

A speedboat is shown from a side profile, moving quickly across a body of water. The boat is white with a dark stripe along the hull. It is leaving a large, white wake behind it. The background features a dense line of palm trees under a sky with soft, orange and pink clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, purples, and oranges.

DEADLY GETAWAY

CAROL J. POST

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Carol J. Post

PRAISE FOR AUTHOR CAROL J. POST

"...Gripping from the start, the second book in the Harmony Grove series keeps readers on the edge of their seats with the various twists and turns."

4 1/2 Star Review, *Romantic Times*

"Motive for Murder gives you some love-inspired suspense. Nothing like a death to make the heart grow fonder between two people who want to 'keep it professional,' but sometimes principles get in the way of the heart."

Clay Stafford, author and filmmaker

"...Don't be surprised if this book is hard to put down..."

4 1/2 Star Review, *Romantic Times*

ALSO BY CAROL J. POST

Cedar Key Series:

Deadly Getaway

[*Shattered Haven*](#)

[*Hidden Identity*](#)

[*Mistletoe Justice*](#)

Harmony Grove Series:

[*Midnight Shadows*](#)

[*Motive for Murder*](#)

[*Out for Justice*](#)

In loving memory of my father, Jacob “Bob” Keiper, who encouraged and supported me in everything I did. All my life, you made me believe I could do anything I set my mind to and never failed to let me know how proud you were of me. You even read and loved my first book. I wish you had lived long enough to see it sold and in print.

I miss you, Daddy.

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FOREWORD

The Cedar Key series is set in a lovely island community in Florida. While I have used a few names of actual places, the events and characters in my series are fictional. The first book published in this series is *Shattered Haven*. For readers who seek to read the series in chronological order, please note that *Deadly Getaway* is a prequel.

DEADLY GETAWAY

A Cedar Key Novel

ONE

There was only one reason Sydney Wilson would be hurrying down a dock at midnight—Bambi.

Bambi and a couple of bangle bracelets.

Ahead of her, Bambi made a zigzag trail, precariously close to the edge of the metal decking, her not-so-straight path likely the fault of too many Screwdrivers rather than the sky-high stilettos. She stopped short and teetered for a moment, looking around her, then made a beeline for a yacht moored two slips down.

When she started to step onto the rear platform, Sydney reached out and grasped her arm. “Shouldn’t we knock or something?”

“Everything’s dark. No one’s here.”

“Then why are you whispering?”

Bambi shrugged. “If he’s gone to bed, I don’t want to disturb him. I just need to get my bracelets.”

“Fine. I’ll wait here.”

“Please come with me.” Bambi turned doe eyes on her. She was a pro at getting what she wanted out of people, especially men.

She stepped onto the platform and swung open the short door onto the back of the boat. Sydney sighed and followed, clutching her purse to her side. Their room key was inside. So was her phone. Someone had to be responsible. At twenty-five, Bambi was a year older than she was, but one would never guess it. Bambi didn’t stress over anything. But she was the best friend Sydney had in all of Atlanta.

“Why’d you take your bracelets off, anyway?”

“Because I needed to wash my hands, and they always fall over my palms. I didn’t want to get soap on them.” She opened the cabin door.

“Now be quiet, in case he’s sleeping.”

Sydney followed her down three steps into the luxurious interior. Past the galley and eating area, a curtain was drawn, closing off the berth. They should just announce their presence. After all, Bambi had spent the last three hours partying with whomever was likely sleeping behind that curtain. Sydney hadn’t been in the mood. So while Bambi had partied, she had watched a movie then gone to sleep. She crossed her arms and waited while Bambi opened a door to the left and slipped inside the small space.

Several moments passed. How long did it take to grab a couple of bracelets?

“What are you doing in there?”

Bambi stepped out. “They’re not there.” She swayed sideways, before catching herself on the edge of the door opening. “I think this is the wrong boat.”

“The wrong boat!” She was still whispering, but wrapping her hands around Bambi’s throat had a lot of appeal at the moment. Maybe once she sobered up...

Bambi made it as far as the first step, when footfalls sounded against the metal dock and hushed male voices drifted to them. Bambi jumped back, plowing into her and almost knocking her down.

“Shh. Someone’s coming up the dock. Let’s stay put.”

Sydney huffed out an annoyed breath. They shouldn’t have boarded without permission. But now that they were here, staying inside until the men were well past was probably a good idea.

Then the boat tilted, its one side dipping down briefly. Someone had just boarded. Bambi cast her a panicked glance, then dragged her into the bathroom.

Sydney shook off her grasp. “We need to just tell them we got on the wrong boat.”

“I don’t know them. They might have us arrested for trespassing.” The effects of the alcohol seemed to have suddenly dissipated. With panic in her eyes, Bambi looked quite sober.

The boat tipped again as another person boarded. Maybe there was even a third. It was hard to tell.

Sydney thrust the curtain aside and stepped into the small fiberglass enclosure, pulling her friend in with her. The door to the bathroom was open several inches, the same as when they had boarded the boat. As long as no one felt like taking a midnight shower, they should be able to eventually slip away without being discovered.

Sydney shook her head. There was only one reason she would be hiding in a yacht bathroom at midnight... Her carefree, impetuous friend had gotten her into predicaments before, but never one like this.

Men clomped down the steps and into the cabin.

“Look, man, I don’t know anything.” The voice was thick with fear. “I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Shut up.” The words were sharp and laced with tension. “Boss, wake up. We got a problem.”

Up front, the curtain slid back in its track, and footsteps sounded.

“What have you done now?”

Bambi had guessed right. The captain of the boat had been asleep in the front berth. And he wasn't happy.

“We made the deal. The contact walked away with the deposit. When we were headed back to the car, we found this guy hiding in the alley. He witnessed the whole thing.”

Bambi's head pivoted, and fear-filled eyes locked with Sydney's, fear that was likely reflected in her own. Dear God, what had Bambi gotten them into? This was supposed to be a fun summertime getaway to Bambi's aunt's condo, a way for Sydney to get her mind off her status as newly unemployed.

“No, I didn't see anything. I had just walked back there.”

“You shouldn't have brought him here.” The captain's tone held a calm coldness.

“What were we supposed to do? Shoot him in the alley? The police would have come down on us before we even made it back to the car.”

Footsteps retreated and pounded up the steps. An engine started up, its vibration rumbling through the hull. The last of the color drained from Bambi's face. Sydney put her hand over Bambi's mouth and held an index finger to her own.

“Where are you taking me?” The fear had turned to panic. “Let me go. I swear I won't say anything.”

The boat backed from its slip, then changed direction. Finally, the pitch of the engine rose and grew louder. They were moving faster now, likely leaving Crystal River and heading into the open Gulf. Sydney lifted her purse strap over her head to the opposite shoulder and gripped the handrail, hoping that no bumps would send them both tumbling out of the shower enclosure.

The captain spoke again, calling down into the cabin from above. “George, get up here and steer the boat.”

More footsteps sounded as the men traded places.

When the captain spoke again, he was right outside the bathroom door. “You did make sure he's not wearing a wire, right?”

“We didn't think about it.”

“You idiots. He could be a cop.”

There was a long pause before the other man spoke. “No, he's clean.”

“So what were you doing in the alley at almost midnight?” The captain was apparently going to be the interrogator.

“I was going for a walk. I couldn’t sleep.”

“You live near there?”

“Yeah, a couple blocks away.”

“Check his wallet.”

“That’s an old address on my driver’s license. I moved a month ago and haven’t had it changed yet.”

Several moments passed in silence. “Kenneth Waskiewicz.” It was one of the other two men who spoke. He stumbled over the last name.

“This isn’t a Crystal River address.”

“I told you, I moved.”

There was another pause. Maybe they were rifling through the things in the guy’s wallet.

“Business cards. Who are you working for?” The captain had resumed his questioning.

“That’s confidential.”

A loud smack sounded just outside the door, accompanied by a grunt. When another punch was thrown, Bambi began to tremble.

“Who are you working for?” Although the words were louder, the calm coldness was still there.

Silence. Then several more punches. Sydney cringed with each one. They were going to beat the guy senseless if he didn’t talk. And if it didn’t stop soon, Bambi was going to come unglued. She was shaking her head, with eyes squeezed shut and tears streaming down her face.

Then there were heavy shuffles and the solid tread of the men moving up the steps. They were all up on deck now. The engine dropped to idle.

“Are you going to talk, or are we going to have to feed you to the sharks?”

“You’re going to feed me to the sharks regardless, so I’m going to protect my client.” His words were strained and slightly slurred. He was likely missing a few teeth.

“You’re right.”

A chill swept through Sydney. There was something ominous about the words.

A gunshot rang out, and Bambi thrust the curtain aside and ran from the bathroom. By the time Sydney recovered enough to follow, Bambi had made it onto the front berth and already had her upper body through the front hatch. As Sydney ran forward, Bambi’s legs and finally her red stilettos disappeared through the opening. Shouts sounded from behind

and footsteps pounded overhead. Another shot rang out, and Bambi screamed. There were two more shots, then a splash.

Sydney froze, horror gluing her to the spot. The men had just killed Bambi. She kicked her body into gear. They would be back down any moment. And they would search the entire boat. There would be nowhere she could hide.

She ran toward the back and up the steps. Kenneth whatever-his-name-was was gone, probably thrown overboard. As she hurled herself through the opening, her purse strap caught on the door latch and held for a fraction of a second before snapping. The leather bag fell to the deck. The same moment, someone shouted behind her. She steeled herself against the pitching and rolling of the boat and stumbled across the deck. Another shot rang out, accompanied by a metallic ping. Pain like nothing she had experienced before shot through her, a red-hot poker into her left shoulder.

She threw herself over the side of the boat, and the waves closed in around her, the Gulf surprisingly cold for late July. Her mind spun. With her left arm useless, she would never be able to get far enough away to elude them. As soon as she resurfaced, they would shoot her.

No, she wasn't going to give up that easily. She kicked her feet and made wide strokes with her right arm. Her lungs began to burn, and still she pushed herself. When she couldn't hold out any longer, she broke the surface, sucked in two quick breaths and once again dipped beneath the waves.

When she surfaced the second time, the boat was moving in a slow circle, two spotlights seeking her out. One passed within a few feet of her. She stifled a panicked gasp and ducked into the waves again. At least nature was on her side—the sky was dark, devoid of a moon, and clouds obscured the stars.

The next time she surfaced, the spots clicked off, and a cold male voice carried across the waves. “Forget it. I hit her. She’s as good as dead. With two bloody bodies in the water and her leaving a trail, she’s inviting every shark within miles to dinner.”

“Think we better monitor the police scanner, just in case?”

“I had already planned to.”

Any other conversation was lost over the roar of the motor as the boat sped away.

Relief flooded her, but it was tinged with hopelessness. They were no longer shooting at her, but she was miles from shore, blood flowing from a bullet wound. Nothing short of a miracle was going to save her. And she wasn't counting on any miracles. She had left behind her parents' childish beliefs the same time she walked away from all their other small-town, backward ways.

And she had hurt them. Deeply. Her heart twisted. She would never have the opportunity to say *I'm sorry*.

She watched the stern light fade as the boat moved away. Soon she would be alone in an inky black world of water and sky. She scanned the horizon. Hope pulsed through her. To her left, a cluster of lights shone in the distance, a soft glow in the darkness. If they had headed northwest out of the river, the cluster of lights would be Cedar Key. But she would never make it. Land was too far away, and she had only one good arm. She would pass out from loss of blood long before she reached those distant lights.

Except one didn't seem so distant. She squinted into the darkness. One light seemed to stand apart, above the others and closer, like the mast light on a sailboat.

Hope sparked again. She wouldn't be able to reach Cedar Key, but maybe she could get the attention of someone on that boat.

She drew in huge gulps of air and forced them out in long, high-pitched calls for help. She wouldn't swim. She needed to conserve her energy. If the people on the boat could hear her, they would come to her. She just had to hold on until they arrived.

The mast light began to move, so slowly she was afraid she was imagining it. Another light appeared, a red bow light. Soon it was joined by a green one. The boat had turned toward her. Renewed vigor filled her. And she continued to scream.

After what seemed like forever, another set of lights appeared on the horizon, dual spots. A rescue boat. Then a rumble broke the quiet of the night, and a helicopter approached, its spotlight sweeping the waves in big circles. Maybe it was time to reevaluate her ideas on miracles. She lifted her good arm and waved, struggling to keep her face above water. The spot stopped, bathing the area around her in sharp white light. They had found her. Help was on the way.

Weakness washed through her, and time seemed to stretch, a thick rubber band pulled by giant hands. Darkness encroached and the lights faded.

No.

She raised a hand.

So close.

And slipped beneath the surface.

Warm.

Comfortable.

And finally safe.

Wade Tanner stood at the helm of the Cedar Key Fire rescue boat, Joe Stearn next to him. The engine was wide open, sending the fiberglass boat bouncing over the choppy seas at over fifty miles per hour.

He hoped it would be fast enough. Not only had Allison Winchester heard distant screams, she had heard gunshots. Someone was in serious trouble. What a way to get back in the saddle after a two-week vacation—a middle-of-the-night search and rescue in the Gulf.

A chopper passed overhead, its low rumble competing with the higher-pitched whine of the 175-horse motor. A beam shone down and swept the waves in slow circles, but everywhere else, the darkness was thick. Finding a lone person in countless square miles of ocean was next to impossible.

Up ahead, the movement of the light halted. His pulse picked up. Had the chopper personnel seen something? He squinted through the darkness. An arm broke the surface, then disappeared between two waves. Hope surged through him.

“Hold on a few more minutes.” The wind blew his words back in his face.

He sped closer. Between the boat’s four spots and the larger one from the chopper, virtual daylight surrounded the struggling swimmer. One more time, an arm lifted briefly, slender, like a woman’s. Then there was no more movement. She was tiring.

“Hold on another half minute.”

Her head dipped out of sight, and for several tense moments, he watched. He threw the throttle back till the engine was idling. She was just

beneath the surface, long hair fanned out around her. Before the boat drifted to a stop, Joe had already removed his shoes and dove in.

Wade turned the boat around and helped Joe lift her onto the flat back deck. As Joe climbed aboard, Wade pressed two fingers to her carotid artery.

“She has a pulse, but it's weak. And she's not breathing.” He tipped her head back and exhaled into her mouth. Her chest rose.

Joe adjusted the movable spots to give him more light and lifted his radio from his belt. Red-tinged water seeped across the fiberglass deck. Her body heaved, and water flowed from her mouth. His breath escaped in a rush as he rolled her onto her right side. She was breathing, but she was still unconscious. Now that he had her on her side, the source of the blood was obvious. There was a nasty hole in her shoulder. And since there didn't appear to be an exit wound anywhere, the bullet was likely lodged somewhere inside. If she was lucky, it missed her spinal cord and vital organs.

After radioing dispatch, Joe moved to the helm and threw the throttle forward. The nose lifted, and they shot into the night. When they got back, there would be an ambulance waiting at the marina.

But Wade's eyes never left the woman lying on the deck in front of him. He had covered her with a dry blanket. And he was keeping direct pressure on the wound, so he had pretty well stanching the flow of blood. But how much had she already lost? Her face was pasty white in the light of their spots, and her breathing was shallow. How had she ended up several miles out in the Gulf in the middle of the night, bleeding from a bullet wound?

As they approached the marina, red and blue flashing lights pierced the dark night. An ambulance was waiting. So was a Cedar Key police cruiser. He dropped his gaze back to the woman, and her eyes fluttered open. There was confusion in their depths. Then they widened in fear, and she tried to sit up.

He put a hand on her good shoulder and leaned close so she could hear him over the roar of the motor. They were at half throttle now. “It's okay. Just relax. You're safe. We've radioed for help.”

Her eyes widened even more, and she shook her head. “No, no radio. They're listening.”

She tried to pull her arms free of the blanket. She was successful with her right, which she used to push herself to a semi-seated position.

He eased her back down and took her hand while Joe motored up to the dock. "It's okay. You're safe now. Tell me your name."

Her gaze locked with his, and a little of the wildness slid from her eyes. "Sydney."

"I won't let anything happen to you, Sydney. Joe and I work for the Cedar Key Fire Department." He glanced to his left where two paramedics were hurrying down the dock with a stretcher.

Sydney's eyes followed his and again grew wide with fear. "No. Make them stay away."

"It's okay, Sydney. They're paramedics. They're here to help you."

She pushed herself into a seated position and reached for the side of the boat. Wade frowned. She was determined to stand with or without his help. He would assist her off the boat, then get her to lie down on the stretcher.

She sagged against him, but as soon as she was off the boat, she pushed away from him and the paramedics and stumbled up the dock.

He reached her in three long strides and pulled her into his arms. "Sydney, you've been shot, and you almost drowned. You need medical care."

"I can't stay." She turned wild eyes on him. "They were listening. They know where I am."

"It's okay. I won't let anything happen to you. We're all going to get you the help you need." The tension seemed to ease from her body. He relaxed his hold on her and looked toward the paramedics. Out of nowhere, a small fist connected with his jaw. For someone on the brink of unconsciousness, that punch held surprising strength.

