



Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE



Cold Case at Cobra Creek

Rita Herron

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Аннотация

A Native American tracker makes it his mission to bring a missing child home, just in time for Christmas After two years, Sage Freeport had all but given up hope of seeing her little boy againuntil she met Dugan Graystone. They shared a disdain for local law enforcement, the same folks who'd hindered Sage's efforts to find her son. As an expert tracker, the broad-shouldered Native American was sure he could find the child - even if he had to leave Texas to do it. Spending time with Sage, watching as she broke down every time a lead didn't pan out, Dugan worked harder than he ever had before. Now, with Christmas just days away, Dugan knew Sage trusted him to give her the greatest gift of all: bringing Benji home.

Dugan yanked the wheel to the left to avoid crashing into the other vehicle, then swung the SUV to the side of the road and threw it in Park.

He jumped out and ran toward the burning vehicle.

The driver had shot at them. Tried to kill them.

Why? Because she was asking questions about her son?

She jerked herself from her immobilized state and climbed out. Dugan circled the car, peering into the window as if looking for a way to get the driver out. But the gas tank blew, another explosion sounded and flames engulfed the vehicle.

Sweat beaded on her forehead, the heat scalding her. She backed away, hugging the side of the SUV as she watched Dugan. He must have realized it was impossible to save the driver because he strode back toward her, his expression grim.

“Someone doesn’t like us asking questions, Sage. But that means we might be on the right track to finding some answers.”

Cold Case at Cobra Creek

Rita Herron



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Award-winning author **RITA HERRON** wrote her first book when she was twelve, but didn’t think real people grew up to be writers. Now she writes so she doesn’t have to get a *real* job. A former kindergarten teacher and workshop leader, she traded storytelling to kids for writing romance, and now she writes

romantic comedies and romantic suspense. She lives in Georgia with her own romance hero and three kids. She loves to hear from readers, so please write her at PO Box 921225, Norcross, GA 30092-1225, USA, or visit her website, www.ritaherron.com.

To all the Mills & Boon Intrigue fans—thanks for reading me all these years!

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[Prologue](#)

Sage Freeport vowed never to trust a man again.

Not after the way Trace Lanier had treated her. Promises of love and happily ever after—until she'd gotten pregnant.

Then those promises had evaporated, like rain on a strip of scorching-hot pavement.

Her three-year-old Benji had never met his father. She'd worried about him not having a man in his life and done her best to be two parents in one. Still, she couldn't throw a softball worth a darn, and baiting her own hook to go fishing at the pond literally made her feel faint.

Then Ron Lewis had come along a few months ago and swept her off her feet with his kindness and intelligence—and treated

Benji like his own son.

Her gaze strayed to the tabletop tree she and Benji had decorated just yesterday. Together they'd made ornaments to hang on the tree, and when he was asleep last night, she'd wrapped his gift. He was going to be ecstatic on Christmas morning to find the softball and glove he'd asked for.

She pulled a pan of homemade cinnamon rolls from the oven to let them cool before her guests at the B and B she owned surfaced for breakfast, then went upstairs to check on her son.

Benji was normally up by now, underfoot in the kitchen when she was cooking—chatting and asking questions and sneaking bacon as soon as she took it off the pan.

But when she opened Benji's door, he wasn't in bed. A few toys were scattered around the floor, a sign he'd gotten up to play after she'd tucked him in the night before.

Figuring he was playing some imaginary game, she darted into his bathroom.

But he wasn't there, either.

She checked under his bed and frowned. "Benji? Where are you, honey?"

No answer.

Her heartbeat stuttered for a moment, but she told herself not to panic. The inn was a big house. The B and B held eight rooms, although most of them were empty at the time. With the holidays approaching, most people were staying home, going to visit family or flying to some exotic location for a winter

vacation, not visiting small-town Texas.

She peeked inside Benji's closet but didn't see him. Yet the dresser drawer stood open, and his clothes looked as if he'd pawed through them.

Probably to dress himself. He was three and starting to vie for independence that way. She just had to teach him how to match colors now.

Then she noticed his backpack was missing.

Her heart suddenly racing, she turned and looked at his room again. The big bear he normally slept with wasn't in his bed. Not on the floor or in the room at all. Neither was the whistle he liked or his favorite red hat.

But his blanket was there. He'd never go anywhere without that blue blanket.

Fear seized her, but she fought it off.

Surely Benji was just pretending he was on a camping trip. He and Ron had been talking about hiking the other night. Ron had even asked Benji which one of his special friends/toys he would carry with him if he was going on a long trip.

The bear, whistle and red cap were on his list.

Her hands shaking as other scenarios taunted her, she raced down the hall to the empty rooms and searched inside. No Benji.

Hating to disturb the two guests she did have but panicked now, she knocked on the door to the Ellises', an elderly couple on an anniversary trip. The gray-haired man opened the door dressed in a robe. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ellis, but have you seen my son, Benji?"

"No, ma'am. Me and Henrietta been sleeping."

"Would you mind checking your room in case he snuck in? He's only three and mischievous at times."

He scratched his head, sending his wiry hair askew. "Sure." He left the door open, and Sage watched as he checked under the bed, the closet and adjoining bathroom. "Sorry, Ms. Freeport, he's not in here."

Sage's stomach knotted. If—no, when—she found Benji, she would explain that hiding from her was not okay.

She climbed the steps to the third-floor attic room. A woman named Elvira had chosen it, saying she needed solace and to be alone. The poor woman had lost a child, and Sage had given her privacy to mourn.

But Elvira didn't answer. Sage let herself in and found a note from the lady saying she'd decided to leave early and didn't want to disturb Sage.

Benji liked this room because the window offered a view of the creek behind the house.

But the room was empty.

Nerves on edge, she ran downstairs, once again checking each room and shouting Benji's name. She rushed outside, wind beating at her as she searched the yard, the garden out back, the swing set, the fort and the tree house.

Benji was nowhere to be found.

Terrified, she ran back inside to call the sheriff. But the phone

was ringing as she entered the kitchen. Maybe a neighbor had found Benji.

She grabbed the phone, determined to get rid of the caller so she could phone the sheriff. But his voice echoed back.

“Ms. Freeport, it’s Sheriff Gandt.”

Her stomach pitched. “Yes, I was just about to call you. My little boy, Benji... He’s gone.”

“I was afraid of that,” Sheriff Gandt muttered.

Icy fear seized Sage.

“I think you’d better come down to River Road Crossing at Cobra Creek.”

“Why?” She had to swallow to make her voice work. “Is Benji there?”

“Just meet me there.”

He hung up, and Sage’s knees buckled. She grabbed the kitchen counter to keep from hitting the floor.

No...Benji was fine. He had to be...

She grabbed her keys and ran outside. The minivan took three tries to crank, but she threw it in gear and tore down the road toward the river crossing.

As soon as she rounded the bend, she spotted flames shooting into the air. Smoke curled upward, clogging the sky in a thick, gray blanket.

Tires squealed as she swung the van to the shoulder of the road, jumped out and ran toward the burning car.

Sheriff Gandt stood by while firemen worked to extinguish

the blaze. But even with the flames and smoke, she could tell that the car was a black Jeep.

Ron drove a black Jeep.

“Do you recognize this vehicle?” the sheriff asked.

A cold sweat broke out on Sage’s body. “It’s Ron’s. My fiancé.”

Sheriff Gandt’s expression looked harsh in the morning light. Then she saw what he was holding in his hands.

Benji’s teddy bear and red hat.

No... Dear God. Had Benji been in the car with Ron when it crashed and caught on fire?

Chapter One

Two years later

Dugan Graystone did not trust Sheriff Billy Gandt worth a damn.

Gandt thought he owned the town and the people in it and made no bones about the fact that men like Dugan, men who weren’t white, weren’t fit for office and should stay out of his way.

