

A Plummet to Murder

by Joanie Bruce

CHAPTER ONE

Dani screamed when she saw the body face down in the rippling stream. The gnarled pine tree poked her shoulder blades as she stepped back, and every beat of her heart pounded against her temples.

She forced her eyes open to stare at the woman. It was a woman—she could tell by the long locks of gray hair floating around the edges of her head and the red ribbon holding her hair in a loose ponytail.

She shuddered.

Should she see if the woman was still warm? What if she had recently fallen into the creek, and Dani could save her with CPR?

That thought electrified Dani. She pitched her mushroom bag on the moss-covered rock embedded in the creek and scurried through the water. With shaking hands, she pulled on

the checked flannel shirt until the body turned.

Gripping nausea tightened her stomach when she saw the swollen face, and she unfurled her clenched fist and let the shirt go.

Oh no! It was Anita Winston.

Another wave of horror traveled through her when she saw the two-inch gash on the top of Anita's head.

She backed away from the creek. Tears filled her eyes, but there was nothing she could do now. Anita was dead—probably murdered.

The jagged rocks scratched her hands as she crawled back to shore.

A hurt so deep she could hardly bear the pain traveled through her. She would never find her birth mother now. Anita was her last hope. After years of searching, she was once again at a dead end.

Shame halted that train of thought. What kind of person was she? Worrying about her own problems when Anita ... She forced herself to forget the fact it was Anita she was leaving behind and walked faster.

Digging in a pocket of the burlap bag, she pulled out her cell phone and looked at the empty bars. She'd have to get out of these woods before her cell phone picked up a signal. She

looked back at Anita's body. Regret for leaving her in the water tore through Dani, but she couldn't disturb a murder scene ... if it was murder.

Off in the distance she heard rumbling.

Thunder.

That's all she needed.

Turning, she forced herself to ignore thoughts of the rain falling on the body in the creek. It was foolish to feel sorry for Anita being rained on when her body was half-submerged in water—but for some reason, the tears returned.

The sun didn't have a chance against angry clouds rolling in to take over the sky. The woods were immediately shrouded in darkness. It was an hour until sunset, but the storm brewing above darkened the open areas around her—the shadows were almost black.

The downpour began filtering through the dense leaves overhead, and she picked up her pace. Her uneven gait made her trip on a protruding root. Falling arms first, she caught herself but not before she banged her knee on a rock buried in the leaves. Pain shot up her leg. Trying to block out the pain, she rocked back and forth on the matted leaves.

Then she heard it ... a stick breaking ... not too far from her position. She tilted her head to listen.

Another crack sounded—a little closer.

Someone was in the woods with her.

Now a new fear emerged.

Was it the murderer?

CHAPTER TWO

Dani sat still, surrounded by a dark and intimidating forest—every one of her senses alerted to the movements around her. Did the sound come from behind her, or was it echoing in the surrounding trees?

Gingerly standing to her feet, she hobbled along, wiping the rain water from her eyes and trying to avoid the dry sticks. A branch crunched under her tennis shoes, and she cringed.

Way to go, Dani.

As she rushed through the thick stand of water oaks, she picked up the slightest sound of movement behind her. Turning, she searched the darkness.

Was that someone moving through the thick stand of pine trees two hundred feet back?

She picked up her pace and almost tripped on another root hidden under the leaves.

Up ahead a thick growth of kudzu vines swung from the tallest tree in the forest. The vines were thick and dense.

Would the massive undergrowth against the old oak hide her?

Rushing to the foliage, she pushed aside an armful of vines and stepped into the hole. Pressing her back against the tree, she forced herself to ignore thoughts of the insects that might be hiding there. Only slivers of the other trees in the forest were visible through the vines in front of her. Thankfully, her blouse was a dark green and blended in with her surroundings.

She pressed the brown bag in front of her face to keep the whiteness of her skin from shining through the darkness and made herself as small as possible. The burlap smelled musty as she pressed her cheek against it and peeked around it into the forest.

Thankfully it was almost dark. This time, the darkness she feared became her friend.

She held her breath and listened.

Heartbeats pounded in her temples.

A swishing sound drew closer as the person following her pushed past tall ferns and undergrowth. The footsteps stopped outside her damp hiding place.

Had she been found?

CHAPTER THREE

Sheriff Alec Benson leaned back in his seat as the owner of the restaurant hobbled over.

"Sheriff, how did you like the new Italian Cream Cake?"

Alec patted his stomach. "It was delicious, Walter, but that baked salmon was out of this world. You must be using new recipes or hiding a new cook back there somewhere because for the last two months, your meals have been fantastic ... I mean, not that they were bad before."

Walter laughed. "Well, I do admit to having a little help here and there, and I've been using some recipes from a new magazine. They have a featured article every week written by a secret chef with super recipes. All my customers seem to enjoy the new food."

"Oh yeah." Alec grinned. "I've already put on five pounds."

They both laughed.

"Hey, I forgot to warn you—Miss Mabel Williams is looking for you."

"Uh oh. Who's she after this time?"

"I don't know, but she came running in here looking for you and rushed out again. She was mumbling something about you never being available when a person needed you." He let out a chuckle.

Alec shook his head. "I guess I better go find her, or she'll never let me forget it. By the way, how's the leg doing?"

Walter shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "A broken leg is a broken leg. It's healing at least."

Alec smiled, got up, and laid a tip on the table.

Outside he looked toward the station and saw Miss Mabel hobbling along the sidewalk with his deputy following behind. He could tell by the frown on Max's face he wasn't happy.

Miss Mabel shouted at him as soon as she saw him.

"Sheriff, I've been looking for you all over town."

Alec walked up to her and took her hand into his to pat it softly. "Calm down, Miss Mabel. I'm here. Did you need me for something?"

"I'm worried about Anita Winston. She's missing."

"Missing? Why do you think she's missing?"

"I'm fixing to tell you, Sheriff," she said with a disgusted look. "Anita passes my house every afternoon ... for more years than I can count ... and today she didn't. I knocked on her door, but she didn't answer. Something's wrong. I can feel it in my bones."

Standing behind Miss Mabel, Max coughed to hide a laugh and covered his mouth with his hands.

Alec frowned at him and turned back to the woman. "Miss Mabel, how do you know you didn't miss her when she walked by. Maybe you were stirring something on the stove, or on the phone."

Max patted the woman's arm. "Yes, Miss Mabel, are you sure this isn't one of your false alarms? Remember last week when you told us there was a prowler in Mrs. Barnes' house, but it turned out to be Mr. Barnes? Maybe that feeling in your bones is arthritis."