But he didn't have time to think about the condition of his jaw. Sydney had slipped from his grasp and had already made it off the dock, headed toward the city park. She had to be running on pure adrenaline. She had nothing else left. As he reached her, she crumpled, and he caught her before she hit the ground. He picked her up and began moving toward the ambulance. Her eyes fell shut then sprang open again, as if she was fighting to stay conscious.

"Please. Don't let them take me. They'll find me." Her voice was weak, paper thin.

He cast a glance at Hunter Kingston, who had exited the cruiser and fallen into step next to him.

“Who’s going to find you?” Hunter’s tone was gentle. “Who did this?”

“Men. I don’t know.”

Wade placed her on the stretcher. “No one’s going to hurt you. The ambulance will take you to the hospital. You’ll be safe.”

She reached out to him and took his hand. “Please stay with me.”

He squeezed her hand. It felt tiny and frail inside his. “One of the paramedics will ride in the back with you. You won’t be alone.”

“The hospital. They’ll find me there. Stay with me. Please.”

Her gaze locked with his in silent entreaty, and in that moment, he couldn’t deny her anything.

“All right. I’ll come. When you wake up, I’ll be there.”

The tension fled her features and she relaxed her grip, letting her hand slide from his. Her eyelids fell closed, her lashes long and dark against her pale skin. Jet black strands of wet hair fell over the side of the stretcher. As they loaded her into the back of the ambulance, his heart lurched. She looked so tiny and frail under the thin blanket covering her.

“Where are you taking her?”

“North Florida.”

He nodded his thanks and moved to help Joe load the boat onto the trailer. As soon as his work was done, he would go home and change into dry clothes. He wasn’t soaked like Joe, but he was wet from holding Sydney. Once changed, he would head for Gainesville.

When the call came in an hour ago, he had just gotten home. He hadn’t even had a chance to unpack. After two weeks on the road, nothing appealed to him more than a good night’s sleep in his own bed. Well, it was going to have to wait. Because a little sprite of a woman had touched his heart. And he had made a promise.

As he cranked the winch, pulling the boat onto the trailer, fear-filled eyes haunted him. Whatever had happened to her, she was terrified.

She had every reason to be afraid. Someone wanted her dead. They had already tried once to kill her.

And if given half a chance, they would probably do it again.

TWO

Sydney drifted on a cloud. Foggy images floated through her mind, disjointed thoughts that she couldn't seem to put in any logical order. A small shower enclosure. A cloudless night sky. Water all around, cold and dark.

And caring eyes set in a handsome face.

That last image was the one she tried to cling to. The others seemed to hold an unspoken threat, something sinister that darkened the edges of her mind.

But not thoughts of the man with the kind eyes. Everything about him promised comfort and security. He exuded warmth, a deep concern that wrapped around her like a thick down comforter. Wherever he was, that was where she wanted to stay.

A rhythmic beep penetrated the fog, and she fought to shut it out. But it tugged at her, trying to sweep her through the mist, away from the man who had looked at her with such care. She reached back and held on, but the pull was too strong. He grew farther away, faded and disappeared altogether.

Her eyes snapped open. When she turned her head to the side, the man in her dreams was sitting in a chair beside her. She couldn't see his eyes. They were closed and his head was tipped forward. She couldn't even see his face that well in the dim light. But it was him.

The last of the fog cleared and reality slammed into her. Memories came rushing forward, screaming into her mind. Her gasp rent the semi-silence of the room. They had killed Bambi. And they were coming for her.

The man's head lifted and his eyes opened. He stood and leaned over her, resting a hand on her arm. "Shh, it's okay."

Her spinning thoughts gradually slowed. He was there. She had asked him to stay with her and he had.

She tried to sit up, but a searing pain shot through the left side of her body and kept her flat on her back. "Where am I?"

"North Florida Regional Medical Center in Gainesville."

She studied him for several moments. That care and concern she had seen in her dreams was still there. She hadn't imagined it.

"You came."

His mouth curved up in a soft smile. "I keep my promises."

“Thank you.” She drew in a deep breath, and another pain pierced her shoulder.

“How am I? Did they get the bullet out?”

He eased himself back into the chair. “Yeah. There wasn’t near the damage that they expected. Pretty much all soft tissue. And no organs got hit. Was the shooter pretty far away?”

“No, we were on a boat. But I think the bullet hit something and ricocheted. There was a gunshot and a ping and a searing pain, all at the same time. I guess I was pretty lucky.”

“Either that, or you have a guardian angel who really stays on his toes.” He gave her another smile, one she couldn’t help but return.

Warmth filled her chest and spread through her body. With those dark eyes, that wavy golden-brown hair, and the way he filled out that T-shirt of his, he could be featured on one of those sexy firemen calendars.

But she wasn’t going to notice all that. She had someone. She and Larry had been together for six months, and it was serious enough to be exclusive.

His words cut into her thoughts. “I’m Wade Tanner, by the way.”

She reached across her chest to extend her right hand. “Sydney Wilson. But I guess you already know that. I owe you a big thank you for saving my life.”

“No thanks necessary. It’s all part of the job.”

His smile made her stomach do a little flip. What was wrong with her? Okay, it wasn’t that many hours ago that people were shooting at her. Maybe she was being a little hard on herself.

“Now that you’re awake, the police are waiting to talk to you and find out how you came to be floating in the Gulf in the middle of the night with a bullet wound in your shoulder. In fact, there’s been an officer stationed right outside that door ever since they brought you in here.”

She let her head roll to the right. There was a bed next to her, but it was empty. Beyond that was a door leading into a well-lit hall. She turned back to Wade. “I don’t know how much information I’m going to be able to give them. I don’t know who the men were. I didn’t even see anyone.”

Wade’s gaze went to the door, and she followed it to watch a male nurse approach. According to the badge clipped to his left pocket, his name was Randy. He laid a clipboard on the table next to the other bed and approached with a syringe.

Uneasiness sifted over her and she pushed it aside. He was a nurse. He had the uniform. He even wore a North Florida Regional Medical Center badge. She was being overly jumpy.

He smiled down at her, but it somehow fell short of reaching his eyes. In fact, their blue depths were cold and hard. There was no kindness there, none of the sympathy and compassion that should form the foundation for his profession. Her uneasiness turned to fear.

“I’m here to give you something for pain.”

“N-no, I’m fine. I don’t need anything.”

He frowned, and his eyebrows dipped down. His gaze grew even harder. “Dr. Smith said you need something for pain.”

“No, really, I’m fine.”

“It’s not going to hurt. Just a little prick.” He swabbed her upper arm, then grasped her wrist with his left hand.

Panic spiraled through her. “No, I don’t want it.” When she tried to pull free, his grip tightened and he brought the syringe toward her. Lightning fast, Wade was on his feet with his hand clamped around the nurse’s forearm, his grip like steel.

“The lady said no.”

Over the top of her, the two men did battle with their eyes. Finally, the uniform-clad one backed down.

“Whatever. Dr. Smith isn’t going to be happy.” He turned and stalked from the room, picking up his clipboard and mumbling something about difficult patients on his way out.

Wade put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, are you okay?”

She drew in a deep breath and tried to calm her racing heart. Now that the nurse was gone, the threat didn’t seem so real. Maybe she had overreacted.

She shrugged. “I didn’t like him. Something about him scared me. He had cold eyes.”

“I don’t know about cold eyes, but he definitely had no bedside manner.”

“Thanks for sticking up for me. I don’t know what’s usually involved in your job, but I’d say you’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty on this one. I really appreciate it, even though I didn’t show it last night.” She gave him a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry I punched you.”

“Was that what that was?” He grinned. “Believe me, you were too weak to inflict any real damage.”

She repositioned the sheet and let a breathy sigh escape. Wade was the epitome of the classical knight in shining armor. He was probably also married. With three kids. Even though it didn't make any difference to her, she still found herself seeking out his left hand. Nope, no ring.

A commotion in the hall drew both their attention, and Wade stood. Moments later, a hospital security guard and two uniformed police officers burst into the room. The one officer she recognized. It was Hunter something from Cedar Key. The security guard raced to her bedside, concern etched into his features.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. Why?”

“We found one of our nurses in the employee smoking area unconscious and wearing nothing but his briefs. When he came to, he said someone had come up behind him and put him in a sleeper hold. That's the last thing he remembers.”

As he talked, dread spiraled through her.

Hunter frowned. “I can only think of one reason why someone would want to impersonate a nurse.”

The other officer finished the thought for him. “To gain access to a patient.”

The room started to spin, and a cold lump settled in her gut. The man with the syringe. She closed her eyes. If Wade hadn't stopped him...

“The nurse—” She opened her eyes and looked at the security guard. “The nurse who was attacked. What is his name?”

“His name is Randy.”

Wade nodded at two nurses and continued down the hall at a good clip. It took everything he had to not break into a full run. He had left Sydney in Hunter's care to go check the security footage. And he'd been antsy to get back to her from the moment he left.

He kept telling himself he didn't have anything to worry about. Sydney was just as safe with Hunter as she was with him. Actually safer. Hunter had his weapon. He hadn't brought his own. When he left his home in the wee morning hours, he had been in volunteer fireman mode instead of part-time Cedar Key police officer mode. The on-duty folks would be right outside her room, armed and ready.

And the bad guys still almost got to her. Whoever was after her was serious.

Wade rounded the last corner and covered the final yards. Even before he reached the open doorway, he heard feminine laughter from inside. He rapped his fist against the door jamb.

“It doesn’t sound like there’s official police work going on in here.”

Sydney laughed again. She had raised the back of the bed and was only about fifteen degrees from upright. “It *was* totally business at first. He asked me everything he could think to ask. And I told him what little bit I know. The rest of the time, he’s been telling me stories.” She smiled up at him. “And I now know a little bit more about you than I did an hour ago.”

He circled her bed to stand next to Hunter. “Don’t believe everything you hear.” He gave the officer a friendly punch to the shoulder.

“Especially when it comes from this guy.”

Hunter grinned at him. He was a good cop. He was also a good friend. He’d joined the police force and moved to Cedar Key a year ago. And they had soon become fast friends. He and Hunter and Darci and now Allison. If Allison hadn’t decided to sail that boat of hers down from Rhode Island and settle in Cedar Key, and if she and Darci hadn’t decided to do a weekend getaway, Sydney wouldn’t be lying there. It was Allison’s 911 call that had saved Sydney’s life.

Hunter grew suddenly serious. “We’re bringing her to Cedar Key.”

“What?”

His exclamation drew Sydney’s gaze.

“I can’t go home. They know where I live.”

“How?”

“They have my purse. My ID, my credit cards and my checkbook. Even my cell phone. They have everything.”

Wade frowned. That wasn’t good. He circled to the other side of the bed and took a chair there. “I looked at all the surveillance video, but there’s nothing we can use.”

Hunter’s brows raised. “He totally avoided the cameras?”

“He kept his head down so no one could see his face.” The guy was smart. That clipboard he pretended to study enabled him to keep his face averted without drawing suspicion.

Wade folded his hands across his lap and leaned back in the chair. "So tell me what I missed. Who are these guys and how did you wind up with them after you?"

Sydney reached for the control to adjust the bed, then winced when the back began its descent. After reclining it a few degrees further, she turned her head to the side to face him more fully.

"Unfortunately, I don't know anything about the men who are after me. I live in Atlanta, but I was vacationing with my friend Bambi at the Riverside Resort and Marina in Crystal River. We wound up on the wrong boat. The captain was sleeping inside. Before we could get off, two guys dragged a third on, claiming he had witnessed something, some kind of deal. They motored out into the Gulf, shot him and threw him overboard."

Her eyes lowered and sadness crept into her features. "That's when Bambi lost it. She ran from our hiding place and up onto the deck, probably planning to jump overboard. She never made it." When her eyes again met his, tears had pooled against her lower lids. "Judging from what I heard, they shot her three times."

A vise clamped down on his heart. She had been through a lot in the past twenty-four hours. Listening to Hunter's stories had likely given her a temporary reprieve. Hunter was good at that, sensing the pain in people and reaching out with encouragement and support.

She sucked in a deep breath. "I knew then that they would find me and kill me, so while they were up front, I slipped out the back. But they saw me before I could dive in. Got me in the shoulder."

"Are you able to describe any of the men? Were any names mentioned?"

She shook her head. "One of the men was George. And the guy that got killed was Kenneth something. His last name was unusual, maybe Polish. And I didn't see anything. Bambi and I were hiding in the shower. Once I came up on deck, I made a beeline for the side and never once looked back. I didn't see the men, but I would be able to identify the boat."

That would be valuable information. The marina where it had been moored would have records of every boat there, along with the information on each owner. "What kind of boat was it?"

"I don't know the make and model, but I would definitely recognize it if I saw it again."

Hunter held up a rough sketch. "She drew a picture of the layout, along with cushion colors, flooring and counter surfaces. I've already called the information in to the station. We've got Levy County helping us on it, too. By the end of the day today, my hope is that we'll have an owner name and at least one person in custody. Meanwhile, we keep her in Cedar Key."

"Agreed. Have you talked to a doctor yet? Any idea how long they're going to keep you?"

"Yeah, the doctor came in a little while ago to check on me."

Wade shook his head. "I'm here all night, then leave for an hour and miss everything. So what did the doctor say?"

"They're sending me home this afternoon."

"Already?" It seemed too soon. She had just the night before been shot and almost drowned.

"Yeah. He said I'm doing fine. I just have to stay in the sling, then go to his office in ten days to have the sutures removed and the wound checked." She lowered her eyes again, as if uncomfortable. "I might need to ask for a ride."

"I'll be glad to take you." Wade jumped in before Hunter could. Not that there was any kind of competition for her attention. Hunter wasn't in the market for romance, and neither was he. At least not with a city girl. He'd been there, done that. More than once. And neither of the women had been willing to give up the city life for a quiet little town like Cedar Key.

"I'm afraid I'm going to be a total charity case. I have no money and no credit cards. Even if I could get to a bank, I can't draw anything out without identification. Whoever helps me, I can totally pay them back once this is over. But in the meantime, all I can offer is a bunch of IOUs."

"Can you cook?"

A smile crept up her cheeks, the first he had seen since shortly after reentering her room. "I'm a quite good cook, actually."

"Then how about staying with me and my cousin? We're two single guys. Neither of us are slobs. But our cooking leaves a lot to be desired. You feed us, and there won't even be any IOUs."

She held out a hand for him to shake. "Deal."

Her smile widened, and her eyes lit with appreciation. She was pretty. No, she'd been pretty last night, with her delicate features and wide fear-filled eyes. Today she was beautiful. Color had returned to her face, and her hair flowed over her shoulders and lay in silken ebony waves against

the white sheets. Her features were still delicate, but there was nothing weak about her. She certainly wasn't a fragile flower to have survived what she had.

And it wasn't over. Hospital personnel hadn't yet found the syringe. Chances were good they wouldn't. But if they did, it would contain something lethal. He had no doubt. When it came time to leave the hospital, they would have to take extra precautions. They would have to sneak her out. Then they would have to make sure they weren't being followed.

Lastly, he would get her set up in his and Caleb's place. Once that was accomplished, he would do everything he could to make sure she was safe.

Even if it meant enlisting the aid of the entire Cedar Key Police Department.

THREE

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and dark, heavy clouds piled up on the horizon, gathering for the usual afternoon shower. Sydney waited just inside the glass doors. Her shorts and T-shirt were the same ones she had come in with during the early morning hours. Now dry, they were almost stiff enough to stand up on their own. But they were all she had. Walking out in a hospital gown wasn't an option.

She scanned the nearest parking area. Wade was out there somewhere, watching from his vehicle. At any moment, a red Corolla would be pulling up to the emergency room entrance to whisk her away.

The plan was Wade's and Hunter's, but their friend Darci would be driving the getaway car. A second friend, Allison, would tag along. If anyone was watching for her to leave, they wouldn't be expecting her to exit through the emergency room.

The red Corolla approached and eased to a stop in front of the door. Two women were inside, one brunette and one blond. Just like Wade had described. The blonde jumped out and reached for a lever on the side of the seat, and its back flipped forward. Yep, definitely Darci and Allison.

As soon as Sydney stepped outside, the blonde flashed her a friendly smile. "I'm Allison, and this is Darci." She slid into the back. "Get in, and we'll take you to Wade's."

Sydney cast a quick glance around. There were people coming and going, but no one seemed to take any special interest in her. The man who had tried to give her the shot was nowhere in sight. She sank into the front seat and pulled the door shut.

"Thanks. I owe you." She was going to be indebted to a whole bunch of people before this was all over.

Darci pulled away from the curb and headed toward the street. "We're glad we can help."

By the time they exited the interstate onto 24, Wade had caught up to them and was directly behind them. Hunter had left a short time ago to check out Riverside Resort and Marina with a Levy County detective. He had said they would meet with marina staff, and he would try to bring back pictures of any boats that fit her description.

Allison spoke from the back seat. "Are you doing all right? Hunter told us everything."

“Better than all right, all things considered.” She was alive. That in itself was saying something, because all odds had been against her the moment the men stepped onto the boat. Now, with four new friends ready to stick their necks out for her, all the odds had just been thrown out the window.

“Oh, this is yours.” Darci reached into the console and picked up a phone.

Sydney took it from her. It was a Trac phone. “Mine?”

