

Only one road climbed Blood Mountain to the exclusive Falling Rock community and its luxury mansions. But Charlotte had no interest in accessing the gated community through the pretty lane lined with oaks and vistas of manicured lawns and gardens.

No, the backside view of the swanky neighborhood was where she'd find clues to the ugly mystery of Jenny's whereabouts. And to get to this precious vantage point in the hollow, she'd hiked a good two miles down from neighboring Lavender Mountain. She raised her binoculars and focused on the nearest cabin's massive wooden deck.

Nobody milling about there.

She slanted them to the cabin's impressive wall of windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jenny—or any other young teenage girl, for that matter. The bastards.

Still nothing.

But she wasn't discouraged. If nothing else, her career as an undercover cop had taught her patience. She waited and, after a few minutes, scanned the row of houses yet again before dropping the binoculars and taking a swig from her water bottle.

Faint voices rumbled through the air, low, deep and indecipherable. Quickly she raised the binoculars to search for the source. But the field glasses weren't necessary. Near the base of the cabin, only one hundred yards away, stood two men armed with shotguns and wearing walkie-talkies belted at their waists. Where had they come from?

Suddenly the muscular guy on the left raised an arm and pointed a pair of binoculars at her.

Oh, no.

She'd been spotted, despite the fact that she was dressed in camouflage and had tucked her red hair into an olive ski cap. The man on the right raised a shotgun to his shoulder and scanned the area. Charlotte dropped to the ground on her stomach, praying she was out of sight. Three deep breaths, and she raised her binoculars again. The men had disappeared.

Strangely, she wasn't comforted by that realization. They could be creeping their way downhill to find her. Time to get the heck out of Dodge. Charlotte tucked the binoculars and water bottle into her backpack and withdrew her pistol. Not the standard-issue one provided by the Atlanta Police Department—they'd forced her to turn that in—but the personal one she always kept stashed in her nightstand. If they found her, she'd be ready for them. The cool, hard wood snuggled in her right hand provided a surge of comfort, just as it always had on those nights when she'd been home alone and whispers of danger made her imagine some ex-con had discovered where she lived.

Charlotte eased the backpack onto her shoulders. Cocking her head to the side, she paused, listening for anything out of the ordinary.

Wind moaned through the trees, and dead leaves gusted in noisy spirals. Then she heard it: a methodical crunching of the forest underbrush that thickly carpeted the ground. At least one of the men was headed her way.

Damn it.

She jumped to her feet and ran, heart savagely skittering. Its pounding beat pulsed in her ears, loud as the echo of dynamite. A slug whistled high above her, and bark exploded from near the top of a pine sapling eight feet ahead.

Did they mean to kill her or merely frighten her off? Because if their aim was the latter, it was working. Charlotte kept running, this time darting behind trees every ten yards or so. No sense providing them with an easy target. The path seemed to stretch on forever, though, and a stitch in her side finally screamed in protest at the brisk pace. Charlotte stumbled behind a wide oak and sucked oxygen into her burning lungs.

Another shot rent the air, but she couldn't tell where the bullet landed. Hopefully not anywhere nearby. She pushed off and ran once more. Wind blasted her ears and cheeks, stinging her eyes as she sped down the trail, mentally calculating her best escape. If only she knew how close they were.

There were three options. One, return to the nearby abandoned cabin and hope they didn't see her sneak inside. Two, if there was enough time, hightail it to her truck hidden in a copse of trees and take off. The problem with the first two was that her cover might be compromised if she were spotted. The third option was riskier, but it would leave her free to continue her planned surveillance.

Another shot torpedoed by like an angry hornet, grazing the side of a nearby oak. This shot was much closer. Again she ran. Gnarled roots gripped her right foot and she fell flat. A pained cry slipped past her lips. She stared down at her twisted knee and the ripped denim on the outside of her right thigh where brambles and rocks had cut deep. Blood oozed and created a widening stain on her pants. Her right temple throbbed and a knot had already formed on her scalp. Charlotte swallowed hard, pushing back the sudden stab of dizziness that narrowed her vision. No allowing the blessed relief of unconsciousness to take hold. The things men like them could do...she'd seen way too many victims and knew a thousand ways evil people could inflict pain upon another.

Focus. You can't let them catch you.

