that whole part about Zane knowing that you weren’t medically ready to resume your duties. This is a double murder investigation, Carley. A cold case—and a red-hot one. He needs someone who’s a hundred percent and he’s not convinced that you are.”

She would have argued if at that exact moment the pain hadn’t pinched at her side. Mercy. When was her body going to heal? It’d been nearly a week. She couldn’t take any more time off. Look what these seven days had done. She was no longer in charge of her own investigation.

Sloan was.

Fate was having a really good belly laugh about that. Sloan, her boss. Her working for him.

Because that was practically an unbearable thought and because her blasted side wouldn’t quit pinching, Carley went inside so she could sit down. Of course, she wouldn’t be able to do that right away. Sloan had those bedroom-blue eagle eyes nailed to her. He was observing her every move—and that wasn’t good, because she wasn’t moving so well.

Carley casually strolled inside, plucked the surveillance disk from the machine and tried to be equally casual by continuing to

stroll into her office.

“You’re in pain,” Sloan remarked.

She ignored him and eased into the chair behind her desk. “I suppose Zane has already briefed you about the case that you’re now officially in charge of?”

He looked ready to call her on her evasive response, but Sloan finally just lifted his hands, palms up. A gesture of surrender.

Carley hoped there’d be more of those before this conversation was over.

“Zane briefed me, of course,” Sloan verified. “But I’d like to hear what you have to say about it.”

“No, you wouldn’t, but you’re trying to placate me because you know I’m mad enough to want to hit you with this surveillance disk.”

Carley took out her anger on the disk. With far more force than required, she shoved it into the player.

“Zane didn’t tell me about the surveillance camera being vandalized. Or even that it’d been installed,” Sloan explained. “He also didn’t tell me that you were back at your office, trying to work.” His voice was calm enough, but she could see the little embers simmering in his eyes. They weren’t so bedroommy now. “He might have missed something else that I need to know.”

It was immature, but she huffed.

Sloan huffed, too. Then he dragged a scarred wooden chair from the corner, deposited it in front of her desk and sat down. “Get past your hatred for me. I’ll get past what I feel for you. And

for the next few minutes remember that you're the sheriff, I'm your temporary boss and that you're giving me a situation report to bring me up to speed on this investigation."

Carley wanted to hang on to her anger and stew in it a little longer, but, by God, he was right. A situation report to a new officer on the scene was standard procedure, and though she didn't like it, she would not violate procedure because of the likes of Sloan McKinney.

She took a moment to gather her thoughts and so she could come up with the most condensed version of facts. The less face time with Sloan, the better.

"Okay. You win. Here's the situation report. As you know, sixteen years ago Lou Ann Wallace-Hendricks was murdered. She was strangled with her own designer-brand purse strap. At the time, she was married to one of our present suspects, Leland Hendricks."

And her briefing came to a halt. Because what she had to say next would only stir up even more bad memories.

"I'll finish this part," Sloan volunteered. "We also know that Lou Ann and my father, Jim McKinney, were having an affair. The night Lou Ann was killed, you claim to have seen my father in the general vicinity of her room at the Matheson Inn. That led to his arrest." A muscle tightened in his jaw. "And the case against him was dismissed."

"The charges were dismissed only because there were some inconsistencies with the evidence. Your father's name wasn't

cleared, and you know it.”

He leaned forward, propping his hands on Carley’s cluttered desk. He violated her personal space and then some. In fact, Sloan was so close that she got a whiff of his manly aftershave. It reminded her of the woods, summer afternoons, picnics and sex.

Whoa.

What?

Sex?

Carley was sure she looked stunned over that last thought. Since it was a truly disturbing notion, she shoved it aside and tried to repair the fractures in her own composure.

“What’s wrong?” Sloan asked.

“Nothing,” she snapped. She forced herself to continue. No more picnic, sex or aftershave thoughts. “I was just thinking how pathetic and dangerous it is that no one was ever convicted of Lou Ann’s murder.”

“Right.” He eyed her with obvious skepticism. “Why don’t we fast-forward this briefing to what happened a little less than a week ago.”

“Gladly,” she mumbled. After a deep breath, Carley went on with the report. “Lou Ann’s older daughter, Sarah, came back to town. She called her kid sister, Anna, who’s an investigative reporter in Dallas, and Sarah asked Anna to meet her at the Matheson Inn. Sarah said she had information about their mother’s killer.”

“Who knew that Sarah had come back to Justice?” Sloan

asked immediately.

“Everybody.”

Carley was unable to contain her frustration about that. Sarah hadn't kept her presence a secret, especially from the killer who obviously wanted to silence her. Not very smart. And because of it, Sarah had ended up dead like her mother. Carley hadn't been able to protect her, and it was because of her that Sarah was dead.

She'd have to learn to live with that.

Somehow.

“Now you can finish the update,” Carley insisted. “Zane wasn't exactly doing daily situation reports to let me know what was going on.”

“Because you were recovering from a gunshot wound.”

“And because he thought I was out of the picture. I'm not. So, boss, why don't you tell me how you plan to catch a killer who's evaded justice for sixteen years?”

