

# PROTECTION

by

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## Chapter One

The blare of a car horn dragged Jake from a sound sleep. He lifted his head to listen, then sat up and looked out the window. A bluish white glow shone through thick fog beyond the slope of ground at the base of his driveway. He grabbed for his jeans and a shirt. Drivers, mostly kids, often misjudged their speed and missed the hairpin turn on the narrow road below. He shoved his cell phone into his hip pocket and tugged on his boots.

When he reached the bottom of the gravel drive, he saw the car rammed into the oak tree that sat at the curve. He ran to the vehicle to find a woman slumped over the steering wheel and the crumpled airbag. As he reached through the open window and pressed fingertips to her neck, checking for a pulse, she moaned and lifted her head, leaning back against the seat. The blaring stopped. From the backseat came a weak whimper.

“Bailey,” the woman struggled to speak. “My baby.”

Jake reached inside to unlock the rear door and pulled it open. A baby lay in a car seat facing the back. When he leaned over her, she flashed a broad grin and kicked, big blue eyes locking on his. “She seems to be fine.” He turned his attention back to the woman. “You shouldn’t move. You’re bleeding.”

But she ignored him, fussing with the seatbelt buckle and freeing herself. “I’m okay.”

“You could have a concussion or broken bones. Let me call for help.”

“No!”

The vehemence of her response brought him up short. “Okay, at least move slowly and let me help you.”

She turned gingerly in her seat and let him help her to stand. “I’ll be fine. Can you get Bailey out of her car seat please?”

“Sure.” He fiddled with the snap locks and, once the baby was freed, picked her up and removed her from the car. “See, she’s fine.” He reached back and picked up a small blanket, handing it to the woman. Press this against your forehead.

She did so, then paled at the sight of her own blood. “I’ll take her.” The woman stretched out trembling hands.

“Maybe I should carry her. You’re shaking. Can you walk? I live right up the drive.”

She took a halting step, then two. “I think so.”

“Here, hang on.” He secured the infant in his left arm and slid his right around the woman’s waist to steady her. “Slow and easy.”

She staggered against him as he guided her up the rough driveway and the few steps to his log cabin. He flung the door open and directed her to the sofa.

The woman dropped down and reached for the baby. “Give her to me.” She lay

the child in her lap and began to inspect her for injuries.

“Your head’s still bleeding. I’ll get a towel. Don’t try to stand.” He hurried to the kitchen, removing a clean dish towel from a drawer and dampening it with cold water, then grabbed a first aid kit from above the fridge. He returned and knelt in front of her, dabbing at a cut above her left eye.

She winced.

“Sorry. I really should call the EMTs. You might need stitches. And both of you should be checked out. You can have hidden injuries after an impact like that.”

“No. We’re fine. I just need a Band-Aid.” She lifted the baby over her shoulder and rubbed the infant’s back in soothing circles.

“At least let me clean this cut and bandage it for you. What’s your name?”

“Hea...Shannon.”

He continued to minister to her wound, first dabbing it with a cotton ball soaked in peroxide, then applying antibiotic ointment and a butterfly bandage. “I’m sorry, I know that hurts.”

“It’s okay.” She lifted her eyes to meet his. Deep blue that matched the baby’s eye color, locked on him. “Thank you. May I use your bathroom?”

“Sure. It’s right around the corner.” He helped her to her feet. “I’m going to see if I can tow your car up here before someone else takes that curve wide and hits it. You need anything?”

She shook her head, then swayed. “I shouldn’t do that.” Holding the baby against her chest, she gingerly made her way to the powder room.

Once she was inside and had closed the door, Jake grabbed his keys and headed outside. Before moving the vehicle, he had the presence of mind to snap a few photos with his cell phone in case she needed them for insurance purposes. He used a chain to secure the vehicle and fastened it to his truck. The car groaned and bits of the body fell loose as he tugged the car slowly away from the tree and then up the driveway. He jogged back to the accident site to retrieve the bumper and kick pieces of plastic and glass off the roadway.