Alec frowned at his deputy as Miss Mabel stood up as tall as her five feet allowed and thrust her nose into the air. "I'm telling you there's something wrong with Anita Winston, Sheriff." She gave him a pointed look and shook a crooked finger at him. "You better find out, before it's too late."

She opened her parasol, threw it on her shoulder, and huffed down the sidewalk.

Max could hold his laughter no longer.

"That lady is something else," he said, shaking his head. "If she didn't come to us once a week and report something crazy—"

Alec stopped the rant with a look. "Go check it out, Max. Sometimes false alarms turn out to be legitimate."

Max frowned. "Okay, boss, but I bet I don't find anything."

Alec's cell phone rang, and he fished it out of his pocket. "Sheriff Benson."

"Sheriff, this is Steve Landon. I'm worried about one of our librarians, Anita Winston. She didn't show up at the library for work this evening, and she's never late. I tried her cell, but she doesn't answer."

Alec snapped his finger toward Max and motioned him to wait.

"Thank you, Steve. Someone else voiced concern about Miss Winston, so we'll check it out. Thanks for the call."

Alec hung up the phone and turned to Max. "Anita Winston didn't show up for work this evening. I'll run by her house to see if she's there. You go by the library and get the phone numbers of Anita's co-workers. See if anyone has seen her. While you're at it, ask them if they noticed anything strange

about her behavior lately."

"Yes sir."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I may be late, Mom. I have to check out a missing person's report." Alec pitched his hat onto the passenger seat and climbed behind the wheel of his cruiser.

"A missing person. Who?"

"I don't think I should say until we know for sure if she's missing. You know how the rumor mill gets going."

"Alec Benson, you know I don't spread rumors."

Alec laughed. "I know, Mom, but I'd rather not say until I know for sure."

"Okay, but try not to be too late. Hamburgers aren't good when they're cold."

"Yes, ma'am. It looks like it'll turn out to be a good night for a cook-out though."

"Definitely. We'll see you when we see you."

Alec ended the connection and rolled down his window. He inhaled the damp air as he drove his cruiser along the straight road toward Anita Winston's house. The rain had ended, and a clean refreshing smell filled his nostrils. As his car leaned into the next sharp curve and straightened back up, he saw a blue car sitting beside the road. The back of the car was

in the ditch, and the front tires barely crossed the white line. He jammed on the breaks. The shiny Subaru Impreza was the only one in the town of Palmer.

Anita's car.

He pulled off the road and parked behind the car. His stomach tightened as he called in the license plate number and got out of the car.

Not knowing what to expect, he walked around to the driver's side and peered into the window.

CHAPTER FIVE

A cold fear traveled through Dani as she peeked over the burlap bag. The man's bearded face appeared directly in front of her, and his eyes passed briefly over her cubbyhole shrouded by vines. Fear held her eyes open as she watched his angry eyes staring down the path.

When the man moved away from her hiding place, Dani allowed herself to breath. Slowly her heart rate returned to normal, but she remained frozen. After a while, uncontrollable shivers tingled through her arms and legs reminding her of the damp space. Her cubbyhole was pitch black, and the fall nights turned cold quickly. She had to move before the darkness devoured the path in the woods.

The rain had stopped, but the wind moaned through the swaying trees, and the sound sent shivers down her spine.

Finally, she pushed aside the vines and placed one foot onto the rotting leaves. Silence met her. Eerie silence.

Pivoting, she turned slowly, trying to get her bearings.

Looking up, Dani searched the buttermilk sky for the North Star. Most of the stars were shrouded in clouds but she could barely make out the big dipper. Following the points, she

found the North Star. It was behind her when she walked to the creek, so she turned toward the star and started walking.

She hadn't gone far when she heard a swish behind her. Turning, she searched the darkness with a pounding heart.

Pumping her legs harder, the words run, run, chimed in her head with each twinge of her knee.

She slowed her pace to step over a log, when someone grabbed her in a bear hold from behind.

She screamed and twisted, but the locked arms around her held.

Adrenaline flowed through her, and memories of the training at the community center rushed in. She stomped the man's foot with her heel and tried to thrust her elbow into his stomach at the same time.

The man's jacket absorbed most of the blow, and he only grunted. His arms held tight as he dragged her around the log and in the direction of the creek.

Dani twisted toward a small tree. Wrapping her legs around the trunk, she held on as tight as she could. Her resistance caused him to lose his hold, and she fell to the ground with a thud. She heard him crash into a pile of dead branches.

Not stopping to look around, she jumped up and took

off running. Crashing sounds behind her forced her to pump her legs even faster. Searing pains stabbed through her knee, but she had no choice. She kept running.

CHAPTER SIX

Alec stepped up to the driver's side of the Subaru and let out a relieved breath when he saw the empty car. Expectations of seeing Anita slumped behind the wheel had his adrenaline flowing. He touched the mic on his shoulder and spoke to the dispatch center.

"Terri, tell Max to leave the library for now and meet me on the Lake road at Hunter's woods. Tell him to bring the equipment. I found Anita's empty car. She may be lost in the woods."

"Yes, sir."

Alec turned to search for footprints in the wet ground surrounding the car when his gaze caught the fading rays of the setting sun reflected off the back of a pickup hidden behind a stand of cedar trees. He scanned the woods for movement and walked toward the truck, flipping the safety strap off his pistol.

The truck cab was empty.

He walked around to the back of the truck.

"Terri?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Run these plates: Kentucky BFT-534."

"It might take a minute. The system was down earlier."

"That's fine. Let me know."

Alec checked in the glove compartment and found the truck's registration.

"Sheriff?"

"Yes, Terri?"

"The plates belong to a 2017, black Nissan Titan. Registered to a Stephen Craus, in Grimley, Kentucky. No warrants."

"Yeah ... That's what the papers in the glove box say too. See what you can find on Mr. Craus."

"I'm on it."

Alec was staring at the papers when he heard a hair-raising scream coming from the woods. Throwing the papers at the seat, he took off running toward the trees, shouting into his mic at the same time. "Terri, get backup out here now!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dani's throat burned, and her lungs ached, but she ran, trying to ignore the pain in her knee and the rushing sounds she heard behind her. Blindly, she crashed through undergrowth and skirted around trees. Pushing aside a bunch of limbs, she jumped when blue lights flashed ahead. Running out past the edge of the trees, she screamed when she plowed into the open arms of a man.

With all her strength, she drew back her hand and thrust it toward his nose.

Strong hands grabbed her wrists, and before she could follow through, the man pulled her arms down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Surprised, Alec grabbed the woman's wrist headed toward his face and pulled her arms to her side. Panic filled her eyes.