He shrugged. “Simple—I'll continue the investigation that Zane started. If the grand jury says there's enough evidence to arrest anyone, that's what I'll do. If not, then I'll reinterview the witnesses—”

“There weren't any witnesses to Sarah's murder.”

“Potential witnesses then,” he calmly amended. “And, of course, I'll talk to Donna and Leland Hendricks since, according to the papers Sarah had, they're the primary suspects for both murders.”

They were. The information that Sarah had brought with her

to Justice pointed the proverbial finger right at Leland Hendricks, the wealthiest man in town, and his equally wealthy ex-wife, Donna.

It was a tangled web that reached all the way back to the first murder.

According to Sarah's collection of papers and notes, sixteen years ago Donna Hendricks was planning to pay Lou Ann big bucks to go to the police with the information and evidence that Leland was plotting to fake his own toddler son's kidnapping and murder so he could collect on the massive insurance policy. Donna hated her ex, Leland, because she'd lost custody of their son to him. So if Lou Ann had threatened to tell all about Donna's bribe, it would no doubt have ended what little visitation rights Donna had left with her little boy. To keep Lou Ann silent, Donna could have killed her and then done the same to Sarah.

Of course, Sarah's allegations implicated Leland Hendricks, as well, because he could have killed Lou Ann when and if she wouldn't go along with his fake kidnapping/murder plan. It didn't help, either, when Zane was able to shatter Leland's alibi for the night of Lou Ann's murder. The wealthy oil baron doctored the surveillance video of his estate that night so that it would appear he was home.

And that brought Carley back to her own surveillance disk.

To the best of her knowledge, hers hadn't been altered or faked, and it was entirely possible she could see who had vandalized city property. She might even discover if it was

related to the murders. And the two attempted murders: Anna Wallace's and hers.

She hit the Play button and got up so she could retrieve the rest of her breakfast that she'd left on top of a filing cabinet.

Sloan stood, too, and looked at the honey-filled donut on the paper plate and her cup of still-warm cinnamon cappuccino. "Hey, where'd you get that?"

Sloan's apparent envy made Carley smile. "Main Street Diner."

He moved closer, staring at it. "They make donuts that look that good?"

"They do now that Donna Hendricks bought the place. She brought in a real honest-to-goodness chef."

He flexed his eyebrows. "Donna is one of the prime suspects in these murders."

"Yessss," Carley enunciated in a way that made him seem mentally deficient. "And your point would be?"

This time he lifted his eyebrow. "Doesn't it seem a little reckless buying donuts from a person who might have murdered two women and then taken a shot at you? How do you know she didn't poison it?"

"I don't," Carley said smugly. "But since I've already had one this morning and I haven't keeled over, I think it's safe for me to eat that one. Besides, the killer has no reason to come after me again because I didn't see his or her face, and everyone in town knows that."

She went back to her seat. Or, rather, that's what she tried to do. Unfortunately Sloan was in her way. Carley didn't let that deter her. She moved past him.

His hip brushed against hers.

She noticed.

Judging from the slight unevenness of his breath, so did he.

Both of them ignored it.

"You're going to eat all of that donut?" he asked.

Was it her imagination or did Carley hear his stomach rumble?

She fought a smile. "What can I say—I'm a cliché. A cop with a donut addiction."

She glanced at the monitor when there was some movement so she could see what the camera had recorded. There was some light coming from her office window, and it gave enough illumination for her to see that it was merely two cats that seemed to have amorous intentions. A moment later they disappeared into the thick woods and out of camera range.

Sloan sat down again, volleying glances between her breakfast and the monitor. "You're not going to offer me any of that donut?"

"Didn't plan on it."

He grinned. Sheez, it was that all-star, billion-dollar grin. "That smile won't work on me," she grumbled.

"What smile?" Oh, butter would not melt in his mouth.

"That one you're flashing right now. I suspect it's coaxed many women into lots of things, including clothing removal. But I'm

immune to it. And it won't work on parting me from my donut."

The grin morphed. Just a tad. But instead of evoking sultry thoughts, it had a sad puppy-dog look to it.

"Besides," he drawled. "You should be eating something more nutritious since you're recovering from your injuries. When we're done looking at this disk, we can head to the diner and get you some real breakfast. While we're there, I'll have a donut."

Carley didn't like the sound of that. Her goal was to finish this situation report, review the surveillance disk and then get him the heck out of her office so she could continue her own investigation.

Maybe sharing the donut would speed things up.

Figuring this would cause them to skip the trip to the diner, she ripped the donut in half, plopped his half back on the paper plate and shoved it across the desk toward him.

"Thanks," he mumbled, diving right into it. "See? We do have some common ground. Our shared love of sugary, high fat pastries that have no nutritional value."

"You call that common ground?"

Sloan used that smile again. "Hey, I'll take what I can get."

She could have added something snarky—like, he had already gotten everything he could possibly get—but the sugary donut was making her fingers sticky, so she began to eat it.

"I've arranged to meet with both Donna and Leland this afternoon." Sloan tossed that out there in between bites.

Carley didn't know if that was an invitation for her to join him

or if he was merely continuing with his briefing. She decided to go with the option that suited her. “Let me know when and where, and I’ll be there.”

