

Love Inspired Suspense January 2016 - Box Set 1 of 2: An Anthology (The Defenders)

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SMALL TOWN JUSTICE

The Defenders

by Valerie Hansen

Back in her hometown, Jamie Lynn Henderson is determined to help her brother get out of prison. But she'll need Shane Colton to keep her alive long enough to discover the truth: Did her brother really murder Shane's father?

COMPROMISED IDENTITY

by Jodie Bailey

Someone is stealing military laptops containing top secret information—and it's Sean Turner's mission to catch the culprit. When an attempt is made on staff sergeant Jessica Dylan's life, Sean's even more determined to bring down the ring targeting soldiers—and to save Jessica.

THE LITTLEST WITNESS

by Jane M. Choate

After Delta soldier Caleb Judd's nephew witnesses his parents' murders, Caleb hires bodyguard Shelley Rabb to protect the little boy while working to expose the killer.

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Small Town Justice

Compromised Identity

The Littlest Witness

Valerie Hansen

Jodie Bailey

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DANGEROUS SECRETS

Back home in Serenity, Jamie Lynn Henderson's determined to prove her brother was framed for the town sheriff's hit-and-run death years ago. But as she encounters dead end after dead end, Jamie Lynn discovers someone will go to any lengths—even murder—to bury the evidence. Her only hope of staying alive long enough to uncover the truth is Shane Colton, the late lawman's wary son. Shane's world was shattered by one senseless act that he can't forgive. But somehow he is drawn to protect the lovely woman trying to free her brother from prison. If they don't work fast, Jamie Lynn's single-minded quest might lead them both into the killer's trap.

"Freeze."

The burly man sprang for the door instead, jerked it open and escaped into the night. Shane chased him as far as the exit and stopped. Not having to shoot was fine with him but he would have loved to land a punch.

A weak moan snapped him out of battle mode. He automatically set the safety as he slipped the gun back into its holster and returned to Jamie Lynn.

She had managed to swing her legs over the side of the bed and sit up. Tears streaked her face. She was gasping out ragged sobs and trying to talk.

"Sh-Shane... Oh, Shane."

He took a step closer and held out his hand, wondering how he could best comfort her after such a frightening ordeal. Any worries he'd had about the possibility she wouldn't want to be touched were banished in the instant it took her to throw herself into his arms.

Instinct took over. He pulled her closer, one hand on her back, the other stroking her hair, and said, "It's okay. I've got you. You're safe."

Valerie Hansen was thirty when she awoke to the presence of the Lord in her life and turned to Jesus. She now lives in a renovated farmhouse in the breathtakingly beautiful Ozark mountains of Arkansas and is privileged to share her personal faith by telling the stories of her heart for Love Inspired. Life doesn't get much better than that!

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SMALL TOWN

JUSTICE

Valerie Hansen

Ask and God will give you.

Search, and you will find.

Knock and the door will open for you.

—Matthew 7:7

To my Joe, who is with me in spirit, looking over my shoulder and offering moral support as I write. He always will be.

And thanks to my dear friend Karen for keeping me on the right track—as much as possible!

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CHAPTER ONE

The narrow dirt track leading to the deserted farm was so overgrown, so cloaked in shadows, Jamie Lynn almost missed her turn. Seeing the decrepit condition of the well-loved house broke her heart.

Parking her mini pickup, she shivered and stared. Well, what had she expected? Nobody had lived there for almost fifteen years. Not since her family had been split apart by lies and she'd been sent to live with an elderly aunt.

The little white dog beside her whimpered.

Jamie Lynn instinctively stroked his head. "Yes, this is it, Ulysses."

He began to pant and wiggle all over. "Okay, you can come with me while I have a look around," she told him, slipping her cell phone into her jeans pocket. "Hold still so I can get your harness unclipped."

He continued to strain and squirm. "I'm about to give up and leave you," she warned. "Sit. Stay."

He sat. He did not stay long. The moment she shifted her attention to the leash lying on the floor of the pickup's cab, he leaped over her, using her back as a springboard, and landed on the hard-packed ground like a gymnast making a competition dismount.

"Ulysses! No!"

Jamie Lynn chased him through the tall grass and weeds, rueing the fact that her clothing was summer-light shorts, a T-top and sandals.

"Ulysses," she wheedled, trying to sound unperturbed. "Come on, baby. I'm not mad. I just don't want to lose you."

Ahead, she heard him yip. "Please, please don't catch anything bigger than you are."

She rounded the house. The roof over the back porch had partially collapsed but she spotted a flash of white fur as her dog ducked through the half-open door.

