

ASPEN GOLD SERIES
ANOTHER NIGHT ALONE



Bernadette Jones

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Chapter 1

There it was. That flash of pink in the trees. Tension escalated in his chest and he took a calming breath as his quarry once again disappeared.

Deke Ward didn't believe in psychics or clairvoyants, or whatever they called that shit nowadays. However, a healthy respect for intuition had served him well throughout the years. His instincts pounded a warning in his head.

A small child running wild in the woods was not normal. Or safe.

For three damn weeks he'd tried to get more than a fleeting glimpse of the pink flash among the pines and aspens surrounding Streaking Moose Campground. He'd followed the trails leading to the lake a dozen times. Everything inside him was on alert and screaming trouble. What the hell was a small child doing alone in the forest?

He climbed from his truck and skirted the parking lot. He'd been patiently waiting for the last hour, hoping to get another glimpse. Choosing a bench that faced the children's playground, he deliberately laid his lunch on the seat beside him. He leaned back and munched on a fry. Desperation turned the food to sawdust in his throat, and he struggled to swallow.

Almost four weeks ago he'd gotten his first glimpse of the blonde waif. Tuesdays he helped out at the VFW counseling the troubled vets. Payback for his own tough years. After his sessions he brought a lunch to the campground to sit, decompress, and recenter himself before heading back to Aspen Gold Lodge and his work responsibilities.

The first time he'd seen her, she was running into the woods from what he thought was a place at the picnic bench. Although there had been other campers that day, no one paid attention to the child.

Something felt wrong, out of place that day and he couldn't get her out of his mind. Well-honed instincts from previous years as a cop instinctively scrutinized the situation. He couldn't come up with a good reason for the child to be alone.

The following week there had been two vehicles at the campsite. As he'd pulled into the lot, one family packed up and headed to their car. He saw the child reach into the garbage receptacle where the family had tossed their trash. After chasing her, he'd lost her on the outskirts of the lake. He'd contacted Sheriff Joe Cavanaugh and Police Chief Hunter Lawe, but they'd found no trace of the girl and assumed she must have left with her family in the other vehicle.

Doubt thrummed through his system and kept him awake at night. He sensed the child was in trouble.

This was the third day this week he'd come by the campground to search for her. The Rockwell County Fair was over, and the park was pretty much deserted. The last two days he'd left food on the bench before heading into the woods to investigate. Each time he came back to the picnic area, the food was gone. He never saw the girl. This morning he'd arrived earlier and stayed in his truck to wait and watch.

He was done playing peek-a-boo. This ended today. He'd chase her down, and her asshole parents would be in jail before the day was over. Nothing lit his fuse like child neglect.

A furtive movement in the playhouse drew his attention and he caught a glimpse of blonde hair. The little girl must have snuck inside from the back.

Conscious of not making quick movements, he ripped one of the food bags open and laid half the sandwich and fries on the paper, sliding them to the opposite end of the bench. Relaxing back against the corner, he plucked a fry from the wrapper in his lap. He spoke loud enough for his voice to carry. "You hungry?"

The child ducked out of sight. Several long moments passed. Patience he reminded himself. He'd left food the last few days to get her to trust him.

Two dirt-smudged little legs popped out from the backside of the playhouse and dangled in his peripheral vision. Anticipation pulsed in his chest and he tensed, expecting her to take off into the woods. No way was he losing her this time.

She dropped the four feet to the ground and stood. Keeping his gaze locked on what he could see under the raised playhouse, he held his breath waiting to see what she'd do. She moved stealthily to the end of the structure and peeked around the corner.

Deke feigned a leisurely pose against the bench and tried to make himself as non-threatening as possible. He should have asked Ruby or Keira to come along. Hell, as big as he was, Owen could make himself seem like a cuddly teddy bear.

Slouching in his T-shirt and worn-out jeans, Deke knew he was all hard edges and sharp lines. He'd forgotten how to look friendly years ago.