“At two this afternoon. Here at the police station.” He tipped his head to the filing cabinet. “Just how strong are those pain pills?”

Mercy. She’d forgotten all about those. They’d blended in amid the stacks of files and other clutter. “Not strong enough to keep me off this case,” she insisted. “Besides, I haven’t even taken any of them.” She would have added more, would have probably even started a fresh argument, if there hadn’t been more movement on the screen.

“It’s motion-activated,” Sloan commented, his attention now fully on the monitor. He set the rest of the donut aside.

Carley followed suit. Because what she saw captured her complete attention, as well.

No amorous cats this time. It was a shadowy figure. She turned the monitor, hoping for a better angle. Sloan walked around the desk and stood behind her.

“I can’t tell if it’s a man or a woman,” he mumbled.

“I can’t tell if it’s even human. It looks a little like a scarecrow in a Halloween costume.”

“Definitely human. The person’s wearing a mask and a cloak.”

She studied the image and had to agree. But the person didn’t have just a cloak and mask. There was something in his or her hand. The light from her office danced off that something. It was

a glint of metal.

And on the screen Carley saw the gun rigged with a silencer.

That barely had time to register in her mind when there was the first shot.

And it wasn't aimed at the camera.

The gunman saved the second bullet for that.

Sloan reached over and pressed a button to rewind the disk. He stopped it just as the first shot was in progress. Carley saw then what she hadn't wanted to see.

Mercy.

A chill went through her.

"This person wasn't just gunning for your surveillance camera, Carley," Sloan confirmed. "He or she was gunning for you."

Chapter Three

“Are you okay?” Sloan asked when he saw the expression on Carley’s face.

What little color she’d had drained from her cheeks. Not without reason. She’d just witnessed a recording of someone attempting to kill her.

“The shots were fired at 1:13 this morning,” Carley mumbled, obviously noting the time displayed on the bottom of the monitor.

“You weren’t here when it happened?”

“No. I finished up work about a half hour before that, but I’d left on the light. I didn’t notice it until after I’d locked up and made my way back to the inn.” She looked up at him. “I can see my office window from my attic apartment. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to leave the light on all night and I knew I’d be back in the office early.”

Sloan played around with that a moment and took it to its logical conclusion. “So, because of the light, someone might have thought you were inside here working at 1:13 this morning.”

Carley nodded. “It’s not unusual for me to be here at that hour.”

He didn’t doubt it.

From all accounts, Carley was driven to be the best sheriff ever. That included plenty of seventy-hour work weeks, even though technically the sheriff’s office was only supposed to open

from eight to five, with all calls before and after hours going through dispatch. He figured with Carley around, dispatch wasn't taking many of the calls, because she made sure she was readily available for the citizens of Justice.

Sloan glanced around the room. "The window's intact, no broken glass. I don't see any point of entry for that first bullet."

He watched the steel and resolution return to Carley's eyes, and she got up at the exact second that he headed for the door.

The race was afoot.

She rushed around her desk and then came to a complete stop. That stopped Sloan, especially when Carley caught onto her side.

"It's nothing," she said, no doubt as a preemptive strike against what he was about to say.

Sloan gave her a flat look. "If it's nothing, then why are you holding your side?"

She immediately lowered her hands.

That was the last straw. Sloan stormed toward her, and before she could stop him—or slap him into the middle of next week—he went after her shirt buttons.

"What in Sam Hill do you think you're doing?" Carley snarled.

Sloan ignored her, and probably because she was in too much pain, she didn't even attempt to fight him off. He undid the lower buttons at her midsection and had a look at the bandage. No blood. No raw, red areas on the skin. That was a good sign. But the edge of the adhesive tape was caught on one of the tender areas where her stitches had recently been removed. So

that might be the cause.

“Hold still,” he instructed.

And, much to his surprise, she did.

Sloan slathered his hands with some liquid sanitizer that she had on top of the filing cabinet next to her pain meds. Taking a deep breath, he pulled over the chair and sat down so that he’d be at eye level with the bandage. It also put him at eye level with her stomach. And the bottom edge of her bra.

Purple lace.

Sloan couldn’t help it. He looked up at her, and when she followed his gaze, Carley narrowed her eyes to little bitty slits. “I haven’t had time to do laundry. It was one of the few wearable things that I had left in my lingerie drawer—and why I’m telling you this, I don’t have a clue. Because it certainly isn’t any of your business.”

To punctuate that, she snapped the upper sides of her top together so there was no visible purple lace.

But Sloan didn’t need to see it to remember that it was there. Nope. It was branded in his memory.

“I never took you for the purple-lace type,” he commented. Partly because it was true and partly because he wanted her mind on something else when he lifted that tape.

She’d already opened her mouth, probably to return verbal fire, but that tape pull had her sucking in her breath and wincing.

“Sorry,” Sloan apologized. “It’ll only hurt for a second.” He worked quickly, before she changed her mind, and he gave the

bandage a slight adjustment. "There. Now it won't pull at the skin that's healing."