Gandt had even tried to stop Dugan from taking on this search-and-rescue mission, saying he could use his own men. But the families of the two lost hikers had heard about Dugan’s reputation as an expert tracker and insisted he spearhead the efforts to find the young men.

Dugan rode his stallion across the wilderness, scrutinizing every bush and tree, along with the soil, for footprints and other

signs that someone had come this way. A team of searchers had spread across the miles of forests looking for the missing men, but Dugan had a sixth sense, and it had led him over to Cobra Creek, miles from where Gandt had set up base camp for the volunteer workers involved in the search.

Dammit, he hated Gandt. He'd run against him for sheriff and lost—mainly because Gandt bought votes. But one day he'd put the bastard in his place and prove that beneath that good-old-boy act, Gandt was nothing but a lying, cheating coward.

Born on the reservation near Cobra Creek, Dugan had Native American blood running through his veins. Dugan fought for what was right.

And nothing about Gandt was right.

Money, power and women were Gandt's for the taking. And crime—if it benefited Billy—could be overlooked for a price.

Though Dugan owned his own spread, on the side, he worked as a P.I. His friend, Texas Ranger Jaxon Ward, was looking into Gandt's financials, determined to catch the man at his own game.

The recent flooding of the creek had uprooted bushes and trees, and washed up debris from the river that connected to the creek. Dugan noted an area that looked trampled, as if a path had been cut through the woods.

He guided his horse to a tree and dismounted, then knelt to examine the still-damp earth. A footprint in the mud?

Was it recent?

He noticed another, then some brush flattened, leading toward

the creek. Dugan's instincts kicked in, and he shone his flashlight on the ground and followed the indentations.

Several feet away, he saw another area of ground that looked disturbed. Mud and sticks and...something else.

Bones.

Maybe an animal's?

He hurried over to examine them, his pulse pounding. No...that was a human femur. And a finger.

Human bones.

And judging from the decomp, they had been there too long to belong to one of the two teenagers who'd gone missing.

The radio at his belt buzzed and crackled, and he hit the button to connect.

"We found the boys," Jaxon said. "A little dehydrated, but they're fine."

Dugan removed his Stetson and wiped sweat from his forehead. "Good. But I need the coroner over here at Cobra Creek."

"What?"

"I found bones," Dugan said. "Looks like they've been here a couple of years."

A foreboding washed over Dugan. Two years ago, a man named Ron Lewis had supposedly died in a car crash near here. Sage Freeport's son had been with him at the time.

The man's body and her son's had never been found.

Could these bones belong to Ron Lewis, the man who'd taken

her son?

* * *

SAGE SET A PLACE at the breakfast bar for Benji, then slid a pancake onto the plate and doused it with powdered sugar, just the way her son liked it. His chocolate milk came next.

The tabletop Christmas tree she kept year-round still held the tiny ornaments Benji had made and hung on it. And the present she'd had for him the year he'd gone missing still sat wrapped, waiting for his small hands to tear it open.

It was a glove and ball, something Benji had asked Santa for that year.

Would the glove still fit when she finally found him and he came home?

Two of her guests, a couple named Dannon, who'd come to Cobra Creek to celebrate their twentieth anniversary, gave her pitying looks, but she ignored them.

She knew people thought she was crazy. Mrs. Krandall, the owner of the diner in town, had even warned her that perpetuating the fantasy that her son was still alive by keeping a place set for him was dangerous for her and downright creepy.

She also suggested that it would hurt Sage's business.

A business Sage needed to pay the bills—and to keep her sanity.

But she couldn't accept that her son was dead.

Not without answers as to why Ron had taken Benji from the house and where they'd been headed.

Not without definite proof that he wasn't alive out there somewhere, needing her.

Of course, Benji's hat and bear had been found at the scene, but his bones had never been recovered.

Sheriff Gandt theorized that Lewis and Benji probably had been injured and tried to escape the fire by going into the creek. But storms created a strong current that night, and their bodies must have washed downstream, then into the river where they'd never be found.

She should never have trusted Ron with her son. It was her fault he was gone....

She refused to believe that he wouldn't be back. She had to cling to hope.

Without it, the guilt would eat her alive.

* * *

DUGAN GRITTED HIS TEETH as Sheriff Gandt studied the bones.

"Could have been a stranger wandering through," Gandt said. "Miles of wilderness out here. I'll check the databases for wanted men. Criminals have been known to hide out here off the grid."

The medical examiner, Dr. Liam Longmire, narrowed his eyes as he examined the body they unearthed when they'd swept the debris from the bones. Most of the skeleton was intact. Of course, the bones had decayed and been mauled by animals, but there were enough that they'd be able to identify him. That is, if they had medical records to compare to.

“What about Ron Lewis?” Dugan asked. “It could be him.”

Sheriff Gandt adjusted the waistband of his uniform pants and chewed on a blade of grass, his silence surprising. The man usually had an answer for everything.

Dr. Longmire looked up at Dugan, then Gandt. “I can’t say who he is yet, but this man didn’t die from a fire or from the elements.”

“What was the cause of death?” Dugan asked.

Longmire pointed to the rib cage and thoracic cavity. “See the markings of a bullet? It shattered one of his ribs. I can tell more when I get him on the table, but judging from the angle, it appears the bullet probably pierced his heart.”

Dugan glanced at Gandt, who made a harrumph sound.

“Guess you’ve got a murder to investigate, Sheriff,” Dugan said.

Gandt met his gaze with stone-cold, gray eyes, then glanced at the M.E. “How long has he been dead?”

“My guess is a couple of years.” Dr. Longmire paused. “That’d be about the time that Lewis man ran off with Sage Freeport’s kid.”

Gandt nodded, his mouth still working that blade of grass. But his grim expression told Dugan this body was more of a nuisance than a case he wanted to work.

“I’ll request Lewis’s dental records,” Dr. Longmire said. “If they match, we’ll know who our victim is.”

Gandt started to walk away, but Dugan cleared his throat.

“Sheriff, aren’t you going to get a crime unit to comb the area and look for evidence?”

“Don’t see no reason for that,” Gandt muttered. “If the man’s been dead two years, probably ain’t nothin’ to find. Besides, the flood last week would have washed away any evidence.” He gestured to the south. “That said, Lewis’s car was found farther downstream. If his body got in the water, it would have floated further downstream, not up here.”

“Not if his body was dumped in a different place from where he died.”

“You’re grasping at straws.” Gandt directed his comment to the M.E. “ID him and then we’ll go from there.”

The sheriff could be right. The victim could have been a drifter. Or a man from another town. Hell, he could have been one of the two prisoners who’d escaped jail a couple years back, ones who’d never been caught.

But the sheriff should at least be looking for evidence near where the body was found.

Gandt strode toward his squad car, and Dugan used his phone to take photographs of the bones. Dr. Longmire offered a commentary on other injuries he noted the body had sustained, and Dugan made a note of them.

Then Longmire directed the medics to load the body into the van to transport to the morgue, making sure they were careful to keep the skeleton intact and preserve any forensic evidence on the bones.

Dugan combed the area, scrutinizing the grass and embankment near where the bones had washed up. He also searched the brush for clues. He plucked a small scrap of fabric from a briar and found a metal button in the mud a few feet from the place where he'd first discovered the bones. He bagged the items for the lab to analyze, then conducted another sweep of the property, spanning out a half mile in both directions.

Unfortunately, Gandt was right. With time, weather and the animals foraging in the wilderness, he couldn't pinpoint if the body had gone into the river here or some other point.

Frustrated, he finally packed up and headed back to town.

But a bad feeling tightened his gut. Gandt had closed the case involving Sage Freeport's missing son and Lewis too quickly for his taste.

How would he handle this one?

BY LATE AFTERNOON, news of the bones found at Cobra Creek reached Sage through the grapevine in the small Texas town. She was gathering groceries to bake her famous coconut cream pie when she overheard two women talking about the hikers that had been recovered safely.

