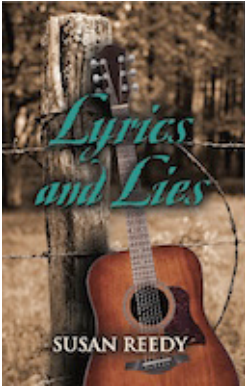




*Lyrics  
and Lies*

SUSAN REEDY



*Newport, Oklahoma is home-sweet-home to Tracy and Jared, whose love story has grown stronger through facing heartache, illness, and family struggles. But when Jared suddenly disappears, Tracy is left behind, forced to rely on her research and music to endure his absence. She soon discovers an international conspiracy has invaded their small town and, when Jared resurfaces years later, she realizes that family secrets and lies have now made them prime targets of military assassins...*

## **Lyrics and Lies**

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# **LYRICS AND LIES**

Susan Reedy

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First Edition

## Chapter 1

Wednesday, December 16<sup>th</sup> 8:48 P.M.

Sims' Farm - Newport, Oklahoma

*“...like a glimpse of Heaven from God above  
Eyes wide opened, our path paved in love  
If I ever get lost in this dream we're livin' in  
one thought of you will lead me home again...”*

Crinkled white pages fluttered in the night air. Tracy Sims clasped her journal and hugged it to her chest, shivering as her latest sentiment lingered in the air. The glow of the red and green Christmas lights strung across the front porch spilled into her eyes and as she glanced to the side, she met Jared Frazier's gaze.

“It came to me last night,” she offered, shoving her journal and unfinished calculus aside. “After you left.”

“Mmm,” he nodded.

The porch light captured Tracy's hazel eyes just right – that kaleidoscope of denim blue, teal and amber – prisms of light that sparkled like Lake Murray at sunset. And that grin curling at the corner of her lips, her one girlish trait that never quite grew up. It had captured her daddy's heart since she was a baby, and now seventeen years later, rendered Jared speechless anytime it unfurled.

But Tracy heard him loud and clear. The love in his ebony eyes and the many ways he showed his love said more than any words could ever say. Securing her seatbelt as soon as she climbed in his truck, holding her close to his side while they tramped through the pasture, carrying her piggy-back after a rainstorm so her feet stayed dry, calling her just before bed every night so hers was the last voice he heard. Those were the simple things that made her feel so... *cherished*. That thought brought an easy smile. She stroked the hair from his eyes. “Known you most of my life and you still make my heart race.”

Jared exhaled and stretched his legs, smoothing his hand along his thigh. Clumps of dried dirt crumbled from his work boots as he shifted his six-foot frame; he swept it from the step with his Packers ball cap.

“Just gettin’ you back.” He crammed his hat on her head and yanked the brim over her eyes. “Torturing me with that tight ass,” he teased. Eyeing the dinner plate just behind her, he reached around and tugged it closer. “And these cookies!”

Tantalizing whiffs of chocolate chip cookies lifted on the air. Seizing another one from the plate, he popped a seventh into his mouth. Warm, melted chocolate smudged his fingers but instead of licking it away, he traced the gooey sweetness around the curvature of her lips. She steeled herself, stifling a smile as he completed his artwork. Without warning she lunged forward and kissed him, coating his own mouth with the rich, sticky ooze. Just as Tracy wound her arms around his neck to enjoy more of the taste, she sensed a movement from the living room window. Her muscles tensed as the sight of her uncle filled the window frame. *Denny Sims*. She cringed at his lanky frame, recounting his “just here for a visit” greeting earlier in the day. Her hazel eyes flared with anger as she remembered his last visit years before – the day

of her grandfather's funeral. Correct that. The day *after* the funeral. Denny skipped his father's actual memorial service. What *memorialized* the event was the scene that played out in front of the courthouse as the police hauled her uncle away after the fool went ballistic in front of God and everybody during the reading of the will. Sims had not made the cut, so to speak, and once the executor announced the recipients of his father's inheritance, Denny chose to let the world see his rage for not having been included.