"Whoa! Wait a minute. I'm here to help."

Understanding dawned, and she melted against him.

"Please ... help me." She panted. "A man ... chasing me."

Alec snapped to attention and scanned the edge of the woods while leading the young woman behind the back of the truck.

"Do you know this man?"

She shook her head. "No, but I think ... I think he killed a woman. She was dead ... in the creek."

A knot formed in Alec's stomach.

Anita?

At that time, two patrol cars screeched off the road and slammed to a stop fifty-feet from them. Two deputies jumped out.

The Sheriff led Dani to the younger of the two.

"Willie, take care of her—there's a man chasing her. See what

she can tell you, and call Tom. We need his dog. Max, come with me. I'll explain on the way."

Max grabbed a rifle from the back of his patrol car and followed Alec into the woods.

CHAPTER NINE

Dani could stand no longer, and she slid to the ground. The young deputy pulled a blanket out of the car and wrapped it around her shoulders.

She whispered a thank you and closed her eyes as she fought the tears.

She was safe.

She heard the deputy speak into the radio and ask for help from a man named Tom then he walked over to her.

"Ma'am, would you like to wait in the car where it's dry, and warmer?"

Dani nodded and stood on shaky limbs. He led her to a squad car parked on the edge of the road. When she sat down in the back seat, the deputy squatted beside her and pulled out a small notebook and pen.

"Ma'am my name is Willie Barnes. I'm a deputy with the Glisson County Sheriff's office. Would you please tell me your name?"

"Dani Robinson."

"Okay, Ms. Robinson, did you know the man chasing you?"

Dani shook her head. "No."

"Do you know why he was after you?"

"I think ... he killed a woman and left her in the creek."

Deputy Barnes straightened.

"Did you know the woman?"

She nodded as the tears returned. She couldn't help the lump that clogged her throat, and she sobbed into her hands.

The man cleared his throat and stood, apparently uncomfortable.

When she finally controlled her outburst, she took several deep breaths and answered him. "Y ... yes, it was Anita Winston."

The deputy didn't seem surprised by the name but wrote it down in his book. "Is there anything else you can tell me about the man?"

Dani shook her head. "He wore a mask that covered his face, but I could see a beard--sort of bushy and dark brown, and his eyes were almost black. She shivered and winced when her knee throbbed.

"Okay, ma'am. I'll get you an ice pack for that knee. Then would you mind telling me everything you remember about finding the body and what happened after that?"

Dani nodded and leaned back in the seat. She wasn't

moving until the man with the angry eyes was caught.

CHAPTER TEN

Alec walked out of the woods with Max behind him. Frustration gnawed at his stomach.

" I can't believe we lost him."

"He must have crossed the creek at some point. Tom's dog lost the trail there. It looks like I owe Ms. Mabel an apology. She was right after all."

Alec turned as flashing blue lights of the squad cars illuminated a black car pulling off the road.

He motioned to Max. "Go with the coroner and show him the body. Make sure CSI processes all the bagged evidence and leaves a copy on my desk. I'll talk to Willie to see what our witness can tell us."

"Yes boss."

Alec nodded as the coroner passed him and turned toward his car. The young woman sat in the back seat, draped in a brown blanket with her head resting against the headrest. An iced gel pack was draped across her right knee. Her eyes were closed, but she wasn't asleep. The muscles of her jaw were tense, and her eyes were squeezed tight ... too tight.

She lifted her head when he opened the door, alarmed.

When she saw his face, she relaxed against the seat. Russet colored hair fell forward. Eyes the color of the sky on a stormy day, looked up at him.

"You didn't find him, did you?"

Her question irritated him, but he shook his head.

"Why was he after you? Do you know?"

"I've never seen him before, but I think he murdered Anita."

Alec drew back. "How did you know it was Anita?"

"I ..." She shook her head and rubbed tears from her eyes.

"You moved the body?"

She looked embarrassed. "I thought I could help ... I just lifted ... I mean, she was ..."

She stopped and covered her face again. Her fingers trembled.

Alec leaned across and touched her on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Miss ..."

"Robinson. Dani Robinson."

"Willie's report said you didn't know the man chasing you, but can you tell me what you were doing in the woods?"

"I was hunting for Maitake mushrooms."

"Mushrooms? Here?"

She looked up, defensive at the tone of his questions. "I had permission from the landowner, Walter Bentley. He owns the cafe in town."

"I know Walter. You're not picking them for the cafe, are you? Wild mushrooms can be dangerous. They're regulated by law."

Dani sat up straight in the car. "No ... of course not."

She's lying about something, thought Alec. Her eyes were blinking too rapidly, and she wouldn't look at him.

"Why were you picking them then?"

"For myself, of course. I love the taste of wild mushrooms. Once you've had them, you'll never go back to eating mushrooms grown in growing houses again."

Alec doubted that, but he let the subject drop.

"Since you already told Willie what you remember, I'll let you go home tonight, but tomorrow we'll need you back at the station to sign a statement. Do you have a car, or is that your truck?" He pointed to the black truck hidden behind the cedars.

Dani shivered. "I don't know who the truck belongs to. My car is around the curve." She rubbed her knee. "I don't think I could drive right now."

"Do you need to have that looked at?" He pointed to

her knee.

"No, I think it's only bruised."

Alec looked at his watch and reached to close the door. "Put your seatbelt on and relax. I'll get one of my deputies to drive your car to your house and pick you up in the morning if you need a ride."

"Thank you."

He didn't say a word but closed the door and got into the driver's seat.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A few hours later, Dani sat in the hard wooden chair opposite the Sheriff's surprisingly neat desk and waited. Something inside her trembled, and she slumped against the back of the chair, wishing she could forget the events of the last several hours. Instead of sleeping, she had played the recent events over and over in her head.

The sheriff walked in and placed a yellow pad down on the desk beside a tape recorder. His dark brown hair was tousled as if he'd come in out of the wind. One look at his soft brown eyes, the color of a vintage violin, and a feeling of peace immediately filtered through her.

"Okay, Miss Robinson, do you mind answering a few questions ... like what you know about Anita Winston's death?"

Dani straightened in her seat. Forget that feeling of peace. Those soft brown eyes were now accusing her of something. Did he think she was the one who killed Anita in the creek?

"Am I in trouble? Do I need a lawyer?"

"Of course not." The man shook his head, but his eyes had turned a deep bottomless brown.

"I need to get your statement recorded and see if

you've remembered anything else since last night. I'd also like you to meet with our forensic artist, Pete McAfee, and see if you can describe the man who attacked you."