The checkout lady, Lorraine Hersher, the cousin of the M.E., broke in. "A body was found out at the creek. Nothing but the bones left."

Sage inched her way up near the register.

"Who was it?" one of the women asked.

"Don't think they know yet. Liam said he was checking dental

records. But he said the man had been dead about two years.”

Sage’s stomach clenched. Two years? About the time Ron’s car had crashed.

Could it possibly be...?

Desperate for answers, she pushed her cart to the side, leaving her groceries inside it, then hurried toward the door. The sheriff’s office was across the square, and she tugged her jacket around her, battling a stiff breeze as she crossed the street.

Sheriff Gandt had been less than helpful when Benji had gone missing. He wouldn’t want her bugging him now.

But she’d long ago decided she didn’t care what he thought.

She charged inside the office, surprised to see Dugan Graystone standing inside at the front desk. She’d seen the big man in town a few times, but he kept to himself. With his intense, dark brown eyes and brooding manner, some said he was a loner but that he was the best tracker in Texas. Tall, broad shoulders, sharp cheekbones—the package was handsome. Half the women in town thought he was sexy, while the other half were afraid of him.

Dr. Longmire stood next to him, the sheriff on the opposite side of the desk.

All three men turned to look at her as she entered, looking like they’d been caught doing something wrong.

Sage lifted her chin in a show of bravado. “I heard about the body you found at Cobra Creek.”

Dugan’s brown eyes met hers, turmoil darkening the depths,

while Gandt shot her one of his condescending looks. She couldn't believe the man had ever been married and understood why he wasn't anymore.

She had heard that he'd taken in his ailing mother, that the elderly woman was wheelchair-bound, difficult and demanding. Even though she disliked Gandt, she had to admit his loyalty to his mother was admirable.

"Who was it?" Sage asked.

Dr. Longmire adjusted his hat, acknowledging her with a politeness bred from a different era. "The body belonged to Ron Lewis."

Sage gasped. "You're sure?"

"Dental and medical records confirm it," the M.E. said.

Sage's legs threatened to give way. She caught herself by dropping onto a chair across from the desk. Tears clogged her throat as panic and fear seized her.

But she'd been in the dark for two years, and she had to know the truth.

Even if it killed her.

"Was Benji with him?"

Chapter Two

Sage held her breath. "Sheriff, did you find Benji?"

Sheriff Gandt shook his head. "No. Just Lewis's body."

Relief spilled through Sage. "Then my son... He may still be out there. He may be alive."

Dugan and the medical examiner traded questioning looks,

but the sheriff's frown made her flinch. Did he know something he wasn't telling her? Was that the reason he'd closed the case so quickly after Benji disappeared?

"Ms. Freeport," Sheriff Gandt said in a tone he might use with a child, "Dr. Longmire believes Ron Lewis has been dead since the day of that crash. That means that your son has been, too. We just haven't found his body yet. Probably because of the elements —"

"That's enough, Sheriff," Dugan said sharply.

Sheriff Gandt shot Dugan an irritated look. "I believe your part is done here, Graystone."

Sage gripped the edge of the desk. "How did Ron die, Sheriff?"

"Ms. Freeport, why don't you go home and calm down—"

"He died of a gunshot wound," Dugan said, cutting off the sheriff.

Sage barely stifled a gasp. "Then the car crash...? That didn't kill him."

"No," Dr. Longmire said, "he most likely bled out."

Sage's mind raced. Who had shot Ron? And why? "The shot caused the crash," she said, piecing together a scenario in her head.

"That would be my guess," Dr. Longmire said.

"Was there a bullet hole in the car?" Dugan asked Gandt.

Sheriff Gandt shrugged. "I don't know. The fire destroyed most of it."

Sage folded her arms and stared at the sheriff. “But that bullet proves Ron Lewis’s death was no accident. He was murdered.”

* * *

DUGAN WORKED TO rein in his anger toward Gandt. The weasel should be comforting Sage and reassuring her he’d do everything humanly possible to find the truth about what happened to her son.

That was what he’d do if he was sheriff.

But he lacked the power and money the Gandts had, and in this small town, that seemed to mean everything.

“It appears that way,” Sheriff Gandt told Sage. “And I will be investigating the matter. But—” he lifted a warning hand to Sage “—if your son had survived, we would have found him by now, Ms. Freeport. Odds are that the shooter fired at Lewis, he crashed and managed to get out of the car and fled. Maybe your son was with him, maybe not. But if he made it to the water with Lewis, he couldn’t have survived the frigid temperature or the current. He would have been swept downstream and drowned.”

“Sheriff,” Dugan snarled, hating the man’s cold bluntness.

The M.E. gave Sage a sympathetic look, then excused himself and hurried out the door.

Sheriff Gandt tugged at his pants. Damn man needed a belt to keep the things up. That or lose thirty pounds around his belly so he didn’t have to wear them so low.

“I know you want me to sugarcoat things, Graystone, but I’m the sheriff, not a damn counselor. I tell it like it is. Good or bad.”

Still, he could consider Sage's feelings. She'd lost a child. "Part of your job is to protect innocent citizens and to find out the truth when something happens to one of them. Benji Freeport was three. He was certainly innocent." Dugan squared off with the sheriff. "But you haven't done a damn thing to give his mother closure or find the answers she needs."

"You think bringing her a mangled bunch of bones is going to make her feel better?" Sheriff Gandt said.

"That would hurt, but at least I'd know the truth," Sage said. "And now that we know Ron was murdered, there is a chance that whoever shot him took Benji." Sage's voice cracked. "That means that Benji may be out there, alone, in trouble, needing me. That he's been waiting for us to find him all this time."

Dugan's chest tightened at the emotions in her voice. Emotions she had every right to feel, because she'd spoken the truth.

Sheriff Gandt swung a crooked finger toward the door. "I don't need either of you telling me how to do my job. Now, leave so I can get to it."

"Then let me know what you find." Sage clutched her shoulder bag, turned and walked out the door.

Dugan stared at the sheriff. "She deserves to know what happened to her son. And if he's alive, she deserves to bring him home."

"She's deluding herself if she thinks she'll find him alive," Sheriff Gandt said. "She needs to accept that he's gone and move on with her life."

Dugan had never had a child, but if he did and that child disappeared, he'd move heaven and earth to find him. "You are going to investigate Lewis's murder, aren't you? After all, you owe it to the people in the town to make sure that his killer isn't still among them."

Gandt tapped his badge. "In case you've forgotten, Graystone, the people elected me, so they obviously have confidence in my abilities. Now, get out of my office."

Dugan shot him a go-to-hell look, turned and stormed out the door. The man might make a token gesture to solve Lewis's murder.

But he doubted he would put forth any effort to hunt for Benji Freeport.

Dugan spotted Sage sitting on a park bench in the square, her face buried in her hands, her body trembling.

He headed across the square to join her. If Gandt wouldn't find Sage's son for her, he would.

* * *

SAGE WAS SO ANGRY she was shaking all over. Sheriff Gandt had stonewalled her before.

But how could he dismiss her so easily now that they knew that Ron Lewis had been murdered?

Ron's face flashed in her mind, and her stomach revolted. She'd been such a fool to trust him. Why had he taken her son with him that day? Where was he going?

And who had killed him?

The questions ate at her. None of it made sense.

Ron had waltzed into her life and charmed her with his good looks, his business sense and his talk of giving the town a face-lift and bringing in tourism. Tourists would have greatly impacted her income, so she'd been on board from the beginning.

Maybe that was the one reason he'd warmed up to her. Had he thought she could influence the town council with his plans for putting Cobra Creek on the map?

Footsteps crunched on gravel, and she suddenly felt someone beside her. A hand on her shoulder.