The front end of the Chevy was in bad shape. The radiator was clearly destroyed, one headlight broken, and the hood bent. He’d have to inspect it further in daylight to assess the full damage. Good thing she wasn’t going very fast.

When he returned to the house, Shannon sat once again on the sofa, rocking and murmuring to the child pressed against her body. Tears now trailed down her face. She sniffled when she looked up at him. “Thank you for helping us. Is there a motel nearby that you can take us to?”

He shook his head as he sat in the chair opposite her. “Not for miles, and not in this fog. You can stay here tonight. You shouldn’t be alone, anyway. Not after an accident like that. Your car’s probably not drivable, but I’ll know more once I see it in daylight.” He paused, then added, “I’m Jake Garber.”

“Thank you, Mr. Garber, but I don’t want to put you out.”

“You’re not. Give me five minutes to fix up the spare room.” He considered her wary expression. “There’s a lock on the door, if that makes you feel better. Maybe I can make up a bed for the baby in a drawer or something.”

“If you could bring in the car seat, it doubles as a carrier.”

“Good, I’ll do that. You just rest. Do you need something to eat or drink?”

“No, thanks.”

Jake wrestled to disengage the car seat. The floor in the back of the vehicle was filled with plastic bags stuffed with clothing and boxes of diapers. It looked like a hasty packing job.

After placing the car seat in the spare bedroom, Jake put clean sheets on the bed and two fresh sets of towels on the dresser. He descended the stairs and paused, watching Shannon and Bailey—an unlikely Madonna and child. He sat again in the recliner and gazed at her. “Where were you headed?”

She regarded him for a moment before replying, “North.”

“How far north? Seattle, Bellingham? Or Canada?”

“Uh...Lynden.”

Her hesitation wasn't lost on him. She wasn't very forthcoming. But she had just endured what could have been a serious accident and she didn't know him from Adam. Which was a good thing for him. “Lynden. Just about to Canada. Got family there?”

“No.”

“Is there anyone I can call for you?”

“It's just me and Bailey. I'll get the car taken care of tomorrow and we'll be out of your way. I appreciate your hospitality for tonight.” She bit her lower lip. “If I could ask just one more favor? There's a small overnight bag in the trunk of my car. Could you get that for me?”

“No problem.” When Jake popped open the trunk that was stuffed to capacity, he noticed a briefcase that lay atop several plastic bags. His fingers twitched with the temptation to pop it open and see if he could learn more about Shannon. Instead he snatched up the overnight bag and closed the trunk.

Shannon stood as he entered the cabin again.

He slid the strap of the bag onto his shoulder. “Why don't you let me carry the baby up the stairs? You're still a little shaky.”

Reluctantly, she handed over Bailey. The baby had been nearly asleep and snuggled in under his chin. Something loosened in his chest as the warm little body trustingly settled into his. “You go first. It's the bedroom on the left past the bathroom.”

He followed her into the bedroom and eased the sleeping infant back into her arms. “She's beautiful.”

For the first time, Shannon gave a brief smile as she looked at her daughter. “Yes, she is.”

“How old is she?”

“Fourteen weeks.”

He set down her bag. “Do you need anything else?”

“Not just now.” Then she frowned. “I'll need to make up a bottle for Bailey. She'll be awake soon and hungry. I'll try to be quiet about it.” She eased the sleeping baby into the carrier and removed a can of formula and a bottle from her bag. “May I use your kitchen? I need to wash this bottle so it'll be ready.”

“Sure, come on.”

Jake poured himself a glass of milk and sat at the table, watching while Shannon washed the baby bottle and nipple under steaming hot water. She paused and eyed his glass. “May I have some of that, too?”

He nodded and stood to get a glass from the overhead cabinet above the sink then

filled it.

“Thanks.” She carried the glass of milk with her back up the stairs.

Jake stared after her, wondering about her story. A woman and baby alone in the middle of the night on the narrow back road that ran in front of his property and heading “north.” He didn’t even know her last name. He dragged a palm down his face. What if this was a set-up? What if someone had found him?