

“Who has a key to your office right now?”

“An assistant I share with Judge Rodriguez and maintenance. You think it was one of them?”

“No, there were fresh scratch marks on the lock. He risked breaking into your office for some reason. What was it?”

Aubrey made her way around to the other side of her desk. Sean started to rise, and she quickly said, “You stay there. If I need you, I’ll let you know.” She opened the top left drawer. “After I’ve gone through my office, I’ll drive your car and take you to the ER to make sure you’re okay.”

He opened his mouth to reply.

She held up her palm. “No arguments on that. If something is wrong and you didn’t get help, it would be my fault.” She shut the top drawer and reached for the bottom one.

Their gazes clashed. A war of emotions played across his face while Aubrey pulled the second compartment out.

A rattling sound sent shivers down her body as she stared at the coiled rattlesnake, poised to strike.

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Lone Star Standoff

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God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

-Psalms 46:1



To my mother-in-law, Marcella,
who has been a great supporter of my writing.

ONE

District Judge Aubrey Madison left her office at the courthouse, her brain pounding against her skull. The jury was finally chosen today in her current trial—a trial that could propel her into the limelight, a place she'd rather not be. At least for the weekend, she could relax and enjoy time with her twins. They meant everything to her.

“Good night, Bill,” she said to the deputy sheriff at the rear entrance.

“Judge Madison, I'll walk you out tonight.”

“I appreciate the offer, but you need to guard the door.”

He smiled. “I know. Part of the extra security for the Villa trial. I can keep an eye on the entrance and walk you to your car.”

Aubrey sighed. Bill took his job seriously. “I know. That's why I parked near the entrance, so you wouldn't have to go so far.” She stepped outside, where the sunset painted the

sky with beautiful shades of red and yellow. “How are you doing?”

He slowed his pace, his forehead wrinkled. “I guess okay, Judge Madison.”

She stopped and turned toward Bill, a large man with a slight potbelly. “I know what you’re going through. My husband died two years ago. I’m here if you need to talk about your wife’s death.”

“Thanks.” His face tensed, and he started walking again. “You have enough to deal with.”

At the end of the sidewalk to the parking lot, Aubrey glanced at Bill. “I can take it from here. My car is right over there.”

The deputy sheriff scanned the area then nodded.

She strolled the short distance to her car. The warmth from the spring day had already faded, and the chill in the air made her shiver. She slid behind the steering wheel and pulled out of her parking space. As she headed toward the exit of the lot behind the courthouse, reserved for people who worked inside, she passed Bill and waved.

When she arrived home a short time later, she punched the garage-door opener then drove inside and parked next to her mother’s car. She didn’t know what she would have

done if her mama hadn't insisted on coming to stay with her at least until Camy and Sammy went to elementary school. Two years ago when her husband was murdered, Aubrey had to go back to work because of Samuel's sudden death. Their savings had all been wiped out by medical bills when the twins were born early. She'd always intended to return to work, but not until they were in elementary school. Instead she'd run for the judge position six months later.

Not wanting to dwell on a past she couldn't change, she hurried into the house, the scent of beef and onions permeating the place. "What's for dinner? It smells great."

Her mother pulled out a casserole dish from the oven and set it on a burner. "My lasagna. Camy and Sammy helped me."

"Where are they?" Aubrey wondered how messy the kitchen had been after her twins' "help."

"When I heard your car pull into the garage, I had them go wash their hands. How did it go today?"

"Long, but the two attorneys have finally settled on a jury."

"Just in time for the weekend." Her mother brushed a stray strand of black hair behind her ear.

“Yes. I threatened to continue late into the night if they didn’t.” Aubrey put her briefcase and purse on the desk nearby. “I’d better go check on my kids. It’s too quiet. They’ve had enough time to wash their hands.”

Aubrey left the kitchen and walked upstairs and down the hallway toward her twins’ bedrooms at the end. The light from the bathroom beckoned her. Giggles resonated down the corridor. That sound usually meant she would have to spend time cleaning up whatever mess her rascals had made. She hurried her steps.

When she entered the bathroom, she looked down at the puddle of water the twins were standing in. She stared at Camy and Sammy, drenched from head to toe. She pressed her lips together, suppressing the laugh at the sight of her soggy children. That would only encourage them. “Who won the battle?”

They each pointed at themselves.

“Who started it?” Aubrey asked, trying to put on her stern face.

“He started it,” her daughter immediately said.

“I dinna.” Sammy stomped his foot, and water on the floor went flying, hitting Aubrey’s pants.

After the serious day she’d had in court,

her children's antics actually lightened her mood. She still fought her smile and remained calm. "Don't move." She marched down the hall to the linen closet and grabbed several bath towels, then returned to her children, still standing where she'd left them. Even though they were twins, they were like night and day. Camy had dark hair and eyes like Aubrey and her mother, while Sammy took after his father's side with light brown hair and hazel eyes.