Normally, Jamie wouldn't have considered entering someone else's house without an invitation. However, since her research had shown that this place had long ago been seized for unpaid taxes and didn't belong to any individual, she figured it would be okay to venture inside long enough to catch her naughty dog.

The staccato cadence of his nails led her to the stairway, where his paws had left impressions in the dust. Jamie followed. Pausing at the top of the stairs, she was overcome with nostalgia for her childhood home.

“Marf!”

Ulysses’s sharp, single bark snapped her back to the present and drew her to her former bedroom. He was circling excitedly in front of one of the tall, narrow windows as if insisting she must look.

Below, parking behind her pickup, was a larger truck with a camouflage paint job. Two men climbed out.

They were both carrying rifles. Uh-oh.

Jamie’s heart began to pound. She tried to lift the warped wooden sash and was barely able to move it.

Before she had a chance to shout hello through the narrow opening, let alone begin an apology, she overheard one of the men speaking. His gruff words made the hair on the nape of her neck prickle.

“That’s her license number. We know she got here.”

“Yeah? So where’d she disappear to?”

The first man cursed. “Probably the house. Let’s go.”

“I don’t like it. Suppose somebody sees us hanging around and makes a connection later?”

“If things turn ugly we’ll ditch her truck. Nobody will suspect she ever made it this far.”

Jamie Lynn was afraid to breathe. These men had known she was coming to Serenity. Who, of the few people she’d contacted to ask about her family history, would send thugs after her? And why?

Easing aside so she wouldn’t be spotted from below, Jamie watched one of the men making a cell phone call. While he talked, the other began stabbing at her truck’s tires. Then they started for the house and disappeared beneath the overhang of the porch roof.

She heard wood splintering. The stomping of heavy hiking boots. They’d smashed the front door. They were coming for her!

It took only seconds to dial 911 and rasp in the address and that she was in trouble. But she knew there was no chance anyone from town could reach her in time to intervene. Not unless she hid long enough for help to arrive. But where?

Voices from downstairs sent rumbling echoes throughout the empty structure. Cracking, banging, background noises indicated that the men planned to take the old house apart, piece by piece, until they found her.

What could she possibly do?

Memories of growing up in the old house carried Jamie Lynn back to childhood and the simple

games of hide-and-go-seek she and her big brother had played. The downstairs maid's closet! Their favorite hiding place was perfectly camouflaged. Only how was she going to reach it without being seen?

So terrified she could hardly draw a usable breath, she tiptoed down the hall to the antiquated bathroom, eased the door shut behind her, then whispered to her nervous dog and held him close. "Easy, boy. Shush."

All she could do was wait.

Aunt Tessie would have urged her to pray, she knew, yet no inspiring spiritual words came to mind. Jamie Lynn wasn't surprised. God had quit heeding her prayers when she was ten years old.

If He had been listening to her back then, she knew she wouldn't have lost her whole family.

* * *

Shane Colton parked his flatbed tow truck beyond the small pickup with four flat tires and hit the ground running, waving his arms to get the sheriff's attention. "Harlan! I just saw two men in hunter's camo run out the back."

"Must've spotted us," Sheriff Allgood replied. "Let 'em go. We've got their truck for ID."

"I didn't recognize either one." Glancing at the old house, Shane frowned. "Aren't you going in?"

"In a minute. Gotta radio the station so my officers know to keep their eyes peeled for two guys on foot."

Uneasy, Shane lifted his chin. Sniffed the breeze. And instantly knew what was happening. Smoke!

Hands cupped around his mouth, he shouted, "Call the fire department," as he raced toward the house.

"Stop! Don't!"

He ignored the sheriff's command. If he hurried, he might be able to put the fire out while it was small. If not, he could at least do a quick search of the premises for victims. Somebody had made the report of trouble at the old Henderson farm. That person might still be inside.

* * *

What was wrong with Ulysses all of a sudden? "Take it easy, boy. We're safe now. I heard them leave."

The lapdog's tiny claws raked Jamie Lynn's forearm. "Ouch! Knock it off," she snapped, immediately penitent. He'd kept quiet while she'd tiptoed down the stairs and hidden them both in the maid's cupboard. It was time to let him be himself again.

"Okay, okay." She got to her knees and operated the panel that masked the secret opening. It slid back silently, revealing disaster. The walls and ceilings were partially obscured by layers of drifting

smoke. They had to get out of there.

Startled, Ulysses twisted from her grasp and disappeared into the smoke, barking.