She jerked her head up, wiping at the tears streaming down her face, and stared into Dugan Graystone's dark eyes. The man was a rebel of sorts and was the only person she'd ever known to go up against the sheriff.

High cheekbones sculpted an angular face, evidence of his High American roots. His chiseled face was bronzed from work on the ranch, his hands were broad and strong looking, his big body made for ranching and working the land.

Or for a woman.

She silently chided herself. Just because she felt vulnerable and needy, and Dugan was strong and powerful looking, didn't mean she'd fall prey to his charms.

No man would ever get close to her again.

"What do you want?" Sage asked, a little more harshly than she'd intended.

Dugan's eyes flared at her tone. "Gandt is a first-class jerk."

His comment deflated her anger, and a nervous laugh escaped her. “Yes, he is.”

“He said he’d look into Lewis’s murder.”

“Sure he will.” Sage brushed her hands together. “Like he looked into the crash two years ago.”

Dugan sank his big body onto the bench beside her. “I know you were engaged to Lewis and want answers about who killed him.”

Anger shot through Sage. “We may have been engaged, but that was obviously a mistake. The minute he took my son from my house without my permission, any feelings I had for him died.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I don’t care why he was murdered. In fact, I would have killed him myself for taking Benji if I’d found him.”

A tense second passed. “I understand,” Dugan said in a gruff voice.

“Do you? That man took everything from me.”

The anguish in her tone made his chest squeeze. “I’ll help you,” he said. “I’ll find out why Lewis was murdered.”

Sage studied his face. He seemed so sincere. Earnest. As if he actually cared.

But she wouldn’t buy in to that, not ever again.

On the other hand, Dugan had run for sheriff and Gandt had beaten him, so he probably had his own personal agenda. He wanted to show Gandt up and prove to the town that they’d elected the wrong man.

She really didn't care about his motive. "All right. But understand this—the only reason I want to know who killed Ron is that it might lead me to my son. Whatever dirt you dig up on Ron is fine with me. I don't care about his reputation or even my own, for that matter."

Dugan studied her in silence for a few minutes. Sage felt the wind ruffle her hair, felt the heat from his body, felt the silence thick with the unknown.

"I'll do everything I can to help you," Dugan said gruffly. "But I may not find the answers you want."

Sage understood the implications of his statement. "I know that." She gripped her hands together. "All I want is the truth...no matter what it is."

"Even if it's not pretty?"

Sage nodded. "The truth can't be any worse than what I've already imagined."

* * *

DUGAN HOPED THAT was true. But there was the possibility that they'd find out her little boy had been burned in the fire. Or that he'd been kidnapped by a cold-blooded murderer.

The scenarios that came to mind sent a shot of fear through him. For all they knew, the shooter could have abducted Benji and sold him or handed him off to a group trafficking kids. Hell, he could have been a pedophile.

In fact, kidnapping the boy could have been the endgame all

along.

Someone could have hired Lewis to get the boy.

But if so, why?

He had to ask questions, questions Sage might not like.

“You’ve done investigative work before?” Sage asked.

Dugan nodded. “I’ve been called in as a consultant on some cold cases. I have a friend, Texas Ranger Jaxon Ward, who I work with.”

“How do you know him?”

“We go way back,” Dugan said, remembering the foster home where they’d met.

Sage arched an eyebrow in question, but Dugan let the moment pass. They weren’t here to talk about him and his shady upbringing. “In light of the fact that Lewis’s body has been found, I’m going to enter your son’s picture into the system for missing children.”

Emotions darkened Sage’s soft green eyes, but she nodded. “Of course. I tried to get Sheriff Gandt to do that two years ago, but he was certain Benji died in the crash or drowned, and said it was a waste of time.”

That sounded like shoddy police work to him.

“If you want to stop by the inn, I can give you one of the latest pictures I took.”

“I’ll walk with you over there now.”

Sage stood, one hand clutching her shoulder bag. “Why don’t you meet me there in half an hour? I have an errand to run first.”

“Half an hour,” Dugan agreed.

Sage hesitated a moment, her breath shaky in the heartbeat of silence that stretched between them. “Thank you, Dugan. I can’t tell you what it means to have someone listen to me. I...know some people think I’m nuts. That I just can’t let go.”

He had heard rumors that she set the table for her son at every meal, as if he was coming home for dinner. Hell, was that crazy, or was she simply trying to keep hope alive?

“I don’t blame you for not giving up,” Dugan said gruffly. “At least not without the facts or proof that your son is really gone.”

He let the words linger between them, well aware she understood the meaning underscoring his comment. If he found proof Benji was dead, she’d have to accept that.

But if there was a chance the boy was out there somewhere, he’d find him and bring him back to her where he belonged.

* * *

SAGE UNLOADED THE GROCERIES, grateful the couple staying at the inn had taken a day trip and wouldn’t be back until bedtime. Breakfast came with the room rental, but lunch and dinner were optional. In addition, she provided coffee and tea and snacks midmorning and afternoon, including fruit, cookies and an assortment of freshly baked pastries and desserts. She usually conferred with the guests on check-in and planned accordingly.

The doorbell rang; then the front bell tinkled that someone had entered. She rushed to the entryway and found Dugan standing beneath the chandelier, studying the rustic farm tools

and pictures of horses on the wall.

People who visited Texas wanted rustic charm, and she tried to give it to them.

“I came for that picture.” Dugan tipped his Stetson out of politeness, his rugged features stark in the evening light.

“Come this way.” She led him through the swinging double doors to the kitchen. His gaze caught on the tabletop Christmas tree, and she bit back a comment, refusing to explain herself.

Maybe Benji would never come back.

But if he did, his present would be waiting. And they would celebrate all the days and holidays they’d missed spending together the past two years.

Chapter Three

Sage opened a photo album on the breakfast bar and began to flip through it. Dugan watched pain etch itself on her face as she stared at the pictures chronicling Benji’s young life.

A baby picture of him swaddled in a blue blanket while he lay nestled in Sage’s arms. A photo of the little boy sleeping in a crib, another of him as an infant in the bathtub playing with a rubber ducky, pictures of him learning to crawl, then walk.

Photos of Benji tearing open presents at his first birthday party, riding a rocking horse at Christmas, playing in the sprinkler out back, cuddled on the couch in monster pajamas and cradling his blanket.

Sage paused to trace her finger over a small envelope. “I kept a lock of Benji’s hair from his first haircut.”

Dugan offered a smile, tolerating her trip down memory lane because he understood her emotions played into this case and he couldn't ignore them.

He shifted uncomfortably. He had a hard time relating to family; he had never been part of one and didn't know how families worked. At least, not normal, loving ones. If they existed.

He'd grown up between foster care and the rez, never really wanted in either place.

She brushed at a tear, then removed a picture of Benji posed by the Christmas tree. "I took that the day before he went missing."

Dugan glanced at the tabletop tree and realized the same present still lay beneath the tree's base. Dammit. She'd kept the tree up all this time waiting on her son to return to open it.

"Can I get the photograph back?" Sage asked. "As you can see, this is all I have left...."

The crack in her voice tore at him. "Of course. I'll take good care of it, Sage." And maybe he'd bring back the real thing instead of just a picture.

But he refrained from making that promise.

"Sage, before I get started, we need to talk. There are some questions I need you to answer."

Sage closed the photo album and laid a hand on top of it. He noticed her nails were short, slightly jagged, as if she'd been biting them.

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you have any idea why Ron Lewis had Benji in the car with him that day?”

“No.” Sage threaded her fingers through the long, tangled tresses of her hair, hair that was streaked with red, brown and gold. “Sheriff Gandt suggested that he was taking Benji Christmas shopping to buy me a present.”

A possibility. “What do you think?”

“Ron knew how protective I was of my son. I don’t understand why he would have left without telling me or leaving me a note. He knew that Benji was all I had, and that I would panic when I woke up and discovered they were gone.”