She gave each child a towel. "Mop the floor with these then put them in the tub." Leaning her shoulder against the doorjamb with her arms crossed, she watched her four-year-olds do the best job they could. When they finished, she stepped to the side. "Put on some dry clothes, then bring the wet ones back here and place them in the tub, too."

Heads down, the twins left the bathroom.

After they disappeared into their bedrooms, she completed the cleanup, then headed back to the kitchen.

"What happened?" Her mama brought the casserole dish to the table and set it down on a hot pad.

"The usual. No doubt the water fight started out innocently but quickly morphed into an all-out battle. They're changing clothes." A

moment later Sammy came into the room with a ragged T-shirt on backward. She refrained from saying anything, but the sight of what he was wearing reminded her of what she'd done at lunch today. She snatched up her keys and headed for the door to the garage in the utility room. "I forgot something in the trunk of my car."

When she stepped into the garage, a faint rotting odor wafted to her. She neared the large trashcan and lifted the top. It was empty because the garbage had been picked up earlier that day. But as she neared the rear of her car, the smell grew stronger. She clicked the car trunk's button on her key fob, and the lid popped up. The nauseating scent engulfed her. She looked down at a large, dead brown rat lying next to a shopping bag from the store she'd visited at lunchtime.

She froze. The dead rat definitely hadn't been there earlier today. Rats and snakes were her two fears. How did it get into her trunk? When was it put there? And *why*?

Fear blanketed her as she thought of her current trial—a top drug cartel lieutenant faced a first-degree murder charge.

Texas Ranger Sean McNair entered his house and tossed his car keys into a bowl in

his kitchen near the door to the garage. Another shipment of drugs had slipped through his fingers today. He felt it in his gut. His tip hadn't paid off. He was too late to stop the drugs from coming into the United States, and his recent suspicions about the Port Bliss Police Department had been confirmed. Someone had warned the Coastal Cartel about the raid.

He made his way to his deck overlooking the water between the Texas mainland and South Padre Island. Gripping the railing, he leaned against it, relishing the cool, late-spring breeze laced with the scent of the sea that always calmed his frustration. A seagull flew over Sean's home, heading for the island.

Frustration churned his stomach. He was one of three people covering a large area of the southernmost tip of the state. Everything pointed to a cartel thug murdering the Texas Ranger before him, but he had no concrete evidence to prove the case. The fallen Texas Ranger had a wife and two babies—who were left without a father. He hadn't known Samuel Madison other than by his reputation of being a good law enforcement officer. When Sean had been moved to Company D to replace the slain fellow officer, he'd met the man's

wife. The look of despair in her dark brown eyes still haunted him, even after two years.

He'd asked to be transferred, especially with the Coastal Cartel firming its base of operation in the area over the past few years. Someone in the cartel was responsible for his brother's disappearance. In his gut, he knew that Jack was dead. But he and his family needed closure on what had happened to him.

Sean had slowly been digging into the organization to finally bring it down. It wouldn't return his younger brother, but if he could destroy it, the cartel henchman wouldn't be able to tear apart another family like his had been. His mother had never recovered from Jack's tailspin into the drug world that ultimately killed him. There had been nothing he could do to stop his little brother. Jack had been living in Port Bliss for the past four years while Sean had been a Texas Highway Patrol officer clear across the state in Amarillo, where they had grown up.

Sean took a deep, cleansing breath of the sea-laced air, closing his eyes as he tried to forget the description of Jack's apartment two years ago when he went missing. Blood everywhere but no body.

The sound of his cell phone's ringtone intruded into his thoughts. He started to ig-

nore it, then with a glance at the screen, he changed his mind and quickly answered. "Hello. Is something wrong?" He'd told Aubrey Madison to call him if she ever needed his help, because her husband's killer had never been brought in, either. This was the first time she had.

"There may be a problem."

"May?"

"Someone left a dead rat in the trunk of my car, and I think it could be connected to the trial I'm currently the judge on."

A rat was often left at a scene where the cartel went after someone. There had been one in Jack's apartment. "Bento Villa's trial?"

"Yes." Aubrey's voice quavered, reminding him of the times he'd interviewed her about her husband and had worked with her to find the killer. They had both been grieving at that time, although he'd never told her about Jack's case. He'd even wondered if his brother's disappearance had been connected to her husband's death somehow. The incidents were days apart. "Have you called the police?"

"Not yet."

"Don't. I'll be there in twenty minutes." *Even if I have to break a few speeding laws.* "Leave the rat where it is. Go inside and lock the doors until I get there. Do you have a gun

and know how to use it?" Sean entered his house and snatched up his keys.