"I only saw his eyes and a little bit of beard."

"Yes, I know, but sometimes Pete can draw things out of you that you don't remember seeing. Do you feel up to the challenge?"

"I'll try," Dani said with a flutter in her stomach.

He reached out and pushed the record button on a digital voice recorder. "This is Sheriff Alec Benson recording the statement of Miss Dani Robinson. Miss Robinson, can you tell us how you found the deceased, Anita Winston?"

Dani nodded and told her story into the microphone. She included the part about being attacked and running into the sheriff then sat back in her chair exhausted.

The sheriff clicked the recorder off and reached over to pat her hand. "I'm sorry to make you re-live that, Miss Robinson, but thank you for your statement."

Dani nodded, trying to ignore how nice his hand felt on hers.

"How did you know Anita?"

Dani took a long breath and blew it out slowly.

"I met her at the library. She was helping me do

research."

"Research?" He leaned back in his seat.

He was curious, but she hesitated to tell him she had been looking for her birth mother. Most people didn't understand that gnawing, inner drive inside her—not only to find the woman who actually gave her birth, but to learn the answer to the question that churned even deeper—why her own mother had given her away.

"It's a private matter."

"Miss Robinson, if you know anything that might help us find Anita's killer ..."

Dani bit her lip. The earnest desire for justice flared in his eyes, and her heart responded. She pictured the body in the creek and knew exactly how he felt.

"Well, ..."

She clenched her hands in front of her.

"... she was helping me find my birth mother."

The sheriff's eyes never changed, but she saw the muscles around his mouth tighten.

"And did she have any luck?"

Dani shook her head. "I don't know. She called me the night before she ... died and said she wanted to see me the next day when she got off work at ten."

The sheriff leaned back in his chair. "How long have

you been searching for your birth mother?"

"Forever, it seems, but only about three months here in Palmer. I finally tracked down the adoption lawyer in the town where I was born, Seattle, Washington, but he said legally, he couldn't help me. The only thing he would tell me was to search the records in Atlanta and talk to the librarian here in Palmer."

"Did he say why?"

She shook her head. "No, but right after I moved here, I found an envelope from a certified letter out by my trash can. It was addressed to me, and it was from Atlanta. There was no return address, just the name of the city. The envelope had been opened and was empty. I thought it might have something to do with my research, but I could never track down a lead about the letter. The post office wouldn't tell me anything."

The sheriff scribbled down something on a piece of paper and turned to her.

"Do you still have the envelope?"

"Yes. At home."

"I might run by this afternoon and pick it up."

"Why, Sheriff? I told you ... there was no return address."

"I know, but if it was a certified letter, the post

office should have records."

She rubbed her forehead. "Do you think Anita's murder has something to do with my past?"

Alec shrugged. "I don't know, but she was helping you, and now she's dead. I need to explore every possibility. Okay, if I have more questions, do you have a number where can I reach you?" He stood up and held out his hand to help her up. That gesture made her smile. Quite the gentleman, even if he did suspect her of murder.

"I'll give you my cell number." She stood up and scribbled on the pad of paper he handed her.

"Excellent. Are you ready to meet with Pete?"

Dani nodded.

"Follow me."

An hour later, the Sheriff met Dani in Pete McAfee's office as she was rising to leave.

He smiled. "Thank you for your help, Miss Robinson."

Those dimples.

"You may as well call me Dani," she said with an embarrassed smile.

"Very well, Dani. Did you drive yourself here this morning?"

"Yes."

The Sheriff held the door open and turned to her. "I know you're frustrated right now, but I've found that prayer always helps."

Dani shook her head. "I'm not really the praying type."

His mouth twisted to the side as he nodded. "Prayers can be pretty powerful. You might re-think that strategy."

Dani turned to the door and walked out of the room, trying to hide her slight limp. As soon as she reached the hallway, she felt a cool chill. Glancing through the tall windows on both sides of the hall, she saw no one outside the building. A shiver traveled up her spine. It felt as if someone was watching her. She turned and looked at the sheriff who was already at his desk, gazing out the back window.

Unease followed her all the way home.

She pulled into her garage and sat there, worried about walking into the empty house.

"This is crazy," she told herself. "I was here last night by myself, and nothing happened. There's nothing to be worried about." The words were meant to calm her nerves, but she wasn't stupid. She saw the deputy sitting in a squad car outside her house all night. The sheriff obviously thought there was reason to be concerned. She glanced around the neighborhood now

and trembled. No deputy.

Had the man in the woods seen her face? Even though the darkness might have prevented him from recognizing her features, she couldn't be positive.

Should she have asked for continued protection from the sheriff's office?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Max Stone pulled up to the curb in front of Dani's house, anxious because he lost sight of her when she left the station. He was relieved to see her sitting in her car inside the garage with the door open. He cut the motor on his cruiser and relaxed in the seat.

A ball field behind the house was no place for someone to hide, so he scanned the neighborhood. Only one person was outside—a neighbor three doors down stood on the porch in her purple robe yelling, "Twig-gy, Twig-gy."

The fattest orange and white cat he ever saw strutted through the yard, half rolled up the steps, and squeezed through the slightly open front door.

Twiggy? Max laughed. He slumped down in the seat and blew out a confused breath. He'd never figure out what made women think the way they did. That's probably why he'd never get married.

Dani finally got out of her car and walked toward the back door. A snail could have made it faster. She pushed the button on the remote and the door closed.

Max saw the garage light go off, but almost

immediately it came back on. He sat up in the seat, alert.

What he saw next had him reaching for his pistol and his shoulder mic.

In the light of the garage windows he saw two shadows. One of them was waving something in his hand that looked exactly like a pistol.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Dani got up enough nerve to get out of the car, she slammed the door and stood there, dreading entry into the house. She finally pushed the button on the remote, and the garage doors came sliding down.

Everything was quiet as she fumbled for the kitchen door key. After unlocking the door, she turned off the garage light and walked into the kitchen.

The light above the kitchen sink was on—something familiar. It calmed her. The box of scones she made to take to the restaurant today were still sitting on the table beside the door where she left them, and her shoes were beside the back door where she kicked them off after work the night before.

When she slammed the kitchen door and turned to lock the deadbolt, she felt cold metal against her cheek.

"Don't move, or I'll shoot you here and now."

Dani froze and closed her eyes.

"Put your arms behind you."

Dani dropped her purse and did what the man said, shaking so hard, she could hardly stand. She felt him slip something over both her hands and pull it up on her shoulders.

Then he reached around her waist and pulled a strap tight and clicked it shut. She looked down and saw what looked like the straps to a backpack.