“No!”

She started to rise from her crawl on the floor. Thicker, acrid vapor made her gag and drop back down. Tears blinded her further. There was no way she'd be able to spot her little dog in that swirling, glowing haze. If he didn't come back to her, the poor baby was going to die! And it was her fault.

Rasping, gagging, Jamie did her best to scream, “Ulysses?” He didn't respond. Was it already too late?

Brokenhearted, she started to inch farther into the thick of things, moving by feel and hoping that her next reach might be long enough to touch his soft fur.

She could not give up. Not as long as there was one more breath left to keep her moving. Coughs racked her body, aching all the way to her ribs and beyond. Thoughts of her parents and brother, R.J., swirled in her mind, and confusion surrounded her, beginning to deaden the pain.

Then, suddenly, she was grasped around the waist and jerked sideways.

Fighting spirit returned. Jamie kicked and struck out at her captor. She even managed a feeble screech.

Spots of bright light flickered in her distorted vision and she felt as if she were floating. Cradled in powerful arms, she heard the strong beating of a heart.

Brightness abruptly bathed her face and she wondered if this was the phenomenon often reported by those having near-death experiences.

Surrendering, she laid her head against the shoulder of her captor and slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

It had been several years since Shane Colton had practiced CPR but everything came back to him in a rush. He laid the woman on the ground, tilted her head to make sure her airway was clear, then pressed his lips to hers and delivered several rescue breaths before checking her pulse.

“Ambulance is almost here,” Harlan shouted. “Is she alive?”

To Shane's immense relief he was able to reply, “Yes!”

“I oughta slap the cuffs on you for pullin' a stunt like that,” the sheriff said. “What would your little boy do if his daddy went and got himself killed? Huh? You ever think of that?”

Shane shook his head. Harlan was absolutely right. A single parent needed to be extra careful. He would never purposely endanger Kyle's future. The poor little guy had been too small to miss his mother much after she'd left them, but losing his only remaining parent would be devastating, even though he'd still have loving grandparents.

"I wasn't thinking. I just did what I thought was necessary," Shane said.

"How'd you find the victim in all that smoke?"

"Heard a dog barking," Shane told him. "You got any water in your car?"

Harlan handed him a small bottle and stood back while Shane trickled some onto the woman's face and gently wiped it with a clean bandanna.

Off to his right, trying to bark and mostly squeaking instead, was a sooty, dusty mongrel. "You may be a sorry excuse for a dog, little guy, but you did your part today."

Still kneeling beside her, Shane gazed at the young woman. Even with reddened cheeks and soot and water streaking her face, it was clear that she was a beauty. He'd never seen hair that silky or quite that dark.

So who was she and what had she been doing inside the abandoned house? He frowned. A better question might be, what did those creeps in camo have against her?

Sirens heralded the arrival of the sheriff's backup units and the ambulance so Shane reluctantly relinquished his place to the team of paramedics and stood aside. As soon as they had checked the victim's vital signs, they put her on a gurney, began administering oxygen and pushed her toward the waiting ambulance.

"Is she going to be okay?" Shane asked, following.

One of the medics nodded. "She's trying to talk. That's a good sign. Keeps saying she's worried about a white dog."

"I can get him. Are you transporting to Fulton County Hospital?"

"Yeah. They'll send her on if necessary."

Shane approached the mini pickup and noticed the excited dog racing toward him. He opened the driver's-side door and stood back. The dog leaped in. What a relief. Of all the things he'd tried to do that day, catching a half-wild pup had turned out to be the easiest.

Fire trucks were arriving. He hailed Harlan. "The dog's out of the way. Want me to go ahead and haul her truck back to my place?"

"Yeah. Lock it in your service yard, then come back for this other one. I'll stop and check them after I'm done here."

"Gotcha. I thought I'd drop her dog by the vet's and make sure it's okay, too."

"You're the one with the kid at home. You should keep him."

"No, thanks." Shane was smiling more broadly. "Did you happen to hear what she called it when she was talking to the medics?"

Harlan chuckled. "Sounded like Useless to me. That name sure fits."

Shane totally agreed.

* * *

Jamie Lynn had fought her way out of the fog clouding her brain. By the time she was delivered to the emergency room, her eyes had been bathed to soothe them and she was able to sit up on her own.

"I told you, I'm fine," she insisted between bouts of coughing that doubled her over.

"I'll be checking you out to be sure," an amiable nurse said. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Jamie Lynn Nolan. I have my ID in my purse. It's in my truck."

"Do you remember what happened?"