Option three it was, then. Quickly she ripped off her jacket and pressed it against her wound. Couldn't let blood drip to the ground and become a trail that would lead the men to her. Not to mention the danger of passing out from blood loss.

She hissed at the wave of pain that slammed into her knee. It was as if someone had tripped a live wire inside her that burned through her veins and traveled up and down her body. Even her mouth had a metallic, coppery taste. Charlotte spit a mouthful of blood, clamped her teeth shut and crouched low. Plenty of time

later to moan and groan. Right now she had to find cover.

It hurt like hell, but she managed a gimpy trot, forsaking the main path and stumbling through shrubs and bands of trees. Winter was a hell of a time to seek shelter in the Appalachian forest. The plants were practically stripped bare, their only foliage a few withered, stubborn leaves that had not yet broken loose. But there were patches of evergreen shrubs and small pine trees still to be found. She'd checked on that in her earlier recon of the area.

"Where'd he go?" one of the men shouted from afar.

The answering voice was much closer. "Lost sight of him."

She dove behind a clump of rhododendrons and curled into a tight ball. If they hadn't seen her, she had a chance. Her breath sawed in and out—to her ears, loud enough to doom any hope of going unnoticed. She crossed her left hand over her thigh and pressed down on the wound to staunch the bleeding. Those damn briars ripped flesh like tiny surgical knives. The pistol was in her right hand, loaded, with the safety off. If they came too close and found her hidey-hole, she might be able to fire at them first.

They tromped through the area and continued the search. Subtlety wasn't their strength.

"You go that way," one of them shouted, pointing in the opposite direction, "and I'll head this way."

A modicum of relief whooshed through her body. One would be easier than two if it came to a showdown.

Footsteps approached, and she rounded into herself even tighter, not daring to breathe.

Please don't stop. Keep walking, she prayed as the nearest man stomped not twenty yards away. He wore black leather boots and dark denims—that much she could see—but she didn't dare lift her face and examine him further.

He stumbled on a rock and tumbled forward several steps, managing to catch his balance at the last minute.

"Damn it," he snarled, then yelled, "Anyone out there?"

Right. Like she was going to raise her hand and pop up like a jack-in-the-box to answer him.

"If you can hear me, you were trespassing. Stay away from Falling Rock, got it? Hey, Ricky, let's get back to the house," he called to his fellow tracker, then walked back toward the main trail.

The other voice, deeper and more gravelly, spoke again. "Probably just a hunter, anyway."

"I didn't see no shotgun on him, but he was wearing camouflage. Scrawny little fella."

"Might not have been hunting animals. Could be one of them 'sengers."

What the heck was a 'senger? Whatever they were, she was grateful they provided another plausible explanation for a person roaming the woods in camouflage attire.

Her breathing slowed at the sound of receding footsteps. Today had almost been disastrous, and she wasn't in the clear yet.

If those men were smart, they'd linger a bit, hoping that their prey would be cocky enough, or stupid enough, to reemerge on the trail, mistakenly believing the danger had passed. But six years on the force had honed her methods and instincts. Never believe your opponent isn't as smart, or smarter, than yourself, she'd been warned.

And so she waited. As shock and adrenaline faded, the pain in her knee and temple increased. As soon as she got to the cabin, she'd clean the wound and patch it up with the first aid kit she'd brought along. She also had Ace bandages to wrap her knee in a brace. It had to be a superficial injury, since she'd been able to put weight on her leg and run. A hospital was to be avoided, if possible. People admitted there sometimes drew too much attention.

The air chilled her skin, although not enough to counteract the burn of ripped flesh. Were the men still lying in wait? She wasn't sure how much longer she could stay. Every moment the wound went unattended increased the likelihood of infection, and she desperately wanted to take something for the building headache.

Gingerly, Charlotte rose and tested putting weight on her right leg. A bolt of pain traveled up from her knee, and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. Hurt or not, she had to leave. Those men might return with a larger force. And even if her damn cell phone worked out here in the boonies, who could she call? Right now she was a pariah to her coworkers, and if she called the local authorities, they'd pepper her with questions.

She gripped her pistol more tightly and set off toward the main trail. Once she got there, she'd walk along the outskirts until she was sure the men were truly gone.

The trail looked as forlorn and barren as when she'd first hiked it that morning. Charlotte ran a hand through her hair and then stopped cold. At some point, her hat had been blown away by the wind. Good thing the men were gone. Now she needed to push through the pain and walk. She could do that. There was no choice.