“What about other family?” Dugan asked.

Sage sighed wearily. “I never knew my father. My mother died the year before I had Benji. A car accident.”

He knew this could get touchy. “And Benji’s father?”

Resignation settled in her eyes. “Trace Lanier. I met him right after my mother died.” She traced a finger along the edge of the photo album. “I was grieving and vulnerable. Not that that’s an excuse, but we dated a few times. When I discovered the pregnancy, he bailed.”

“Where is he now?”

“I have no clue. He worked the rodeos, traveling town to town.”

“Did he express any interest in seeing his son?”

Sage laughed, a bitter sound. “No. He didn’t even want to

acknowledge that Benji was his. In fact, he accused me of lying, of coming after him for money.”

Dugan waited, his pulse hammering. Sage didn’t strike him as that type at all.

“I was furious,” Sage said. “I told him that my mother was a single mother and that she’d raised me on her own, and that I would do the same. I didn’t want his money. And I didn’t care if I ever saw him again or if he ever met his son.”

“And that was that?”

Sage brushed her hands together. “That was that. I never heard from him again.”

Dugan contemplated her story. “Do you think that he might have changed his mind and decided he wanted to see Benji?”

Sage shook her head. “No. I think he’s doing pretty well in the rodeo circuit now. Making a name bronco riding. That brings the rodeo groupies. The last thing he’d want is to have a child get in the way of that.”

Dugan had never met the bastard, but he didn’t like him.

Still, he’d verify that information. Perhaps Lanier’s manager had suggested that having a little boy could improve his popularity. It was a long shot, but Dugan didn’t intend to ignore any possibility.

SAGE HATED ADMITTING that she had fallen for Trace Lanier’s sexy rodeo looks, but she had. Even worse, she’d believed Ron Lewis was different.

Could he have simply been taking Benji Christmas shopping

and gotten killed before he could bring her son back?

And why would someone kill Ron?

Or had Ron taken Benji for another reason?

But why? She didn't have money to pay a ransom....

"Do you want coffee?" Sage asked.

Dugan nodded, and she poured them both a mug, then placed a slice of homemade pound cake on a plate in front of him. "It's fresh. I baked it last night."

A small smile curved his mouth. "I've heard you're a good cook."

"Really?" Sage blushed. What else had he heard?

"Yes, I'm sure it helps with your business."

"I suppose so," Sage said. "I used to stay with my grandma when I was little, and she taught me everything she knew."

He sipped his coffee. "Tell me about Ron Lewis. How did you two meet?"

"Actually he stayed here when he came to town on business," Sage said. "He was a real estate developer. He wanted to convince the town council to go forward on a new development that would enrich the town, create jobs and tourism and bring us out of the Dark Ages."

"I remember hearing something about that project," Dugan said, although he hadn't exactly been for the development. The group handling it wanted to buy up ranches and farms in the neighboring area, and turn Cobra Creek into a tourist trap with outlet malls, fast-food chains and a dude ranch.

“So you struck up a friendship?”

Sage nodded. “I was reluctant at first, but he was persistent. And he took an interest in Benji.”

“Benji liked him?”

“Yes.”

“He would have gone with him, without being afraid?”

“Yes,” Sage said, her voice cracking. “Ron stayed in Cobra Creek most of that summer, so we went on several family outings together.” She’d thought she’d finally found a man who loved her and her son.

Fool.

Dugan broke off a chunk of cake and put it in his mouth. Sage watched a smile flicker in his eyes, one that pleased her more than it should.

“Did the town council approve his plans?”

Sage gave a noncommittal shrug. “They were going back and forth on things, discussing it.” She frowned at Dugan. “Do you think his murder had something to do with the development?”

“I don’t know,” Dugan said. “But it’s worth looking into.”

Sage contemplated his suggestion. She should have asked more questions about Ron’s business, about the investors he said he had lined up, about him.

And now it was too late. If something had gone wrong with his business, something that had gotten him killed, he might have taken that secret with him to the grave.

* * *

DUGAN NEEDED TO ask around, find out more about how the locals felt about Lewis's proposal. What had happened to the development after his death? Had anyone profited?

But Sage's comment about Ron's interest in Benji made him pause. "You said he showed an interest in Benji?"

Sage stirred sweetener in her coffee. "Yes, some men don't like kids. Others don't know how to talk to them, but Ron seemed...comfortable with Benji."

"Hmm," Dugan mumbled. "Did he come from a big family?"

Sage frowned. "No, I asked him that. And he actually looked kind of sad. He said he was an only child and lost his parents when he was young."

"Was he married before? Maybe he had a child."

"No, at least he said he'd never married," Sage said. "But at this point, I don't know what to believe. Everything he told me could have been a lie."

True. In fact, he could have planned to kidnap Benji all along. He'd warmed up to the boy so he'd go with him willingly.

But why?

For money? Maybe someone had paid him to take Benji, then killed Ron Lewis to get rid of any witnesses.

But why would anyone want to kidnap Benji?

Sage wasn't wealthy, and she had no family that could offer a big reward. Kidnappers had been known to abduct a child to force a parent into doing something for them, but if swaying the town council to vote for the development had been the issue, it

wouldn't have worked. Sage had no power or influence in the town.

Then again, Dugan had no proof that Ron Lewis had done anything wrong. That the man hadn't been sincerely in love with Sage, that he hadn't come to the town to help it prosper, that he was an innocent who had been shot to death for some reason.

And that he might have died trying to save Sage's son.

* * *

"DID LEWIS LEAVE anything of his here at the inn? A calendar? Computer?"

"No, I don't think so," Sage said.

"I know it's been two years, but what room did he stay in?"

"The Cross-ties Room."

He arched an eyebrow.

"I named each room based on a theme. People who come to Cobra Creek want the atmosphere, the feel of the quaint western town."

"Can I see that room, or is someone staying in it?"

"You can see it," Sage said. "I have only one couple staying here now. They're in the Water Tower Room."

Sage led Dugan up the stairs to the second floor. She unlocked the room, then stood back and watched as he studied the room.

"Have you rented this room since he was here?"

"Yes, a couple of times," she said. "I was full capacity during the art festival both years."

He walked over and looked inside the dresser, checking each

drawer, but they were empty. Next he searched the drawers in the oak desk in the corner. Again, nothing.

“What are you looking for?” Sage asked.

Dugan shrugged. “If Lewis was killed because he was into something illegal, there might be evidence he left behind.” He opened the closet door and looked inside. “Did he take everything with him that day when he left?”

Sage nodded. “His suitcase and computer were gone. That was what freaked me out.”

“If he’d simply been taking Benji shopping, he wouldn’t have taken those things with him.”

“Exactly.” Sage’s heart stuttered as she remembered the blind panic that had assaulted her.

“Did he mention that he was leaving town to you?” Dugan asked.

“The day before, he said he might have to go away for a business meeting, but that he’d be back before Christmas.”

“Did he say where the meeting was?”

Sage pushed a strand of hair away from her face. “No...but then, I didn’t bother to ask.” Guilt hit her again. “I was so distracted, so caught up in the holidays, in making a stupid grocery list for Christmas dinner and finishing my shopping, that I didn’t pay much attention.” Her voice broke. “If I had, maybe I would have picked up on something.”

Dugan’s boots clicked on the floor as he strode over to the doorway, where she stood. “Sage, this is not your fault.”

“Yes, it is,” Sage said, her heart breaking all over again. “I was Benji’s mother. I was supposed to protect him.”

“You did everything you could.”

“Then, why is he missing?” Sage asked. “Why isn’t he here with me this year, wrapping presents and making sugar cookies?”

“I don’t know,” Dugan said in a low voice. “But I promise you that I’ll find out.”

Sage latched on to the hope Dugan offered. But the same terrifying images that haunted her at night flashed behind her eyes now.