“Wade had us pick it up here in Gainesville and activate it. Since the bad guys have your phone, they might try to use your contact list to find you.”

A knot of dread settled in her gut. It wouldn’t work, because no one knew where she was. But her parents would be frantic if they thought she was in trouble. So would Larry.

“I’d better make a couple of phone calls.”

The first was her mom. Her hello held hesitancy, probably because of the unknown number. But beneath the hesitancy was worry.

“Mom, it’s me.”

“Honey, where are you?” The words tumbled out.

She had just talked to her mom two days ago, right before leaving for Crystal River. Someone had obviously spoken with her since.

“I’m okay.”

“A detective from the Gainesville Police Department called and said you were in trouble and they needed to know where you were. I told them you were on vacation somewhere in Crystal River. I couldn’t remember the name you gave me.”

“That was no detective. I saw something I wasn’t supposed to see. Can you give me the number they called from?” These guys were probably too smart to make the mistake of calling her parents from a traceable number. But that would be for the police to determine.

The sigh that came through the phone was heavy with worry. “Honey, please come home. Your father and I are so worried about you.”

“Mom, I can’t. It wouldn’t be safe, for you guys or me. Please don’t worry. I’ve got people looking out for me.” She drew in a deep breath. “But if you guys wanted to send up a few prayers on my behalf, I wouldn’t be opposed.” She could use all the help she could get.

After jotting down the phone number with a pen and paper that Allison provided, she touched the screen and ended the call. “They’ve

contacted my parents. I've got the number they called from. Do you know Hunter? He's a Cedar Key police officer."

Darci smiled. "Everyone in Cedar Key knows Hunter Kingston. His cell number's in your phone."

Her eyes dipped to the phone. "What?"

"Allison and I took the liberty of saving a few numbers we thought you might need. Hunter's cell number is in there and so is Wade's. While we were at it, we put mine and Allison's in, too."

She looked at Darci askance. Her jaw was probably sagging. But she couldn't help it. Until last night, she had never met anyone from Cedar Key. Now she had four people helping her as if they had all been childhood friends.

She dialed Hunter's number. He was just leaving Crystal River. He promised to stop by Wade's that evening. Her next call was to Larry. He picked it up on the first ring, in spite of the strange number.

"Oh, it's you. Where are you calling from?"

"Gainesville." Well, actually, they were halfway to Cedar Key by now. But she couldn't tell him that. "Something's come up and I'm going to be gone a little longer than I had planned." She wouldn't give the details over the phone. And she wouldn't say anything about Bambi. The police were going to take care of notifying next of kin. Bambi's parents lived out of state. The last thing they needed was to find out about it on Facebook.

"Any idea how much longer?"

"No." Somehow he didn't seem all that disappointed. "I'll let you know once everything gets resolved."

"You're not in trouble, are you?"

"Sort of." She glanced at Darci. "But I'm with friends."

"Is there anything I can do?" Now there was a touch of worry in his tone.

"No. I'm all right." She bid him farewell and ended the call.

When they reached 19/98, instead of driving straight ahead toward Cedar Key, Darci made a right turn.

"Where are we going?"

"Walmart in Chiefland."

Sydney frowned. "I don't have any money."

"Yeah, you do." Darci reached into the front pouch of her purse and pulled out several twenties.

“I can’t take that.”

“Too late.” Darci offered her a cheeky grin. “It’s from Wade, and I already accepted it for you. Hunter’s going to clean out your room while he’s there, but since your trip has been indefinitely extended, Wade wanted to make sure you have enough stuff to get by.”

She shook her head. “I’m going to be indebted to him for life. Is he always this generous?”

“Yeah.” The answer came in unison.

Darci continued. “I’ve known him since I was a kid. Even back then, he was always taking in some poor orphaned animal or sharing his sandwich with the kid who forgot his lunch money. I think it’s in his bones.”

Yep, total knight in shining armor. Sydney groaned inwardly. She needed to get over this crazy attraction to him pronto. They were going to be living under the same roof, with her cooking his meals. Larry wouldn’t be happy if he knew all the details.

Then again, Larry probably wouldn’t care. He didn’t get riled about much. He either trusted her one hundred percent or wasn’t that concerned about losing her.

When they pulled out of the Walmart parking lot forty-five minutes later, two plastic bags sat in the back seat. Wade had gone inside with them, but hung back to give her privacy. One of the first orders of business had been finding something more appropriate than her silk teddy to sleep in. She had decided on a loose T-shirt and gym shorts, then had chosen a few items to supplement her meager wardrobe. When she left Atlanta, she had planned to be gone four days. Of course, July in Florida, she could pretty well live in shorts, tees and sandals.

Once they arrived at Cedar Key, Darci moved down Gulf Boulevard, away from town, and eased to a stop in front of a small white house. Wade pulled his pickup into the narrow driveway. To the right of the drive, two tire tracks led to where an older Firebird was parked next to the house. Darci and Allison bid her farewell, leaving her alone with Wade. And whoever owned that Firebird.

“Is your cousin going to be all right with having an unexpected house guest?”

“Caleb, yes. Chandler, I’m not sure about.”

“You have two roommates?”

He reached for the knob, but the door swung inward. One of said roommates occupied the opening. He had the bleached blond hair and tan of a surfer and a relaxed stance that shouted *easy-going*.

"You must be Sydney." He stuck out his hand. "Caleb, Wade's cousin. He's the older one. I'm the better looking one."

She laughed, his friendliness putting her instantly at ease. "Thanks for letting me stay."

"Don't thank me. I'm just glad to get a break from this guy's cooking for awhile."

Wade closed the door behind them. "Hey, I could say the same about you."

Frenzied barking came from the direction of the hall, and moments later, a dachshund bounded into view, ears flopping. Dark brown eyes met hers, and he skidded to a stop. The barking intensified. Wade bent to scoop him up. "It's okay, buddy. She's good."

"I take it that's Chandler." Sydney smiled and extended her arm, palm down. The dog sniffed her hand, then eyed her warily.

"He'll get used to you pretty quickly." He poked a thumb toward Caleb. "He has let this guy into the house the past two summers."

Wade headed down a short hall and into a bedroom. Since her two Walmart bags were hanging from his arm, she followed.

He put the dog down, then placed the bags on the bed. "This will be your room."

She glanced around her. This wasn't a guest room. The bed was made, but at least two shirts were draped over the back of the desk chair, and the computer was on.

"Isn't this your room?"

He shrugged. "I'm going to sleep on the couch."

"Oh, no you're not." She snatched up the bags and headed for the door. "I'll sleep on the couch. I am *not* going to kick you out of your room."

He spread his arms, blocking her exit. "You're not kicking me out. I'm leaving willingly. You're a woman alone with two guys. You need your privacy."

"I grew up with three brothers. I don't know what privacy is." She planted her hands on her hips. "I also know how to stick up for what I want and not get mowed down just because I'm outnumbered and out-strengthened."

One side of his mouth quivered for a half second, as if he was trying to stifle a grin. “Out-strengthened?”

“You know what I mean. I’m not backing down on this. I already feel like I’m imposing. I’m not going to take over your bedroom.”

Before he could respond, the doorbell rang. Chandler flew from the room, once again barking. It didn’t last long. Apparently the newest visitor wasn’t a stranger.

She followed Wade down the hall. When they reached the living room, Hunter was inside, talking with Caleb. He was still in uniform and held a manila folder.

“I stopped by the station to print these up.” He reached inside and handed her several photos. “This boat isn’t usually moored in the area that you were describing, but the layout is the same. It’s owned by a Joseph Waterman. He’s a Crystal River dentist.”

She studied the first photo. It was the side of the boat, taken while approaching. The name spanned several feet, bold teal-colored letters against the white fiberglass—*Mary Sue*. She would have noticed that, even with her annoyance at Bambi for dragging her out of bed at midnight. Mary Sue was her mother’s name.

She looked at each of the other pictures, then shook her head. “This isn’t it. The boat we were on didn’t have the name painted there. The cabinets aren’t right and the mirror in the bathroom is different.” She handed them back to Hunter.

He slipped them into the folder. “There’s another boat that management says usually occupies a slip where you described, but it’s not there. It apparently sailed out sometime in the last twenty-four hours, a newer Tiara 3100. We looked up that model, and it’s the same layout as what you gave us.”

“Who owns that one?” The question came from Wade.

“A Bradley Burgess. He’s a general contractor. Lives in a nice house on the river. We tried going by there, but no one was home. And his construction company is closed for the weekend.”

While Hunter spoke, anticipation coursed through her. It had to be her boat. Its slip was in the right area. It fit her description. It had gone out and not come back. The evidence was piling up, too much to be mere coincidence.

They needed to find that boat. It would likely lead them to Bradley Burgess.

And if they could find Burgess, chances were good they would have Bambi's killer.

The scent of brewing coffee wafted down the hall, and Wade opened his eyes. No, that wasn't just coffee. He inhaled slowly, savoring the aromas. Bacon. Eggs. Likely even grits and toast. He had woken up to the same thing yesterday.

Sydney had won the battle for the couch. He had tried to convince her she wasn't imposing. Not in the slightest. But as long as she had his room, she was going to feel that way. So he had given in and let her take the couch, even though it went against every gentlemanly instinct he possessed.

Both nights he had slept with his door open, one ear cocked for any sounds outside the usual creaks and groans of the old wood-frame house. If Sydney would be safe anywhere, that place would be Cedar Key. But he wasn't going to totally relax until Bradley Burgess was caught, along with the two men working for him.

When he passed through the living room, Sydney's sheets were stacked on one end of the couch, neatly folded, with a sleeping Chandler on top. He shook his head. Fortunately, Sydney liked dogs. Because this one had taken to her almost immediately. He shouldn't be surprised. Chandler was a lady's dog, switching his loyalty to Wade only when it became clear that the lady had left for good.

He sighed and walked into the kitchen. Caleb was already seated at the table, nursing a cup of coffee, ready for his part-time job at the Island Trader. In another two weeks, he would head back to Florida State for his last year of school. He held up his mug in greeting.

Wade poured himself a cup of coffee. "Morning, folks."

Sydney offered him a smile, then returned to her duties, which were, at the moment, stirring scrambled eggs while they cooked. His heart stuttered. Her hair flowed down her back in soft waves, its rich color in sharp contrast to the pale blue of her T-shirt. She still wore the sling, but each day she seemed to get a little stronger. And a little more relaxed. Watching her settle in to her new role filled him with an odd sense of contentment. It was beginning to feel as if she belonged there. And it had only been two days.

He added creamer to his coffee and shook off the fanciful thoughts. The whole set-up was temporary. In fact, Sydney was temporary. As soon as she was no longer in danger, she would head back to Atlanta, and he would be alone again.

“Breakfast is ready.” Sydney plopped scrambled eggs on three plates, added grits, and then divvied up the bacon. A healthy stack of buttered toast sat on the kitchen table next to a jar of jelly. “Chandler has already eaten.”

No wonder the dog was so content. Wade eased into the chair opposite Caleb, and Sydney sat next to him.

“So what’s on the agenda for today?”

“Mowing the lawn and a trip to The Market for Gram and Gramps. Then when I’m done with that, a hand of rummy. There’s no way Gramps will let me get away without it.”

She smiled, but there was something wistful about the gesture. “It sounds like you’re close to your grandparents.”

“I am.”

“Do your parents live here, too?”

“Gram and Gramps *are* my parents. My dad left when I was three, and six months later, my mom dropped me off at Gram’s and never came back for me.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been hard.”

He shrugged. “I don’t remember it that well. I had a good life with Gram and Gramps. Gram was room mother and came to every school function we had. And in twelve years, neither of them ever missed a performance or end-of-year award ceremony. I don’t have any regrets.”

Caleb stood and picked up his empty plate. “Sorry to eat and run, but I’ve got to get to work. I’m opening today.”

Sydney waved and watched Caleb walk away. Then she turned back to Wade.

“What about you? It’s the start of a new week. Don’t you have to go to work at some point? I’m sure the Cedar Key Fire Department isn’t going to let you just hang out here with me indefinitely.”

“Actually, the Cedar Key Fire Department might. But the Cedar Key Police Department won’t.”

Both brows shot up. “You told me you worked for the fire department.”

“As needed. I also work part-time for the police department. Used to be full-time, but I cut my hours back a couple of years ago to go back to school.”

“For what?”

“Teaching. I start at Cedar Key School in two weeks.”

“What grade?”

“Fifth.”

She laid down her fork. “Wow, from police officer and fireman to fifth grade teacher. That's quite a leap. Do you know what you're in for?”

“I think I have a pretty good idea. I've been a youth worker at church for the past five years. Of course, those are teens.”

She studied him for several moments. “I can see you as a teacher. I bet you're good with kids.”

“I like to think so.” He downed the last of his coffee and set the empty cup back on the table. “What about you? Don't you have a job that you're in danger of losing if you don't get back soon?”

She gave him a wry smile. “That's already happened. I've spent the past two years as office manager for an aluminum construction company. Two weeks ago, they closed down my branch. That's what Bambi and I were doing in Crystal River. I was kind of bummed, and she wanted to get my mind off the fact that I had just lost my job.” She frowned. “I'd say she succeeded. Over the past few days, I haven't thought about my job at all.”

“It definitely puts things in perspective.” He stood and took both of their plates. “You cooked. I'll wash dishes.”

“How about if you mow while I wash dishes? Then if it's all right, I'll tag along with you to the grocery store.”

He nodded. “I'll even bring you with me to Gram and Gramps' house if you don't mind.”

The closer he could keep her, the better. She was probably perfectly safe. But he'd always been one to err on the side of caution.

Two hours later, he led Sydney to his Ranger and helped her into the seat. When he circled around to the driver's side, his gaze drifted down the street. A block away, an SUV sat facing them, parked at the edge of the road. It didn't belong to his neighbors. In fact, those neighbors spent their summers in Indiana.

Uneasiness crawled along his spine. Was someone inside, watching them? The vehicle was too far away to tell.

No, he was being paranoid. Although not the usual beach vacation destination with high-rise hotels and throngs of people, Cedar Key was still a favorite getaway for many. Strangers came and went all the time.

He slid into the driver's seat and cranked the truck. After backing from the drive, he started down Fourth Street, making frequent glances in his rear-view mirror. The SUV didn't follow, further proof that he was worrying for nothing. Going to and leaving the market, it didn't appear, and once he arrived at Gram and Gramps', he successfully pushed it from his mind.

He'd been wrong when he told Sydney Gramps would demand a hand of rummy. Gramps hadn't been satisfied until they'd played three. The extended game time was likely a plan to keep Sydney there as long as possible. Knowing Gram, she'd probably been conspiring the entire time, trying to figure out a way to inconspicuously lure the two of them together. It wouldn't be the first time Gram had played matchmaker. Every time he introduced a young lady to his grandparents, Gram's eyes lit with hope. She had a habit of setting herself up for disappointment.

It wasn't that he planned to stay single the rest of his life. He was just being more careful. This time it would be someone fairly local, who loved Cedar Key as much as he did. Someone who enjoyed the outdoors and would appreciate his friends and his church. Someone who was a good cook, because he wasn't, and he loved to eat. And someone who wouldn't mind spending time with two old people who meant more to him than anyone else in the world.

He smiled wryly. He wasn't asking for much.

His cell phone chimed, indicating that he had just gotten a text. After pulling into his driveway, he swiped the screen and touched the app. It was Hunter asking where he was. Thumbs flying over the screen, he typed, "Just got home from Gram's."

He pocketed the phone. "Hunter has news."

Excitement straightened her spine. "Maybe they found Burgess."

He nodded. He would take whatever Hunter had. They had traced the number that Sydney's mom had provided, and it had led nowhere. It belonged to a throwaway phone.

When he pulled into his driveway, Hunter was already there. He met them at the Ranger.

"Levy County just heard from Bradley Burgess."

Wade stepped from the truck. "Burgess called them?"

“Yep.”

Sydney hurried around the front, and Hunter continued. “He had gotten back to the marina, and management told him we were looking for him.”

Wade glanced down the street. The SUV was gone. But still, he’d rather have this discussion inside. He moved toward the house. “So what did he have to say?”

“He said he had just come back from a three-day fishing and photography trip. Said he got more pictures than he did fish. Anyway, he was shocked to find out about the murders. He was actually there the night it happened.”

Wade unlocked the door and motioned Hunter and Sydney inside. Chandler wiggled with excitement but didn’t bark. He was now used to Sydney. And his days of barking at Hunter were long past.

He closed the door and squatted to pet the dog. “Did Burgess see anything?”

“Yes and no. He said he heard a boat come in a little before midnight. He had already gone to bed, so he didn’t get up.”

Sydney’s brow creased. “Wait a minute. I thought you said he has a house on Crystal River.”

“He does. Apparently he and his wife are going through a pretty nasty divorce. She threw him out, and he’s been staying on the boat for the past three weeks. Anyhow, an hour after the boat came in, he heard the motors crank up again. This time he looked out the window and actually saw it leave.”

Wade offered Hunter a seat, then lowered himself into the recliner. “Was he able to give a good description, like the name of the boat?”

“He didn’t notice the name. But he said the boat was the same kind as his, a Tiara 3100, maybe a year or two older.”

“Did he see any people?”

“Not really. There was only one person up on deck, and he was sitting at the console. So Burgess couldn’t get a good look at him.”