It appeared she'd survived this encounter. Sometimes the best option was to hide and live to fight another day. Justice delayed beat justice denied. Besides, it wasn't as if she harbored a death wish, though death would be preferable to what these men were capable of doing.

They might have succeeded in running her off for the day, but she wasn't giving up. She couldn't give up. Not today, not ever. She was the last, best hope for Jenny and the other lost girls.

THE NEAR-DESERTED roads suited James just fine. October, while beautiful in the Appalachians, had drawn crowds of tourists flocking to view the scenic foliage. But November's gray skies and biting wind meant that Lavender Mountain was back to its usual calmness—and he could sure use some peace and quiet. Returning

from Afghanistan hadn't exactly led to the grand family homecoming he'd once envisioned. Instead, murder had wiped out half his family before he'd even set foot in Elmore County. That tragedy, combined with what the doctors deemed a mild case of PTSD, had left him edgy and filled with uncertainty about the future.

With no conscious plan, James meandered the deputy sheriff's cruiser up the mountain road, and he startled at the sudden sight of his father's old cabin. How often had he done this very thing on routine patrols? Ended up driving right here, precisely at the place he'd rather not be?

He shook his head in disgust and hit the accelerator. Memory Lane had zip appeal.

Twenty yards down the road, a flash of beige slashed through his peripheral vision. What was that? He did a U-turn and craned his neck, searching the brown-and-gray woods. There, he spotted it again. Curious, he pulled onto his father's old property and exited the cruiser, shrugging into his jacket. He strode along the tree line until he solved the riddle: someone had parked their truck toward the back of the property behind a couple of large trees. He retrieved his cell phone and hurried over on the off chance that someone might be injured or stranded.

It was locked, but he peered in the tinted windows. No clues there. The interior was practically empty and spotlessly clean. He headed to the back of the truck and took a photo of the license plate. He'd call in the numbers shortly.

No damn reason it should be here. No good reason, anyway. Frowning, he went to the cabin and pulled out his keys. Better make sure some squatter hadn't decided to take up free residence.

He inserted the key in the lock, but it wouldn't turn. James withdrew it and checked—yes, this was the correct key. Someone had changed the locks. He felt a prickle of unease mixed with anger, and the twin emotions churned in his gut. Anger won.

"Open up," he bellowed, rapping his knuckles on the old wooden door. "Sheriff's department."

Silence.

He stepped back on the porch and noticed for the first time that every window was taped up with plain brown wrapping paper. This was his place, damn it. He'd chosen not to live in the cabin he'd inherited, but that didn't mean just anyone could help themselves to it and move in. James rapped on the door again, louder. "Open up now, or I'll break down the door."

Still no answer.

With a quick burst of energy, he kicked the door. Splinters flew, and the frame rattled. He kicked again, and it burst open. James shuffled to the side and removed his sidearm, then proceeded cautiously inside with his gun raised. The room was abnormally dark from the taped windows, and only the light from the open

doorway illuminated the den. At least most of the furniture was gone. In this room, only an old couch remained. No place to hide.

James flicked the light switch, grateful he'd kept the power on. The realtor had insisted on it so she could show the place to potential buyers. That was a laugh—the place had sat empty for months. Seemed fixer-upper cabins in remote Appalachia weren't a hot commodity. Hardly a shocker.

He made his way to the kitchen, gun still drawn. Like the truck and the den, it was pristine, and mostly empty. No signs of forced entry or habitation. Three more rooms to check. He padded down the short hallway, gun at the ready. The guest bedroom and bathroom doors stood open, but the main bedroom door was shut.

Gotcha, he almost whispered aloud. He spared a cursory glance in the guest room that housed only a bed. Nothing was underneath the tucked comforter, so he eased toward the closed door. Spots of spilled liquid, still wet, stained the pine flooring leading from the bedroom into the bathroom. He flipped on the bathroom switch, careful to keep his gun aimed at the closed bedroom door.

Smearred blood and dirt formed a drag pattern on the floor and basin and continued their path to the side of the tub. A wet towel lay beside the tub, as well as strips of gauze and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. Someone had been hurt—and recently.

A grating metal sound came from behind the closed bedroom door, and James barreled into the room. A mattress lay on the floor, and food provisions and clothes were neatly stacked in plastic containers along the side wall. But it was the open window that drew his immediate focus. Oh, hell no, they weren't slipping away. He was going to get answers. James rushed to the window and stuck his head out.