Jamie touched her forehead. It felt gritty. "Yes. Two men were after me. I hid and they set the house on fire."

"That's pretty much the story I got from the sheriff," the nurse told her. "I'll ask him to bring your things to you here. How's that?"

"Wait!" Jamie grabbed her forearm. "They have to find my little dog." Tears began to fill her eyes and trickle down her cheeks. "Ulysses was with me inside the house and I don't know..." More coughing interrupted her as she buried her face in her hands.

The nurse gently patted her shoulder. "Okay. Wait right here. I'll go find out what I can."

The weight of her anticipated loss was so burdensome, Jamie Lynn wondered how she could bear it. Poor little Ulysses. She drew up her legs, clasped them in front of her and rested her forehead on her skinned knees. Aunt Tessie had warned her against stirring up the past, but she hadn't listened. And now her stubbornness and curiosity had cost her the life of her very best friend.

More bits of fractured memory began to drift into place and fit together. She recalled being lifted and carried from the burning house. At the time she'd tried to resist, but whoever had rescued her had continued to treat her gently. He had delivered his own air to her burning lungs and forced her to breathe again. Whoever it had been deserved her lifelong gratitude.

Jamie didn't know how long she'd sat there, lost in thought. It must have been a long time because when her nurse reappeared she was carrying the purse from the truck.

"You found my things!"

"Sure did. All of them."

As the nurse stepped aside another figure came into view; a well-built man about six feet tall. He seemed familiar. Had she looked into those warm brown eyes before?

"This is my friend Shane," the nurse told Jamie. "He's the guy who saved you."

New moisture bathed Jamie's reddened, smarting eyes. She didn't try to hide it. This man was her hero and she wanted him to know how grateful she was.

As he stepped closer, she reached out. He clasped her hand, their gazes locking, their connection evident.

"I don't know how to thank you," she whispered hoarsely.

"No thanks necessary. I'm just glad the good Lord led me to be there when I was needed."

"I wish my little dog had been rescued, too."

The grin that instantly illuminated his handsome face gave her new hope. Her eyes widened. Her grip on his hand tightened. "You found him?"

Shane nodded. "Yes.

"He's okay? I mean, he wasn't burned?"

"That long hair got singed and he was more gray than white, but the vet says that's basically all. They'll take care of him until you can pick him up."

Elated beyond her most fantastic dreams, Jamie Lynn swung her feet off the side of the exam table, threw her arms around her rescuer and hugged him as tightly as she could. Several seconds passed before she felt the answering pressure of his broad hand patting her back.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She leaned away to look into his eyes again. "I don't know how I can ever pay you back, but I promise to try."

He eased away and looked as if he might be blushing.

"I meant, maybe I can treat you to a nice dinner out once they spring me from this place," she explained. "And your family, of course. The more the merrier."

"It's just me and my son, Kyle," Shane said. "We'd love to go out to eat with you. If you're well enough, how about this Sunday after church?"

"Well, I... I mean I don't usually go to church. I used to when I was little but..."

He raked his fingers through his wavy, light brown hair. "No sweat. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

Jamie was about to reply when he handed her a business card.

"I have your truck. Take this so you'll know how to reach me when you're ready. Are you planning to be in Serenity long?"

"I'm not sure," she said, continuing to smile. "I've rented a room at the motel."

"Great. When the doctors release you, the sheriff or I can give you a lift. He'll need to take your statement, too."

"I can't imagine what I might be able to tell him that he doesn't already know." She sobered. "Has he tracked down the arsonists yet?"

"I don't think so. But he will. We both grew up here, so we know everybody in Serenity."

It was then that Jamie Lynn glanced down at the card he'd given her. His last name was Colton?

She repeated it aloud. "Colton? Any relation to the man who used to be sheriff?" she asked, wondering if her voice would have sounded so shaky without the throat irritation.

"Yeah. Sam was my dad. He was quite a guy."

He sure was, Jamie thought, clenching her jaw and wondering what strange quirk of nature had put her in such an untenable position.

She now owed her very life to a man whose family had destroyed hers, one lie at a time.

CHAPTER TWO

Shane brought his personal pickup to a stop under the hospital's front portico and let it idle while he stepped inside. As Harlan had promised, the woman he'd rescued the day before was waiting. When she glanced up and saw him, she was clearly surprised. And not terribly pleased.

"I thought the sheriff was coming to pick me up."

"He was." Puzzled, Shane ventured a smile. "He got another call and asked me to stand in for him. I'm a volunteer. Hope that's okay."