Sydney nodded. “That fits. They were all in the cabin at first. Then the captain left to go start the motor.”

Wade frowned. “Are they taking Burgess’ word on everything, or is someone going to get pictures of the inside of his boat?”

“Someone from Levy County is headed there as we speak. Burgess is being more than cooperative. Says he wants to help in any way he can.”

Hunter turned to Sydney. “So we should have pictures for you to look at tomorrow.”

Wade nodded. “Good.”

Burgess’ story sounded convincing. But he wasn’t willing to take anything at face value. Especially when Sydney’s safety was at stake.

No, he wouldn’t eliminate Burgess as a suspect until Sydney did.

FOUR

Sydney stepped through the sliding glass door. A wall of heat pressed into her, even though the sun was almost through its descent. But at the end of July, Florida still had another two months of summer to burn off. She had slipped outside for privacy. But she wouldn't be there long. Larry wasn't a big talker.

She probably should have called him sooner. But she really hadn't found the time. Or maybe she just hadn't *taken* the time. Wade had worked in the morning, while she and Caleb occupied themselves with two games of Monopoly. And yesterday, the trip with Wade grocery shopping, and the visit with his grandparents had taken up a good bit of the day. That visit had also filled her with an unexpected homesickness. And even though she didn't call Larry when she got home, she took the time to call her mom.

The day before that, she had accompanied Wade and Caleb to Sunday morning services, much to her parents' pleasure. Except for a co-worker's wedding, it was the first time in two years that she had stepped foot inside a church. And the experience had left her second-guessing her decision to walk away from her faith. Staring death in the face had a way of rearranging one's priorities.

She took a couple of steps toward a wrought iron table and chair set, shaded by a big green umbrella. Except now, so late in the day, the oval-shaped patch of shade cooled the grass beside the patio. She sank into one of the chairs, phone in hand. Larry answered on the second ring.

"Hi babe. I was wondering when you were going to call." There was a stiffness in his tone. What was that about?

"I don't have anything new to tell you, but I wanted to check in, let you know I'm okay."

"Good, good. I'm glad to hear it."

No *I've been worried about you* or *When will you be coming home?* Something was off. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing, just hanging out."

A distant female voice drifted through the phone, but Sydney couldn't make out the words.

"Who are you with?"

"No one."

"I thought I heard a woman."

“That was the TV.” His next words came through hushed and muffled, as if he was whispering and trying to cover the phone. “Shh, stop it.”

Then there was a high-pitched giggle.

Sydney closed her eyes as a hollowness spread through her gut, along with a sick sense of déjà vu. She released a heavy sigh. “Don’t worry, I won’t bother you again.”

“Sydney wait, I can explain. I—”

She tapped the screen, sat back in the chair and waited for the tears that she fully expected to come.

There weren’t any.

And she knew why. She liked Larry, but she couldn’t say she loved him. They hadn’t gotten to that point yet. She was too gun shy. For good reason. The first time she had gone through betrayal with a guy, they had progressed far beyond exclusive and were thinking along the lines of forever. Forever had lasted a few months.

She stood with a sigh, and when she turned toward the house, Wade was watching her through the sliding glass door. He opened it for her when she approached.

“Everything okay?”

“Sure.” What else could she say? For the second time, a boyfriend had cheated on her? He would think she was awfully gullible. Or had a knack for choosing bad men. Apparently she did. “Are you ready to leave?”

He closed and locked the slider. “I am.”

Ten minutes later, he squeezed his Ranger into a parallel parking space at the edge of the road. Sydney leaned forward to look past Caleb. Dock Street was a hodgepodge of wooden structures housing a variety of restaurants, gift shops and lodging. According to Wade, on the Gulf side, many structures extended over the water, supported by pilings driven deep into the bedrock below.

Tonight they were headed to Steamers Bar and Grill, which occupied the space above the Island Trading Post. Bright blue steps led from the sidewalk to the lower deck. A combination of stairways and landings painted the same shade of blue made a diagonal swath across the building, carrying patrons up to the entrance of Steamers.

“This is it.” Wade stepped from the truck and circled around to meet her and Caleb on the sidewalk. “Darci’s car is already here. I’m guessing she picked up Allison, so we’re waiting on Hunter.”

And that was expected. He was just finishing his shift. They made their way up the steps and inside. Allison and Darci were already seated at a six-person table near a window. Most of the restaurant had a pretty much unbroken view of the Gulf.

Darci flashed them her usual vibrant smile. It seemed no matter what she was doing, she somehow managed to radiate enthusiasm.

Allison, while friendly, was a little more reserved. Though she smiled and interacted with everyone, there seemed to be an underlying somberness about her, as if she had known tragedy and hadn't yet been able to move past it. She had arrived in Cedar Key early that month, having sailed alone from Rhode Island. She was in the process of buying a rundown Victorian house with plans to renovate, but living on her boat in the meantime. And that was all Sydney knew about her. According to Wade, that was all anyone knew.

When the waitress came to take their drink orders, Darci finished with a request for a sweet tea for Hunter. Sydney looked around the table. They were a close-knit group.

"It's nice of you guys to include me."

Wade smiled. "It's nice to have you. But pretty soon we're losing these two." He inclined his head toward Darci and Caleb. "A week from Friday, Caleb leaves for three days for his friend's wedding. A few days after that, they both head back to school."

"Same school?"

Darci shook her head. "Rival schools, actually. Florida State and University of Florida. Go Gators!"

Caleb didn't take the bait. Either he didn't want to get into a whose-team-is-better debate, or he didn't care.

They had just gotten their drinks when Hunter joined them, taking the last available seat. He was still dressed in his police uniform.

"Sorry I'm late. And sorry to mix business with pleasure." He handed her a manila file folder.

"What's this?"

"Pictures of Burgess' boat."

She opened the folder. The one on top was a shot of the exterior. It showed the right side, the rear, and the back deck area. The name of the boat wasn't visible. Just as she remembered. Her pulse sped up.

The next photo was taken directly from the back. Everything looked the same there, too, with the steering console to the right of the opening that led down into the cabin.

Then the similarities ended. The seat cushions were all wrong. The ones on the other boat were an off white or cream color. These were a deep royal blue. Where the galley counter had been a medium brown color with beige flecks, this one was white with gray flecks. And instead of polished teak, a type of short-nap carpet covered the floor.

Disappointment flooded her. They were back to square one. Well, not quite square one. They knew what kind of boat it was. But without a location or an owner name, they might as well have nothing.

The waitress came back to take their orders, and she closed the file. Once the six of them were alone again, she handed it back to Hunter. "I was really hoping this would be it."

"We'll keep looking." He laid the folder on the table in front of him. "We've been following up on the name you gave us, too, checking missing person reports. Although there have been a couple of Kenneths, none of the last names are at all foreign sounding. We've got a Parker and a Downing."

"I wish I could remember the name. But I can tell you for sure it wasn't Parker or Downing."

"Oh, no." Wade spoke the words close to her ear.

When she turned to look at him, his face was angled toward the corner, his eyes locked on the TV screen there. She followed his gaze. In the foreground was crime scene tape, an upper middle class house in the background. There had been a shooting, apparently a sniper. One of the commissioners for Citrus County was dead.

Wade frowned. "Martie Hartland. She's in the news a lot. I'm afraid she's made a lot of enemies over the years, taking on big business and standing firm in her convictions."

"She has," Hunter agreed. "You can be sure they'll be checking anyone and everyone she's gone up against in the past couple of years."

Wade drummed his fingers against the table. "There are probably quite a few people that would want to see her out of office."

Hunter finished the thought. "The question is, would any of them want to see her dead?"

Long after conversation moved on to other topics, the story haunted Sydney. The woman had a husband and two teenage daughters. She had

gotten home, stepped out of her car and headed toward her house. She had never made it inside. A sniper's bullet had dropped her in the driveway. When she left home that morning, she'd had no idea it was to be her last day on earth.

Just like Bambi. She'd planned to retrieve her bracelets and be back in their room in no time. She wouldn't have dreamed in a thousand years that she would be dead at twenty-five.

Her eyes widened as a thought blazed a path through her mind. Was there a connection between the two incidents? Was that the deal that Kenneth overheard, procuring a hit on the commissioner? The men mentioned giving someone a deposit. The rest would be paid once the man followed through. Whatever the deal was, it happened in Crystal River. And Crystal River was in Citrus County.

So far, her description of the boat had led nowhere. Maybe they weren't at a dead end after all. Maybe if they learned who had put out the hit on the commissioner, it would lead them to Kenneth and Bambi's killers.

It was a long shot. But at least it was something other than a dead end.

Sydney sat in the kitchen, an open recipe book and a pen and sheet of paper on the table in front of her. The recipe book belonged to Wade's grandmother. Actually, all three did. Two more were stacked at the edge of the table.

She turned the page. Five-spice beef and rice. That sounded intriguing. She skimmed the ingredient list. A picture of the finished product would be helpful. But back in Gram's day, recipe books contained just that—recipes.

She picked up the pen and added several more items to her list. One more meal, and she would have her cooking planned through the end of the week. Feeding two ravenous men was turning out to be kind of fun. And earning her keep made her feel less like a charity case.

"Hey you."

She swiveled her head toward the masculine voice that had come from the open doorway. Wade stood there, leaning against the jamb, hands in his shorts pockets. With that tousled hair and teasing glint in his eyes, the casual pose suited him well. He was too handsome for his own good.

“Hey yourself.” She flipped several pages in the recipe book. “I’m planning the menu for the rest of the week, making a grocery list.”

He crossed the kitchen and began drying the dinner dishes she had placed in the drainer. By the time he hung the towel on the oven door, she had finished her list.

“Thanks.” She laid the pen down and folded the list in half. “And not just for drying the dishes. Thanks for everything. I’m afraid you’re going to be stuck with me longer than you planned.”

He settled into the chair beside her. “*I’m* not in any hurry for you to leave, but I’m sure you have people back home who miss you.”

“Yeah, a few friends.” Although how much they actually missed her was questionable. They did movies and concerts together and just hung out. But her friends would still do all that without her.

“A boyfriend?” He picked up his sandwich and took a bite.

She emitted an unladylike snort. “The boyfriend missed me so much he’s already with someone else.”

“He’s an idiot.”

His words sent a flutter through her chest. Or maybe that was because of the way he was looking at her. Concern and understanding filled his eyes. Gold flecks danced amidst deep brown, infusing his gaze with a rich warmth.

Her eyes dipped to the table, and the spell was broken. “I’m all right.” She hiked up her shoulders and let them fall. “What about you? I’m surprised you’re still single.”

He shrugged, mimicking her earlier motion. “I love Cedar Key, but not everyone is willing to live in a small town. As long as I have Gram and Gramps, though, I’ll be here. I won’t leave them, and I won’t ask them to relocate. They’ve lived here all their lives.”

“They’re lucky they have you.”

“No, *I’m* blessed that I’ve had *them*.”

Sydney sighed. Tanner had too many good qualities to count. Whoever captured his heart would be a lucky woman indeed.

Wade pushed himself to his feet. “Are we ready to hit The Market?”

“If you’ve got the credit card, I’m armed with the list.”

A few minutes later, Wade pulled into one of the parking spaces beside Cedar Key’s only grocery store—The Market at Cedar Key, or simply The Market for the locals. While he pushed the cart through the aisles, she filled it. Finally, they stopped at the counter. After the cashier

had bagged the groceries, Sydney picked up the two bags while Wade tucked the receipt and his credit card into his wallet.

Wade grinned down at her. "Are you happy now?"

"Happy and well-stocked."

They stepped into the final remnants of daylight, and he slipped his wallet back into his pocket. But before he could take the bags from her, a tourist stopped him on the sidewalk at the corner of the building.

"Are you from around here?" At Wade's nod, the man continued.

"Can you tell me how to get to Dock Street?"

While Wade began his explanation, Sydney headed toward the truck two spaces away. She would set her items in the back then rejoin Wade. She had just put the last bag in when a van pulled into the parking space next to her, blocking her view of Wade and the other man. With the window tinting and the poor light, she couldn't make out the driver's features.

Uneasiness trickled over her. She turned and took a step toward the street, planning to round the back of the van. Before she got any farther, the side door slid open and a man sprang out. Her gaze locked with a cold, dark one. She knew those eyes. And she knew that face. It was the man from the hospital.

The scream that surged up her throat never made it past her lips. A rough hand clamped over her mouth, and the man pulled her toward the open door of the van. She twisted and reared back, but he only tightened his grasp. She was no match for his strength.

She slanted a glance through the open door of the van and out the front windshield. Wade stood in profile at the corner of the building, still answering the man's questions, oblivious that she was being abducted ten feet away. He wouldn't even know she was gone until the van pulled out.

Not if she could help it. She worked her jaw open under his hand, then sank her teeth into the meaty flesh of his palm. He drew back with a string of curses, and she let out a fear-filled shriek. Without warning, the back of the hand she had bit slammed into her cheek. Her head snapped sideways, and her scream once again died.

"Come on, come on." It was the driver. Urgency underscored each word. "Let's get out of here."

The man dove into the van and pulled the door shut as the driver backed from the space. Then the vehicle squealed down Third Street, leaving a twenty-foot trail of rubber in its wake. Wade hadn't hesitated. He

had already reached her and drawn her into a protective embrace. She sagged in his arms, giving way to the strength and security he offered.

"It's okay. I've got you." His breath rustled the hair at her ear, sending goose bumps cascading over her. "Tell me what happened."

She tilted her head back, though she would rather have kept her face buried in his chest. "He tried to drag me into the van."

His hold tightened. "Who?"

"The man from the hospital."

"We've got to call 911." He dropped an arm to reach for his phone. "Are you okay?"

"I—I think so." After testing to make sure her legs would support her, she backed from his embrace. The man he had been talking to had disappeared. He was probably in cahoots with the men in the van, his job to distract Wade while the other two abducted her.

Wade swiped the screen on his cell phone. "I didn't have a chance to get a tag number, but I've got a description of the van. They won't make it off Cedar Key." He punched in three numbers and pressed the phone to his ear. There was no sense going after them. They had too much of a head start. And from what little she knew of Wade, he would be too responsible to engage in a high-speed chase through the streets of Cedar Key.

He pocketed the phone and helped her into his truck. By the time he had circled around and gotten in on the driver's side, she was shivering, as if it was the dead of winter instead of a balmy afternoon in late July.

"It was him. He's found me." She crossed her arms in front of her to still the shaking. "He had his hand over my mouth. When I bit him, he hit me."

Fury flashed in Wade's eyes, and his jaw tightened. He lifted his hand, then halfway to her face, let it fall. His breath whooshed out, and he seemed to deflate in front of her. "I might have led them to you."

"How? You made sure we weren't followed."

"They knew you were rescued by Cedar Key authorities. There was a Cedar Key police officer outside your room. Even though I wasn't in uniform, since I showed up so soon after you came in, they may have put two and two together and figured I was from Cedar Key, too. What better place to start their search than right here, on the off chance that we were following this through to the end." He shook his head. "I should have thought of that."

She put her hand on his shoulder and gave him a little push. “Hey, don’t beat yourself up. I’m a whole lot safer here with you than I would have been out on my own, no matter how you look at it.”

A Cedar Key Police cruiser pulled into the space that had been occupied by the van. Sydney stepped from the truck and met the officer on the sidewalk. Both Cedar Key and Levy County Sheriffs were on the lookout for the van. But this officer was there to get information from her. She didn’t get a good look at the driver, but she could describe the other man. It was the second time she had seen him. His features would be indelibly etched in her mind.

The officer had just finished taking his report, when a short announcement came across his radio. They had found the van. Sydney’s pulse jumped to double time as anticipation shot through her. But it didn’t last long. The suspects had fled on foot and were still at large.

When the officer left, Wade helped her into his truck. Instead of closing the door, he paused in the opening, staring down at her, lines of concern marring his features. He lifted his hand to cup the right side of her face.

“Your cheek is red. Does it hurt?”

“A little.” Actually, more than a little. But with Wade’s soothing touch, the incessant sting had retreated to the background. She closed her eyes and let her head rest in his palm. Warmth spread through her, making the chill she had felt less than thirty minutes earlier nothing but a distant memory. And for a half moment, she allowed herself to pretend that there was more behind his touch than professional concern for a woman he had rescued.

She opened her eyes and gave him a shaky smile. She usually wasn’t this flaky. In fact, she usually kept a pretty good head on her shoulders. But for some reason, that levelheadedness seemed to have fled the moment Wade pulled her out of the Gulf.

But maybe the phenomenon was more common than she realized. In fact, it probably happened all the time—women falling for their rescuers. There was probably even a name for it in a psychology book somewhere.

After all, Wade had already saved her life twice. Three times, if she counted today, because although he didn’t actively oppose her abductors, if she had been alone, they wouldn’t have given up so quickly. It was hard not to think of him as a hero, her knight in shining armor. And when he

held her in his arms and looked at her with such concern, it was hard not to think of forever.

He dropped his hand and stepped back. "I need to get you home. And from now on, I'm sticking to you like glue." The seriousness underlying his tone canceled out what might have been a teasing glint in his eyes.