She eyed him with skepticism and then tested it by rotating her arm. No wincing. No sucking in her breath. Just a relieved expression. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. But you know, if you were at your apartment resting, that bandage wouldn't have shifted."

"And you wouldn't have gotten a cheap thrill of learning that I own a purple bra." She buttoned her shirt as if she'd declared war on it. "By the way, you tell anyone about my choice of underwear and you're a dead man."

Puzzled, he stared up at her. "Why wouldn't you want anyone to know that?"

She dodged his gaze and stepped back. "I don't want to draw any attention to the fact that I'm female. I already have enough strikes against me without letting people know that I occasionally wear girly stuff."

Still puzzled, Sloan shook his head. "Why?"

"Because I'm not male. Because I'm the first woman in Justice to wear this badge. Because I don't have the full support of this town." She aimed her index finger at him. "Because I'm not you. And despite the fact you've been gone for years, most people still and always will think of you as the sheriff."

Sloan wanted to deny it, but he knew it was true. Despite the advances in Justice, Carley was probably battling a gender bias. He'd been one of the guys. A good ole boy. Many people in town

had no doubt thought that badge was made for him. His for a lifetime.

That acceptance hadn't been extended to Carley.

"Just for the record," he let her know, "you don't have to prove anything to me."

She frowned and then mumbled some profanity. After some posturing and a huff or two, the aimed index finger returned. "Let's get something straight, Sloan McKinney. I want no camaraderie with you. None. And you don't want that with me. Remember, you accused me of lying about your father. I accused you of being blind to the truth. I also accused you of being a jerk and an—"

"I get the point," Sloan interrupted. Man, she made it easy to remember the anger. "So here's the deal. I'll work my butt off to solve this case as quickly as possible so we won't have time to develop any camaraderie. Agreed?"

She agreed with a grunt and headed toward the back exit, where they'd entered earlier. Sloan was right behind her. Neither wasted any time once they were outside. They both started scouring the building for that first bullet.

Thanks to the blazing sunlight striking the brown brick exterior, it didn't take Sloan long to spot it. He went to the window and there it was. A bullet lodged in one of the bricks that framed the window directly outside Carley's office. This was obviously the first shot that the gunman had fired in the wee hours of the morning. The shot meant for Carley.

“I checked the exterior this morning, when I was looking at the surveillance camera,” she mumbled. “How could I have missed that?”

He could have stated the obvious—maybe she didn’t see it because she was exhausted and wasn’t medically ready for duty. But reminding her of that would have only started another argument.

Without touching it, Sloan examined the embedded bullet. A .38 slug. Another inch to the right, and it would have gone through the glass and hit anyone who might be sitting at Carley’s desk.

Sloan peered through the window and realized something else. Her high-back chair would have made it impossible for a gunman to see if she was there or not.

Carley obviously realized that, as well, because he heard the sudden change in her breathing. Sloan didn’t address her reaction. No sense touching on uncomfortable issues again. So he scanned the area to figure out what’d happened there.

“Sarah’s killer escaped into those woods,” he surmised, talking more to himself than her. “It’s the same path your shooter took.”

Carley made a sound of agreement. “And there’s evidence out there—footprints, possibly trace fibers, maybe even the bullet that injured me that night. It was never recovered. So maybe the killer planned to scour the woods to retrieve any incriminating evidence, and the camera got in the way.”

“Then why fire that first shot into your office?” Sloan asked.

She shrugged, hesitated, but Sloan already had a theory. Unfortunately he didn’t get a chance to voice it, because he heard footsteps.

He instinctively drew his weapon and stepped in front of Carley. To shield her. To protect her. It didn’t earn him any brownie points. She pulled out her own gun, huffed, mumbled something and then stepped out from behind him so that they were side by side.

It didn’t take long for their visitor to appear around the corner of the building. It was Leland Hendricks, and since he was a murder suspect, neither Carley nor Sloan lowered their guns.

“There you are, Sheriff Matheson,” Leland barked. He said her name as if she were some annoying insect that he was about to squash. “What the hell do you mean calling me in again for questioning? I don’t have time for this. I have a business to run. And until that grand jury says differently, I’m a free man.”

Carley slipped her gun back into her holster and tipped her head to Sloan. “He’s in charge. Yell at him.”

Sloan gave her an aw-jeez-thanks look before he turned his attention back to a possible killer.

The years had been kind to Leland Hendricks. Of course, money and massive ego probably helped. The graying hair and the wrinkles only added to his air of authority.

“You’re in charge?” Leland stared at him.

Sloan nodded. “You have a problem with that?”

“You bet I do.” He shook his head. “I won’t let you McKinney boys railroad me into taking the blame for these murders. I won’t become the scapegoat for your drunk of a father who can’t keep his pants zipped.”

It took some doing, but Sloan forced himself not to react to that. “You’re saying you’re innocent?”

“Damn right I am.”

“And what about the fake kidnapping of your own son? You’re innocent of that, too? Because Sarah, your dead stepdaughter, said differently.”

Leland probably didn’t want to react, either. But he did. Every muscle in his body seemed to tense. “It doesn’t matter what that witch Sarah said. Even if I admitted I’d planned a fake kidnapping, you can’t arrest me for that. The statute of limitations is on my side. Besides, I’ve paid in the worst way a father can. My son disappeared that night. I don’t know if he’s alive or dead.”