If the person who’d shot Ron had abducted Benji, what had he done with him? Where was he? And what had happened to him over the past two years?

Was he taken care of or had he been abused? Was he hungry? Alone?

Would he remember her when they found him?

* * *

“THEY FOUND LEWIS’S BODY.”

“Dammit. How did that happen?”

“Floods washed the body up. That Indian uncovered his bones in the bushes when he was looking for those hikers that got lost.”

“After two years, they identified Lewis?”

“Yes. Damn dental records. I should have extracted all his teeth.”

A tense second passed. “Hell, you should have burned the bastard’s body in that car.”

"I thought it was taken care of."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't. And Sage Freeport is asking questions again. Knowing her, she'll be pushing to get the case reopened. She's like a bloodhound."

"If she doesn't settle down, I'll take care of her."

"This time make sure nothing can come back to haunt us."

"No problem. When she disappears, it'll be for good."

Chapter Four

"Did Lewis always stay in this same room?" Dugan asked.

"Yes."

"How long was he here?"

Sage rubbed her temple. "The first time he came, he stayed a couple of weeks. Then he left for a month. When he returned, he stayed about six months."

"Where did he go when he left?"

"He was traveling around Texas. Said he worked with this company that looked for property across the state, small towns that were in need of rebuilding. Part of his job was to scout out the country and make suggestions to them."

"Where was his home?"

Sage straightened a pillow on top of the homemade quilt, which had imprints of horses on the squares. "He said he was from South Texas, I think. That he grew up in a little town not too far from Laredo."

Dugan made a mental note to check out his story. Maybe someone in that town knew more about Lewis.

He walked through the room again, the boards creaking beneath his boots as he stepped inside the closet. His toe caught on something and when he looked down, he realized a plank was loose.

He knelt and ran his finger along the wooden slat, his senses prickling. Was something beneath the board?

He yanked at it several times, and it finally gave way. He pulled it free, laid it to the side and felt the one next to it. It was loose, too, so he tugged it free, as well.

His curiosity spiking, he peered beneath the flooring. Something yellow caught his eye. He slid his hand below and felt inside the hole. His fingers connected with a small manila envelope.

“What are you doing?” Sage asked over his shoulder.

“Something’s under here.” He wiggled his fingers until he snagged the envelope, then removed it from the hole.

“What is that?” Sage asked.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out.” Dugan felt again just to make sure there wasn’t anything else lodged beneath the floor, but the space was empty. Standing, he walked back to the corner desk, opened the envelope and dumped it upside down.

Sage gasped as the contents spilled out. “What in the world?”

Dugan picked up a driver’s license and flipped it open. A picture of Ron Lewis stared back at him.

But the name on the license read Mike Martin.

“That’s a fake driver’s license,” Sage said.

Dugan raked his hand over the lot of them, spreading a half dozen different licenses across the bed. "Each one of these has a different name."

"My God, Dugan," Sage whispered. "Ron Lewis wasn't his real name."

"No." Dugan met her gaze. Aliases indicated the man might have been a professional con man. "And if he lied about who he was, no telling what else he lied about."

* * *

SAGE SANK ONTO the bed, in shock. "I can't believe he lied to me, that he had all these other identities." She felt like such a fool. "Why would he do that, Dugan? Why come here and make me think he was someone else? Just to make me fall for him?"

Dugan's mouth flattened. "Do you have a lot of money, Sage?"

"No." She gestured around the room. "I put everything into remodeling this house as a bed and breakfast."

"You don't have a trust fund somewhere?"

"God, no," Sage said, embarrassed to admit the truth, "I'm in debt up to my eyeballs."

"Then he didn't fabricate his lies to swindle you out of money," Dugan said. "My guess is that this business of a land development was some kind of sham. You just happened to get caught in the middle."

"So, he never really cared for me," Sage said. She'd asked herself that a thousand times the past two years, but facing the truth was humiliating. It also meant she'd endangered her son by

falling for Ron Lewis's lies.

Dugan's apologetic look made her feel even more like an idiot.

"Even if he was running a con, maybe he really did fall in love with you and Benji," Dugan suggested.

"Yeah," Sage said wryly. "Maybe he was going to change for me." She picked up one of the fake IDs, read the name, then threw it against the wall. "More like, he took me for a moron and used me." She studied another name, her mind racing. "But why take Benji that day?"

"I don't know." Dugan shrugged. "Did he know about your debt?"

Sage nodded. "He told me not to worry, that when this deal came through, my B and B would be overflowing with business and we'd make a fortune."

"Maybe he meant that," Dugan said. "Maybe he really wanted to make things better for you and your son."

Sage made a sound of disgust. "Like you said before, Dugan, he lied about his name. What else was he lying about?" She scattered the IDs around, trying to recall if he'd mentioned any of the other names he'd used. "I can't believe I fell for everything he said." Because she'd been lonely. Vulnerable.

Had liked the idea of having a father for her son.

Never again would she let down her guard.

Not for any man, no matter what.

* * *

DUGAN GATHERED THE fake IDs to investigate them. As

much as he wanted to assure her that Lewis had been sincere about his intentions with her, the phony IDs said otherwise.

A liar was a liar, and Dugan hadn't found just one alias. The man had a string of them.

Meaning he probably had a rap sheet, as well, and maybe had committed numerous crimes.

It also opened up a Pandora's box. Any one of the persons he'd conned or lied to might have wanted revenge against him.

The fact that he'd lied to Sage suggested he might have lied to other women. Hell, he might have a slew of girlfriends or wives scattered across Texas. Maybe one in each city where he'd worked or visited.

All with motive, as well.

"Do you know who Lewis met with in town about the new development?"

"George Bates, from the bank," Sage said. "He also met with the town council and talked to several landowners, but I'm not certain which ones or how far he got with them."

"I'll start with Bates." Dugan stuck the envelope of IDs inside his rawhide jacket.

Sage followed him to the door. "Are you going to the sheriff with this?"

Dugan shook his head. "I don't think he'd like me nosing into this, and I don't trust him to find the truth."

"I agree." Sage rubbed her hands up and down her arms, as if to warm herself. The temptation to comfort her pulled at Dugan.

God, she was beautiful. He'd admired her from afar ever since the first time he laid eyes on her. But he'd known then that she was too good for a jaded man like him. She and her little boy deserved a good man who'd take care of them.

And that man wasn't him.

But just because he couldn't have her for himself didn't mean that he wouldn't do right by her. He would take this case.

Because there was the possibility that Benji was alive.

Dugan wouldn't rest until he found him and Sage knew the truth about what had happened two years ago.

Sage caught his arm as he started to leave the room. "Dugan, promise me one thing."

He studied her solemn face. Hated the pain in her eyes. "What?"

"That you won't keep things from me. No matter what you find, I want—I need—to know the truth. I've been lied to too many times already."

He cradled her hand in his and squeezed it, ignoring the heat that shot through him at her touch. "I promise, Sage."

Hell, he wanted to promise more.

But he hurried down the steps to keep himself from becoming like Lewis and telling her what she wanted to hear instead of the truth.

Because the truth was that he had no idea what answers he would find.

* * *

SAGE WATCHED DUGAN LEAVE, a sense of trepidation filling her.

At least he was willing to help her look for the answers. But the phony drivers' licenses had shocked her to the core.

How could she have been so gullible when Ron was obviously a professional liar? And now that she knew Ron Lewis wasn't his real name, who was he?

Had he planned to marry her and take care of her and Benji?

No...everything about the man was probably false. He'd obviously fabricated a story to fit his agenda.

But why use her? To worm his way into the town and make residents believe he cared about them, that he was part of them?

Devious. But it made sense in a twisted kind of way.

She straightened the flooring in the closet, then went to Benji's room. Benji had loved jungle animals, so she'd painted a mural of a jungle scene on one wall and painted the other walls a bright blue. She walked over to the shelf above his bed and ran her finger over each of his stuffed animals. His friends, he'd called them.