Casually, he lifted another fry to his lips and waited. Short of three feet tall, the pale-skinned little girl with uniquely white hair rounded the corner and stared at him with wide blue eyes. She wore a tattered bath towel as a shawl around her slender shoulders. Twisting the frayed ends around her fingers, she studied him. The shoes she wore were too small and the heel had been folded down so she could still wear them covering her toes with her heels hanging over the back. Her faded pink dress had snags, tears and stains.

Heart pounding in his chest, he struggled to stay nonchalant. All he wanted to do was lift her into his arms, hug her and let her know he'd protect her. Memories of another anxious little girl assaulted him, threatening his composure.

He arched an eyebrow in question and held out a fry. Her little chest expelled a breath. She took a tentative step toward him, then another and another. Approaching from the end of the bench where he'd laid the food for her, she grabbed a handful of fries and shoved them into her mouth.

"Careful, not too many at once or you'll choke," he spoke softly.

She paused and her eyes crinkled. Chewing slowly, she swallowed and selected one from the pile. Taking a dainty bite, she studied him.

He waved toward the food he'd laid out. "That's for you. Take your time."

She reached for another.

"Are you here by yourself?" he asked.

Tilting her head, the child took another nibble.

"What's your name?"

She pushed the end of the fry into her mouth. She studied him for a minute before attempting to wrap up the remaining food in the paper.

Go slow, he reminded himself. Lifting the paper sack that had held his food, he leaned toward her.

Like a hungry puppy, she bent forward and covered her food.

“It’s okay. I’m not taking your meal. I’m giving you my leftovers. Put everything in the bag. It’ll be easier to carry.” He held the bag open. “It’s okay, put it in here.”

She straightened. Keeping one hand on the food, she reached for the bag and he let her take it. After she’d dropped all the food inside, she clutched the bag.

“Is your daddy close by?” He asked.

She jerked her head up and looked over her shoulder, shifting her gaze from one place to the other.

He sensed her fear. He was losing her.

A car on the highway rumbled loudly as someone downshifted and idled up the engine. A second car responded. Clasp the bag to her chest, she took off running for the dense trees. The opposite direction of where he’d been searching for her. Every other day she’d headed toward the lake.

Deke sprinted after her. Damn, she was quick as a jackrabbit and small enough to dash under bushes and limbs he had to go around. A child of the wild, she knew how to hide. After ten minutes he’d lost her.

“Sonofabitch.” Hands on his hips, he surveyed the area where he’d last seen her. A movement up the mountain to the left caught his attention. A bush shook as though something had taken off from the opposite side. Charging up the slippery slope, he reached a rise where the path split a lightly forested field leading higher up the mountain.

Ahead he spied a flash of pink along the tree line bordering the path. He took up the chase. Following little glimpses of pink for the next fifteen minutes, he questioned if the child was leading him somewhere. The higher he went, the narrower the path, eventually ending in a wall of trees.

He paused, dropping to his knees. Tire tracks, visible in the damp earth, led up the trail toward where the path ended.

Glancing in the opposite direction, he recognized his location. Off-roading in this area was possible. Not smart, but possible. He was quite a distance from any roads, and the path he’d taken following the child must have covered almost two miles, maybe more. A breeze of doubt whispered across the back of his neck. What was going on? Had he stumbled onto something he wasn’t meant to find?

Taking his phone from his pocket, he checked for reception and texted both Joe and Hunter his coordinates. He'd already reported seeing the child before the fair. The authorities knew he'd continued looking for her. His friends would send back-up. Slipping his Sig Sauer from his ankle holster, he straightened and glanced up the trail.

He'd made an enemy here and there in his years in law enforcement and since taking over security for Aspen Gold Lodge. Now wasn't the time to get careless.

The little girl stood in the open near a section where the woods thickened, the bag of food clutched to her chest with her forearm. Her gaze locked on him. A good seventy feet away from her, he watched as she clasped her hands in front of herself. She lifted them both in an almost beseeching fashion and disappeared into the forest.