As soon as they stepped inside, he walked through the house and double checked the windows and doors, making sure everything was securely locked. A little less secluded setting would have been nice. Wade was probably thinking the same thing, because that stretch of Gulf Boulevard leading past the cemetery to Hodges was sparsely populated, with woods separating the houses.

Wade had just finished when a knock sounded on the door. Chandler flew past them to take up his usual post near the door, barking for all he was worth. Sydney tensed, uneasiness sifting over her. Judging from the stiffness in Wade's gait, he wasn't any more comfortable than she was.

He stopped at the door. "Who is it?"

A muffled voice reached their ears between barks. "It's me, Hunter."

Wade swung the door open and motioned him inside. "Did you catch them?"

"They're still out there. We've tracked the information on the van, though."

"And?" Wade prompted.

"It's a rental. But the identification the men rented it with is fake."

Sydney sighed. "So we've hit another dead end."

Hunter crossed his arms and leaned against the door jamb. "Until we catch up with the men, I'm afraid so. But we searched the van. In their rush to escape, the men had left behind a picture, copied from a driver's license and blown up several times."

Wade's brows shot up. "A picture?"

"Of Sydney. So they would know exactly who they're looking for."

Wade finished for him. "And not make any mistakes."

FIVE

A breeze rustled the leaves on the oak shading the front yard, providing brief respite from the sweltering heat and humidity, but also warning of an approaching afternoon shower. Wade laid down the hedge trimmer and pulled a thick black bag from its box. Leafy twigs littered the perimeter of the house, trimmings that he needed to get picked up before the sky decided to dump its burden.

Sydney was inside the house. He had given her the password to his computer and told her she could come in and use it anytime. He could tell being cooped up in the house was getting to her. But going outside was just too risky.

It was possible that the men who had tried to abduct her were just trolling the island for her, comparing every young dark-haired woman with the picture they had, ready to pounce once they had a match.

Or maybe they didn't have to troll Cedar Key. Maybe they only had to watch one house—the residence of a certain fireman—and wait for the ideal time to make their move.

The distraction on the sidewalk had provided just that opportunity. Actually, the distraction on the sidewalk was likely part of the plan. Chances were good that the man asking directions was no random tourist. He was there to distract Wade long enough for the others to nab Sydney.

He shook his head. Two days had passed, and he was still kicking himself for falling for it. He should have been on his toes more than that. He was a cop, for Pete's sake, at least for another two weeks. The problem was, he had had a false sense of security since they were in Cedar Key, with its tranquil atmosphere and almost zero crime rate. He wouldn't make that mistake again. From now on, he wasn't going to let her out of his sight.

He bagged the last of the trimmings and made his way to the front door. Somewhere nearby was either a Cedar Key police officer or someone with Levy County. But he was taking extra precautions—keeping the blinds drawn and Sydney inside. She hadn't put up any fight. Neither of them was willing to risk a sniper's bullet coming through an uncovered window.

He stepped inside the house, then closed and locked the door. The rest of the evening, he would stay inside. And tomorrow?

Tomorrow was Sunday. He had already asked someone to cover his Sunday school class. He didn't feel safe bringing Sydney with him, and he didn't want to leave her alone. Usually, unless he was out of town, nothing could keep him away from his teens. He loved teaching. And he loved kids. Gram thought it such a shame that at almost thirty he'd never had any. But first would come a wife, one who was in it for the long haul. Even Gram, as anxious as she was for great grandkids, agreed with that.

When he walked into his room, Sydney was sitting at his desk with her back to him, staring at the computer screen. He gave a couple of soft raps on the door jamb, and she turned to greet him with a smile.

"Did you get finished with the yard work?"

"*Finished* is a misnomer. There's no such thing as finished when it comes to summertime yard work in Florida. But I did get through what I had hoped to accomplish today."

He sat on the foot of the bed, and the fresh scent of lavender wafted over to him, likely her shampoo. When he had headed outside, she had just emerged from the bathroom, a towel on her head, turban style. Now her hair was dry and brushed to a silky sheen, begging to be touched.

Spending so much time with her was becoming slow torture, especially with the memory of how she had felt in his arms—so lithe and in shape, but soft in all the right places. When she had closed her eyes and pressed her face into his hand, the gesture had stirred something deep within. What had she been feeling? Safety and security in his presence? Gratitude for what he was doing for her? Or was it something deeper? His heart longed for the latter.

But in the end, it wouldn't matter. He wouldn't leave Gram and Gramps. And he would never try to pull Sydney away from the city lights. Because the city lights had a way of reclaiming what was taken from them.

He shook off the melancholy creeping up on him. "What have you been up to?"

"Catching up on the news. Then I decided to take a look at the proposals going before the Board of County Commissioners for Citrus County."

He leaned forward to see what she had up on the screen, taking the opportunity to draw in a slow, fragrant breath. "Find anything interesting?"

“Yeah, I’m reading about it now. Apparently a commercial developer called Kirst Development has been trying to get approval for a business park near Inverness. The County turned them down the first time. But apparently, they made a few changes and reapplied. That hearing was yesterday. The new plan passed with a narrow three-two vote.”

“Interesting.”

“What’s even more interesting is when I did a search for Kirst Development *and* Martie Hartland. I found a couple of articles where she was quite vocal in her opposition to the park. She felt it was too close to protected areas and would encroach too much on nature.” Sydney clicked off the article and faced him again. “The first vote was close also—three against and two for. Hartland’s vote was the tiebreaker vote that killed the plan. But yesterday, her replacement voted yes, so this time it passed.”

Wade frowned. “You can bet that detectives will be taking a close look at the principals at Kirst Development. That looks an awful lot like motive to me.” He gave a small chuckle. “Good police work, Detective Wilson.”

She grinned up at him. “I might as well. It’s not like I have anything better to do at the moment. But I have to admit, I might have an ulterior motive.”

“Like what?”

“I keep asking myself whether there could be any connection between Kenneth’s murder and the commissioner’s.”

He drew his brows together, trying to follow her train of thought. “How do you figure that?”

“Kenneth overheard something, some kind of a deal. Money was exchanged, a deposit, with the rest to be paid once the job was done. What if Kenneth overheard the hit being put out on Martie Hartland?”

He thought for a moment. It was possible. Not highly likely, but the time frame would be right. The deal went down and four days later, the commissioner was dead.

“Where did Hartland live?”

Sydney made some clicks and typed in several words. After a couple more clicks, she sat back in her chair. “Beverly Hills. I didn’t know there *was* a Beverly Hills, Florida.”

“Yeah. It’s only about ten miles from Crystal River.” So the location of the deal was right, too. “I think you may be onto something. I’ll give Hunter a call. I’m sure law enforcement is on top of it, as far as a possible

link between Kirst Development and Hartland's death. But Citrus County isn't necessarily going to link that case with yours."

Wade rose and walked from the room. He would call Hunter, and they would get on it.

Probably a good place to start would be to see if any of the officers of Kirst Development owned a Tiara 3100.

Sydney drew in a long, slow breath, and her stomach rumbled. Every time the sliding glass door opened and shut, enticing aromas wafted through the house. This time it was Caleb, who had just walked out with a clean plate. Wade stood manning the grill, Hunter keeping him company.

For Sydney, the patio was off limits. Actually, the dining area was, too, for the time being, since the vertical blinds in front of the sliders were open. But that was okay. She had Darci and Allison to keep her company inside. Six people was a little more excitement than what Chandler needed, so Wade had closed him up in his bedroom.

Having everyone over for a cookout had been Wade's idea. He had said it was a going away party for Darci and Caleb, who would be heading their separate ways in another week and a half. She suspected that the get-together had a dual purpose—a farewell to Darci and Caleb, and an attempt to keep her from losing her mind. She wasn't an indoor kind of person, and the sudden confinement was about to make her crazy.

But Wade was doing everything in his power to make it easier for her—letting her use his computer, bringing her library books, hanging out with her every chance he got. The more time she spent with him, the more he chipped away at her defenses.

But she had been forewarned. Darci and Allison told her what Wade was like on the ride home from the hospital. Not only did he look like every woman's dream, he possessed all the qualities that, to her, made a man irresistible. If she wasn't careful, she was going to find herself falling for him head over heels, which would be a huge mistake.

She had just ended one relationship. The last thing she needed was to be thinking about another one. In fact, that would be violating one of her own rules: No dating for at least six weeks after yet another man turned out to be a dud. She wasn't going to be one of those women who made bad decisions by jumping into relationships on the rebound.

Yep, that was the plan. Wait at least six weeks. Then guard her heart as if it was made of spun glass.

The back door once again slid open and Caleb and Hunter stepped into the dining room. Wade followed, carrying a plate heaped with thick, juicy burgers. While Hunter pulled the blinds, Wade placed the plate on the counter next to the potato salad, baked beans, chips, buns, and condiments already there.

Soon they were all seated around the living room with TV trays, laughing and telling stories. Caleb, Darci and Wade had grown up in Cedar Key and had known each other most of their lives. Hunter had come a year ago, so his history with them wasn't nearly as long. Allison was the new kid on the block, but seemed to be enjoying the conversation as much as anyone else.

Darci laid her half-eaten hamburger on her plate and wiped her hands. "It's been a fun summer, but I'm looking forward to getting back to campus life, jumping into my last year of school."

Caleb tossed a wadded-up napkin at her. "Yeah, right. You're just anxious to get back to Daniel."

Darci corrected him. "Doug. And no, I'm not. Well, maybe a little." She grinned. "He *is* pretty cute. And he was doing an awful lot of flirting at the end of the last term. We'll see if that chemistry is still there."

"This year I'm going to swear off women and just focus on my studies."

Wade poked him in the side. "Don't let one bad experience ruin it for you."

Caleb shook his head. "I should have known better than to get mixed up with a woman named Jan. They're all heart breakers."

Darci's brows raised. "You had another girlfriend named Jan?"

"I sure did. My first crush. Jan Slominski. We were in second grade." He popped a potato chip into his mouth and continued. "We were on the playground. I gave up my swing for her, and she kissed me on the cheek. That did it. I was in love."

Darci laughed. "So how long did it last?"

"About twenty-four hours. The next time we were on the playground, I saw her kiss Tommy Jenkins. One day, and she was already off in search of greener pastures."

"Poor baby." Sydney gave him a teasing smile. "I knew a Slominski in elementary school, too, a guy. Maybe they were cousins."

No, come to think of it, the name wasn't Slominski. But it was similar. She reached back into her past and tried to call it up. Wominski? Walinski? Wicinski. That was it. Joseph Wicinski.

She drew in a sharp breath and sat up straighter. "Waskiewicz."

All eyes went to her.

"What?" It was Wade who spoke.

"I just remembered the name of the guy who was shot. Kenneth Waskiewicz."

Wade looked at her askance. "You got Waskiewicz out of Slominski?"

"Yes. No. Sort of." She shook her head. The harder she had struggled to remember, the more the name had eluded her. Now, out of the blue, there it was. Well, not exactly out of the blue. The other names had gotten her mind going. And the fact that she was relaxed and enjoying herself likely had something to do with it, too.

Hunter was already on his feet. "Let's go look it up."

"Sure." Wade stood and headed down the hall. Sydney followed.

After Wade filled in the password, he clicked on the address bar and typed in several characters. A website popped up. Sydney leaned closer. It was the Department of Justice's National Missing and Unidentified Persons database. He clicked on Missing Persons, then filled in the name. "How do you think Waskiewicz is spelled?"

She shook her head. "No idea. I'd do a search. When you get a few letters typed, the rest will probably fill in."

After a few false starts, it came up. But there was no one with that name listed in the missing-persons database, even with alternate spellings.

Wade clicked off the site. "Maybe he hasn't been reported missing yet." He rose from the chair and headed toward the door.

Hunter frowned. "In a week and a half? It seems like someone would have missed him by now."

"Not if he lives alone," Wade argued. "Neighbors might assume he's out of town. And if he doesn't have a regular job to report to, his disappearance could go unnoticed for a while."

Hunter stepped into the hall. "We'll do a search for the name. It's uncommon enough, there are probably only a handful of them in the entire state of Florida. Then we'll start talking to people."

Sydney followed him down the hall, hope surging through her. Once they narrowed their search down to the right one, maybe they could get their questions answered.

Like who was Kenneth Waskiewicz?

What was he doing following two men into an alley at midnight?

And what kind of web had he gotten caught in?

SIX

Wade rounded a bend and glanced over at Hunter, who was studying a map. The narrow two-lane road they traveled wound through clusters of trees with condo buildings nestled in their midst. They had just stopped at the association office and garnered directions.

According to the info they had, Kenneth Waskiewicz lived in one of the units. One Ken Waskiewicz lived there, anyway. The other lived in Fort Lauderdale. There were only two in the entire state. But since Ocala was less than an hour from Crystal River, that was the most logical place to start.

Hunter pointed ahead. "Left at the stop sign, then take the first right."

After the two turns Hunter indicated, Wade came to a stop in front of a condo building. It looked much the same as each of the others had—two stories with cedar siding and varying roof elevations. Stairs broken by landings zigzagged up to the second floor.

An hour and a half earlier, he had gone to the station, leaving Sydney in the hands of Caleb. Well, Caleb and whatever law enforcement personnel had been assigned the job of watching the house. And that was what he would keep reminding himself—there were others keeping her safe.

Staying home twenty-four seven wasn't an option. Now he just had to work two or three days a week with Cedar Key Police. Soon he would be spending every weekday at the school.

Hunter removed his seat belt but didn't open the door. "Hey, she'll be fine. If anyone so much as steps foot into your yard, Cedar Key and Levy County will be all over them."

Wade gave his friend and co-worker a wry smile. "Am I that obvious?"

Hunter's brows lifted. "Other than the fact that you've hardly said two words since we left the station? Not really."

He frowned. "These guys aren't messing around. I mean, they tried to abduct her with me standing a car length away. They almost succeeded, too. If she hadn't had the presence of mind to bite the guy's hand..." He let the thought trail, unwilling to voice the likely outcome aloud.

Hunter studied him for several moments. When he spoke, his tone held an uncharacteristic seriousness. "Does she know how you feel about her?"

“What do you mean?”

“Don't try to deny it, man. It's all over your face every time you look at her.”

Wade sighed. “It doesn't matter how I feel.”

“Why not?”

“Because as soon as this is over, she'll be gone. She's not going to want to stay in Cedar Key, and I won't haul Gram and Gramps to Atlanta.”

“You've already discussed it?”

“I don't need to.”

Hunter nodded. “I see. So you've developed a new skill.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Reading minds. You know exactly what she wants without her telling you.”

Wade glared at him. If Hunter wasn't such a good friend, he would just tell him to mind his own business. Maybe he should tell him that anyway.

“Look, I know how it works. Cedar Key is a refreshing change. Everything's great at first. I mean, what's not to love? We're living in paradise. But eventually they get bored and start missing all the city life has to offer. Next thing you know, *poof*, they're gone.”

Hunter shook his head. “Sydney isn't Lori. Neither is anyone else. You can't project that onto every woman you meet. It's not fair.”

Maybe it wasn't, but Hunter wasn't the one left with empty arms, a broken heart and a grieving dog.

Of course, there was more wrong with his and Lori's relationship than her dissatisfaction with Cedar Key life. Even though he'd offered to follow her to Chicago, bringing Gram and Gramps with him, she hadn't been interested in trying to work anything out. She had been unhappy almost from the instant they said “I do.”

Several moments passed. Then Hunter broke the tense silence with a hand on Wade's shoulder. “Just think about it.” He reached for the door handle. “Let's go see what we can find out about this Kenneth Waskiewicz.”

Wade followed Hunter up the sidewalk, which forked before reaching the building. Hunter nodded toward the oval sign next to one of the doors. “Unit 1021, lower left. I'm betting there won't be anyone home.”

“I'm betting you're right.”

After Wade rang the bell, several seconds passed in silence. Then the click of a door opening drew their attention to the right. A middle-aged woman stepped out of unit 1022 holding a mug, her purse hung over the opposite shoulder. Her gaze shifted to them, dipping to their uniforms. “Is everything okay?”

Wade took a couple steps toward her. “We’re looking for Ken Waskiewicz. Have you seen him lately?”

“Not for the past week or so. I figured he was on vacation.” Her forehead creased. “Nothing’s happened to him, has it?”

Hunter stepped up next to him. “We’re not sure. Can you tell us anything about him, where he works, any friends or family members?”

“No. He just moved in about four months ago, and we haven’t had any interaction other than short greetings if we happen to be coming or going at the same time. But I know who could probably help you. Unit 2027.” She angled her head upward. “Old Ms. Fishbein makes it a point to know everybody’s business. If anyone can tell you something about Ken, it would be her.”

They climbed the stairs, and Hunter rang the bell. The door swung open before the last lingering note of the chime had died away. She had apparently been standing right there. In fact, if she was as much of a busybody as what her downstairs neighbor claimed, she had probably been watching them from the moment they came up the sidewalk.

Wade inclined his head. “Ms. Fishbein?”

“Yessir?”

“We need to ask you some questions about your neighbor, Ken Waskiewicz.”

“Come on in.” She opened the door wider and stepped aside, eagerness radiating from her. She looked to be in her late sixties, with a pinched smile and sharp eyes that likely didn’t miss a thing.

She invited them to sit on the couch, and she perched on the front edge of the recliner. “Ken’s been gone for the past week and a half.”