At night he'd pile them all in bed around him, so she could barely find him when she went to tuck him in. His blankie, the one she'd crocheted before he was born, was folded neatly on his pillow, still waiting for his return.

Where was her son? If he'd survived, was he being taken care of? Had someone given him a blanket to sleep with at night and animal friends to comfort him in bed?

She thought she'd cried all her tears, but more slipped down her cheeks, her emotions as raw as they were the day she'd discovered that Benji was gone.

The news usually ran stories about missing children. For a few weeks after the car crash, they carried the story about Ron and her son. Although the implication was that both had died in the fire, a request had been made for any information regarding the accident. They'd hoped to find a witness who'd seen the wreck, someone who could tell them if another car had been involved.

But no word had come and eventually other stories had replaced Benji's on the front page. With this new development, maybe she could arouse the media's interest again.

She hurried downstairs to the kitchen and retrieved the scrapbook with clippings she'd morbidly kept of the crash and the coverage afterward. Why she'd kept them, she didn't know. Maybe she'd hoped one day she'd find something in them that might explain what had happened to Benji.

The small town of Cobra Creek wasn't big enough for a newspaper, but a reporter from Laredo had interviewed her and covered the investigation. At least, what little investigation Sheriff Gandt had instigated.

She noted the reporter's name on the story. Ashlynn Fontaine.

Hoping that the reporter might revive the story and the public's interest, now that Ron's body had been found and that his death was considered a homicide, she decided to call the paper the next morning and speak to Ashlynn.

DUGAN DROVE TO the bank the next day to speak with George Bates, the president. One woman sat at a desk to the left, and a teller was perched behind her station, at a computer.

He paused by the first woman and asked for Bates, and she escorted him to an office down a hallway. A tall, middle-aged man with wiry hair and a suit that looked ten years old shook his hand. "George Bates. You here to open an account?"

Dugan shook his head. "No, sir, I need to ask you some questions about Ron Lewis."

Bates's pudgy face broke into a scowl. "What about him? He's been dead for two years."

"True," Dugan said. "I don't know if you heard, but his body was discovered this morning at Cobra Creek. It turns out he didn't die in that car crash or fire. He was murdered."

Bates's eyes widened. "What?"

"Yes, he was shot."

Bates rolled his shoulders back in a defensive gesture. "You think I know something about that?"

"That's not what I meant to imply," Dugan said, using a low voice to calm the man. "But the fact that Ms. Freeport's little boy wasn't with him raises questions about where he is. Ms. Freeport asked me to look into his disappearance. Learning who killed Lewis might lead us to that innocent little boy." Dugan paused. "You do want to help find that child, don't you?"

His comment seemed to steal the wind out of Bates's sails.

“Well, yes, of course.”

“Then tell me everything you can about Ron Lewis.”

Bates tugged at his suit jacket, then motioned for Dugan to take a seat.

“Lewis came in here with all kinds of plans for the town,” Bates said. “He had sketches of how he wanted to renovate the downtown area, parks that would be added, housing developments, a giant equestrian center and a dude ranch, along with an outlet mall and new storefronts for the downtown area.”

“Did he have backing?” Dugan asked.

Bates scratched his chin. “Well, that was the sketchy part. At first he said he did. Then, when it got down to it, he approached me to invest. I think he may have hit on some others around town. Especially Lloyd Riley and Ken Canter. They own a lot of land in the prime spots for the equestrian center and dude ranch.”

“He made them offers?”

“You’d have to talk to them about it,” Bates said. “Neither one wanted to tell me any specifics. But I think Riley signed something with him and so did Canter.”

So, what had happened to those deals?

“Were most of the people in town in favor of the project?”

“A few of the store owners thought it would be good for business. But some old-timers didn’t want that dude ranch or the mall.”

“When he asked you to invest, did you check out Lewis’s financial background?”

Bates frowned. "I was going to, but then he had that crash and I figured there wasn't no need."

"Was he working with a partner? Another contact to deal with on the project?"

"If he was, he didn't tell me."

Probably because he was running a scam. Lewis had never had backing and was going to swindle the locals into investing, then run off with their money.

Had one of them discovered Lewis's plans to cheat him and killed Lewis because of it?

Chapter Five

Dugan stopped by his ranch before heading out to talk to the ranchers Lewis had approached.

He'd worked hard as a kid and teen on other spreads, doing odd jobs and then learning to ride and train horses, and had vowed years ago that he would one day own his own land.

Growing up on the reservation had been tough. His mother was Native American and had barely been able to put food on the table. Like little Benji's, his father had skipped out. He had no idea where the man was now and couldn't care less if he ever met him.

Any man who abandoned his family wasn't worth spit.

Then he'd lost his mother when he was five and had been tossed around for years afterward, in foster care, never really wanted by anyone, never belonging anywhere. It was the one reason he'd wanted his own land, his own place. A home.

He'd hired a young man, Hiram, to help him on the ranch in exchange for a place to live. Hiram was another orphan on the rez who needed a break. He also employed three other teens to help groom and exercise the horses and clean the stalls. Keeping the boys busy and teaching them the satisfaction of hard work would hopefully help them stay out of trouble. He'd also set up college scholarships if they decided to further their education.

Everything at the ranch looked in order, and he spotted Hiram at the stables. He showered and changed into a clean shirt and jeans, then retreated to his home office.

He booted up his computer and researched Trace Lanier. Seconds after he entered the man's name, dozens of articles appeared, all showcasing Lanier's rise in success in the rodeo. Other photos revealed a line of beautiful rodeo groupies on his arm. For the past two years, he'd been traveling the rodeo circuit, enjoying fame and success.

He had no motive for trying to get his son back. He had plenty of money. And now fame. And judging from the pictures of him at honky-tonks, parties and casinos, he enjoyed his single life.

At the time of Benji's disappearance, he was actually competing in Tucson.

Dugan struck Lanier off the suspect list, then phoned his buddy Jaxon and explained about finding Lewis's corpse and the phony identities.

"Sounds like a professional con artist," Jaxon said. "Send me a list of all his IDs and I'll run them."

Dugan typed in the list and emailed it to Jaxon. He could use all the help he could get.

“I’m plugging them in, along with his picture,” Jaxon said. “Now, tell me what you know about this man.”

“He came to Cobra Creek on the pretense of saving the town. Said he had a developer wanting to rebuild the downtown, and expand with an equestrian center, dude ranch, shopping mall and new storefronts. The banker in town said he approached him to invest and that he solicited locals to, as well. I’m going to question them next. But I’m anxious to learn more about his background. Does he have an arrest record?”

“Jeez. He was a pro.”

“What did you find?”

“He stole the name Lewis from a dead man in Corpus Christi.”

“A murder victim?”

“No, he was eighty and died of cancer.”

“So he stole his identity because it was easy.”

“Yeah, Lewis was an outstanding citizen, had no priors. His son died in Afghanistan.”

“What else?”

“Three of the names—Joel Bremmer, Mike Martin and Seth Handleman—have rap sheets.”

“What for?”

“Bremmer for theft, Martin for fraud and embezzlement and Handleman for similar charges.”

“Did he do time for any of the crimes?”

“Not a day. Managed to avoid a trial by jumping bail.”

“Then he took on a new identity,” Dugan filled in.

“Like I said, he’s a pro.”

“Who bailed him out?”

“Hang on. Let me see if I can access those records.”

“While you’re at it, see if you can get a hold of Sheriff Gandt’s police report on Lewis’s car accident. I want to know if Lewis was shot before the accident or afterward.”

“The sheriff doesn’t know?”

“According to Gandt, he thought the man died in the car fire. Now we have a body, the M.E. pointed out the gunshot wound. When I asked Gandt if he saw a bullethole in the car, he sidestepped the question, and said the car was burned pretty badly. But all that tells me is that he didn’t examine it.”