"Oh." She got to her feet, shouldered her purse and reached for a small plastic bag.

"Let me get that for you."

"I can handle it. It's just laundry." Although her words sounded brusque, she did add, "Thanks."

"So that's why you're dressed in scrubs."

"Yes."

Shane lost his chance to hold the lobby door for her because it was automated, so he hurried to his pickup to open the passenger side.

As soon as she was settled, he smiled again. "I thought we'd stop at the vet and get Useless before I took you to your motel."

Her eyes narrowed. "What did you call him?"

"Useless. That's his name, isn't it?" He chuckled briefly. "I must say, it fits."

"His name is Ulysses," Jamie Lynn told him flatly.

That sounded so funny in contrast to what he'd been told, he laughed again. "If you say so, ma'am."

"I certainly do."

"Okeydokey. Do you need help with your seat belt?"

"No, I can manage." She turned aside to cough, and Shane was sorry to hear the raspy breathing that accompanied it.

"How are you feeling?"

"A lot better than I sound. Thanks for asking. I'm supposed to follow up with my family doctor in a few days."

"Will you be leaving, then?"

"No. If I don't stop wheezing soon I'll find a local practitioner." She sighed audibly, triggering another bout of coughing.

"We're not short on doctors around here," Shane told her. "Pharmacies, either. Didn't they prescribe anything for you?"

"Just over-the-counter syrups. I'll be fine once I get Ulysses back and you've repaired my tires."

"They'll all need to be replaced," Shane stated flatly. "Did you look at what was done to them?"

"I saw a man stabbing them with a knife. I was too far away to tell how badly they were damaged."

"Let's just say they wouldn't even make a good planter in a hillbilly's front yard."

"That bad, huh?"

"Actually, worse." Shane could tell she was worried. "I've got a buddy in the tire business. Want me to ask him if he has a new or used set that will fit your truck?"

"As long as you two don't try to sell me oceanfront property in Arizona or something like that."

Shane held up a hand as if taking an oath. "No tricks. I promise. This is a small town. Our reputations are very important." He began to grin. "Besides, we all trust each other around here."

"Is that why you left this pickup running in front of the hospital? If you tried that most places it wouldn't be there when you came out."

"Serenity isn't most places."

To his surprise, his passenger averted her face and muttered, "You can say that again."

* * *

Jamie Lynn's reunion with her dog was tearful yet joyful. When neither the veterinarian nor the groomer who had washed him would accept payment she was astonished.

"Told you so," Shane said on their way out.

She buried her face in Ulysses's soft, clean fur. "I don't get it. Those people don't know me. Why should they waive their normal fees?"

"Maybe because I explained the situation when I left Useless with them."

"You're determined to call him that, aren't you?"

Looking at his profile, she could see half of a wide grin. "Yup. I like to see steam shoot out of your ears."

"Fine. Suit yourself. I don't imagine you and I will have much reason to talk again after you've fixed my truck, anyway."

"Oh, I don't know." He shrugged. "It's a pretty small town. If you hang around, we're bound to run into each other."

What Jamie wanted to say was, Not if I can help it, but she kept that thought to herself. It seemed impossible that a man as astute as Shane Colton had not yet put together enough clues to guess her former identity. Or had he? she wondered. It was remotely possible that he'd figured out her lineage and was toying with her. Was he the kind of man who would be purposely devious?

She honestly didn't think so, not that she considered herself the best judge of truthfulness. After all, Aunt Tessie had lied to her for years about what had become of her parents and she'd believed every word.

Clutching Ulysses, she murmured endearments and let him lick her under the chin. He was clearly so glad they were reunited he could hardly sit still. Jamie Lynn sympathized. She was feeling such a strong sense of unrest she wanted to fling open the door and escape from the moving vehicle. The mere thought of such drastic action was unnerving. What was wrong with her? Shane, the hospital staff, the sheriff, the vet—everybody in Serenity had been so nice.

Yeah, if you didn't count the men who had said they were going to get rid of her, one way or another.

"Speaking of small towns, what's the latest on the two guys who set the fire?" she asked.

"Their truck was a dead end. It had been stolen that morning." He glanced across at her. "What were you doing wandering around out there in the first place?"

"Like I told the sheriff, I was exploring and thought the abandoned house looked interesting."

"Uh-huh."

"You don't sound convinced." And neither had Harlan Allgood when he'd questioned her, but at least he hadn't pressed for details that might have revealed her past before she was ready to do so.

"I might buy that if nothing bad had happened to you while you were poking around."