Wade pulled a notepad from his pocket. “Do you know where he went?”

She shook her head and a gray curl fell across her forehead. She reached up to reposition it. “He wasn’t going anywhere. Just last month I asked him if he was going to be taking a vacation before summer was over, and he said no, that money was too tight.”

“Do you know what he did for a living?” Wade uncapped his pen, prepared to take notes.

“He was a private investigator.”

“Did he tell you the name of his business?”

“It wasn’t his. He worked for someone else.” She pursed her lips, and her brows furrowed in concentration. “Sunset something or other. He was complaining because they hadn’t been giving him as many jobs lately.”

Wade jotted down the name, and Hunter picked up the questioning. “Do you know if he has a girlfriend?”

“No. He told me about one girl that he was engaged to a year or so ago, but she called it off. And he hasn’t found anyone since.”

“Does he have any family in the area?”

“His whole family’s in Michigan.”

Wade jotted a few more notes. No girlfriend, no local family, and a job where he pretty much worked alone. That would explain how he could disappear for a week and a half and no one notice.

“Did something happen to him?” Concern settled in her features, but there was something else, too—a barely restrained enthusiasm, the eagerness to be the first to know.

Hunter stood. “Right now we’re just checking things out.”

Wade pushed himself to his feet. Ms. Fishbein stood, too, but it was with reluctance. For someone who thrived on getting all the juicy details, this had been a rather unproductive meeting.

When they got back to the patrol car, Wade slid into the driver’s seat. “Sunset something or other. Let’s see what we can find.”

Hunter opened the laptop and keyed in a few words. “Bingo. Sunset Investigations, Inc., on Pine Avenue.”

Wade started the car and backed from the space. “I’d say Waskiewicz was watching someone and got caught. More than likely, someone on his client list knows the killers.”

“And if the nosy neighbor is correct, that they weren’t giving him many jobs lately, maybe that will be a fairly manageable list.”

Sunset Investigations was an easy twenty-minute drive away. It was situated in an office complex, sandwiched between an accounting firm and a court reporting outfit. A young woman sat at a desk in the lobby area, an open door to each side. Hunter introduced them and got right to the point.

“We’re looking for Kenneth Waskiewicz. He does work for you, right?”

“Yes, he does.” Her brows drew together. “Is he in trouble?”

“We’re not sure yet. But we have reason to believe he might have met with foul play.”

She gasped and her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, no. Is he...dead?” The last word seemed to stick in her throat.

“It’s too early to say.”

Before Hunter could continue, a chair behind one of the open doors squeaked, and footsteps sounded on the tile floor. Moments later, a man stepped through the open doorway, trying to tuck his shirt more neatly into his pants. He pushed his glasses up on his nose, then finger-combed the hair he had shifted from the side to try to cover a large bald spot on top. If his disheveled appearance was any indication, mounds of haphazard files and papers likely covered his desk.

He gave them a smile and extended his hand. “Brian Givans. What can I do to help?”

“We need information on all of Ken’s cases.”

“I can tell you what I’ve assigned to him, but he keeps his own files on anything he’s currently working.” He turned and headed back toward his office. “Follow me, and I’ll give you everything I’ve got.”

Inside, Wade took one of the two chairs Givans indicated. His initial assessment of the man as a slob couldn’t have been further from the truth. Three files sat on one side of his desk, the latest edition of *PI Magazine* on the other.

“Ken worked for a police department up in Michigan before coming to me.” Givans opened a file drawer and removed six files. “These are the cases he’s currently working.”

Wade took them and after handing half to Hunter, opened the top folder. The client was a man who believed his wife was cheating and wanted her watched. They lived in Ocala, and based on the information he gave, the places she frequented, from her law practice to the country club, were also in Ocala. Not likely to land Ken in Crystal River.

He closed the file and switched it to the bottom of the stack. The next one wasn’t any more promising. The case involved suspected insurance fraud, with the subject located in Silver Springs, northeast of Ocala. That was even farther from Crystal River.

He had just slipped the file underneath the other two when the name on the tag of the third jumped out at him. Burgess. As in Bradley Burgess? No, the client’s name was Pamela.

With a Crystal River address.

His pulse picked up speed. She was going through a nasty divorce and custody battle and basically wanted to dig up anything that would help her case.

He turned the page. There was the information on the husband. The name at the top was Bradley Burgess.

Sydney slid the chicken and rice casserole into the oven and shut the door. Wade had helped her cook, which wasn't supposed to be part of the deal, but he had insisted.

Now he was sitting at the table, using her as a sounding board. He squeezed the bridge of his nose. "So we have a link between Burgess and Waskiewicz."

"That's the only link we have." She leaned back against the counter. Since yesterday's developments with Waskiewicz, she had been doing a lot of brainstorming herself. "There are a several things that seem like they should be connected but aren't. I was on a boat just like Burgess', but it wasn't Burgess' boat. Waskiewicz witnessed a deal, but we have nothing to link it to the hit on the commissioner. The commissioner was killed, but there's no reason for Burgess to want her dead."

She pushed herself away from the counter and started to pace. "I can see Kirst benefiting from Hartland's death. In fact, he already has. He's gotten his office park approved. But Burgess isn't a developer. He's a contractor. So what would be in it for him?" She stopped at the chair opposite Wade and slid into it, still struggling to connect the dots. "Hey, what if Burgess is one of the contractors who does work for Kirst Development? Any chance he could benefit from this project, enough to kill to make it happen?"

Wade shook his head. "Burgess is residential. So he isn't likely to have any dealings with Kirst. He certainly wouldn't be a contractor on this project."

Sydney propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands. "So whatever Waskiewicz witnessed, it probably had nothing to do with the hit on the commissioner."

"There's a connection. We're just missing it." Wade leaned forward, reducing the space separating them. "The man was in Crystal River the night he was killed. Of his six cases, only one would bring him there."

“Maybe the Burgess case *is* what brought him there. But while he was doing his thing for Pamela Burgess, he stumbled onto these other guys. Maybe all of this is completely unrelated to Burgess.” She crossed her arms on the table and fell into a slouch. “If that’s the case, we’re back to square one.”

A knock on the door sent tension spiking through her, instantly straightening her spine.

Wade sprang to his feet, tight jaw and creased brow announcing his own uneasiness. “Stay here. I’ll see who it is.”

Moments later, Hunter’s voice reached her. As soon as she walked into the living room, his eyes met hers. “I finally got a call from Pamela Burgess.”

Anticipation surged through her. Although Hunter and Wade had tried to make contact with Pamela yesterday, they’d had no success. Since Hunter now stood in Wade’s living room, he must have gotten something valuable.

Wade motioned for him to have a seat in the recliner, then moved to the couch. “Learn anything interesting?”

“I did.” He pulled the notepad from his pocket. “Waskiewicz had been in contact with her several times the night he was killed. He texted her earlier in the evening and said there was a party on the dock, told her that Burgess wasn’t a part of it. At 9:21, he texted that two men had boarded Burgess’ boat. He didn’t know who they were or why they were there. All three men disappeared into the cabin right away.”

Hunter once again referred to the spiral-bound pad. “At 11:04, he texted her again. The men were leaving and he was following them. That was the last anyone heard from him.”

Sydney nodded. “That would have been an hour before Bambi and I got on the boat. Bambi woke me up right at midnight, so I’d say it was around 12:10 when we boarded the boat and maybe two minutes later when the men boarded.”

Wade frowned. “So where was Waskiewicz between 11:04 p.m. and 12:12 a.m.?”

Hunter gave him a wry smile. “That’s the million-dollar question. We’ve requested his phone records. Maybe we’ll learn more there.”

The door to the laundry room opened and closed, and a few seconds later, Caleb appeared. Since that was where he parked, he came and went through the side more often than the front. “Hey, guys.” He drew in a deep

breath. “Something smells really good. Do I have time for a shower before dinner?”

Sydney glanced at the clock hanging on the adjacent wall. “Twenty-two minutes.”

“Good, because if I have to choose between Sydney's cooking and a shower, you won't want to sit beside me.”

Caleb jogged off down the hall, leaving her grinning at his compliment.

“You know,” Hunter began, “when this is all over, Wade isn't going to want to let you go. He might just find a way to kidnap you.”

Sydney laughed, casting a sideways glance at Wade. But Wade wasn't laughing. He wasn't even smiling. In fact, his gaze was fixed on Hunter, a note of warning in his eyes. What was that all about?

She gave another laugh, but this one was forced. “By the time this is all over, I'm sure Wade will be ready to have his life back.”

“Don't bet on it.” Hunter stood. “I'm on duty till six, so I'm going to leave you three to enjoy your evening.”

Wade walked him to the door, then after closing and locking it behind him, returned to sit with her on the couch. “One more piece of the puzzle confirmed.” He was back in investigator mode, the silent exchange with Hunter apparently forgotten. “We now have proof of what Waskiewicz was doing in Crystal River.”

Sydney nodded. “So two guys meet with Burgess. Waskiewicz follows them when they leave. A little over an hour later, he's dead.”

He studied her. “You look like the wheels are turning. Any ideas?”

“Not really.” She pushed herself to her feet. “But I'm going to poke around on the internet and see what comes up.”

She headed down the hall and slid into the chair at the computer desk. Wade took up his usual position on the foot of the bed. If they did much more of this, he would probably do well to bring in a folding chair.

Once online, she typed Burgess' name into a search engine. “Hmm, he's a South African pianist.”

Wade leaned forward. “Somehow I don't think that's our guy.”

She scrolled down, past the LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube links, clicking to the second page and then the third. “Here we go. Page three. Better Homes by Burgess. The man could use a little search engine optimization.” It was a decent website, with an impressive gallery showing his work. On the *About* page, Burgess himself stood in front of one of his

homes, wearing a polo shirt and a friendly smile. He looked like a pretty nice guy. Looks could be deceiving.

After several clicks, she refined her search to include the names Burgess and Kirst. Her eyes widened, and she leaned closer to the monitor. “Ever heard of corporationwiki.com?”

“Can't say that I have.”

“Me, neither. But they've somehow got the two names connected.”

She clicked the link. *Kirst Development Group, Inc.* spanned the top of the page. “This is information taken from the Florida Department of State.”

The top box was an overview, with a list of key people. Stanford Kirst was named as president. She read the next name, and her blood ran cold. “Vice-president, Bradley Burgess.” She clicked on his name. “Crystal River, Florida.”

“There's our link. Good job. Are you sure you haven't worked as a detective sometime in your life?”

When she met his eyes, respect and admiration shone there. Her stomach tried to do a little somersault. He put a hand on her shoulder. Heat radiated from his palm, warming her from the outside in.

She shook off the effect he was having on her and gave him what she hoped was a relaxed smile. “No, but I did read all the Nancy Drew mysteries. My mom has the entire original set.”

“Well, it has apparently paid off. Something tells me we just got a step closer to solving this thing.”

“There's only one problem. Bambi and I weren't on Burgess' boat.”

“How do you know?”

“Hunter showed me the pictures.”

“What was different?”

“The cushions.”

“Cushions can be recovered.”

He had a point. Quite easily. “But the boat in the pictures was carpeted.”

“Carpet can be laid over teak.”

He was right again. When she offered her final argument, it lacked conviction. “It was a completely different counter top.”

“Something else that's doable. Maybe not as easy as the other two fixes, but for a contractor who did that type of work, it wouldn't be a problem.”

The question was, could all that be accomplished in less than three days?

And could they find the company that actually did the work?

SEVEN

Wade stepped out of the air-conditioned cruiser into an asphalt parking lot. Heat radiated from the surface, threatening to bake anything unfortunate enough to be left exposed for too long. A small building stood in front of him, topped by a large wooden sign. Victor's Marine Interiors looked like a little hole-in-the-wall shop, but the man apparently did a decent business. There were three other vehicles in the parking lot.

Hunter exited the driver's side and fell in next to him. For the past two days, both Cedar Key and Levy County had been contacting every marine outfitter and interior design company on the west coast of Florida. Finally, they got the break they were hoping for. Hunter found one who claimed to have recently done work on a Tiara 3100.

Wade pulled open the glass door and stepped inside. Two people sat at a table in the corner. One flipped through a book of fabric swatches. The other seemed to have a portfolio, with glossy eight-by-ten photos. A man who Wade guessed to be Victor stood behind a long counter helping a third customer.

The man glanced at them and held up an index finger. "I'll be with you gentlemen in a few minutes."

A few minutes dragged into a half hour. Finally, the last customer made his choices and walked out the door. Hunter and Wade stepped forward, and Wade leaned against the counter.

"We're here to talk to you about the work you did on the Tiara 3100."

"Sure." He flashed them a friendly smile. "I'll remember the details of this one for a long time."

"Why is that?"

"Several reasons. One, this guy had beautiful floors of teak without a scratch on them. And he had me cover it with a Berber type carpet." He shook his head. "I mean, Berber's nice, but it kills me to cover up a floor like that."

He rounded the counter to approach a beat-up drink machine. After slamming the side of his fist into the machine a couple of times, a Coke fell into the bin. He retrieved it, then straightened. "You guys want anything?"

"No thanks." He wasn't thirsty, and Hunter was a tea drinker. "You said there were several things that were memorable about this transaction."

“Yeah.” Instead of returning to his place behind the counter, Victor joined them on the customer side. He had an easy manner, with salt and pepper hair and an extra thirty or forty pounds.

He rested an arm on the laminate surface. “The most memorable part of it was the money. The guy came in and said what he wanted done. I gave him a price and said I could have it ready in two weeks. He said he’d pay me triple if I could do it in two days.”

“And did you?”

“You bet, I did.”

Hunter joined in. “So tell us what you did, besides the carpet.”

“Recovered all the cushions. The old ones were in great shape, but you know how these rich folks are. They get bored with something and everything’s gotta go. Doesn’t matter how new it is.”

“Anything else you did for him?”

“Me personally, no. He had a new counter top put in, but I sub out granite work. I saw the finished product, though, took pictures and everything.”

Wade lifted his brows. “You have pictures?”

“Before and after. I keep a portfolio of all my work.” He crossed the room to retrieve a four-inch loose-leaf binder from the table. “This is the latest one.” He laid it on the counter and flipped the pages until he was a few from the end. When he found what he was looking for, he turned the book and pointed to the first photo, protected behind clear plastic. “The first two are before pictures.”

Wade leaned closer. An L-shaped seat wrapped a small white table, its cushions a light beige. Stained and polished teak planks ran fore to aft. The next picture showed the galley, with its rich wood cabinet and its chocolate-covered top.

Everything as Sydney had described.

Victor flipped to the next set of pictures. “Here are shots of the new cushions. This royal blue is something I had in stock. The guy didn’t want to special order anything, said he didn’t have time to wait for it to come in.” He turned the page again. “And this is the new counter top. That had to have been a lot of work, with the way this upper part rests on it. But it looks pretty sharp with the blue.”

Victor closed the book. The after pictures Wade had already seen. They were identical to the ones Hunter had taken.

“Do you have the sales ticket for this?”

Victor moved behind the counter and pulled out another binder, this one thinner and filled with pink duplicate invoices, all handwritten. He searched through them until he found the one he was looking for. "This is it."

Wade looked at the one he indicated. *David Faraway*? That wasn't Burgess. The name didn't match the one on the fake ID used to rent the van, either.

He looked back up at Victor. "How did he pay for this?"

"Cash, a nice wad of hundreds."

That made sense. If he wasn't using a check or credit card, he could choose any name he wanted.

"Do you take down vessel registration numbers?"

"No, just the model of the boat."

Wade frowned. Something more definitely identifying the boat would have been nice. But with the before and after pics and Victor's testimony, it should be a pretty open and shut case.

"Do you mind if we take these pictures temporarily? We'll make copies of them, then I promise we'll return them."

"Sure." Victor pulled back the plastic sheet protecting each of the pictures and, one by one, laid the photos on the counter. "I take it this guy's in some kind of trouble."

Wade nodded. "Let's just say, things aren't looking good for him right now. Do you think you could pick him out of a line-up?"

"No doubt. Like I say, the details of this deal are going to stick with me for a while."

Five minutes later, Wade followed Hunter out the door, pictures in hand and excitement coursing through him. They had finally solved the case. They now knew who had shot Waskiewicz and Bambi and had been pursuing Sydney. They had everything they needed to bring the killers to justice.

As Wade slid into the front passenger seat of the cruiser, a sense of melancholy crept through him, a dark cloud casting its shadow over him, tempering his joy. Solving the case meant Sydney would soon leave. And he wasn't ready to let her go.

Hunter got in, but instead of starting the car, he turned and stared at him.

Wade fidgeted. When Hunter studied him like that, it was never good. "What?"

“You need to ask her to stay.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. I’ve been watching her get under your skin ever since you pulled her out of the Gulf. If you let her go, you’re going to regret it the rest of your life.”

No, Hunter was wrong. If he asked her to stay and she did, then walked away two or three years down the road, that was what he would regret the rest of his life.

“Ask her to stay,” Hunter repeated. “Or are you too much of a coward?”

Fire shot through Wade’s veins. He was a cop and a fireman. No one had ever accused him of being a coward. And he could just about deck Hunter for doing it now.