“Shoddy work.”

“You could say that.”

Dugan drummed his fingers on the desk while he waited. Seconds later, Jaxon returned.

“Each time, a woman bailed him out. The first time, the lady claimed to be his wife. The second, his girlfriend.”

“Their names?”

“Eloise Bremmer,” Jaxon said. “After Bremmer disappeared, the police went to question her, but she was gone, too. Same thing with Martin’s girlfriend, Carol Sue Tinsley.”

“Hmm, wonder if they’re one and the same.”

“That’s possible.”

“How about the other names?”

“One more popped. Seth Handleman. He was charged with fraud, but the charges were dropped. Says here his wife, Maude, lives in Laredo.”

“Give me that address,” Dugan said. “Maybe she’s still there.”

She also might be the same woman who’d bailed out Bremmer and Martin.

* * *

SAGE RUBBED HER FINGER over the locket she wore as she parked at the coffee shop where Ashlynn Fontaine had agreed to meet her. After Benji had disappeared, she’d placed his picture inside the necklace and sworn she wouldn’t take it off until she found her son.

It was a constant reminder that he was close to her heart even if she had no idea if he was alive or...gone forever.

Clinging to hope, she hurried inside, ordered a latte and found a small corner table to wait. Five minutes later, Ashlynn entered, finding Sage and offering her a small smile. Ashlynn ordered coffee, then joined her, shook off her jacket and dropped a pad and pen on the table.

“Hi, Ms. Freeport. I’m glad you called.”

“Call me Sage.”

“All right, Sage. You said there’s been a new development in the case.”

Sage nodded. “I take it you haven’t heard about Ron Lewis’s body being found.”

The reporter's eyes flickered with surprise. "No, but that is news. Who found him?"

"Dugan Graystone, a local tracker, was searching for some missing hikers and discovered his body at Cobra Creek."

"I see. And the sheriff was called?"

Sage nodded. "Sheriff Gandt said he would investigate, but he didn't do much the first go-around."

"How did Lewis die?" Ashlynn asked.

"He was shot."

"Murdered?" Another flicker of surprise. "So he didn't die from an accident?"

"No." Sage ran a hand through her hair. "He died of a gunshot wound. At this point it's unclear if he was shot before the accident, causing him to crash, or after it, when he tried to escape the burning vehicle."

"Interesting."

"The important thing is that they found Lewis's body but not my son's. So Benji might be alive."

Ashlynn gave her a sympathetic look. "Did they find any evidence that he survived?"

"No," Sage admitted. "But they also didn't find any proof that he didn't."

"Fair enough."

"Think about it," Sage said. "The shooter may have wanted to kill Ron. But maybe he didn't realize Ron had Benji with him. When he killed Ron and discovered Benji, he may have taken

my son.”

A tense heartbeat passed between them, fraught with questions.

“That’s possible,” Ashlynn said. “But it’s also possible that he didn’t.”

Sage’s stomach revolted. “You mean that he got rid of Benji.”

“I’m sorry,” Ashlynn said. “I don’t want to believe that, but if he murdered Lewis, he might not have wanted any witnesses left behind.”

Sage desperately clung to hope that Ron’s killer hadn’t been that inhumane. Killing a grown man for revenge, if that was the case, was a far cry from killing an innocent child.

Ashlynn traced a finger along the rim of her coffee cup. “I hate to suggest this, but did the police search the area for a grave, in case the killer buried your son?”

Sage’s throat closed. She clutched her purse, ready to leave. “I didn’t call you so you’d convince me that Benji is dead. I hoped you’d run another story, this time focus on the fact that Lewis’s body was found but that Benji might still be out there.”

She pulled a picture of her son from her shoulder bag. “Please print his picture and remind people that he’s still missing. That I’m still looking for him.” Desperation tinged her voice. “Maybe someone’s seen him and will call in.”

Ashlynn reached over and squeezed her hand. “Of course I can do that, Sage. I’ll do whatever I can to help you get closure.”

Sage heard the doubt in the reporter’s voice. She didn’t think

Benji would be found.

But Sage didn't care what she thought. "I know you have your doubts about him being alive, but I'm his mother." Sage stroked the locket where it lay against her heart. "I can't give up until I know for sure."

Ashlynn nodded and took the picture. "Did Benji have any defining characteristics? A birthmark, scar or mole? Anything that might stand out?"

"As a matter of fact, he does," Sage said. "He was born with an extra piece of cartilage in his right ear. It's not very noticeable, but if you look closely, it almost looks like he has two eardrums."

"Do you have a photo where it's visible?"

Sage had actually avoided photographing it. But it was obvious in his first baby picture. She removed it from her wallet and showed it to Ashlynn.

"This might help," the reporter told her. "I'll enhance it for the news story. And I'll run the story today." Ashlynn finished her coffee. "As a matter of fact, I have a friend who works for the local TV station. I'll give her a heads-up and have her add it to their broadcast. The more people looking for Benji, the better."

Sage thanked her, although Ashlynn's comment about searching for a grave troubled her.

As much as she didn't want to face that possibility, she'd have to ask Dugan about it.

* * *

DUGAN ENTERED THE ADDRESS for Maude

Handleman into the note section on his phone, then drove toward Lloyd Riley's farm, a few miles outside town.

He'd heard about the tough times some of the landowners had fallen upon in the past few years. Weather affected farming and crops, the organic craze had caused some to rethink their methods and make costly changes, and the beef industry had suffered.

Farmers and ranchers had to be progressive and competitive. He noted the broken fencing along Riley's property, the parched pastures and the lack of crops in the fields.

He drove down the mile drive to the farmhouse, which was run-down, the porch rotting, the paint peeling. A tractor was abandoned in the field, the stables were empty and a battered black pickup truck was parked sideways by the house.

It certainly appeared as if Riley might have been in trouble.

Dugan parked and walked up the porch steps, then knocked. He waited a few minutes, then knocked again, and the sound of man's voice boomed, "Coming!"

Footsteps shuffled, then the door opened and a tall, rangy cowboy pushed the screen door open.

"Lloyd Riley?"

The man tipped his hat back on his head. "You're that Indian who found the hikers?"

"I was looking for them, but another rescue worker actually found them," Dugan said. He offered his hand and Riley shook it.

"Name's Dugan Graystone."

“What are you doing out here?” Riley asked.

Dugan chose his words carefully. Tough cowboys were wary of admitting they had money problems. “I spoke with George Bates at the bank about that development Ron Lewis had planned around Cobra Creek.”

Riley stiffened. “What about it?”

“Bates said he asked him to invest before he died. He also mentioned that he talked to some of the locals about investing, as well.”

“So?” Riley folded his arms. “He held meetings with the town council and talked to most everyone in town about it. Didn’t he approach you?”

Dugan shook his head. “No, he probably meant to, but he didn’t get around to me before he died.”

Riley pulled at his chin. “Yeah, too bad about that.”

The man sounded less than sincere. And Bates had said that he thought Riley made a deal with Lewis. “I heard Lewis offered to buy up some of the property in the area and made offers to landowners. Did he want to buy your farm?”

Riley’s eyes flickered with anger. “He offered, but I told him no. This land belonged to my daddy and his daddy. I’ll be damned if I was going to let him turn it into some kind of shopping mall or dude ranch.”

“So you refused his offer?”

“Yeah. Damn glad I did. Heard he cheated a couple of the old-timers.”

“How so?”

“Offered them a loan to get them out of trouble, supposedly through the backer of this rich development. But fine print told a different story.”

“What was in the fine print?”

“I don’t know the details, but when it came time to pay up and the guys couldn’t make the payments, he foreclosed and stole the property right out from under them.”

Riley reached for the door, as if he realized he’d said too much. “Why’d you say you wanted to know about all this?”

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