A trap? Or a cry for help? A sense of urgency settled in his gut and he loped up the incline. The nagging voice warning he could be walking into a trap didn't stop him. He instinctively knew the little girl needed him.

Deke followed the worn path the child had taken. He stopped abruptly. A compact off-road camper had been jammed between two large trees, severely damaging one side. A spidery tingle raced up his spine.

The girl stood in front of the hitch, as though waiting to meet his gaze. She rubbed her hands together again, then dropped to her knees and crawled under the trailer.

Rushing to the vehicle, he dove to the ground and peered underneath. The scent of human waste assaulted him.

The child had disappeared.

How? What the hell? He pushed to his feet and raced around the unit checking the immediate area before coming back to the camper. Had she deliberately led him here? The camouflage paint ensured the vehicle would easily go unnoticed. Two small windows near the roof, each a foot long and about ten inches wide were closed. Someone had made a haphazard attempt to fix the damaged side of the trailer.

Circling around the back, he found a large water tank with less than four inches of murky water in the bottom. He frowned. The camper hadn't been parked as much as deliberately concealed.

Rounding the corner, horror detonated in his head. A thick chain and padlock secured the camper door.

Re-holstering his weapon, he dropped to the ground and squeezed under the camper as he'd seen the child do. Using his phone's flashlight, he found an opening in the camper undercarriage. A hole big enough for a small child to climb in and out of.

"If you can hear me, I'm going for help. I'll be back." He hoped she understood.

Pushing out from under the unit, he ran to the larger path where he could get reception. "Joe, I found the girl. She's living in a camper. The door is padlocked. We need a heavy-duty bolt cutter."

"I've got two men on the way up on off-highway vehicles," Joe replied. "You should hear them soon. I'm close and the guys with the larger utility vehicle are right behind me. I've got cutters. I'll have Chet send the Life Support Vehicle over to meet us at the highway. My guys can radio down the coordinates."

Minutes later, Deke heard the low rumble of the OHVs the deputies used before they rounded the bend and came into sight. Deke directed the first deputy to turn back to show Joe the fastest route. The second deputy, Derek Wick, followed him to the camper.

"I can't see anything through those tinted windows." Officer Wick shook his head. "I've got a cousin who has an off-road camper similar to this. They're for the hard core, live-off-the-grid types. Those windows are smaller than most. There might be an opening on the roof, but the ladder's missing. Give me a hand up and I'll see if there's anything."

Deke laced his hands giving the younger man a boost.

"There's something. I can't reach it. The pane looks sealed and is as dark as these side windows. Whoever owns this had pretty specific modifications made." Dropping to the ground, he walked around to the door and eyed the lock. "Some big bucks went into this unit."

Deke nodded. The sound of a vehicle in the distance drew their attention. Derek headed back to the trail to meet his boss and show him the way.

Joe walked up to Deke wielding a pair of heavy-duty bolt cutters. "Tell me what you saw."

"Since the fair left, I've been coming by the campground. Two days in a row I put food on the bench and went searching for the girl in the woods down by the water. Each time, the food disappeared. Today, I sat and waited. She hid inside the playhouse. I told her I had food, but she'd have to come get it.

“I don’t know if she understood me or if she just screwed up her courage and came over to get the meal because she needed food. A couple cars on the highway revved their engines and the noise scared her. She lit out like the devil was after her.” He scanned the area.

“I never would have checked this direction. Every other time I’ve tried to follow her, she headed toward Lake Louise.” He hesitated. “I think she wanted me to follow her today. Twice she halted and motioned with her hands. Once she had my attention, she’d take off again. She’s been making the trip on her own for weeks.

“She got to the camper and made sure I saw her before crawling underneath. There’s an opening in the undercarriage big enough for her to climb inside.”

“You think she’s inside now?” Joe asked.

“Yes. I called to her. She won’t or can’t answer. She may be too scared to talk.”

Joe nodded and walked closer to the vehicle. “It’s not illegal to park here.”