“You’re certain you don’t know that?” Sloan asked.

That did not please Leland. The veins on his neck began to bulge. “I have no idea where he is. If he’s alive, I don’t know who has him or where he’s been for the past sixteen years. That’s punishment enough.”

Sloan shrugged. “It won’t be if I can prove you murdered those women. There is no statute of limitations on murder, and right now I’m making you for these killings.”

Leland glared at Carley before he turned that glare on Sloan.

“You’ll never prove it.”

“Never say never, Leland,” Sloan countered. “Oh, and if you’re not there for that interview this afternoon, I’ll have you cuffed and brought in just like anyone who disobeys the law.”

There was a staredown, and Sloan wasn’t the first to blink. Leland was. He mumbled, “I’ll be there,” along with some choice profanity, then stormed away, disappearing around the building.

“Well, wasn’t that a special way to start the morning,” Carley grumbled.

“That started the morning,” Sloan said, pointing at the bullet lodged near the window. “I’ll dig it out and send it to the crime lab.”

“Nearly everybody in town owns at least one .38,” she reminded him. “And I’m willing to bet there are a dozen or more that aren’t registered, so we don’t even know about them. Matching that bullet to a specific firearm will be a needle in a haystack.”

A slim chance was still a chance, and the truth was, they had little physical evidence to connect anyone to Sarah’s murder. The bullet was a start. But he had other avenues to explore.

One of those avenues was standing beside him.

“Maybe this latest attempt to shoot you isn’t about something you saw less than a week ago right after Sarah’s murder. Maybe this is about the first murder—Lou Ann’s? If so, maybe you saw or heard something sixteen years ago that the killer doesn’t want you to recall.”

“Then why wait all these years to come after me?” she asked.

“Because, other than the killer, you might be the only person in the entire town who was close enough to witness both murders. Either the killer thinks you saw something or you did see something and you just don’t remember it.”

Her posture became defensive again. “I remember everything about that night, and the only person that I saw anywhere near Lou Ann’s room was your father.”

“You could have missed something. A few hours before the body was found, you were sitting in that big, comfortable chair in the lobby at the inn, reading a teen magazine with Johnny Depp on the cover.”

Her defensive posture went up a notch. “How did you know that?”

“I looked through the window and saw you.”

Carley’s eyes widened considerably. “What—you’re a Peeping Tom?”

“I’m not. I was looking for my father,” Sloan calmly answered.

And he’d looked at Carley, too. In fact, she’d distracted him that night. Why? Because for the first time he’d noticed that she was no longer the gangly girl two grades behind him in school. Among other things, he’d noticed that she had breasts. But it was her mouth that had really caught his attention. The heart shape. The full bottom lip. Her mouth was sultry then. And it was sultry now.

Something Sloan wished he hadn’t remembered.

“I saw you that night, too.” Her voice was low and whispery, as if this wasn’t something she wanted to admit. However, her voice didn’t have to be loud to grab his attention.

“Where? When?” Sloan asked.

“I heard something and looked out the window. You were walking on Main Street, headed in the direction of your house.” She cleared her throat. “That was about an hour and a half before the murder.”

She turned and started inside, but Sloan caught onto her arm. “I get the feeling there’s more that you’re not telling me.”

Carley didn’t jump to her defense and she didn’t huff at his accusation. “I’ve told you everything that’s pertinent to the murder and to this investigation.”

Sloan really didn’t care for the way she’d phrased that. “Does that mean there are other nonpertinent things you haven’t told me?”

She didn’t answer. Which in itself was probably an answer—yes, she was withholding something. Carley eased out of his grip and she walked back into the building.

Sloan didn’t want to dwell on it. After all, Carley wasn’t the type to withhold vital information that would affect the outcome of the case.

So what secrets did she have?

The question settled hard and raw in his stomach. Because it made Sloan search his own memory. It made him recall things about that night. Specifically something that had haunted him for

the past sixteen years.

It haunted him now.

Carley Matheson wasn't the only one keeping secrets.

Chapter Four

Does that mean there are other nonpertinent things you haven't told me?

Carley frowned.

Sloan's question kept flashing like a neon sign in her head. Either she was missing the gene that could supply her with a poker face or Sloan was psychic. Because there was indeed something "nonpertinent" that she hadn't told him. Nor would she. It was just one of those totally embarrassing events that a woman didn't want to have to recount aloud.

Especially since Sloan was that nonpertinent detail.

Yes, she'd seen him that night, but seeing him wasn't all she'd done. She'd stepped out the side door of the inn and watched him, well, walk down the street. She'd even followed him for a few minutes. At the time, she'd blamed the voyeurism on boredom, the sweltering summer heat and her leftover lusting brought on by that magazine picture of Johnny Depp.

But she had to blame it on Sloan, as well.

That night, she'd finally figured out what the other girls had meant about his bedroom eyes. Oh, yes. He'd stirred things in her that even Johnny Depp hadn't managed to stir, and that was something Carley planned on taking to her grave. Sloan was already cocky enough without learning he'd had that kind of effect on her. She wasn't about to be labeled a Sloan McKinney

groupie.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Sloan commented.