"Now, turn around and look at me."

Slowly she pivoted until she was facing a man who was covered from head to toe in black. Only his eyes were exposed—the same gray eyes she had seen in the woods. Her legs almost gave away, but she locked her knees in place and held onto the door handle.

He waved a TV remote in front of her.

"Do you know what this is?"

"N ... no." Her voice was broken and barely audible.

"It's a remote control, and it activates that bomb on your back."

Dani almost fainted. She saw the room getting dark around the edges, and her knees gave way. Before she could fall, the man grabbed her arm and shoved her against the door. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and clamped them to the backpack straps across her chest then spun her around toward the back door.

"Don't worry," he sneered. "It won't go off unless I touch the red button, and don't think I won't," he said and gave

her a push. "I don't care if I blow myself up with you, just so I take you out of the picture. Now, go."

She stumbled out the door and almost tripped down the steps.

The sheriff's words came back to her.

"Prayers can be pretty powerful."

Lord, please help me, was all she could think as the man pushed her toward her car.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alec leaned over the desk of the postmaster and spoke to his old college friend.

"Look, Zach, you know I understand about following the letter of the law, but we both know that if this is evidence in a murder investigation, I'll have a warrant in less than an hour. Can't you skip that step and let me take an unofficial peek at the paper?"

When Zach frowned, his bushy eyebrows joined in the center of his forehead, and his nose flared with the deep breath.

"I don't know, Alec, I'll lose my job if anyone finds out."

Alec leaned back, crossed his arms and let out a sigh. "I don't want you to lose your job, Zach. I'll be back in an hour."

"Wait a minute," Zach said as Alec turned. "Uh, this envelope was definitely sent certified mail, and I think there might be another page to this report. Let me see if I can find it. I'll be back in a minute." He pushed the paper to the edge of the desk and walked to the door with a wink.

Alec grinned and slid over to the desk.

He perused the report and found what he was looking for. Now all he had to do was talk to this lawyer in Seattle.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dani got into the car behind the wheel as the man in black slid into the passenger's seat.

"Open the garage, and let's go," he said as he pointed the gun at her stomach. "And remember, all I have to do is push this button."

It took three tries to finally get the car started, but when she did, she wished she hadn't. Where would he take her now? Back to the creek? She shuddered, thinking about Anita's body lying face down in the water.

"Let's go," he growled.

As she touched the garage door opener on the visor, he fumbled around in his pocket and pulled out another pair of handcuffs. He slipped one onto her right wrist, and the other onto the steering wheel.

"That will wipe out any thoughts you might have of jumping out of the car while it's running." He snarled out an evil laugh.

"Now back up out of the garage and turn toward the left."

Dani inched out of the garage as slow as possible but

stopped when she saw a man running toward her car in the rear-view mirror. One of the deputies.

No ... go back, she thought. *Before you get us both blown up.*

She must have stared at the mirror too long, because the man beside her let out an expletive and turned to look back. He pulled the slide on his pistol and pointed toward the back glass.

The air around her exploded, and she screamed, ducking down into the seat. The man beside her shot two more times then turned toward her.

"Go, go, go!" he shouted while jerking the car into gear.

Dani grabbed the wheel and tried to back down the cement. Where was the deputy? Was he still on the driveway? Had he been shot? As she backed into the road and pulled forward, she felt a thump against one of the tires. A knot twisted in her stomach.

She had run over a man.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Knowing she might have killed the deputy because of this man, fanned a flame of anger in Dani's stomach. Her foot on the gas pedal hesitated. Could she wreck the car on his side to knock him out before he pushed the red button?

The man beside her coughed then wheezed out the words "Drive faster."

Dani glanced toward him and gasped in horror. The mask was hanging below his face, and blood trickled from a wound on the side of his head. The blood was soaking his hoodie. At first, she felt relief that he was injured, but that relief turned to worry. His injury might give him reason to be reckless with the bomb.

Lord, please hear me. I know I haven't talked to you in a long time, but please help me now. I can't get out of this without Your help.

After that prayer, Dani felt courage build inside her. "It looks like you need a doctor. Do you want me to take you to the hospital?"

He ignored her question and pointed to the stop sign. "Turn right ... at the four-way stop," he wheezed with effort

and coughed again.

The car bumped oddly along the highway, but she kept driving. They were heading toward a cabin nestled in the middle of a thin stand of pine trees at the end of a dead-end Cul-de-sac.

The man pointed toward the cabin.

"There."

A red pickup sat in the yard. She pulled into the driveway and stopped, not ready for what would happen next.

He reached over, turned off the motor, grabbed the keys and opened the door.

"Don't go anywhere." His throat made a hollow sound as he got out of the car.

She watched him stumble into the house. "Think, Dani," she whispered as she searched the car for something tiny that might open the handcuffs, knowing it was useless. Even if she did open the one on the backpack, she'd never get the one on her wrist open with one hand. She clawed at the handcuffs locking the straps together and sobbed. There was no escape. Even if the man died, how would she get rid of the bomb?

The man stumbled out of the house clenching a stack of papers in his fist. A large spot of blood seeped through his hoodie in the middle of his chest. He jerked open the driver's

door and pushed the papers and a pen into her face.

"Sign it."

Dani shrank from his nearness and the metallic smell of blood. She looked at the paper. "What is it?"

He glared at her. "Your suicide note," he growled. He threw the pen toward her and backed away from the car. Pointing the remote at her, he growled, "Sign it, or this will be the end of you, and I'll take my chances without your signature."

Dani looked at the paper. It looked like the last page of a legal document but nothing like a suicide note. If it would appease him a little longer ... she picked up the pen and signed the paper.

He jerked the paper from her hands with a gleam in his eye, leaned over and stuck a key into the handcuffs attached to the steering wheel. He pulled her hands together and clipped it on her other hand.

"No matter if you get away, I can still detonate the bomb from ten miles away," he sneered. "Now get out."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Get out!" he shouted and coughed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Alec picked up his car radio and shouted into the microphone. "Repeat?"

"I said shots fired in Dani Robinson's neighborhood, and I can't get Max on the radio."

Alec made a quick U-turn and screeched toward the east side of town. In three minutes he was there, and what he saw made his heart skip a beat. The garage door was open and stood empty, and a bulky figure in a blue uniform lay motionless in the middle of the road.

"Terri, get an ambulance at this address now. We have a policeman down. Put out an APB on Dani Robinson's car. A white, Toyota Corolla."

He grabbed a towel from the backseat and hurried to his deputy.

Max lay still, but his eyes were open and responsive.