Deke met his gaze. “There’s something suspicious going on inside. It’s illegal to abandon a vehicle on government property. The damage to the trees is a federal offense. With all the drug issues you’ve had in the nearby park, there’s a high likelihood this is a distribution station. Not to mention I saw an abandoned child. You have more than enough probable cause to demand entry.”

Joe lifted an eyebrow. “You’ve been thinking this through I see.”

Deke glared back. “We need to go in. Now!”

“Derek, drop down and keep an eye on the undercarriage. I don’t want her sneaking off.” Crossing to the camper, Joe paused and pounded on the door. “Sheriff’s department. Come out now with your hands up.”

Silence.

“This is the Sheriff’s department,” he tried again. “If you don’t respond, we’re coming in.” He motioned to his other two deputies. They pulled their weapons and stood at the ready. Deke reached forward, pulling the lock up giving Joe a better angle for the cutters. After three tries the lock snapped.

Throwing the lock and chain to the ground, Deke grabbed the handle. Joe put a hand on his shoulder, and he shrugged him off. “She’s seen me. Let me go first.”

Pulling his own weapon, Joe stepped back and nodded. “I’m right behind you.”

Deke eased the door open and cautiously scanned the interior. A clump of blankets lay on the hard floor. A slight shift in the bundle drew his attention to the far side of the pile. He slipped inside.

“Don’t be scared. I’m here to help. I’m the man from the park.” Crouching, he gently tugged on the nearest corner of cloth. The blanket slipped off the lump exposing the little girl holding a dingy white teddy bear wearing a blue shirt. Thumb pointing up, she put one fisted hand onto the palm of the other and lifted both hands together.

Damn, now he recognized the action. She’d been signing *help* all along. How could he have missed it? He nodded. She leaned forward and pushed at the blanket exposing the pale, gaunt face of a woman in her early to mid-twenties.

He studied the woman’s almost translucent skin, white hair and eyelashes. Delicate like a china cup that would crumble with the slightest impact.

His heart lurched. Was she still alive?

He only knew the basics in sign language and didn’t feel competent communicating in this situation. Hoping the child could read lips. He met her gaze. “I need to come closer. I’m not going to hurt either of you.” Dropping to his knees, he leaned forward. The child watched him intently while holding her stuffed animal to her chest. He glanced down and slipped two fingers onto the young woman’s carotid artery desperately hoping for a pulse. He guessed her to be the girl’s mother, although she didn’t look much older than a teenager herself. His thoughts immediately riffled through the situation looking for explanations and not liking the ones that came to mind. He spoke softly. “Got a pulse, Joe. Flesh is cool.”

Gently, he slid the blanket lower, skimming his gaze down the woman’s bony frame outlined by the worn dress. He’d seen emaciated people before.

“Sonofa—,” he paused, remembering the child. “Her belly doesn’t seem to be bloated. Which is a good sign.”

Joe shifted back toward the door and spoke to someone.

“Paramedic is on his way with a gurney,” Joe whispered. He nodded toward the woman. “Starvation?”

“My guess.” Deke pointed to the bags on the floor and the fry lying near the woman’s head. “Those are the food bags I left the last three days.”

Turning his head, he spoke quietly to Joe. "It's been a little over three weeks since the first time I saw the girl. By the looks of this woman, the girl may have been scrounging for food even then. There would have been a lot of scraps and trash while the fair was in town. Very little since."

A muscle in Joe's jaw ticked. He swallowed hard as he visibly composed his emotions. Deke turned back to the woman to see what caused his reaction. The child had picked up the fry and brushed it across the woman's lips. Heartbroken, he struggled to breathe.

"Out of my way," Dan commanded from outside.

The child jerked the blanket back over the woman and crouched lower.

"Give me a minute, Dan," Deke called before glancing at Joe. "Explain."

Joe nodded and headed for the door.

Deke turned to the child, signed *help* and pointed to himself. "If you can understand, I'm here to help. Your mom is sick. We need to get her to a doctor. You can trust me."