Nothing had changed. His coal black hair and unkempt beard still screamed *outlaw*. From beneath the brim of his weathered Stetson, two cold, sunken eyes bored into Tracy, leaving her to wonder what she had done in one afternoon's time to warrant his anger. She tore her eyes away and once the inside curtain fell free, she began to breathe again.

The warmth of Jared's palm brushed her cheek. As he stroked her face she noticed the tiny laugh lines around his eyes – *character lines*, her mother would have said. Just one of the many traits she loved about the boy she so adored. The words of her poem waltzed through her mind. *Glimpse of Heaven, path paved in love, livin' in a dream...* sure enough, thoughts of him brought her home again. She rose from the porch, dropped the journal to her side and took Jared's hand.

“Let's take a walk.”

Jared laced his fingers through hers. Descending the porch, they fell into step – leaping the mound of gravel that lined the driveway as they negotiated a path to the edge of the hayfield - their private hideaway.

Tracy drew in the brisk air, clearing her mind of everything but Jared. Laughter sprinkled through the night, like the hit and miss traces of snow that had begun to fall. They rounded the hay shelter just beyond the reach of the security light beaming from the barn, then breathless,

collapsed into the freshly-thrown straw scattered along the ground. Jared peered toward the house, then to the darkness of the pasture. Pressing his fingers to her mouth, he muffled her laughter. “Your dad’ll kill me if he catches us out here!”

“Nah, he’ll probably keep you alive and make you suffer!” she teased.

Deep, raspy breaths marked time with the rise and fall of her chest. Jared lifted her hand to his heart.

“Do you feel it?” He pushed the ball cap away to see her eyes. She nodded. Both hearts had slowed to one rhythm. She kissed him – losing herself in the moment as the frozen wheat crumbled beneath them. His strong arms swathed her in warmth -- like that cozy, down-feather quilt she disappeared into on cold, rainy days. His breath ebbed and flowed like a tide of soothing heat and with every release of air, Tracy drifted deeper and deeper into his hold.

Her hands migrated south into the back pockets of his frayed jeans. Her gentle squeeze made his muscles react and that same familiar longing pulsed within her. Their lips brushed together -- tender, sensual sweeps that fanned the flame. Feverish heat blurred her mind, but in the dim glow of the distant security light, her sights became suddenly focused. Maybe it was the fear her uncle provoked. Or maybe it was the excitement of Christmas, or the last semester of high school, or the stress of applying for college. Then again, maybe it was just the simple, warm assurance that she and Jared Frazier belonged together. While it was always assumed that their first time would be after marriage, something deep inside told her *the perfect time, the perfect place* was here and now.

“Daddy’s out checking the cattle,” she breathed against his ear.

“You sure?”



With a gentle tug she unsnapped his jeans, and at once their hands could not work fast enough. Jared stretched his long, tight-end arms around her, pushing her jacket aside and reaching underneath her hoodie to feel the warmth of her skin.

She cradled his head to her chest, feeling the steamy heat of his breath against her breast. Her body arched into him – perfectly. Trembling, she pulled his face close and kissed him, so deeply her senses swirled like the airy snow. Muscles tightened. The rise and fall of her chest quickened. Their minds and hands wandered in a drunken flurry as he tenderly began to lead them into undiscovered love.

But from across the road a dog’s unruly howl shattered the silence. A porch light flared, splashing an arc of light across the front yard. The screech of the screen door wailed its warning, alerting they were no longer alone.

“Damn! It’s your uncle.”

In one fluid motion, he gripped Tracy’s hands and yanked her to her feet - fastening, straightening, buttoning. Snatching her jacket from the ground, he froze. Listened.

*Silence...*

A peek around the hay bale confirmed her uncle was still patrolling the porch. The red glow of his cigarette shone through the darkness.