"Yes, it was my husband's."

"Good. Get it just in case." With what he'd seen working this area over the past two years, a dead rat was not only used as a symbol of the cartel but also to send a message they would always follow up. Suddenly a question popped into Sean's mind: Was the dead rat a warning to the judge that the cartel was coming after her?

"Okay. Thank you." The judge disconnected their call.

He stuffed his phone into his pocket and left his bungalow. As the sun disappeared totally below the horizon, he sped as fast as he could toward her house in the next town.

Aubrey slammed the trunk down, her stomach roiling as the rotting odor grew worse by the minute. She hurried into the house and went immediately to the safe for the revolver she'd kept more as a memory of her husband than in the expectation she would ever use it, even though she knew how to fire a gun and keep it serviceable. But she had her children and mother to think about and protect. She hid the weapon in the big pocket of a bulky sweater she donned.

She returned to the kitchen, where her mother sat at the table with Camy and Sammy, waiting for her. Mama glanced at her bulging sweater pocket and furrowed her brows. She started to say something, but Aubrey quickly shook her head. She sat, but didn't know if she could eat much. Her nausea persisted while her heartbeat raced. She couldn't get it out of her mind that the rat was a warning.

"Let's bless the food," Aubrey said. "Sammy, it's your turn."

Her son joined hands with her and his sister, then bowed his head. "Thanks for the food and my *madre* and *abuela*." He looked up then hurriedly added, "And Camy."

Aubrey smiled at the Spanish words her son loved to throw in. Her mother was working with the twins to teach them her family's language as well as English.

Her daughter turned her head so fast her long black ponytail swung around. "I cleaned up more than Sammy."

"No, you dinna."

Aubrey gave each twin a long stare, then replied, "What's the rule when we're eating?"

"No fighting," they both said.

Aubrey ignored Camy sticking out her tongue at Sammy and instead stared at the

food on her plate, wondering how she was going to eat it all. She checked her watch. The Texas Ranger who'd taken her husband's place should be here soon. How was she going to keep her worries from affecting her children? She'd been on the bench for almost two years and even dealt with a few drug cases involving low-level members of the Coastal Cartel. Nothing had happened during that time. Was the message in her car trunk because the man on trial was one of the lieutenants in the cartel?

"Mama!"

Aubrey blinked and glanced at her daughter. "What?"

"Are ya lost in your mind?"

"Huh?"

"I've been askin' ya for more *leche*." Camy held up her empty glass. "I'll pour it."

"No!" The last time her daughter had tried to refill her milk, it went everywhere. "Sorry. I was lost in thought." Aubrey took the glass from Camy and crossed to the refrigerator.

When she came back to the table, she intercepted a puzzled look from her mother. She didn't want to say anything in front of her children, so she switched her attention to Camy and forced a grin. As she started to sit again, the doorbell rang.

Aubrey jerked to a standing position. "I'll get it. I may be a while. It's work. Finish your dinner. I'll eat later."

Her mama stared at her for a few seconds, then said to the twins, "After dinner, you two can help me with the dishes, and then we can play a game."

A resounding cheer came from her children as Aubrey rushed toward the entry hall and reached to clasp the knob. She stopped in mid-motion. Instead she looked through the peephole and saw it was Texas Ranger McNair, then opened the door. "Thank you for coming." She stepped to the side for him to enter.

She hadn't seen him at the courthouse in over a month and had forgotten how tall and well built he was. Dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt with a striped gray-and-red tie, black pants, an off-white cowboy hat, brown boots and his badge pinned over his heart, he had a commanding air about him. The sight of him dressed for work reminded her of her husband, and a knot clogged her throat. That first year after Samuel's murder, she saw Sean a couple of times a week while he worked the case.

He paused a few feet from her, turned toward her and held out his hand. "It's nice to see you again." His dark blue eyes roamed

over her features, and a slow smile spread across his tanned face. “Although I wish it were under different circumstances.”

She shook his hand. “I agree, Sean. I have a home office where we can talk. My children are in the kitchen, and I don’t want them to overhear our conversation.”

“I understand. Lead the way.”

Aubrey passed him in the foyer, feeling dwarfed by his large frame. She was only five four while he must be at least six and a half feet, if not more. She waved her hand toward a brown leather love seat and two chairs. Although she had a desk, she usually ended up working on the two-cushion couch with her laptop and papers spread all over the coffee table.

“When I’m not in a trial, I often work from home to be here for my two kids. It helps that my mother lives with me, and I’m only ten minutes away from the courthouse.”

While he took a chair, she sat on the love seat, thinking they should switch places. He looked so big in the wingback. He took off his hat and laid it on the coffee table between them, then ran his fingers through his thick, short black hair. “Being the judge in the Bento Villa trial must be tough.”