He stood and backed to the door, motioning for her to follow, hoping she would. She fixed him with a piercingly forsaken blue gaze. Time stood still as he waited.

She pushed the blanket to the side. Still clutching the bear, she knelt before lunging into the open cabinet behind her and dropped from sight.

He should have seen that coming.

"Damnit." Deke straightened and scrambled out the door, pushing Dan and Joe out of his way. The child stood at the edge of the woods looking back at him. He nodded and cautiously advanced toward her. He got within ten feet, before she turned and darted deeper into the woods.

Oh hell, now what horror was she going to show him? He swallowed the dread in his throat and followed. She stopped at a fallen tree, partially rotted-out and moss covered. She gently laid her bear to the side and crouched down to brush a pile of leaves from the end of the log. Sitting, she braced her feet against the outer rim, reached into the hole and started tugging on something.

"Stop," he snapped.

Startled at the command in his voice, the child turned wide eyes on him.

Forcing a calmness to his voice he didn't feel, he smiled. "Let me help." He lifted her bear. "You come take care of Bear and I'll get what you're trying to drag out."

Scooting to the side, she sat and held up her arms for the toy. He knelt beside her and stuck his hand into the hollowed-out stump. His hand brushed what felt like a canvas bag. His mind took a dark spin, fearing he'd pull a canvas-wrapped sibling from a rotting grave. With a sharp jerk, a backpack toppled at his knees, too small to hold a body. Relief washed over him. Although small, the bag weighed a lot.

The child stood, grabbed the top strap and turned back to the camper dragging the bag beside her.

Reaching her side, he slipped his hand around one of the shoulder straps and lifted the bag to help her with the load. She stopped, studied him keenly, and proceeded toward her destination.

By the time they got back to the camper, Dan had the woman strapped to the gurney and was loading her onto the back of the transport vehicle.

The child tried to run after her mother, but the weight of the bag dragged her down. Struggling with her bag, she tripped over a dead branch on the ground.

Deke caught her before she landed.

"Dan, wait." Shifting the child in his arms he slipped an arm under her butt and lifted her and the bag to his chest. Holding her was all knees and elbows with very little weight. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she trembled in his arms. He swallowed hard, before he spoke. "It's okay. We're going to help both of you."

At the vehicle, he stood the girl on the seat where she could reach over the back and touch her mom. "See, there she is."

He tapped her shoulder so she would look at him, signed *help*, and indicated himself. Again, she studied him with her focused stare before nodding. Deke sat next to her on the seat while Dan efficiently secured the woman.

Joe approached the opposite side of the vehicle. "Derek will be staying here to work the site and wait for forensics."

Deke nodded.

The child turned to him, hugging the bear to her chest. Her other hand clutched the blanket covering her mom.

“It’s going to be okay.” Deke crooned, wrapping an arm around her. “It’s going to be okay.”

They made quick work of the trip down the mountain to where the Spencer Fire Department Advanced Life Support vehicle waited. The child became frantic as the workers tried to remove the woman. She struggled and fought, trying to climb onto the gurney, stuffed animal and clumsy bag in hand.

Deke stepped from the vehicle, slipping the backpack from her tenuous grip and opened his arms to her. “We’re going with her.”

To his shock, the child wrapped the arm gripping the bear around his neck and relaxed in his embrace.

He gave Dan a commanding look. “We’re riding with you.”

The younger man nodded. “We’re good.”

“Who’s on duty at the hospital?” Deke asked.

“Doc Ewing is covering.”

“He’s back from his vacation?”

“Yesterday.”

Relieved, he nodded. Another friend who could be counted on.

“Deke,” Joe called out. “Toss me your keys. I’ll have someone drive your vehicle over to the hospital.”

* * *

At the ambulance bay the medical staff tried to separate the child from the gurney to take the woman into the ER. The child battled and squirmed, refusing to be removed from her mother’s side.

“Leave her,” Deke snapped.

“Mr. Ward,” the nurse began. “Doctor Ewing will need to examine her, and this is no place for the child.”