Jared exhaled his frustration. Tracy pressed her finger to his lips. “Tomorrow night,” she vowed as she ran her hands up and down his arms to warm him.

His face glowed in the beam of the security light. She knew the look. The tiny gold flecks in his eyes had darkened as they always did when he grew serious. It had never failed to give away his mood. Carefree, indifferent – *amber gold*. Intent, somber – *chestnut brown*. And at the moment, even in the low light she could see his eyes were as dark as night. He

leaned in with a kiss so familiar and comforting, yet in the mix of heated emotion and light snow flurries, more sensual than anything she could have ever dreamed.

“I’ll be here,” he breathed.

\*\*\*

Nine miles to the east, U.S. Senator Matthew Hastings stared into the glow of the fireplace, strumming his fingers in steady rhythm of the *tick, tick, tick* of the mantle clock. His anxiety -- or the incessant barking of the dog next door -- had him on edge. Every shadow, every flicker of motion, every ordinary sound that echoed through the house triggered fear. With a slow unsteady breath, he brought the tumbler to his lips and felt the last of the bourbon burn the length of his throat. A long sigh accompanied his ease into the recliner. Unclasping his briefcase, he lifted the transcripts and studied his testimony notes one last time.

The clock chimed. Hastings stared at the ceiling, counting the strokes in anticipation of his business partners’ arrival. But at the stroke of nine, the dog’s high-pitched wail sliced the air. The agonizing whine echoed louder and louder and then, silence. Dropping the papers, Hastings rushed to the window to see the neighbor’s property come alive – motion detectors sweeping white light across the side property. In a panic he sped a text to alert his partner David Frazier, CEO of Sutherland Petroleum. A movement from outside caught his eye. Ducking aside the curtain, he waited, searching the darkness. That same adrenalin rush he remembered from past surveillance missions raced again.

From behind, the deadbolt popped.

He held his breath. But when the muted beep of the front entry alarm sounded, he grew faint. The front door creaked open unleashing a flurry of sounds: incessant beeping, fingers

tapping an alarm code, a snip of wire cutters releasing a cold, eerie end to all noise.

Hastings dove behind the sofa, measuring every distressing sound: the intruder's steady approach, the soft *whish, whish* sweep of cotton with each new step, the *tah, tah, tah* of the clock marking time, and the pounding of his pulse surging within.

A sudden flick of light flashed in the gold-plate engraving of the mantle clock. Hastings turned - directly into the aim of the assassin's gun. His limbs went numb - not in fear of the 9mm, but in sheer terror as he stared into the face of his former special-ops sergeant.

The assassin grinned and flipped a mock salute. "*Nu tradez un prieten*. Isn't that what you always told us, Colonel?"

Hastings blanched with the memory. *Never betray a friend*. The code. The man snatched Hastings' papers from the open briefcase and chucked them into the flames. Evidence. All that was left of Hastings' written testimony smoldered into ash. His last hope of justice spiraled into the air along with thoughts of his wife and children who were sleeping upstairs.

"Mack...please, I can explain..."

The invader had not come to listen. He was not there for an apology or for excuses. The dark fatigues, the gloved hands, the precision of every movement. Senator Baird Mackenzick was there for one reason: to eliminate the threat to his interests in Sutherland Petroleum.

Hastings glanced at the clock. Against his ear, he heard the faint *click* of the gun's safety. He closed his eyes, yielding to the protective memory of earlier years - before the rise of Sutherland Petroleum and before his first election. Life had been simpler then.

The silencer of the SIM Bauer 9mm pressed into the tender flesh of his left temple. He thought of his wife. One inaudible whisper brushed his lips.

“Claire”

Then Hastings drew his last breath.

\*\*\*

Just to the west of Shiloh, the Newport Air Facility operated daily routes throughout the Southwest and occasionally catered to private flights coming in from greater distances. But when airport manager Hank Tisdale studied the Prince Air 200 corporate jet which had arrived an hour earlier with the pilot as the only occupant and no recorded flight plan, his curiosity piqued.