"He ... he's got her boss. In ... her car. I shot ... one of the ... tires." Max's eyes rolled back in his head, and he passed out.

Alec looked at the blood on Max's shoulder and pressed a white towel onto the wound.

He could already hear sirens. In two seconds the ambulance screeched to a stop beside him.

"Hold on, Max," He told his unconscious friend. "Help is here."

The EMTs jumped out of the ambulance as Alec's mic vibrated.

"Sheriff, Willie reported seeing the car on Howell Road, near the cabins at Red Gorge."

Alec handed over the towel to the EMT and jumped into his car. Those rental cabins were only two miles from here. He pushed the motor to the limit until he reached the four-way stop. Willie was parked on the side of the road and pointed toward the cabin at the end of the road.

In the distance, Alec saw a white car in the driveway of an off-the-road rental cabin. "Follow me," he shouted to Willie.

With one hand, he pulled his pistol from its holster and flashed on the lights. At the same time, he saw a man pull Dani from the car and turn toward him.

Alec slammed the car in park and jumped out, staging behind the car.

"Sheriff's Department! Drop your weapon. Now!"

The man pulled Dani in front of him. He was shrouded

in black except for his face and raised a black remote in the air. "Back off, or the bomb on her back goes off."

Alec's shoulders tensed, and the arm holding the pistol trembled while making his decision. He had no choice.

He slipped his gun onto the ground, slipped out beside the car, and raised his hands in the air. "Okay, okay. Don't do anything rash. Let's talk."

Alec stole a glance toward Dani. Her face was paper white, and handcuffs held her hands together in front of her.

"No way! You will let me leave or this woman doesn't live to see another day." The man bent over slightly and coughed onto the ground.

Alec sucked in a gulp of air when he saw blood on the side of the man's face. Looking closer, Alec saw drops of blood trickling from the man's mouth. Max must have hit more than a tire.

"It looks like you need a doctor, man. Why don't you let the woman go, and we'll get help," Alec shouted.

"Shut up!" The man pointed his gun at Alec and fired. The bullet hit the car beside him, and Alec ducked behind the front bumper. He inched up to the window and saw the man double over with his hand on his mouth. When the man saw the blood, he let out an infuriated scream. In fury, he grabbed the strap of

the backpack and pulled Dani with him.

Alec's stomach churned. He was heading toward the Red Gorge.

Alec grabbed his pistol from the ground and followed behind the couple, trying to keep out of sight. His thoughts were scrambled. If he tried shooting the man, there was a chance the bomb would be activated. On the other hand, if Alec's shot was accurate, the man wouldn't get a chance to push the button.

Thoughts of the bomb exploding with Dani anywhere near it churned a rock in his stomach.

Willie was working his way around Dani and her captor and was indicating to Alec he wanted to jump the couple.

Alec shook his head at him. If he did, Dani wouldn't have a chance.

When Alec rounded the last curve before the gorge, he froze. The man stood on the edge of the three hundred feet deep hole, staring into the abyss. Dani was struggling to get away from him, but she was too small, and his arms pinned her completely. The man pulled Dani closer to the edge, keeping her between him and Alec. He turned to look Alec square in the eyes.

"If I can't have my father's legacy, no one can."

Alec was horrified when the man picked up Dani, pitched her over the edge, and jumped over the rim after her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dani felt herself falling but jerked to a stop, her feet dangling. When she looked down, she saw a man's body at the bottom of the hole, facing down on top of a pile of brush—his body twisted at odd angle.

She turned her eyes away and trembled. Her lifeless body would have been right there beside him, except for ... what? She didn't know.

For some wonderful reason she was still alive—hanging in mid-air over the gorge below.

The shoulder straps of the backpack dug into her shoulder, but when she tried to ease the pain by shifting, she slipped and fell another six inches toward the bottom.

Gasping, she felt for a foot-hold in the rocks near her heels. Smooth rock met her shoes and mocked her.

Holding her breath, she froze. The straps of the backpack must have caught on something. She raised her head in tiny increments to see what was holding her in suspension.

The first thing she saw was the sheriff's face peering at her over the edge of the cliff, ten feet away.

"Don't move, sweetheart. Help is on the way."

Dani wanted to nod, but the thought of moving made her stomach weak. She closed her eyes and prayed.

Lord, please help me. The sheriff said prayers are powerful, and I need your power now more than ever.

After an eternity, she heard movement above her.

She looked up and saw a rope snaking down toward her.

"Dani, grab the rope and put your arms through the loop at the end. Try to put your head through the loop too and hold it tight under your arms."

Dani reached for the rope and slipped another inch as the rope swung out of reach. She bit her lip and lunged for the loop, grabbing it with all the strength inside her.

The backpack slipped again as she thrust her arms through the loop in the rope and pulled it over her head. The rope tightened around her and held. For a minute she thought she was safe until the backpack tore loose from the branch, and she felt herself falling.

When the rope tightened under her arms, she was jerked up and down like a bungee jumper. A hard slam against the rocks stopped her swaying but pushed all the air from her lungs. She couldn't breath and panicked.

Her fingers clawed the rocks as she fought for air. That's when she heard a voice from above.

"Calm down, Dani. Take slow, deep breaths. You only had the wind knocked out of you."

Dani closed her eyes and waited for the pain in her diaphragm to stop. She slowly took a breath and air seeped back into her lungs. She gulped several breaths of air and closed her eyes.

The last jolt almost tore the rope from around her shoulders, but she still had the loop behind her head. She wanted to scream, but fear of losing control and falling stopped her.

"Hold on," she heard someone above her yell.

She felt herself being pulled up, inch by inch. Her feet swung back and forth.

Relief flooded through her when she felt hands pulling her arms and shirt. Slowly she slid up over the edge of the cliff and onto the damp grass.

Dani gasped for breath and opened her eyes to stare up at the heavens. White clouds in a beautiful blue sky flooded her with thankfulness.

"Thank you, Lord," she announced to the sky.

The peace dissipated as soon as she moved and felt the tug of the handcuffs on her wrists.

The bomb.

She lifted her head and saw Alec standing above her, slicing through the straps on the backpack with a knife.

"Dani, we have to get this off. Stephen is still alive down in the ravine, and he has the bomb remote in his hand."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"What?" Dani gasped. She tugged on the straps over her shoulders before she remembered the two sets of handcuffs.

"No!" she moaned.

"It's okay," Alec said as he dug his own keys from his pocket. He stuck the handcuff key into the keyholes, and they released.

"Hurry, " shouted Willie as he stood at the edge of the gorge looking down. "He's pointing the remote toward us."