Sitting at her desk, she glanced up at him. He was in the doorway, his hands bracketed on either side of the frame, and he was staring at her. Specifically he was staring at her mouth. Probably waiting for her to explain herself.

Uh-oh.

It was time to get this conversation back on something it should be on—the case.

“I’ll have one of the deputies start the gun roundup for the .38s,” she informed him. “Then the crime lab can do the ballistics tests and compare that bullet lodged in the brick to the guns from the town.”

Sloan pushed himself away from the door and stepped toward her. He reached over and ejected the surveillance disk from the computer. “And I’ll send this to the crime lab, as well. They might be able to enhance the image so we can figure out who fired those shots.”

“Yeah,” Carley mumbled, recalling both the image and the shots. “It’ll be nice to know who wants me dead.”

Their eyes met before he leaned back away from her. “I’m sure it’s not personal.”

“Somehow that doesn’t make it any easier to accept.” Carley decided it was a good time to sign the time sheets centered on her desk. It was a necessary task and it would prevent any more eye contact with Sloan. “And you’re wrong. It is personal. Very

personal. In all probability, someone I've known my entire life is out to murder me."

"Something that neither of us will let happen," Sloan assured her. "Now that we know what we're up against, we can take precautions."

That got her attention off the time sheets. Heck. Eye contact again. "What precautions?"

"Well, for starters, you shouldn't be working late here alone. Not that you'd have time for that anyway. The case should keep us both busy." He motioned in the general direction of the lodged bullet. "In addition to the ballistics and reinterviewing Donna and Leland Hendricks, there are those papers that Sarah brought with her to Justice."

Since that sounded like a prelude to something, Carley sipped her now-cold cappuccino and waited. She didn't have to wait long.

"Carley, if we're going to work together on this case, it means we're going to be together. As in physically together. A lot."

She took the safe approach and tossed out a hopefully confident-sounding, "So?"

"So, can you handle that? I mean, it's obvious you can't stand the sight of me."

Well, she apparently had a poker face after all. "I don't have to like you to do my job."

"Does that mean our past isn't going to get in the way?" he asked.

“Oh, it’ll probably get in the way,” Carley readily admitted. “But above all else, we’re lawmen. Focused lawmen. Solving this case is as important to you as it to me.” She drank more coffee. “And speaking of doing our jobs, you mentioned those papers that Sarah Wallace brought to town. Where are those exactly?”

“I have copies of them.”

That was it. I have copies of them, and no offer to share them with her.

“And?” she prompted.

“There’s a problem with what Sarah had with her when she was murdered.” He sat on the corner of her desk. “Basically the papers are a collection of notes and copies of notes that implicate both Leland and Donna.”

Carley shrugged. “That doesn’t sound like much of a problem to me. If they’re guilty, we just arrest them both.”

“The notes don’t prove murder—even though that’s obviously what Sarah believed or she wouldn’t have tried to get them to her sister. At worst, the notes and copies are gossip and innuendo. At best, they point fingers at Leland and Donna for some dirty dealings and shady behavior.”

That improved her mood. “Anything we can arrest them for?”

Sloan shook his head. “Time’s run out to prosecute them on those accounts.”

The improved mood didn’t last long. “So what’s in Sarah’s copies that we can use?”

“I guess the papers are good for painting a picture of what

was going on in the Hendricks household about that time. Lou Ann's copying and hiding habits weren't limited to Leland. There are receipts for prescription painkillers and booze that the nanny, Rosa Ramirez, bought for Donna. God knows where Lou Ann found those."

Carley frowned. "Why would the nanny be buying those things for Donna?"

"My guess? Donna wanted to keep up the appearance of a clean and sober socialite. Her father was still alive back then. You remember how he was."

Yes, she did. And Donna's old-money dad definitely wouldn't have approved of a drugged-out, drunk daughter who might tarnish the family name. "Anything else in Sarah's stash of info?"

"There's a copy of a bank statement that basically proves Leland was broke at the time he planned his son's fake kidnapping and murder."

"That's old news," Carley mumbled.

Sloan made a sound of agreement. "In fact, the reason Leland had come up with such a ridiculous scheme was because he was desperate for money." He paused. "Unlike Donna. She had the cash, but she had it hidden away in trust funds and foreign accounts."

Carley made a mental note of that, but she didn't immediately know how it would help them build a case against either Leland or Donna.

Or even if there was a case to build.

“Is there anything you’ve seen in those papers and notes that’ll help us solve these murders?” she asked.

“I’ve just scanned through them, but I hope after all the pages are thoroughly examined that Lou Ann and Sarah will be the ones to give us the ammunition to make an arrest. Because Leland’s right about one thing—we can’t nail him on the fake kidnapping plot. We either get him for murder or he walks.”

“And if Leland walks, then maybe that’s because he’s innocent.” Carley didn’t wait for him to respond to that. “Of course, I’ll want to look at Lou Ann’s and Sarah’s collection of notes and papers.”

Nothing. Nada. Only that drilling stare. It seemed to last for hours before he finally nodded.