“Yes, it’s taken days to find a jury. The

trial will actually start on Monday. When you leave, I'll open the garage door and show you the dead rat in my car's trunk. I didn't touch it. In fact, I left a shopping bag in there with clothes I bought at lunch for my twins, Sammy and Camy. They're four and a half. My mama takes care of them when I'm working." When she and Sean had talked before, it had been centered on her husband's case, but if someone was coming after her now, Sean needed to know everything about her family. They could be affected, too.

"Is your son named after his dad?"

"Yes, and Camy after my mama. Her name is Camilla." Texas Ranger McNair had always been easy to talk to. Aubrey reclined back, trying to relax some of her tight muscles that had stayed with her since she left the courthouse. The only place she dealt with her job at home was in this office. When she walked out of here, her family became her focus—until someone had left that message in her trunk. "A dead rat has been used by the cartel before as a warning. I've also received a few hang-ups at my office in the courthouse since I was assigned to the Villa trial."

"Have you received calls like that at other times?"

"Occasionally, and that's why I shrugged

them off this time. I know it's not Bento himself, since he's in jail and his communications are monitored. But the Coastal Cartel is big and ruthless."

"What's the security for this trial?"

"Extra guards at the courthouse and inside where the trial is. I've always felt safe at work. Someone coming after me won't change the fact that Bento Villa is on trial for the murder of Hector Martin."

"This is a high-profile case." Sean wrote something on the pad he held. "Can we narrow down the time and place where the rat could have been put in your trunk? Then I can check security cameras to see if I can catch the person on tape."

"During lunch, I usually eat in my office at the courthouse, but today I needed to get away. The atmosphere is tense. Since we were getting near the end of the selection of jurors, I announced a two-hour lunch period. I still ate in my office and decided to lie down on the couch and take a nap. Since this case began, I haven't slept as well as I usually do. But I couldn't fall asleep. So I decided to go shopping for summer clothes for the kids. The dead rat wasn't in the trunk when I put that bag in there after visiting the store I usually get their clothes at."

“What store?”

“Clothes Galore on Main Street.”

“Did you go right back to the courthouse?”

Aubrey looked away from Sean’s intense gaze. “No. I went to Sweet Haven Parlor and had a double scoop of cookie-dough ice cream in a waffle cone. Indulging always manages to cheer me up.”

He chuckled. “I’ve been there before. Their ice cream is great.”

“What flavor?” He made her feel at ease during this tense time.

“Chocolate. Don’t tell anyone that’s my weakness.”

She laughed. The sound surprised her even more. For the past thirty minutes, she’d been tied in knots, and in a brief time he’d gotten her to laugh. But she quickly sobered as he wrote on his pad. This visit was about someone leaving her a message. She couldn’t take that lightly.

“I’ll check the security cameras at the courthouse and Sweet Haven Parlor, if they have any. Did you go anywhere else?”

“No. I came right back and had only a few minutes to get to my office and put on my robe.”

“When you drove home from the court-

house, did you stop anywhere and leave your car unattended?”

“No. After this week, all I wanted to do was get home.”

Sean stood and pocketed his notepad. “Show me your car.”

“Let’s go out front. I’ll raise the garage door. If we go through the kitchen, my children will want to come with us. They’re curious and ask so many questions.” They reminded her of her husband in that way. He’d always proclaimed that was what made him a good investigator—and what had probably led to his death. She shivered at the thought.

As she exited her office, laughter from the kitchen drifted to her. She smiled. No doubt Sammy and Camy were competing at clearing the dishes from the table.

“Your kids sound like they’re having fun.” Sean opened the front door.

“They love to compete with each other but are quick to stand up for one another when needed.” Aubrey put in her code on the pad at the garage. The noise of the door rising filled the quiet. She hoped her kids didn’t get curious at hearing the sound and want to check it out.

As she approached the rear of her car, she popped the trunk. The odor of the dead rat

overwhelmed her even more than before. Shivering at the sight, she pinched her nose and gestured toward the rat.

Sean took pictures of it then put on gloves to handle the rat. "I need something to put this in. Can I use the bag your children's clothes are in?"

"Sure." She moved toward Sean and picked up the bag to remove the outfits. As she pulled them out, something dropped onto the concrete. She heard it before she saw what came out of the bag. Clutching the clothes against her chest, she intended to kneel and pick up whatever fell.

"I'll get it." After putting the bag with the rat on the floor, Sean squatted and reached under the vehicle. When he stood, he held his palm out flat toward Aubrey.

She stared at her husband's hammered-gold wedding band with her name engraved in it. It had been missing since his murder.

The twins' outfits fell to the concrete as her legs gave out.