He glared at his friend and co-worker. “You’re so full of romantic advice for everyone else, but I don’t see you out there dating and jumping into relationships. There are all kinds of single women making goo-goo eyes at you, and you’re avoiding them like they have scabies. So you’re a fine one to accuse someone of being a coward.”

Pain flashed in Hunter’s eyes, as if Wade had hit a raw nerve. Then it passed as quickly as it had come. Maybe there was something in the other man’s past that he knew nothing about.

When Hunter spoke, his tone was low, with an underlying steeliness. “This has nothing to do with me. The women in my life are just friends.” He started the car, then shot Wade another glance, his gaze accusatory. “I haven’t fallen in love with any of them.”

And he hadn’t fallen in love with Sydney, either.

He liked her. A lot. She was sweet and upbeat and fun to have around. She could cook like a master chef. And she was as beautiful outside as in.

Sydney deserved to be free, living in an environment that made her happy. Soon that would happen. Soon she would have her life back.

And that was exactly what he wanted.

If only it could include him.

Sydney’s heart pounded, and a sheet of perspiration coated her palms. Two pictures lay on the dining room table. Wade had called her before leaving Clearwater and told her that Burgess had had his boat redone, and

that the *before* pictures were exactly as she had described. But seeing them lying there in full color was jarring. “This is it. This is the boat.”

Wade put leftover lasagna on a plate and slid it into the microwave. She and Caleb had eaten earlier. Then Caleb had gone back to pack for his friend's wedding. At the time they ate, Wade wasn't home yet. After finishing his shift with Cedar Key Police, he had taken a fire call.

He turned from the counter and took both of her hands in his. “It’s almost over. There’s a warrant out for Bradley Burgess’ arrest. His two henchmen will be next. Any day now, you’ll be free to go home.”

He smiled, but there was no joy in the gesture. Maybe it was his body language, the excitement that seemed to be manufactured. Or the sadness underlying his tone. Or the fact that that smile he gave her never reached his eyes.

Her own feelings were as conflicted as his. Two weeks ago, she had wanted nothing more than to put everything behind her and go home.

But where was home? The small Georgia town where she grew up loved and sheltered, but smothered? The big city that offered a different activity for every night of the month, but left her feeling cold and alone?

Or her temporary home, where a handful of new friends had taken her under their wings and practically laid down their lives for her. And where a little white church on the corner had wrapped her in love and pointed her back to her roots.

“What if I don’t want to go home?”

“What?”

“What if I decide to make Cedar Key my home?”

Hope flickered in his gaze, then died. He dropped her hands and turned away. “No.” The word came out a little sharp. Or maybe she was being overly sensitive.

When he spoke again, his tone had softened. “I won’t ask that of you.”

“You don’t have to ask. Maybe I *want* to stay.”

He turned back around to face her. “Cedar Key is nothing like Atlanta. You’ll be bored stiff.”

Her heart fell. She had hoped that he was starting to feel something for her, even just a little bit. She had been wrong. He didn’t want her in Cedar Key. In fact, he was trying his hardest to get rid of her.

Disappointment turned to anger. Who was he to say what she did or didn't want? "You've known me for two weeks, and now you're an expert on what's best for my life?"

"No, not an expert." His gaze dipped to the floor. "Just someone with experience." When his eyes met hers again, they were filled with resignation. "Cedar Key is a wonderful place, if you like peace and quiet. If you need a little more excitement than that, it gets old in a hurry."

Before she could respond, a door opened down the hall, and several seconds later, Caleb passed through the dining area on his way to the fridge. He opened the door, then stood staring at the shelves.

Sydney frowned. "What are you looking for? You just finished eating an hour ago."

"An hour and a half, actually. But I'm trying to find something for the road."

She tilted her head toward one of the cabinets. "There's a pack of chocolate chip cookies up there." She watched him put a handful into a zippered plastic bag. "Are you all packed?"

"I think so." He closed the top and put the now half-empty package back into the cupboard. "I don't know why Ryan had to move all the way out to California. Now I'm going to be stuck on a plane half the night."

The microwave beeped, and Wade removed his dinner. "It was your choice to schedule a red-eye flight."

He grinned. "Everybody knows I'm cheap."

Wade gave him a playful punch in the shoulder. "No argument there. But I wish I could go, just to see you in a tux."

"Believe me, it'll be a long time before it happens again."

Caleb disappeared down the hall. Wade carried his lasagna to the table and took a seat next to Sydney. When Caleb came back in, he was wheeling a suitcase.

"I guess this is it. See you guys in three days."

He stepped into the laundry room, and a few seconds later, the exterior door opened and closed. Less than a minute had passed when there was a rhythmic knock on the door.

Wade grinned at her. "How much you wanna bet he forgot his keys?"

Wade got up to unlock the door, and Sydney took his empty plate to the sink. Caleb passed through the kitchen at a half jog, then came back holding one hand in the air. A set of keys dangled from his fingers. "I think I'm set this time."

Sydney closed the dishwasher door and had just walked from the kitchen when Caleb's secret knock sounded again. She shook her head. "He's as hard to get rid of as bedbugs."

As she started down the hall toward the bathroom, Wade's voice reached her over the creaking of the side door hinges. "What did you forget this ti—"

A booming thud reverberated through the house, as if something, or someone, had been slammed into the washer. Wade screamed her name. Then there was another thud and a groan. She turned in time to see Chandler sail off the couch and run barking toward the laundry room.

Panic pounded up her spine and lodged in her mind, scattering her thoughts in a thousand different directions. It wasn't Caleb. Someone had heard his knock and mimicked it. Now that someone was inside the house.

And Wade was hurt. He needed help.

Then there was a softer thud followed by a yelp. Then silence. Her heart twisted. Someone had kicked Chandler.

Heavy footsteps pounded against the tile floor, more than one set. She forced her thoughts to clear.

They weren't after Wade. They were after *her*. If Wade could talk to her right now, he would tell her to not worry about him *or* his dog. He would tell her to run.

She ducked into the bathroom and closed and locked the door. A frosted window looked out over the back yard. It was high. And it was small. But so was she. She unlocked it and slid it up in its track.

The footsteps stopped right outside the door. The lock jiggled.

"She's in here. Stand back."

Heart pounding and hands shaking, she stepped up onto the toilet and pushed out the screen. The door exploded inward, and she dove through the opening, landing in the bushes below. Pain shot through her shoulder, not totally healed from being shot. She rolled onto her hands and knees, but before she could get up, a head appeared in the opening.

"There she is." It was the man from the hospital.

She sprang to her feet and stumbled sideways. She had hurt her left knee, too. She limped toward a scrub oak ten feet away. As she slipped behind it, a shot rang out. Pieces of bark peppered her arm. The shot had grazed the tree.

For several moments, she waited in tense alertness. If the men came outside, they would take her down in no time, especially with a bad knee.

But according to Wade, there was a cop watching the house at all times. Wade had said they made regular rounds, staying in the shadows, looking for anything suspicious. Wherever he was, he would have heard the gunshot and would be calling in backup. She just had to stay alive until they arrived.

She peeked around the tree to look toward the house. The men were no longer at the bathroom window. A moment later, the vertical blind slats at the sliding glass doors angled to open, then slid back in their track.

Renewed panic shot through her. She couldn't wait for the police. She headed toward the back woods at a limping jog. Two more shots rang out, one slamming into a tree inches from where she passed.

Three shots. Any time now the place would be swarming with cops. She turned right, toward Wade's next door neighbor's property. According to Wade, the neighbor wasn't there. Neither was the one on the other side. Both spent their summers up north. But she didn't need to seek out help. She only needed to stay hidden until help arrived.

She stopped to listen, pressing herself against the rough bark of a tree. Scrub oaks, palmettos and wild shrubs surrounded her. But they weren't nearly dense enough, especially with the bright and perfectly round moon shining down.

A voice reached her. "Yeah, boss. She's in the woods. Drive around and watch for her to come out."

Leaves rustled and twigs cracked as the men came closer. She stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe. If she moved now, they would hear her. And probably start shooting again.

"We need to separate." The words came from less than twenty feet away. "You go this way. I'll go that way. And use the light on your phone."

Her fists tightened as tension spiked through her. Lights would give them even more of an advantage. She pressed herself more tightly against the tree. Where were the police? She should hear distant sirens by now.

Footsteps advanced, and someone passed within six feet of her. A small beam swept the area. She closed her eyes.

And for the first time in two years, she really prayed.

EIGHT

Wade winced, and the pain of a dozen daggers pierced his head. Nearby, someone groaned.

What time was it? And where was he? He tried to focus, to capture one of the thoughts drifting through his inflamed brain, but it skittered away, as elusive as the wind.

Another groan filled the air, and he opened his eyes. The groan was his own. The first was, too. He let his head roll to the side. The washing machine was there, twelve inches from his face, the dryer next to it. Why was he lying on the laundry room floor?

Chandler limped toward him, head down. When Wade lifted a hand to pet him, the dog flinched and whimpered. What was wrong with him?

Wade pushed himself to a sitting position, and the room began to spin. Pressing his hands to the sides of his head didn't stop the motion. It didn't lessen the pain, either. He dropped his arms. His right palm was wet and sticky. Blood.

What had happened?

Caleb. He had left to go somewhere. The airport. And he had come back. Two times. No, he came back once. The second time was someone else. Two men.

Memory crashed into him with the force of a Mack truck. Two men had barged in, grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head into the door jamb. *To get to Sydney.*

The last of the fog fled his brain and he struggled to his feet, calling her name, but not expecting her to answer. The men had taken her. Where was that Levy County deputy that was supposed to be watching the house?

He snatched up his phone and called 911. Maybe the deputy had already called. But he wasn't taking any chances. While on the phone, he moved through the house and checked each room, Chandler limping along behind him. He could guess what had probably happened—Chandler had gone after the men, and one of them had kicked him.

It didn't look as if Sydney had put up any fight. The sliding glass door in the dining room was open, but nothing was disturbed in the kitchen or living room. When he reached the hall bath, though, the door had been ripped from its hinges, the jamb splintered. The window was open, and the screen had been removed. Hope flickered inside. Sydney had gotten out and fled on foot.

He relayed what he had found to the dispatcher and asked that they send a K-9 unit. She likely had headed into the woods to escape the men. Apparently she hadn't run into the deputy, or help would have arrived by now.

After ending the call, he briefly checked Chandler, then retrieved his weapon and walked out the back, careful to not touch anything. For several moments, he stood listening. All was silent except for the crickets and other night sounds.

So where was the deputy? Had the men taken him out before they went after Sydney? He looked around him, all senses on full alert. Soft moonlight illuminated the yard, but the woods beyond were hidden in shadow.

Was Sydney nearby, hunkered down, waiting for help to arrive? Or had the men already caught her? Had they carried out their plans while he lay unconscious on the laundry room floor?

No. He pushed the thought from his mind. *Lord, please don't let us be too late.*

He slowly circled the house, pistol raised and ears cocked for the slightest sound. It wouldn't do any good to go searching for her alone. He had no idea where to look. But the dog would know. His best plan would be to wait for help to arrive.

Meanwhile, he would call Hunter. He wasn't on duty tonight. But he would want to know. And he would want to be there to help search for her. Hunter wasn't just close to him, he was close to Sydney, too. And Hunter knew how he felt about her.

Sydney didn't. He had discouraged her from staying, giving her the impression that he didn't want her around. That was the furthest thing from the truth. He enjoyed every moment he spent with her. Her presence filled his home with life and warmth. Maybe he even loved her.

No, he hadn't discouraged her from staying because he wanted her to leave. He had discouraged her from staying because he wasn't willing to once again risk his heart, to take the chance that she would become his and then leave. Like Lori had.

Maybe Hunter was right. Maybe he *was* a coward.

Hunter answered on the first ring. While Wade explained what had happened, he continued his path around the house and into the front yard.

As soon as he ended the call, he began to pace. And scold himself. How could he have been so stupid? He was supposed to be protecting her.

He had heard Caleb's secret knock and hadn't questioned it, especially since he had knocked just a couple of minutes earlier. There was no peephole in the door, no side window to look through. But he could have called out and made sure it was, in fact, Caleb.

Instead, he had opened the door and let the men in. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

The distant squeal of sirens interrupted the mental tongue-lashing, and he stopped his pacing to look down the road. The sirens grew louder, and soon a colorful glow bounced off the trees.

Two Cedar Key vehicles came into view, then stopped at the edge of his yard—the SUV and one of the Crown Victorias. Over the next ten minutes, two Levy County patrol cars arrived. A uniformed deputy stepped from one, accompanied by a German shepherd.

“Do you have something that belongs to the victim?”

“I do.” Sydney had just done laundry two days ago. But the clothes she wore yesterday were in the small basket in the laundry room. He hurried inside and returned a minute later with a T-shirt and a pair of shorts.

“She climbed out the bathroom window back here.” Wade led the deputy around back and handed him Sydney's clothing.

After letting the dog smell the items, he straightened. “Bruno, track.”

Bruno sniffed the air, then put his nose to the ground, full of eagerness. When he reached the area in front of the bathroom window, that eagerness turned to excitement.

He had picked up the trail.

Sydney crept through the shadows, resisting the urge to run full speed toward Wade's. She had heard law enforcement approach. Four vehicles, if she had counted the sirens correctly. She was only three houses away.

But she had to be quiet. A too-loud rustle, or the crack of a rotten limb, and Burgess' men would be on her. Burgess would be even more desperate to end her life. There was a warrant out for his arrest, charges to be filed that wouldn't stick without her testimony. Leaving her alive was a mistake they couldn't afford.

She continued to tiptoe through the woods, each step bringing her closer to Wade's, and safety. She took another step, onto a fairly thick branch. She felt it under her foot a fraction of a second before she heard it. Hard and thick. But brittle. The crack of dry wood shattered the silence, and she froze, not even daring to breathe.

"George, this way." The hoarse whisper carried to her in the darkness. If she was lucky, it carried to the cops, too.

The men stomped toward her, apparently more concerned with speed than stealth. Beams of light converged on her from two different directions. One of the men was between her and safety.

She took off running, ignoring the pain in her knee, and let out a loud scream. The men knew where she was. She could now alert the police. If she was able to run fast enough, the police would bring down the men before they killed her.

A shot rang out, and a piece of bark hit her in the face. Her heart almost stopped. She would never make it. The men were gaining on her, firing shots from behind, and the police were too far away to help. She could hide, but she couldn't outrun a bullet.

Then there was commotion all around her, and shouts. Commands to lay down their weapons and surrender, that they were surrounded.

But Sydney didn't slow down. She ran full speed ahead, making a zigzag path. Two more shots sounded.

The next moment she was out in the open, bathed in moonlight, the woods behind her, a darkened house in front of her. She had apparently reached a street running perpendicular to Gulf Boulevard. With panic on her heels and nothing impeding her path, she ran faster than she had ever run, around the house and into its front yard.

Across the street, two cars sat in a driveway in front of a house. The glow of lights shone through several windows. Someone was home, and still up. She shot across the street, just as a car turned the corner a block away.

Anxiety spiked through her. Someone was in a vehicle looking for her. The boss. Burgess, no doubt. Were those headlights his? Had he seen her?

She ran around the back of the house, unwilling to stand out front. A set of French doors led onto a brick patio. Sheer curtains covered the glass panes. Inside was a dining room, with a table and several chairs. That light was on, too.

She pounded on the door, waited a couple seconds and pounded again, her knock even more urgent. After what seemed like forever, a male figure stepped into view and approached. An outside light came on, bathing her in virtual daylight. She looked around her, feeling exposed and vulnerable, afraid that someone would at any moment step around the corner of the house.

A lock clicked over, and the man reached for the doorknob. Movement in her peripheral vision drew her attention to the left. It was Burgess. He looked the same as he had in his picture on the website.

Except this time he was holding a gun.

Her heart leaped into her throat. The door opened the same moment a shot rang out, wrenching a scream from her throat. But the bullet didn't hit anywhere near her. A male figure had flown out of the darkness and slammed into Burgess, knocking him to the ground. Another person joined in, and within moments, Burgess was subdued.

Her savior stood and, for the first time, faced her. It was Wade. He had just saved her life for the fourth time. She stumbled toward him. But she didn't have to go far. In three long strides, he had reached her. He wrapped her in a tight embrace, picked her up and spun her around.

When he finally put her down, he didn't release her. In fact, he held her like he was never going to let her go.

And she rested in the safety of his arms. His heart pounded against her ear, and his masculine scent wrapped around her.

All too soon, it would be over. She would go back to Atlanta and never see him again. Because that was what he wanted.

But she wouldn't think about that tonight. Instead, she would stay in the circle of his embrace and savor the moment.

Because there was nowhere else she would rather be.

Sydney jogged down Gulf Boulevard, her tennis shoes pounding the asphalt. After being cooped up inside for the past several days, she needed the fresh air and exercise. And she needed to clear her mind.

She was free to go home. Burgess had been arrested. He was the one Wade had tackled. The two men who had pursued her into the woods had also been captured. Before barging into Wade's house, they had knocked out, gagged and bound the cop, thinking they had their bases covered.

They hadn't counted on her being able to elude them until Wade came around.

Early tomorrow morning, she and Wade would leave for a six-hour trip to Atlanta. Since she had come to Crystal River in Bambi's car, her own was sitting safely in its assigned spot in front of her apartment.