Just a nod.

Not exactly an enthusiastic endorsement for her investigative abilities, and so much for his assurance that she would assist him on this case. But it didn’t matter. She would study those papers, and this would be her chance to prove to Sloan that she was a good cop.

“I have some reports I have to do for Zane,” he let her know. “Then we’ll talk about the ground rules for Lou Ann’s papers.”

Carley was certain that she blinked. “There are ground rules?”

“Yeah. You’re guaranteed not to like them, but they’re a necessity if we want to keep you safe.” Sloan went to the cabinet in the corner and took out a small plastic evidence bag. “For now, I’ll dig out that bullet. My advice? Don’t try to assist, because all

that reaching and moving will only aggravate your injury.”

She had no intentions of assisting. She needed a reprieve from Sloan. Judging from the speed with which he made his exit, Sloan needed some time away from her, as well.

Unfortunately her reprieve didn't last long.

Mere seconds.

Before Carley heard the brass bell jingle—an indication that someone had come in through the front entrance of the Justice police station.

She checked her watch. It was a half hour too early for any of the deputies to arrive for duty, and maybe because she was still jumpy about that bullet being fired at her, she sprang to her feet. The sudden movement tugged at her injury, but Carley tried not to react. She made sure she could draw her gun if it became necessary.

“Sheriff Matheson?” someone called out. “It's me—Jim McKinney.”

She didn't relax one bit. In fact, she moved her hand to the butt of her gun. Because, simply put, Jim McKinney could be the person who wanted her dead.

Carley heard the footsteps come closer. Cowboy boots thudding on the hardwood floor. The thudding stopped when Jim McKinney appeared in her doorway.

“It's a little early for a visit.” Carley nearly groaned when she heard her own voice. It was actually shaky. She cleared her throat, squared her shoulders and continued. “What can I do for

you?”

Carley looked him straight in the eyes. Eyes that were obviously the genetic source for Sloan’s own intense baby blues. Jim’s, however, were cragged with wrinkles at the corners. It didn’t detract from his good looks. Nope. These were character lines.

As if that face needed anything else to give it character.

Jim slipped off his pearl-gray Stetson and held it against his chest. It was almost a submissive kind of pose, but there wasn’t anything submissive about his expression. Besides, he wasn’t the kind of man who could look totally docile. Ever. The well-worn Stetson helped. The tail of a rattler dangled from the silver-rope hatband.

“I came by to talk,” Jim explained. “About the murder investigation.”

Carley didn’t want to be, but she was highly flattered. A suspect was actually treating her like the sheriff. A rare occurrence.

“I hadn’t planned to reinterview you anytime soon,” she informed him. “Mainly because Zane already did.”

Jim nodded. “But I figured you’d have some questions of your own.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Carley just hadn’t expected to be asking them so soon. Her hands went on her hips. “Okay, let me just say what’s on my mind. Most suspects don’t volunteer to be interviewed, and your presence here makes me

suspicious. Making yourself readily available doesn't mean you aren't guilty."

Jim appeared to fight back a smile. "You don't beat around the bush."

"It saves time," she explained.

"Yeah, it does. So I'll just put it all out there, too. Anything I do or say will make you more suspicious. It's just the way things are, Sheriff. You're convinced I killed Lou Ann." He shook his head and plowed his hand through his hair. No more smile fighting. His face was somber now. "And I can't remember half of what happened that night. But I do remember where I was nearly a week ago and, just for the record, I wasn't anywhere near Sarah Wallace or the Matheson Inn."

"But you knew she was back in town?"

"Not until after she was dead." He hesitated a moment. "Sarah called me, though."

That revelation surprised her more than Jim's visit. "You didn't mention that when Zane interviewed you."

"Because at the time I didn't know." His breathing was suddenly weary. "I don't think it's a secret that my wife and I argue. A lot. Well, this morning, right after I got home from work, Stella and I had one of our disagreements. It turned a little ugly on her part, and in the heat of anger she blurted out that Sarah had called me that night. Stella thought I might be having another affair."

"Were you?" Carley asked.

“Not on your life.”

“But your wife believed you were.”

“Stella often believes that,” he said as if choosing his words carefully. “And it’s because I’ve given her mountains of reasons to doubt me. Her doubt was misplaced this time, though. I wasn’t having an affair with Sarah. In fact, I hadn’t seen that girl in sixteen years.”

Not sure that she was buying this, Carley shrugged. “Then why did Sarah call you?”

“Probably to ask about my relationship with her mother. To try to make some sense of what’d happened.”

Off the top of her head, that was Carley’s guess, too. Sarah had apparently come to town to get a lot off her chest. “And what would you have told her about her mother if she’d asked?”

“I would have said that while I’ve done plenty of kissing, I refrain from the telling part.” He met her gaze. “It would have served no purpose for me to rehash the details of that affair. It was just that. An affair. It meant little or nothing to both Lou Ann and me.”

He was certainly convincing—about that part anyway. Partly because of that Texas charm that seemed to be ingrained in the McKinney males. Still, that didn’t make Jim innocent, and Carley couldn’t exclude him as a suspect.