Alec jerked the backpack off Dani's shoulders and threw it toward the ravine. Instead of going over the side, it landed beside the gaping hole and the flap opened.

A box with wires fell out and landed on the grass.

Alec stared at the box.

Willie raced toward the bomb.

"Wait," Alec shouted at Willie. Willie froze.

Alex inched closer to the box and relaxed. "It's only a radio ... with the wires pulled out."

"What?" Willie shouted.

Dani slumped back on the ground. "Why?"

Alec looked over the side of the ravine at the

lifeless man.

"I don't know, but he was trying to scare you, even to the very end."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Dani walked over to the man in the hospital bed and placed her hand on his.

Max opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"You're okay," she whispered with tears in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry. I thought I ran over you."

Max laughed then grabbed his chest and grimaced.

"Don't make me laugh, please, and I'm kind of glad you didn't." He smiled. "It was the bullet hitting your tire that you felt, and seems to me you didn't have a choice."

"Alec says you'll be out of here tomorrow. I'm glad you'll be okay. Thank you for trying to protect me. You're my hero." She glanced at the door. "Well ... one of my heroes, anyway."

Max's face turned red. "I was just doing my job, ma'am."

"Sure you were, but you're still a hero to me."

"Did you find out who the man was ..." He stopped. He must have seen the change in her eyes.

"No, but Alec will be here soon to fill us in on things he learned this morning."

At the same time a knock on the door made her jump.

Alec walked into the room carrying an envelope.

"Max, you're looking better this morning."

"Yep. I feel great, but they don't feed you enough in here to keep a skunk alive. If the doctor doesn't release me today, you better bring me something to eat, or I'll die sure enough ... of starvation."

Alec laughed. "Yep ... same old Max."

Dani smiled at their good-natured bantering ... like brothers. A pain clenched her heart when she thought of family—something she wanted with all her heart.

Alec turned to Dani. I have news. The man's name was Stephen Craus, and he was from Grimley, Kentucky. Does that ring a bell?"

"No," said Dani.

"So far, the authorities in Grimley haven't found any mention of you in his computer or anywhere in his home. There's no connection between him and you, and we still have no motive. The paper he gave you to sign was a Power of Attorney, so that doesn't tell us much. Obviously, he wasn't after you only because he thought you witnessed the murder. He must have wanted the Power of Attorney for another reason. For what . . . we don't know."

"Did you find out why Anita was murdered? Was it because she was helping me?"

"We don't know yet."

Dani slumped down in the chair sitting beside the bed.

Alec walked over to her and touched her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Dani. We'll get it figured out. I promise."

She looked up at him and felt a tingling in the pit of her stomach. His deep brown eyes were soft and warm. She felt a wave of warmth travel through her and ducked her head to fiddle with a string hanging from her jacket.

"I do have some good news, though," he said quietly.

She took a deep breath and smiled up at him. "I'd love to hear the good news."

"I found out where the certified letter came from—a lawyer in Seattle. He agreed to meet us at his Atlanta office. We have an appointment with him tomorrow morning."

Dani's spirits perked up. "Do you think that will give us answers?"

"I hope."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The next morning, Dani was thankful when Alec reached over to grab her hand as they walked up the sidewalk to the austere brick building in Atlanta. She stopped, and he smiled at her with a nod.

"It'll be okay, Dani."

"Why did he say he sent the letter?"

"He didn't say."

She gave him a twisted smile. "I guess we're about to find out."

They walked into the building, and the receptionist directed them to the fourth floor. As the elevator doors opened, a secretary stood from behind her massive desk and greeted them.

"Ms. Robinson and Mr. Benson. We're glad you made it. Mr. Zion was held up in traffic. He should be here shortly but told me to make you comfortable." She pointed to an open mahogany door, and they entered the impressive office.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked the secretary. "A soft drink, or a bottled water?"

Alec and Dani both shook their heads.

"No thanks." Alec smiled at her as she left the room.

Dani paced across the front of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. "I don't know why, but this is frightening. Am I about to find out who my birth mother is? Or is there another reason he sent me a certified letter?"

"Whether you find out who your birth mother is or not, at least you'll know why he wrote you, right?"

Dani nodded and sat down beside him in the plush brown chairs.

Alec reached over and took her hand in his. His eyes were that sienna color that made her stomach flutter, and she relaxed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Two minutes later, Alec stood as a large man entered the room in a rush. His dark gray suit was pristine and neatly pressed, but the short hair below his balding head was askew.

"I'm so sorry, folks. A wreck on the interstate at my exit ramp caused bumper-to-bumper traffic for miles. I thought we'd never get here."

He plopped his briefcase on the desk and turned to shake their hands.

"Sheriff Benson," he said as he shook Alec's hand and turned to Dani. "Ms. Robinson." He smiled at Dani as she rose to shake hands. "It's nice to finally meet you after searching for you all these months."

Dani shook his hand and frowned. "You were searching for me?"

"Of course. Please, have a seat."

Alec sat back down and watched Dani perch on the edge of her chair.

"Why were you searching for me? Have you found my birth mother?" Her voice was just above a whisper.

Mr. Zion sat back in his chair and folded his hands in

front of him.

"Ms. Robinson, have you ever heard of a chef named Johann Craus?"

"Of course," said Dani. Her voice rose, and her eyes brightened. "He's only the best chef in the world. He won the UCA's highest awards multiple times."

Alec leaned toward Dani. "What is the UCA?" he asked.

"The Universal Culinary Association."

Mr. Zion opened his briefcase and pulled out a pile of magazines and papers. "Yes, and he also won several Distinctive Excellence Awards and three Outstanding Achievement Medallions."

Alex was confused. "What does this chef have to do with Dani?"

"I'm getting to that," Mr. Zion said with a smile as he lifted the magazines. He turned them around and laid them on the desk in front of Dani, who's cheeks puffed out a hurried breath.

"How did you find out?" she asked.

"I have ways, but the point is, you also have received honors and awards as a chef. Isn't that right?"

"What?" Alec was really confused now. He turned to look at Dani.

A flush crept into her cheeks. She turned to look at

him.

"I've been writing recipes and articles for several international food magazines under an assumed name for years. And ..." she looked at Mr. Zion. " ... they won a few awards."

Alec's brows rose and he blew out a long breath. "Wow." Suddenly, he had a thought. "You must be the one helping Walter at the Diner."

A slow smile lit up her face as she looked at him.

Alec nodded. "Now it all makes sense."

Dani turned to the lawyer. "I don't understand. What does this have to do with any of this?"

The lawyer pulled another sheet of paper from the stack on his desk and handed it to Dani. "This was folded and placed in the middle of Mr. Craus' will. We found it with his papers when he died."