With every tightened bolt and every tweak to the control panel of the small Cresta 182 he had been restoring, the odd behavior of the Prince Air pilot rankled his mind. Paying cash for fuel, producing no identification when asked, and climbing into the black rented four-door Police Officer Waylon Vincent had left in the lot earlier in the day, all tangled into a knot of suspicion. It was enough to warrant a phone call to alert his friend, David Frazier, founder of Sutherant Petroleum.

“Like I said, Dave, it was over an hour ago. Late forties, light complexion, crew cut, muscled up. Flashed a wad of cash and took Vincent’s car like he owned the place. Said he had business in Shiloh, but something about him just felt off. I know you’ve been tightening up security at Sutherant the past few days, so I thought...” Tisdale continued.

David Frazier did not need to hear more. It was what he had feared the past two days. Somehow, somewhere, someone had discovered their collaboration with the FBI. And if this phantom stranger had ties to Newport Police Chief

Waylon Vincent, Frazier knew he couldn't be trusted. Frazier disconnected and wheeled to the side of the highway. That's when he noticed the text message from his friend, Senator Matthew Hastings: *URGENT! CANCEL MEETING!*

Frantically, Frazier pressed Hastings' number. Five long, unanswered rings taunted him. He tried Hastings' business cellphone that was used for governmental business. Six more rings - unanswered. The torturous silence screamed out to him like a hurt child, and like a caring parent, his sixth sense kicked in, telling him to worry, telling him that all was not right. His chest tightened and in the darkness, he fumbled for his glasses. He tried a different number, that of his friend and company lawyer, Leonard Osteen, the fourth in the partnership that had been formed to confront the conspiracy. His pulse pounded stronger with each unheeded ring. No answer. He searched again and found Osteen's landline number. Three rings.

"Hello?"

"Oh, thank God, Sara, it's Dave. I need Leo. I can't reach him on his cell and I need to cancel our meeting."

Frazier paid no mind to the rest of the conversation as Sara explained that she thought her husband had left minutes ago. He barely heard her ramble as she made her way through the house to see if she could catch him. He disregarded her laughter when she joked about Leo getting lost in the neighborhood without his GPS. Frazier even failed to bend an ear when she invited his family for dinner later in the week. But as he heard her enter the garage, he pulled the phone closer. Her surprise to find her husband's car still there led to another string of chatter. But then he heard the scream -- a shrill, heart-wrenching surge of agony.

Between hysterics, he gathered details of the scene as she frantically detailed what she saw -- the raised garage door, a

gray smoke rising rising from a metal garbage can, the noxious smell of burning trash, the twisted necktie slashed into her husband's neck. Frazier tasted bile a moment too late. Vomit spewed across the side panel and as he flung the door wide, his stomach lurched again. His mind went wild. *Ambushed in his own garage...burning what? Evidence? Files? Within minutes and one mile of Hastings' place where there had been no answer. Had Hastings been the first target?*

They say that when we face our most life-altering despair or fear, our spirit gains strength from some outside source – adrenalin, mind over matter, God's grace. It's what got him through the death of his infant daughter twelve years before. And now as Frazier listened to Sara's suffering, regret struck his soul and he felt that same weight of grief overcome him.

Before he gained composure, a jabbing pain shot through his chest and he bolted upright. *His own family!* Eyes shot to the dashboard clock – 9:08. *Linda! Jared!* In a panic he swerved across traffic and braced his foot against the accelerator to race the nine miles back to Newport. His own home would be the assassin's next target.

On speed dial he reached Phil Murphy, the new head of security for Sutherland Petroleum. In rushed, staccato commands, Frazier set his escape into action, ordering Murphy to drop everything to get his family to safety.

Another frenzied call to Mark Sims, Sutherland's financial director and a key witness to the extortion, money-laundering, and drug trafficking. With a prayer on his lips, Frazier begged that he was not too late to warn his friend.