"Guess I was in the wrong place at the wrong time." The whole truth would become obvious to everyone soon enough and she didn't want to distract him while he was driving. Besides, she felt safer in Shane's company and wanted to stay on his good side, not that that made much sense.

"That would do it," Jamie muttered, realizing belatedly that she had actually voiced her conclusion.

One quick peek told her he had heard. Before he could start asking more questions, she said, "In case I didn't tell you yesterday, thanks for saving my neck."

"I got the idea you were grateful," he replied.

A flush of color on his cheeks reminded her of the way she'd thrown herself into his arms after hearing that her little dog was safe and well.

"That hug was for saving Ulysses," Jamie insisted, once again burying her face in the small dog's silky fur.

"If you say so."

"I do. He's family." The moment those words were out, she realized she'd opened another can of worms.

"What about the people in your life?" Shane asked.

"I—uh—I was raised by my great-aunt."

"Your parents...?"

"Are gone," she said, using the familiar expression to tell the truth while giving the impression both were deceased. For all she knew they might be.

"I'm sorry."

Jamie Lynn nodded. "Me, too. So, how far is it to my truck? And how long will it take you to fix it?"

"I thought you'd want to go back to the motel. You know, kick back and rest. Maybe grab some lunch."

"I ate at the hospital and I've done nothing but rest since yesterday. What I need is wheels."

"Fine. We'll swing by the garage I own so you can see the tire damage for yourself. Believe me, I'm not exaggerating. Nobody could repair those cuts."

"Do you accept credit cards?"

"Sure. We may be rural but we aren't primitive."

Jamie couldn't help smiling. "Oh? You could have fooled me." They were passing the antebellum courthouse and modest businesses around the old square. "This place looks like it belongs in history books."

"It does. One of the battles of the Civil War was fought on Pilot Hill." He leaned over the steering wheel and pointed. "Right up there where the radio towers are now. See the flashing beacons?"

"Yes." Leaning back against the seat, she closed her eyes and sighed. There was another page of Serenity's history that interested her far more—the one that involved her brother and both parents.

As soon as news got out that she was in town to investigate the crime that had destroyed her family, chances were that most folks wouldn't want to talk to her, let alone offer their help. The current sheriff had studied her as if he were close to figuring out who she really was when he'd interviewed her in the hospital. It was only a matter of time until somebody remembered Jamie Lynn Henderson, put two and two together and got four.

Correction, Jamie Lynn thought. Someone had already added it up. Whether her attackers had found her at the old farm or followed her there, their orders had been clear. They'd said it themselves. It was their job to eliminate her before she made any progress on her brother R.J.'s behalf.

Progress that might not only prove her big brother was innocent of vehicular homicide but also point the finger of guilt at someone else.

She knew she was on the right track precisely because they had sent thugs after her. Although her enemies might be ruthless, they were functioning on an emotional level rather than a rational one. As long as she kept her wits about her and stayed out of abandoned buildings, chances were she'd eventually dredge up enough truth to help her brother get a new trial. In a new venue.

She glanced at her handsome companion, chagrined that her goal was to disprove the accepted story of his father's death. But could she trust him?

Who she could and couldn't trust in that town was one of the first things she needed to know. Confiding in the wrong person could be worse than doing nothing.

* * *

As the hours passed, Shane was beginning to think the young woman was never going to ask to be taken to her motel. Considering the way she'd made herself and Useless comfortable in his tiny waiting room, he wondered if she intended to spend the entire afternoon. That would have been troubling by itself. Added to the concentrated attention she was giving him and his workers, it was getting downright creepy.

He pulled out his cell phone and punched in the number of his buddy Charlie.

"Tire shop."

"It's Shane again. Any word on those tires I called about?"

"You asked me the same thing an hour ago," Charlie said. "Keep your shirt on. I've checked my own inventory and don't have four alike but I think I've located a good used set in Batesville."

"Think, or know?" Shane eyed his office through the grimy window between it and the garage. Being the only auto repair shop in town sometimes had its drawbacks. "It looks like she is planning to sit right here until I get her truck back on the road."

"So?"

"So, I don't like it."

"What's the matter, is she ugly?"

Shane shook his head and turned his back on the window. "No. She's actually a knockout."

"So, she's raising a ruckus?"

"Not that, either. There's just something strange about her. Maybe it's the way she's been staring at me. I don't know."

"You saved her life, right?"

Shane nodded. "Yeah."

"Then I wouldn't worry. She's probably got a bad case of hero worship."

"I suppose that could be it." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Give me a call as soon as you know anything definite, will you?"