She picked it up and looked at the document.

"I don't understand. This is a birth certificate."

"It's a certified copy of *your* birth certificate, Dani."

She looked at the document closer, and she grasped her fist across her heart.

"Dani, what's the matter?" Alec leaned toward her and put his hand on her arm.

"He ... Johann Craus ... was my father?" She raised tortured eyes toward Mr. Zion.

"Yes, Dani. Mr. Craus was your father and my very dear friend."

The document fluttered from her hands and landed back on the desk. "I ... I don't believe it."

"Johann was married to your mother, Rachel, until she died of cancer immediately after you were born. Johann had just signed a two-year chef's contract with a local hotel chain. He knew he couldn't take care of you himself, and he couldn't afford childcare at that time in his life. So ... he gave you up for adoption to a young couple living in his community. He hated doing it, but he thought he was doing what would be best for you."

Alec pieced it all together. "The guy who attacked Dani ... his name was Stephen Craus. They were related, weren't they?"

Mr. Zion nodded. "Stephen was Johann's son by his second wife who also died five years ago. Stephen was Dani's step-brother. He was a gambler, a thief, a worthless scalawag. He knew nothing of you, Dani, until Johann died. Then he was hit with the fact that the estate was left to both of you."

"What?" Dani squeaked.

"You were named in Johann's will as heir to half of his estate. Now that Stephen is dead, you'll inherit his share as well."

"I don't believe it. I was led to believe my father was a pauper."

"By whom?"

"The lawyer I contacted in Seattle."

Mr. Zion looked at a paper on his desk. "Was it Randall Topper?"

Dani looked stunned. "How did you know?"

"He was representing Stephen Craus. He's a disreputable lawyer who lost his license because of his illegal law practices. Stephen promised him a great deal of money if he helped him inherit his father's total estate. When Topper couldn't break the will, Stephen decided to take matters into his own hands and take care of you himself."

Dani rubbed her head and sat back in the seat. "So Anita must have found out about this through her research. Did she die because she was helping me?"

"No, we found emails where the young Craus and her were corresponding. She knew Johann and your mother years ago and that Johann put you up for adoption when your mother died. When you asked for help to search for your birth mother, she put

two and two together and contacted Stephen, wanting money. Rather than be blackmailed for the rest of his life, he killed her ... after she told him who you were."

Alec saw confusion in Dani's eyes. She felt lost, and his heart hurt for her. To find her mother and father one minute only to learn they were both dead in the next ... and now her brother too? She must feel lost. He touched her arm to keep her from feeling totally alone.

She looked at him and smiled. She got the message. Her eyes were pure blue, and in them he saw ... hope. That hope blossomed in his heart and filled him with excitement for the future.

"There's one more thing we found in Johann's safe that might be of interest to you." Mr. Zion pulled a huge notebook from the shelf beside his desk.

"What is it?"

"It's a photo album. There are captions, so you'll know what they are when you see them, but there's one I want to show you now ... in case you still have doubts about Johann being your father." He opened the book and flipped a couple of pages. Then he laid the book in her lap and pointed to the caption under the first picture on the page.

Alec leaned over and looked at it with her.

Dani read the words. "Johann, Rachel and Dani. Dani's first outing. Picking mushrooms near the ski slopes."

A man in the picture had his arms around a young woman who was cuddling a blanket. Dani could see the love in the man's eyes as he smiled at the woman.

"That's Johann and his first wife ... your mother," Mr. Zion said.

Tears rolled down her face as she finally looked into the eyes of her birth mother.

"She looks just like you, Dani," Alec told her with amazement. "It's like you're looking into a mirror."

The love in her mother's eyes as she gazed at her baby was obvious.

"You can tell she loved you," Alec told her. "See the tenderness in her eyes."

Dani's eyes brimmed with tears as she nodded. Then she gasped. "Look," she said simply as she pointed to a brown bag sitting on the ground.

Alec leaned closer. "That looks like your mushroom bag."

"It's the same one," she whispered. "See the initials and the mushroom drawing?"

The initials JLC were painted underneath a simple

drawing of various types of mushrooms.

"Johann Lindon Craus," Mr. Zion told her. "Your dad was also an artist. He painted the mushrooms on the bag. He gave that to your adoptive parents when he handed you over to them."

"He was my father." Dani leaned back in the chair and held the picture closer.

"My mother and father," she whispered as she touched their faces lovingly.

She looked at Alec, and he smiled at her. Finally, after all these years, she could feel at peace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Three years later

Alec stood in the hallway holding his son in his arms and sighed as he watched his wife moving around in the living room. Watching her graceful beauty never got old. It hardly seemed possible that next week they would already be celebrating their second wedding anniversary. *Thank you, Lord, for so many blessings.*

Dani pulled her parent's photo album from the bookshelf and sat down on the sofa. She turned to a well-worn page and lifted the plastic protector. Pulling out one picture, she slipped another in its place.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" Alec asked as he joined her on the sofa with a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm recording an event in history," she said with a smile at him as she stroked the baby's hair.

Alec leaned over and smiled. "Now I see why you asked that couple to take a picture of us on the trail that day."

"Yep. It was Johann's first outing ... picking mushrooms."

Alec touched the two pictures positioned side-by-side.

"They're almost the same. That's amazing." He laughed as he compared the picture of Dani's parents to the one of him and Dani holding Johann.

"I thought so too, when I first saw it." She looked at Alec, and her eyes were the color of the sky on a sunny day.

Alec's phone rang, and he repositioned the baby to answer. "Hey mom."

"Alec, don't forget to bring the chips for your dad's birthday party this evening."

Alec laughed. "I won't mom. We have them sitting beside the diaper bag."

"Oooo... how is my precious grandson doing today?"

"Just as spry as ever and can't wait to see his Nana."

"Tell Dani I said hello and we're looking forward to seeing you both."

"I will, Mom. We'll see you soon."

When he hung up the phone, he turned to see Dani gazing at him with love in her eyes.

"Thank you for giving me a family," she said simply. "Not only do I have a husband and a son, but I have a new mom and dad as well."

Alec kissed her softly on the forehead, and the baby squirmed. They laughed at Johann's demand for attention. "It's

our pleasure, isn't it big fellow," Alec said with a tickle on the baby's cheek.

Johann opened his mouth and crooned, "Aaarrgh..."

They both laughed.

"See there, he's happy to have you as a mom too."

"Yep," Dani said with tears in her eyes. "I could not have picked a better forever family."

She closed her eyes and whispered. "Thank you, Lord."

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