Once home, she would get her credit cards canceled and new ones issued. Then Monday morning, she would show up at the driver's license place with her birth certificate and other required information. Soon she would have her life back. She should be excited.

But she wasn't. Her best friend was gone. She had no job. The big city had lost its appeal. What she really wanted to do was stay in Cedar Key. In two short weeks, she had fallen in love with the place. And she had made great friends. Darci and Allison would always hold a special place in her heart. So would Caleb and Hunter and Wade. She had even gotten attached to Chandler, who, after a trip to the vet, was back to sleeping at her feet.

But Wade wanted her to leave.

She veered off to the right, past an open wrought iron gate. A concrete pillar bore a small rectangular sign reading "Cedar Key Cemetery." Moss-draped oaks shaded weathered tombstones, many dating back to the 1800s.

In the slanting light of the late afternoon sun, there was nothing spooky about the place. Instead, it held a sense of tranquility, much like the rest of Cedar Key—quiet, unpretentious and rich with history. Buried beneath these aging concrete monuments were people who, over the past century and a half, had called Cedar Key home.

Sydney slowed to a brisk walk. *Home*. Two years in Atlanta, and it still didn't feel like home. Maybe that was because she was really a small town girl at heart.

She once again picked up her pace to a jog and followed the curve of the road headed out. Wade got back to the house the same time she did and stepped from the Ranger dressed in his Cedar Key Police uniform.

She fell into step with him. "How was your day?"

"Wonderfully uneventful."

She smiled. They had had enough excitement last night to carry them for the next ten years.

He closed the truck door and headed up the front walk.

“We made a couple more arrests today, one of which was Donald Kirst. We suspected he was behind all this, and we were right, although he was careful to avoid getting his hands dirty.”

Before they even reached the front door, a pleasant aroma enveloped them. Wade drew in a slow breath, closed his eyes and tipped back his head. “You’re tormenting me before I even get inside.”

She grinned. “That’s the plan.”

Wade opened the door and waited for her to enter. He had left her his spare key, just in case, which she had tucked into her shorts pocket.

He followed her into the kitchen, where she cracked the oven door to look inside.

“Ten more minutes, and it’ll be ready.”

He leaned against the counter, his pose casual. “You know, I’m going to miss this. You’ve spoiled me these last two weeks.”

His smile was teasing. His gaze was anything but. There was a seriousness there, maybe even longing.

But he wanted her to leave. He had, in so many words, said so. Now his eyes were saying something entirely different. And she wasn’t going to let him get away with it.

“You’re going to miss me, but not enough to want me to stay.”

“I never said that.”

“You just strongly encouraged me to leave.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

She crossed her arms. “Then how did you mean it?”

“I want you to be happy.”

“And what makes you think that I won’t be happy right here? I like Cedar Key. I like the tranquility, I like the friendliness of the people, and I like the close-knit, small town feel.”

His brows drew together. “I thought you liked big cities.”

She uncrossed her arms and leaned against the counter next to him. “Two years ago, I moved to the city, but that’s not how I grew up. I was raised on a farm outside a Georgia town the size of Cedar Key. When I was fourteen, a family with a girl my age moved to town. Kristen and I became fast friends. She had just moved from Philadelphia and seemed so mature and worldly. She had all kinds of stories about what life was like in Philly and couldn’t wait until she was old enough to hightail it out of Podunkville and get back to the city. So when I finished college, instead of heading back home, I took off for Atlanta.” She drew in a deep breath and

let it out slowly. "But sometimes reality doesn't hold all the glitz and glamor people paint with their stories."

She paused and narrowed her eyes. "So tell me why you want me to leave."

"I didn't want you to stay and then regret it."

She studied him, and suddenly she knew. "It's happened before, hasn't it? You got involved with someone, and she got homesick and left."

"Twice. The first one I married." He gave her a wry smile. "I'm ashamed to admit there was a second time, but I guess I'm a slow learner. At least with that one, she figured it out a little sooner."

"Well, this small town girl is tired of the noise and traffic and commotion. I hope you're not going to try to talk me out of moving, because I'm pretty determined."

"Then let me be the first to welcome you as a full-time resident of Cedar Key."

A slow smile climbed up his cheeks, and this one *did* touch his eyes. Warmth filled her. She hadn't known him long enough to think about anything permanent. But the idea of staying offered intriguing possibilities. For the future, anyway. Because she wasn't jumping into anything.

Six weeks. That was her rule. Or maybe she would squeak by with five. Just this once. After all, whatever she and Larry had, it wasn't that serious. If she got involved with Wade, it wouldn't be on the rebound. There was nothing to rebound from.

She opened the oven door, then reached for a couple of potholders. Wade beat her to it.

"Here, let me."

After he had placed the hot casserole dish on top of the stove, he turned to face her.

"Once you come back and get settled in somewhere, I hope I'll still get the occasional home-cooked meal."

"You will. I promise." She pulled two plates from the cupboard and put them on the table.

"And someone to share it with?"

"Of course." When she turned to get the silverware, her gaze locked with his, and the warmth there made her heart stutter. Okay, maybe three weeks.

She drew in a stabilizing breath and tried to inject levity into an exchange that had become much too serious. “You’ve liked having a cook, and I’ve enjoyed having a bodyguard.” She grinned up at him. “In fact, I’m thinking about taking applications for the position.”

She turned so the counter was at her back, and he stepped in front of her. Any attempts she had made to lighten the mood hadn’t worked. His head was tilted downward, his face inches from hers. If he hadn’t had her pinned with his body, the heat in his gaze would have held her rooted to the spot.

“I’m thinking about applying.” His breath brushed her lips. “When can I interview?”

The air escaped her lungs in a sigh of longing. Pooh on rules. They were made to be broken. “How about right now?”

Those final inches separating them dissolved, and he slanted his mouth across hers. Liquid honey flowed through her, sapping the strength from her legs. If she hadn’t been still holding onto the counter top, she might have slid to the floor in an undignified heap.

When he drew back, she almost protested. She wrapped both arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

“You’re hired.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol J. Post writes fun, fast-paced inspirational romance and romantic suspense and lives in sunshiny central Florida. Her books have been nominated for a RITA© award and an RT Reviewers Choice Best Book award. She sings and plays piano for her church and also enjoys sailing, hiking, camping—almost anything outdoors. Her daughters and grandkids live too far away for her liking, so now she pours all that nurturing into taking care of two fat and sassy cats and one highly-spoiled dog.

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Deadly Getaway is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, is entirely coincidental. Cedar Key is a real town on the western coast of Florida, chosen as the setting for this story for its beauty and peacefulness.

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Read on for a preview of *Shattered Haven*, the next book in the Cedar Key series.

“...The reader will enjoy trying to decode the clues to reveal their meaning. This is the first in what looks to be a drama-filled series.”

4 1/2 Star Review, Romantic Times

Allison Winchester's old Victorian house contains a valuable secret code, one that someone is dead set on uncovering. After her house is ransacked and her life is threatened, she has no choice but to accept the protection of injured ex-cop Blake Townsend. Allison never thought she'd trust a man with secrets again—and Blake is as much a mystery as the man who is stalking her. The lawman vows to shield her from the dangerous criminal. But can Blake and Allison decipher the mysterious code before their island safe haven becomes their ultimate resting place?

ONE

Allison Winchester lay stock still, every muscle tight with apprehension.

Something had awoken her. A noise. Different from the usual creaks and groans of the old Victorian.

But all was quiet. Was it her imagination? The remnants of a dream?

She eased into a semi-upright position and propped herself on her elbows. A full moon cast its silver glow into the room, the lace curtains making shadowed patterns on the furnishings. The door was closed, her robe hanging from a hook on its back. Next to the bed, two shams and a half dozen throw pillows lay stacked in the upholstered chair with a stuffed Garfield perched on top. Everything was exactly as she had left it. A sliver of tension slid away.

Then it came again. A rattle. Like someone trying to jimmy a window. The tension ratcheted up again, and she lay frozen, ears straining in the silence that followed. When the rattle resumed, she had no doubt. Someone was trying to break into her house.

She sprang from the bed and snatched her cell phone from her purse. As she finished punching in the three numbers, the crash of breaking glass shattered the still night. Panic raced up her spine and settled in her chest, squeezing the air from her lungs. Disjointed prayers circled through her mind, along with frantic commands—lock the door, hide, grab Tom’s gun. When she was finally able to breathe again, her ragged gasp echoed in the spacious room.

Then another sound registered—a calm female voice.

“Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?”

“Someone’s in my house.” Her voice was a raspy whisper.

The dispatcher continued her soothing tone. “Help is on the way. I’m staying on the line until they arrive.”

Allison tiptoed to the door and silently turned the lock. Downstairs, heavy footsteps thudded against the polished hardwood floors. Her intruder wasn’t even trying to be quiet. She clutched the phone more tightly and pressed it against her ear, that soothing voice her lifeline to safety.

The footsteps hesitated, and for several moments, she forgot to breathe. Then a new noise shattered her already frayed nerves—the creak

of the bottom step. Renewed panic spiraled through her. Lord, please help me.

“He’s coming upstairs.” Where were the police? What was taking them so long?

She drew in a shaky breath. Probably less than a minute had passed since she had first placed her call. But she wasn’t going to wait helplessly while a possible killer made his way toward her room.

She backed away, eyes still glued to the door. If he wanted to come in, the lock wouldn’t stop him. One solid kick, and the doorframe would splinter. She propped the phone against her ear with one shoulder and opened her T-shirt drawer, cringing at the scrape of wood on wood. There hadn’t been any more creaks. Maybe he had abandoned his plans for coming upstairs. But she wasn’t taking a chance.

Her fingers scrambled along the bottom of the drawer, reaching for what had lain untouched since she moved to Cedar Key two years ago. When her hand made contact with cold steel, trepidation warred with relief. Holding something so lethal just didn’t feel...safe. She had outgrown her youthful klutziness. But she still didn’t feel confident handling a weapon.

Now wasn’t the time for such reservations.

“I’m getting my gun.” She kept her voice low.

“Help is on the way. Just stay put.”

“Believe me, I will.” No way was she leaving the room. At least until the cops arrived and the intruder was cuffed.

She propped the phone against her shoulder and inserted the loaded clip, hands shaking. Then she waited, weapon trained on the door, her finger poised on the trigger.

According to Tom, the pink GLOCK was a perfect ladies’ gun. He bought it for her a month before he was killed, insisting she keep it with her. He even tried to teach her how to use it.

She should have paid more attention. But she hadn’t seen the need. She lived in an upper class New England neighborhood, separated from the unsavory elements of society. And blind to the unscrupulous activities of her husband. Those same activities had left her a widow at age twenty-four. Tom had needed the gun worse than she had.

A siren sounded in the distance and screamed closer. Her breath spilled out in a relieved sigh. “They’re almost here.”

She moved to the side window and looked out over the small yard that lay along the west side of her house. She wouldn't be able to see the police. But the reflection of flashing lights in the window of her neighbor's bungalow would signal their arrival.

A second later, the siren stopped. A figure appeared from the back and charged across her side yard at a full run. Within moments, he had disappeared behind the hedge bordering her neighbor's back yard.

She laid the weapon on the dresser, disconnected the call and grabbed her robe from the back of the door. The intruder was probably long gone, but she needed to tell the police what she saw. She hurried down the stairs, then crossed the small foyer.

As soon as she stepped onto her front porch, she stopped short. A Cedar Key police cruiser sat in her front yard. But the officer wasn't alone. He had already apprehended the suspect. He had him pinned against the side of the car and was cuffing him.

She cinched the belt on her robe more tightly and started down the porch steps. The officer turned and nodded a greeting. It was Hunter Kingston. He had somehow managed to catch the intruder and drag him back to the cruiser before she could get down the stairs and out the door. Hunter was good, but she didn't know he was that good.

He looked her up and down. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. He didn't come upstairs. I'm guessing your siren scared him away." She cast a glance at the suspect. "You can bet I won't forget to set the alarm again."

One edge of Hunter's mouth turned up. He obviously recognized her comment for what it was—a threat to the intruder. She had never considered installing an alarm system, had never felt the need.

The stranger turned when she spoke. In the glow of the nearby streetlight, he was an imposing figure, even with his hands secured behind his back. A Guy Harvey T-shirt stretched taut over a muscular chest, and massive arms spoke of hours in the gym. With the close-cut hair, firm set of his jaw and sense of authority he exuded, he didn't fit the image of a common burglar. He looked more like a military guy. Or a cop.

His eyes shifted from her back to Hunter. "What's going on?"

"Someone broke into this lady's house."

"It wasn't me. I already told you, I was chasing my dog."

His tone was nonchalant, the concern she would expect to see absent. Either he had a lot of confidence in his ability to talk his way out of

trouble, or he had been through enough arrests that the thought of spending some time in jail didn't faze him.

Hunter didn't appear to be buying his story. "At four a.m.?"

"Since three-thirty, actually. He saw a cat and took off. I've chased him all over this side of Cedar Key."

"Where are you staying?"

"Cedar Cove Marina, on my boat. I just arrived this afternoon."

"I'm going to have to bring you in for questioning." Hunter opened the back door of the cruiser and guided him around it.

Now the stranger's eyes did fill with concern. "I need to find my dog. He's a young Doberman, answers to Brinks. He won't hurt anybody, but he's probably halfway to the mainland by now."

"We'll keep an eye out for him." Skepticism filled Hunter's tone.

Allison pursed her lips. Something wasn't right about the whole scenario. Hunter would have to be Flash to have covered that much ground by the time she made it outside. She couldn't identify the intruder. Between the clouds obscuring the moon, the oak that shaded a good portion of her side yard and the distance from the street light, it was too dark.

But she knew where he had come from and which direction he had gone.

"Hunter, wait." She held up a hand. "Where was he when you saw him?"

"I was coming down First Street, and he ran out from between your house and the one next door." As Hunter spoke, he gestured with his right hand, tracing the path the suspect had taken.

It was all wrong. The intruder came from the opposite side of the house and went in a different direction. The stranger was telling the truth. And for some unexplained reason, she was glad.

"Hunter, we've got the wrong guy."

His brows lifted in question, and she continued.

"I saw the intruder, just as you got here. He ran out from behind my house and went that way." She lifted a hand, her index finger extended.

Before Hunter could respond, a Doberman came bounding toward them and skidded to a stop at the open door of the car. The dog put both front paws in the man's lap and slathered sloppy kisses up one cheek, initiating peals of laughter.

“Now you decide to show up. You almost got me arrested.” Still laughing, he maneuvered to his feet. Not easy with two large paws in his lap and his hands cuffed behind his back. “No more jerky treats for you. At least till tomorrow.”

Hunter stepped behind him and inserted a key into the handcuffs. “Sorry about that. We don’t get many break-ins here. In fact, we don’t get any break-ins. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

The stranger shot him a forgiving smile over one shoulder as the cuffs clicked open. “No problem. You were only doing your job. But I have to admit, this was my first time on this side of the handcuffs.” He clipped a leash onto the dog’s collar before extending his hand. “Blake Townsend, Dallas P.D.”

Hunter’s brows shot up again. “You’ve got to be kidding. I was arresting a cop?”

“Former cop, actually. Injured on the job.” He turned toward Allison. “And you, milady, deserve a big thank you for getting me out of hot water. I at least owe you dinner.”

The smile he gave her reached his eyes, creating fine lines at their corners. His manner was joking, but something told her he was dead serious about dinner. And she was suddenly hit with a case of teenage shyness. She reached to smooth her hair, then dropped her hand. Why bother? The first impression was already made—barefoot and bedhead. Not that it mattered.

She returned his smile with one that she hoped projected confidence. “That won’t be necessary. Your words were thank you enough.”

He nodded, then looked at Hunter. “If you’re done with me, I’ll get Bozo here back to the boat. Next time you see us, he’ll be on a leash.” He frowned down at the dog who eyed him eagerly, tail nub wagging. One ear stood at attention, straight and sharp. The other made an attempt. But the top two inches flopped forward. The imperfection lent a comic element to his would-be ferociousness. “I think he needs obedience training. He’s usually a good dog, but when he sees a cat, his brain shuts down and he morphs into seventy pounds of pure, dumb instinct.”

He turned and started down the sidewalk, favoring his right leg. Probably the injury he’d mentioned. There was stiffness in his gait, as if he was trying hard to hide what should have been a pronounced limp after spending the last half hour chasing his dog.

A cop. She had him pegged right. Maybe she was getting better at reading people. It was about time.

When she returned her gaze to Hunter, he was grinning at her. “Checking out the newest Cedar Key resident?”

“Not like you’re thinking.” Her cheeks warmed in spite of her flippant response. Hunter was a good friend. They had a lot in common, right down to their determination to avoid serious relationships with the opposite sex. She didn’t know his reasons, but she knew her own. Serious relationships required trust, something in short supply lately, at least on her end.

“Let’s check out your place.” Hunter’s words cut across her thoughts. “We’ve got a breaking and entering to investigate.”

She squared her shoulders and started up the front walk, uneasiness descending on her with every step. Meeting the injured cop had been a nice reprieve. Now she had to face what she would find inside—a broken window, the possibility of items missing from her house.

And the end of the sense of security she had always known there.

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