Red hair whipped in the breeze. A petite woman wearing a camouflage shirt and black panties—no pants, no shoes—ran through the yard. Blood oozed from ripped flesh on her right leg, and she limped as she headed toward the truck.

Okay, that was far from the thug or drugged-out squatter he'd expected. "Halt," he ordered.

She didn't even bother looking back at him as she continued a gimp run to the tree line.

"For Christ's sake," he muttered, tucking his sidearm back into its holster and rushing through the cabin. He exited the busted front door and stormed down the porch steps to the side lawn.

"Stop right now," he called out.

Again she ignored his command. Stubborn, foolish woman. He couldn't let her get in that truck. But as he ran toward her, she spun around, raising a pistol in both hands and aiming it straight at his heart.

James threw up his hands and cautiously walked forward before pointing at his badge. "Lady, you don't want to shoot an officer of the law." He nodded at her leg. "Looks like you need medical attention."

"You're a cop? Let me take a look at that badge." She approached and examined the badge on his uniform. The harsh glint in her eyes softened, and she lowered the gun. "Sorry. I didn't stop to see who broke in when I ran."

"I identified myself as from the Sheriff's department," he said grimly. She might be pretty as all get-out and pretend compliance, but people weren't always what they seemed. This job and his tour of duty had taught him those lessons well. "Now gently lay down the gun and step away from it," he ordered.

She kept her eyes on him as she bent her knees and placed her weapon on the ground. "No problem, Officer. I always—"

Her right leg gave out from underneath, and she swooned forward—which put her hands right by her gun, he couldn't help noticing. Quickly he crossed the distance between them and kicked it several yards away.

"Suspicious much?" she drawled.

"I'll call for an ambulance or drive you to the hospital in my vehicle. Do you have a preference?"

"Neither. I'm fine. It's not as bad as it looks."

"There's blood on the right side of your scalp. Not to mention your mangled leg. Might need stitches, at the very least. Antibiotics, too."

"I said no." She struggled to stand and then limped past him. "Just let me get dressed, get my things and go."

"Not until you explain how you got hurt and what you were doing in my cabin."

That got through to the woman, and she whirled around. "Your cabin?" She bit her lip and mumbled, "Of all the damn luck."

"You can explain on the way to the hospital."

"I don't need a doctor. Give me ten minutes and I'll be out of your hair."

She hobbled to the door, and he scrambled to retrieve the fallen weapon before following her, trying to deduce this stranger's game. "You hiding from an abusive husband?" he guessed.

“No,” she said flatly, grabbing onto the porch rail and wincing as she climbed the steps.

“There are shelters that can help, you know. In fact, there’s one less than thirty miles—”

“I don’t need a shelter. I can protect myself.”

Like hell she could. “Fine. You want to clam up? Let’s go down to the station. I’ll run your license plate and clear up this mystery.”

She sighed, resignation rounding her shoulders. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to get dressed first.”

Woman was probably freezing her butt off. “Of course. Look, whatever kind of trouble you’re in, we can help.”

She blinked and nodded her head. “Thank you, Officer. I’m sorry about intruding and...and pulling that gun on you. Just let me get dressed and we can go.”

About time she saw sense. “Fine. I’ll wait here.” He took in her pale face, and his eyes traveled down to her right leg. “Can you manage by yourself?” he asked gruffly.

“Of course. Any chance I can have my gun back now? After you unload it, of course.”

What kind of fool did she think he was? “No, you may not.”

She cast her eyes down in a demure manner. “Be back in a minute.”

He watched as she made her faltering way down the hall, her back ramrod straight. What kind of man could hurt a woman that way? It looked as though she’d taken a hard tumble. Her ex was obviously dangerous. He’d see that whoever the man was, he’d get his due punishment.

James paced the empty den, thinking of his dad and sister Darla, both murdered at the hands of another family member. How sad that the ones we most loved were often our worst enemies and betrayers of our trust.

He shook his head and strode to the windows, stripping off the papers the woman had taped up to avoid detection. It shouldn’t matter, but he hated the thought of the cabin being shrouded in darkness night and day. Bad enough he’d abandoned it to die a slow death from neglect.

What was taking her so long? Had she passed out from loss of blood?

A flash of red in the barren landscape caught his eye.