*No answer.*

Frazier struggled to type a text, hoping beyond hope he could reach Sims in time. But deep down, he knew his frantic prayers were too late.

\*\*\*

From the distance of the pasture, Tracy heard the steady crunch of gravel and knew that her uncle had re-entered the yard. Car lights approached from the south. A dark four-door pulled into her drive and her uncle stepped from the shadows to meet the driver.

“Let’s get out of here,” Tracy urged, tugging at Jared’s elbow.

Jared fastened her jacket. Since she had been diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at age thirteen he had never wavered in protecting her. “Warm enough?”

Her simple nod appeased him.

With a flashlight drawn from his coat pocket, Jared illuminated the trail that bordered the hayfield and led Tracy deeper into the darkness. Light snowflakes began to mix with sleet and the brisk air stung their every breath. Tracy reached for a cottonwood branch and began to slice through the stubbly winter wheat, blazing a new trail toward the small grove of trees in the distance. Together, they slowed to a lover’s pace, paying more attention to each other than to their surroundings. Tracy slid her arm around his waist. The woodsy scent from a recent high school bonfire lingered on his crimson letter jacket and she leaned against his shoulder, inhaling the rustic aroma.

“Cold out here tonight.” Jared’s lazy drawl skimmed the silence.

“It’s perfect,” she livened as they conquered the last few steps toward their destination, encouraged by the fact that once they made it through the two exams scheduled for the next day, Christmas break would follow and two whole weeks could be shared.

Jared helped her across what was left of the trickling stream that ran along the trail then lifted her to the massive

tree root that jutted from the base of an ancient oak. Gawky branches and roots had knotted together like lovers, and as brutal west winds and the yearly rise of the creek prevented the mangled limbs from taking root, a suspended hammock of sorts had formed. Tracy's mom had lain many a picnic lunch in its shade over the years, and as she had died of cancer when Tracy was only twelve, Tracy's father, Mark Sims, frequented the special place to reflect on her memory.

"Hey, thanks again for last night. My birthday gets harder for Daddy every year. Glad you were there."

"Wouldn't miss it. Seventeen. Almost legal."

She flashed that grin. "I love my new journal. And the rose rock is beautiful."

A rose rock -- the combination of barite and iron found in the Central Oklahoma soil made for an abundance of the unique red-hued sandstone formations that became the state rock of Oklahoma in 1968. The "petal-like" layers overlap to form perfectly-shaped blossoms and the reddish color gives them a likeness of a perfect, crystalized rose.

"Found it down by the pond. Thought it'd remind you of Oklahoma when you got to be rich and famous."

"Yeah, right," Tracy chuckled as she stretched her hand across his thigh. "Like that'll ever happen. And I'll never forget home."

Jared twisted her way. "Marry me, T."

Shock paralyzed her. But then her face softened, reflecting on all the times he had said those very words in past months. Still, it always took her by surprise to hear him actually say it. "Soon as you ask my dad," she teased.

"Already did. We talk about it all the time," he confessed.

Tracy choked. "You and Daddy talk about us?"



“Unless he’s yakkin’ about fishin’ or his work,” he confirmed. “He could jaw all day about those computer programs he works on.” Jared’s face came alive. “Just last night he showed me his design for the new security system he installed. He loaded these killer security blocks for the new financial files he has on his computer. This thing’s foolproof and nobody can break through without the right password and codes. Said I’m the only one who’s seen it,” Jared bragged.

“Did you know he’s thinking about resigning from Sutherant?” Tracy tip-toed through the topic, knowing her dad had not announced it to Jared’s father, David Frazier, the owner of the company.

“Yeah, he told me. Even hinted that if I didn’t want to work for my dad, I could take over your farm.”

“The farm? What did you say?”

“After I stopped laughing about the thought of working for my dad?”