“So why didn’t Stella tell you sooner that Sarah had called?” Carley continued.

“Like I said, she thought I was having an affair. Or on the verge

of starting one. Stella wouldn't have wanted to play messenger for something like that, so she likely decided to nip it in the bud."

Carley tried to piece all of that together. "You told Zane that you were home the night Sarah was killed?"

He nodded. "I was. So was Stella."

There was some hesitation in his voice when he spoke his wife's name. It was the slightest pause that caused Carley to pounce on it. "You know for certain that Stella was home?"

More hesitation. But Jim still nodded. "Her bedroom door was shut, but the light was on. She was probably reading or watching TV."

"You and your wife don't share the same room?"

His face reddened a bit. "Not in a very long time."

Some arrangement. And in this case it wasn't a good arrangement for Jim McKinney since it essentially put his alibi in doubt. "So Stella can't verify that you were home?"

"No. She didn't see me. I guess a sheriff with a suspicious mind could always say that I sneaked out the window, walked clean across town and strangled a young woman that I had absolutely no reason to kill."

Oh, Carley could think of a reason. "You could have killed Sarah because she knew you were her mother's murderer."

Jim bobbed his head and scratched his chin. "True. But I didn't." His gaze went back to hers. "Carley, I know you don't think much of me. Hell, I don't think much of myself, either. But in my way of seeing things, women are the most fascinating

creatures on this earth. I'd rather bed one than hurt one. So, if you're going to accuse me of a particular sin or crime, don't make it the murder of a woman."

The sound of the door must have snared Jim's attention, because he turned in that direction. Carley saw the man's grip tighten on his Stetson.

"Sloan," Jim greeted. Some of his cocky ease evaporated. "I didn't know you were back in town."

"Just got in this morning. I'm taking over the murder investigation while Zane's working with the grand jury."

Jim cast an uneasy glance her way. Carley gave him back that same uneasy glance. "Then I guess I'm talking to the wrong lawman. I was giving Sheriff Matheson an account of some information I just learned."

"Sarah apparently phoned your father the night she was murdered," Carley provided. "According to him, your mother took the call, but she didn't tell him about it until this morning."

Sloan didn't seem overly surprised. "Mom was jealous of Sarah."

"Something like that," Jim verified. "Even if I had gotten Sarah's message, I wouldn't have met up with her. Something like that would have gotten back to your mother, and I wouldn't have wanted that."

Sloan peered around the doorway at her. "Well, Sheriff? Do you have any more questions for him?"

"One," Carley readily admitted. "Did you happen to take a

shot at me at one o'clock this morning?"

Jim's eyes widened considerably. "I'm not in the habit of shooting at people. Especially women. And I didn't shoot at you." He paused a heartbeat. "Any idea who did?"

"Nope. But I wouldn't count on it staying that way. The truth has a way of turning up."

"Not necessarily in Justice," Jim mumbled before turning back to his son. "You'll be staying at the house while you're in town?"

"No. Since I'll be working here pretty much night and day, I decided I'd crash at the Matheson Inn. I booked a room there."

Carley was sure her own eyes did some widening. "Since when?"

"Since this morning."

Good grief. No one ever told her anything. Here, Sloan had booked a room with one of her parents' employees, and no one had thought it important to let her know that a Texas Ranger was going to be staying practically right next door to her.

There was another jingle of the brass bell, followed by footsteps. No cowboy boots this time. Those were dainty, almost delicate steps.

Carley couldn't see their visitor, but judging from the looks of pure dread on both Sloan's and Jim's faces, this wouldn't be a good encounter. Carley figured it was probably Donna Hendricks.

But Carley was wrong.

“Jim,” she heard the woman say. And Carley knew before she even turned around that it was Sloan’s mother, Stella.

Stella spared her son a glance before aiming those unapproving eyes at her husband. “Jim, what in the name of sweet heaven are you doing here?”

Jim lifted his shoulder. “I wanted to tell the sheriff about Sarah calling me.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have. You shouldn’t be here at all. Not without an attorney.”

Stella fanned herself as if she were about to faint. It wouldn’t be a first. Carley rarely saw the woman and yet she could recall two instances where she’d personally witnessed Stella pass out.

“Are you okay, Mrs. McKinney?” Carley asked.

“No. I’m not.” Stella turned to face Carley. “I feel horrible, yet I found it necessary to get out of bed and come here when I realized what Jim might be doing. I won’t have you harassing him like this, understand? We’ve been through enough because of you.”

Sloan stepped closer to his mother. “Mom, he came on his own accord.”

“Because he knew that Carley would find out about Sarah’s call sooner or later and then she’d have him hauled in here so she—”

“Speaking of Sarah...” Sloan interrupted. “What exactly did she say the night she called?”

Stella cast uneasy glances at all three of them. “I can’t

remember.”

“Try, Mom,” Sloan insisted.

There was more gaze-dodging. Some fidgeting. But finally Stella answered. “She said she wanted to meet with my husband. I told her flat out no. I didn’t want Jim anywhere around that low-rent woman.” She looked at her husband. “We’re leaving now. I can’t breathe in this place. I need to get home so I can take my headache medicine.”

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