Gage swept into the area. “Leave her. I’ve got it.” He glanced at one of the nurses as he guided the gurney into the triage area. “Get some electrolyte drinks, a couple juice boxes, and some crackers. And get Deke a chair.”

He smiled at the child then spoke softly. “Mommy’s sick. I’m going to check her eyes, ears and nose.” He winked. “I may have to tickle her belly.”

Deke was grateful for Gage's quick assessment and softly spoken words.

The child pointed to the bed. At Gage's nod of approval, Deke sat her at the end by her mother's feet. She studied him earnestly before cuddling her bear closer to her chest.

The chair and snacks arrived. Deke lifted her onto his lap beside the head of the bed where she could see her mom. She drank a whole container of electrolytes and ate half a package of crackers.

Quietly, Gage concentrated on checking vitals, drawing blood, ordering tests and examining the woman. Once he had the IVs started, the nurse took over to sponge bathe her.

Motioning for him to bring the child to a second bed, Gage hunkered down to be at eye level. "So, sweetie, what's your name?"

Deke waited to see if she'd respond. She silently studied her bear. "She only signs. But from things I've noticed, I suspect she may hear."

Gage reached out to take her hand. She pulled away and tried to climb Deke's torso to escape. Hugging her to his chest for a moment, Deke sat her back on the bed and met her gaze. He pointed to himself and hoped like hell the next thing he signed was *safe*. He should have paid more attention when Bethel and Yolanda taught the staff at the lodge. "It's okay, sweetie. Doc isn't going to hurt you. He wants to make sure you're not sick. He's going to listen to your heart. I'll be right here and you can hold my hand. Mom will be right over there sleeping."

The little girl rubbed her nose against the bear, glanced up and reached for him. Deke held her hand as Gage checked her temperature, eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Deke cringed at the scrapes and dried blood on the child's feet.

"Those shoes haven't been much help. It's like you've been running barefoot in the woods," Gage spoke. "You're pretty cut up." He glanced at a nurse. "Get me a kit so I can siphon some of this blood for testing. And she'll need a tetanus shot."

After sponging the soil off her legs and feet, Gage treated them with ointment then went to find socks. While Doc was gone Deke helped wipe off her arms, hands and face removing the worst of the grime.

Gage returned with two pairs of soft, fluffy, child-size sock-booties. "Pink or blue?"

She pointed to the blue and let Deke slip them on her feet.

“I’m having them moved upstairs. The mom will be here for a while. Finding them when you did, probably saved her life. I don’t know how many more days she would have survived before the damage would have been irreversible.”

Two orderlies walked into the room followed by Joe and Hunter.

“We’re headed upstairs. Meet us on the third floor.” Gage instructed the law officers.

Deke placed the child on the end of the bed with her bag as the staff prepared to move their patients to a room. She looked up with frightened eyes and reached for him. He tapped the orderly and motioned him away. He’d push the bed. At Gage’s nod, the man backed off.

Waiting for the elevator, Deke studied the child. She was so tiny. Yet her spirit was fierce for one so young. What if he hadn’t found them? The child would have been alone, motherless. Easy prey for man or beast in the mountains. Unsuspecting and vulnerable. Deke clenched his jaw, pushing back the memory of another mother and little girl.

In the room on the third floor, he took the child to the bathroom, where one of the nurses took over. Signing *safe*. He stood in the doorway with his back turned so she could see him and have a view of her mother. Once they finished, Deke settled her back on the bed.

“Doc,” the nurse spoke, “she didn’t know how to flush the toilet. The water startled her when it came out of the faucet. I tried to explain to her the difference between hot and cold. She’ll need to be supervised. I can’t tell how much she understands. I cleaned her up as much as I could. We’re short staffed. A bath will need to wait.”

Gage shot him a questioning glance.

Deke shrugged. These were basic human skills. Exactly how feral was the child? He cleared his throat. “Thanks for your help. I’ll handle it from here.”