Tracy sneered and punched his arm. “Your dad’s not that bad, Jared.” For years she had watched Jared’s relationship with his father deteriorate and as the growth of Sutherant Petroleum had spiraled, the tenuous father-son bond had weakened. Worse still, the stress of constantly having to vie for his father’s approval had at times placed a strain on Jared’s relationship with Tracy. The added burden of feeling responsible for his infant sister’s death twelve years before did not help matters. Alli had choked on a wheel from one of his toy cars. Although his parents reasoned that she had crawled into Jared’s room while he was in the kitchen, Jared blamed himself for having left the toy within reach. Although Alli’s death was obviously an accident, he never forgave himself and bore the guilt any time he looked into his father’s eyes.

“So what did you tell him?” Tracy pressed.

Jared's voice softened. "Told him it was up to you." A clump of moss growing on the tree stump stole his attention, and as he poked at it with a stick Tracy waited. "I'm pretty simple, T. I don't have any huge plans to go out and conquer the world or anything. After graduation we can stay here if that's what you want."

Tracy drew a deep breath, smiled and brushed his cheek, but Denny Sims' harsh voice caught her off guard.

"NINE-FORTY! Time to come in!"

Tracy winced, gritting her teeth as she felt her uncle's reins tighten. She stiffened more when the visitor's car door slammed. Peering toward the house, she watched the brake lights flash when the stranger backed out of her driveway.

Jared braced to jump from the tree root, but Tracy stopped him.

"No, Jared, wait. Please."

He scooted closer. "What's wrong?"

A shrug. She shot a nervous glance toward her house as she tugged the cords of her jacket. Her feet knocked together - the cadence of a tightly wound clock. "Just stay 'til Daddy gets back."

She considered the reason for her suspicion - how she had walked into her bedroom to find her uncle closing one of her desk drawers. His lame excuse of "getting some ideas for Christmas" had infuriated her. And overhearing a phone call he had made earlier that afternoon was fresh on her mind. His words were clear - *to keep an eye on things - a lot of money at stake - as long as I need to stay.*

Jared followed her eyes and saw her uncle walking through the yard. "Why do you think he's here?" Jared wondered.

"He started calling three or four months ago. Got so bad Daddy considered changing our number. Denny's always

been the moocher of the family so I assume it's about money. He says he's here while his girlfriend in Colorado is away on business. But get this. I walked in when he was talking to Daddy this afternoon. As soon as he saw me, he started whispering - trying to get Daddy to sign some kind of papers."

Jared shifted. "Papers?"

"Farm documents," Tracy explained. "Daddy got so mad he flung them across the table. Funny thing, later we were eating dinner and Daddy signed them, stuffed them back in the envelope and slapped them down beside Denny's plate. That's when you showed up and I came outside."

Tracy pitched a clump of moss toward a brush pile. A cold front settled overhead and the sudden drop in temperature made her shiver. The grating sound of Dennis Sims' gruff smoker's cough spurned evil thoughts of a massive heart attack.

The screen door creaked open then slammed shut as Sims stormed back into the house. The *whapp* reverberated in the air - marking his presence with an eerie permanence.

Tracy cocked her head and remembered Jared's own brief encounter with her uncle earlier in the night: the awkward hand-shake when they first, the brevity of words, and that sneer in her uncle's eyes when her dad walked Jared to the barn.

The screen door swung open again and her uncle's boots pounded the porch.

"Almost ten!" he yelled. "Come on in."

She could feel his beady eyes scan the property, searching for his prey.

"Be right there," Tracy hollered. More pounding echoed as he stomped back across the porch. He threw open the screen door; the slamming force riveted anger into the frame.

“We’d better go,” Jared said.

Tracy pushed hard against his thigh.

“Jared...” For the briefest moment she was the small scared child from years ago – the girl who was afraid of the dark, of spiders, and of stepping on a crack in fear of breaking her mother’s back. Then just as quickly that hypnotic grin unfolded. *Fear* was the last thing on her mind.