"If she's as pretty as you say, why not just enjoy her company?" He chuckled. "If I wasn't so busy here I'd drop by and take her off your hands."

Shane was shaking his head as he said, "No way. She's not that kind of woman. She's... I don't know, sort of fragile."

"Skinny?"

"Not at all. I can't explain it. All I know is she seems lost. Even lonely. The first time she opened her eyes and looked up at me after the fire she reminded me of an injured deer surrounded by a pack of hungry coyotes."

"Sounds to me like you're as scrambled as she is. I'll get back to you ASAP."

"Okay. Thanks." Shane pivoted when he heard the back door slam.

A bundle of energy raced toward him, arms raised, and Shane swung his five-year-old son off the ground. "Hey, buddy. Why are you here so early?"

"Memaw's gonna go get beautiful."

"Did you tell her she already is?"

Kyle's head bobbed, making his honey-blond curls bounce. "Uh-huh. But she didn't believe me."

Holding the boy close, Shane looked past him to smile at Marsha. "Hey, Mom, we both think you're pretty enough."

"Well, I don't. Look at all the gray in my hair. I don't want Otis to start thinking he married an old lady." She began to fan her overly rosy cheeks and giggle like a love-struck teenager.

It had pleased Shane when his widowed mother had finally fallen in love again and remarried, but it was still hard to picture Otis Bryce as a father figure, let alone see his own mother as a blushing bride. Just short of turning thirty, he'd pictured people his mother's age as too old to care about romance.

About to reassure her about her good looks, Shane was stopped by a shrill squeal next to his ear.

"A puppy!" Kyle was squirming in his arms and pointing at the waiting room. "Let me go see!"

It took Shane a second to realize why the boy was so excited. "That dog belongs to the lady who's holding him."

"Okay." He continued to struggle against Shane's restraint. "I wanna pet him. Can I, Daddy? Can I? Please...?"

Taking the child's hand, he cautioned him, "All right. Just go slowly and don't yell or you might scare him."

"Puppies love kids. Everybody says."

"Well, that dog isn't a pup. He's all grown up. And sometimes little dogs bite because they get scared. We need to ask the lady if you can pet him and do whatever she says. Understand?"

"Uh-huh."

The five-year-old was leaning forward, dragging his reluctant father along as if he were towing a semitruck behind a tricycle. Shane saw his customer gather up her pet and stand. Although she had looked wary when Kyle had screeched, she was currently smiling.

"This must be your son," Jamie Lynn said.

The child beamed. "I'm Kyle. I wanna play with your dog!"

"Can you play nicely and be careful you don't hurt him? He's getting kind of old."

"Daddy told me."

"Kyle thinks every small dog is a puppy," Shane explained. "I told him that Useless was all grown up."

She cradled her beloved fur ball as she sat again, placing the wiggly white mound on her lap. "Let him smell your hand before you try to touch him so he knows you're friendly."

Ulysses sniffed, then started to lick the boy all the way from his fingertips to his wrist.

Kyle broke into gales of laughter. "It tickles."

"What did you have for lunch?" Jamie Lynn asked.

"Um, a burger and a corn dog."

"Both? What about vegetables or fruit?"

"I hate bedj-tables. Yuck."

Shane could tell his customer wasn't pleased with his son's apparently haphazard diet. He knew he didn't need to make excuses to a stranger, yet for some reason he wanted her approval.

"We were in a hurry this morning, partly because I still had a man out sick and was handling the tow truck again, so I fed him a corn dog," Shane said. "I assume the burger was part of his school

lunch.”

“Uh-uh,” the boy said. “Memaw bought it for me when she picked me up.”

Marsha piped up. “I have a hair appointment.” She patted her short locks and began to grin at the other woman. “You don’t approve of fast food?”

“Sorry. I have a degree in early childhood development and sometimes advice just slips out. Proper nutrition is critical, especially in the formative years.”

Shane had heard enough. “Look. I’m a single parent and I’m doing the best I can, okay? He’s happy and healthy.”

“It’s actually more than that,” Jamie Lynn said.

He watched her eyes begin to glisten. She had to be one of the most changeable women he’d ever met—more unpredictable than Ozark weather.

Just as he was preparing to defend himself further, she sighed and added, “I can see that you’ve given him something else that many children lack.”

“And what would that be?”

“Love,” she told him, speaking softly. “All the vitamins in the world can’t take the place of that.”