He grabbed a hospital shirt from the top cabinet. “Alright, sweetheart, we’ll get you a bath in a little bit. For now, we’re going to get you into something clean so you can lay with mom. You’ll need to be careful of the cords on her arms. Can you do that?”

The child stood before him and shucked out of her clothes. Once the soiled dress pooled at her feet. He noticed her prominent collar bone. Pale skin covered her delicate

bony frame. He clenched his jaw as he helped her slide her arms through the sleeves of the open top, fighting back his escalating rage. He wrapped the strings around her waist twice and tied a bow.

Joe and Hunter entered as the nurse walked out. The child scrambled to the floor, grabbed the bag, her bear and ducked under the bed.

Hiding. Always looking for shelter. She could educate experts with her stealthy talents.

Deke squatted and leaned over so he could see her. She hunched as small as possible near the wall, her possessions beside her. Holding out his hand, he spoke. “No more peek-a-boo with me. You need to come rest with mom. I’ll watch over you. You’re safe.”

When she didn’t respond, he signed *safe* and *help*. Slowly she inched from her hiding place.

Deke reached down, lifting her and her treasures to the mattress. Insisting on keeping her hands on both, she curled next to the woman’s side.

Deke got another blanket and gently covered her, brushing her hair from her face. “Sleep. I’ll be right here, Little Boo.”

Gage, arms crossed over his chest, leaned against the wall watching. Deke scowled at him. “What’re you smiling about?”

“Just thinking you look pretty natural doing that. Maybe you have experience?”

“Quit fishing. Don’t you have some doctoring you need to do?”

Joe snorted.

Deke studied the child who’d immediately fallen asleep. He nodded toward the door and his friends followed him into the hall.

Joe spoke first. “My guys are still working on getting the camper to impound. Derek did a fast check and can’t find anything to identify the two of them or who owns the camper. The unit has been stripped of identifying markings and labels. They found empty food boxes and cans. There wasn’t much. The water tank was so low nothing would come out. When whoever rammed the unit into the trees, the side buckled under the sink and the woman must have been able to pry up the floor to create the hole the girl

has been climbing through. They found a couple broken knives, a screwdriver and a chair leg she must have used for leverage.”

“That explains the cuts and sores on the woman’s hands,” Gage muttered.

“What’s the woman’s condition?” Hunter asked.

Gage looked directly at Deke. “We have a chance. Any longer and we may not have been so lucky. We’ll be keeping a close watch on her for the next few days. Her vitals are better than I first expected. We’re working on getting her electrolytes and her blood sugar counts up. If I were to guess, she’s eaten very little over the last four maybe six weeks so the child would survive. We’ll know more in twenty-four hours. I’m—cautiously optimistic.”

“When can I talk to her?” Joe asked.

“I want you to leave her alone for at least twenty-four hours *after* she wakes, unless she asks to talk to you. I don’t want anything upsetting her until we get her stabilized. I want her to be eating soft foods.”

“The child?” asked Hunter.

“She stays,” Deke stated.

“Then I’ll call social services—”

“I stay.” Deke stared down his friend. “She trusts me. I’ll protect both of them until her mom wakes and can tell us where she wants to go. From here on out, I’m family until we know more.”

Joe studied his friend. “I should have listened more to your gut when you first reported this. I’m sorry.”

Deke turned and entered the room. He pulled a chair closer to the bedside and watched the two innocents breathe. He condemned his own failure. He’d known something was wrong the first day. *He’d* taken too long to act. *You did find them*, he tried to console himself. He hoped it was soon enough.

The cruelty of leaving a woman and small child to slowly starve to death incited such anger he thought his chest would explode. The absence of shock at the evil humans perpetrated on each other didn’t surprise him. He’d seen both in war and growing up on the streets of St. Louis. He’d learned hard lessons in his hometown. What threatened to consume him was the need for retribution and justice on behalf of the ones brutalized. He

thought he'd learned acceptance. He thought he'd buried the anger long ago. Apparently not.

Right now, all he wanted was revenge.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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