CHAPTER THREE

The rush of emotions the little boy had triggered had almost destroyed Jamie Lynn’s self-control. When he’d wrapped his arms around her neck to thank her for letting him pet her dog, she’d had to fight to keep from weeping for the loving family she’d lost so long ago.

It was this town, she reasoned. That was what was bothering her. She’d not only cheated death since arriving in Serenity, she’d done it in the very place where she’d spent her childhood. Of course she’d be upset. Confused. Perhaps a tad emotionally unstable. There was nothing disturbing about that. Instead of wasting energy dwelling on what she’d lost, she should be trying to figure out who wanted to get rid of her. Given the seriousness of that, all her other worries paled.

“I guess I’ll give up and head over to the motel,” she announced to Shane after he had settled his son in his private office with crayons and a coloring book.

She glanced at her truck, still sitting on flattened tires. “I don’t imagine you’ll be able to get me back on the road today.”

“Nope.”

“How far is it to the motel?”

His noncommittal shrug gave her the notion that she may have used up her chances to hitch a ride. “I can walk. Just point me in the right direction.”

Shane sighed. "I'll take you. But right now I have to finish this job and line up tomorrow's schedule." He glanced at his watch. "Give me forty-five minutes."

"It's okay. Really it is. I walk all the time to exercise Ulysses."

The stern look he gave her was unexpected. "Look, lady, you spent the night in the hospital after somebody disabled your truck and tried to barbecue you. Since Harlan has no idea who's to blame, don't you think it would be wise to keep a low profile?"

Jamie Lynn tried to mask the shiver that shot through her by gathering up her purse. "I thought the sheriff was convinced those guys were just local boys acting reckless. That's the impression he gave me."

"He may be convinced, but I'm not," Shane said quietly. "Now sit down and wait for me the way I waited for you all afternoon."

An urge to snap to attention, salute and shout, "Yes, sir," came over her. With effort, Jamie was able to nod and appear compliant. She hated taking orders, particularly from folks she hardly knew, and her offbeat wit was overly fond of lightening that burden with problematic humor.

This time, however, she held it in check. Shane Colton had been nothing but nice to her and the more she let him do on her behalf, the more guilt piled up on her side of the equation. He was bound to be livid by the time he learned she was R.J.'s sister.

Nevertheless, she reasoned, limited options were keeping them together. If there had been anywhere else nearby to have her truck repaired, she'd have gotten away from him immediately. Even the tire store was thirty miles south. It made no sense to have her vehicle taken there when it was already in good hands.

Shane's hands were good, she affirmed without hesitation. Judging by all the business he had coming and going, his reputation was sterling.

A perverse part of her wished he were not quite so honest or approachable or considerate. It would be a lot easier to work against the prejudices of this town if she didn't have to worry about hurting such an amenable man.

Remember what the people here did to you and your poor family, she reminded herself. They banded together to convict your brother—and Shane Colton is one of them.

Jamie Lynn raised her eyes to watch him working. As little as twenty-four hours ago she'd had no trouble classifying Shane as just another narrow-minded local. Somehow, in that short span of time, she had begun seeing him as almost a friend, almost a potential ally. That was ridiculous, of course.

Trembling, yet decisive, Jamie Lynn snapped the leash on Ulysses before picking him up, got to her feet, smoothed the hem of the hospital garb she'd borrowed and walked straight out the door of the waiting room.

It was time to come clean.

* * *

Shane was startled when he heard someone at his elbow say, "Excuse me?"

"I told you I had a few things to see to before we left. Be patient, okay?"

"It's not that," she said. "I need to talk to you. Privately."

Something in her tone slipped through his concentration and pulled him from his work as effectively as a lasso tightening around the neck of a bucking bronco. His glance swept the work area then returned to her. "This is about as private as it gets. What's wrong?"

"I don't want you to think I've been deceiving you."

"Don't tell me your truck is stolen."

"No, no. Nothing like that." She'd tucked Ulysses under her arm and was petting him.

"Won't this wait?"

"Not really."

"We can talk later while I drive you home."

He saw her shake her head and marveled at the way her dark hair caught the light and gleamed as it moved. It was evident that once this woman got a notion to do or say something, nothing could stop her. "Okay. I'm listening."

"My name used to be Jamie Lynn Henderson instead of Nolan."

Scowling, Shane stared at her. "Okay."

"I don't think you fully understand," she said.

Shane sensed the crackle of tension in the air and noted her easing away from him, although she'd barely moved. He faced her and folded his arms across his chest. "Spell it out for me."

"Henderson doesn't ring a bell?"

"There's a town near Lake Norfolk by that name." *

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