She locked her arms around his neck and pulled him close. This time, Jared did not resist. His lips conquered hers before she could finish her sentence. While their bodies collided in lustful motion, a harsh cold wind stirred above carrying a gentle, more respected voice.

“Traaacy – Jaaared...”

Her father this time. With the official curfew call, their lips parted. Tracy stroked her finger along his jawline and caught her breath. “We could always elope,” she grinned.

“Ha! Don’t tempt me.”

Light snowflakes dotted Jared’s brown hair and the awkward position of sitting on the tree root had caused his legs to stiffen. He kissed her again before helping her from his lap, and then with a labored sigh pushed himself from the tree suspension.

“AAHHHGG!” Jared bolted upright and dropped the flashlight to the ground. His lower body went rigid as he doubled over in pain. He grasped his leg and collapsed to the ground.

Tracy knew what was wrong. She had seen it all too often. She fell to her knees and squeezed pressure into his calf, kneading his muscles to relieve the pain of the leg cramps he had been so prone to during football season. She clenched her hands around his thigh, massaging deep into muscle as Jared groaned.

“Shhh, let me work it,” she insisted.

His eyes blurred as he writhed in pain. She stroked his leg until moments later, his face relaxed and he slowly exhaled. Tracy swiped his forehead and steadied him against her.

“Better?”

He strained a nod and rolled to his side. He reached for the flashlight and the bright beam arced across the ground. Something shiny caught his eye. He focused and in a hollowed-out space just beneath the gangly tree root, he saw the flicker again. Fingering the tiny object, he raised it to the light. It was a sparkling, clear, cut stone.

“Whoa, is that a diamond?” Tracy gasped and turned it in the light.

Jared sat silent studying the tree.

“What’s wrong?” Tracy watched his eyes shift between the ground and the tree.

“Ah, nothing.” Jared scanned the tree root again then lifted the diamond.

“What are you thinking?”

“It’s just something your dad said the other day while we were burning brush.” His eyes drifted again to the base of the tree. “Just said there’re all kinds of treasures on this land. Anyway - pretty, huh?” He rolled it in his hand then held it out to her. “Here...” He let it drop into her hand. “...to remind you.”

“Remind me of what?” Tracy lifted the diamond and watched it sparkle.

“That you belong to me.”

Tracy paused as the words settled. She met his gaze and saw the pooling darkness of his eyes. It was true. He had captured her heart years before – she did belong to him.

She smiled and hugged him close as together they shuffled through the field toward her house.

“Tomorrow night?” She whispered as they entered the yard.

He released her hand and tightened his arm around her waist. “Definitely.”

From the distance, Mark Sims called out in mid-stride as he lumbered from the barn. “Hey, kids. Better call it a night. Getting’ cold out here.”

Sims’ soiled farm jacket swallowed his weary frame and his hunched shoulders added the look of another hard-lived decade to his forty-six years. He stomped the manure from his work boots. With a lift of his brimmed hat, he pushed his damp, thinning hair back into place. He looked haggard and worn, like a ‘player on the losing team’ as Tracy’s grandfather would have said. Her face softened as she watched his approach, noticing his slow unsteady gait.

A sudden movement from inside the house caught her eye. The edge of the curtain fell free just as her uncle’s shadow passed by the window. A sharp pain flared and she realized she was grinding her teeth again.

“How’re the cattle tonight, Mr. Sims?”

Tracy had always wondered why Jared didn’t take her dad up on his offer to call him by his first name. Good manners – another thing she loved about Jared.

“Good, Jared. They’re settled in the north hollow. How was school today?”

Sims shuffled toward Jared and as always, Tracy had to indulge their small-talk. But seeing her father’s slow movement, she stepped in to give him a hug.

“Real good. Coach has us doing some easy weight training so I’m getting a breather and can focus on other things.” Jared inadvertently glanced at Tracy.

“Well,” Mark winked. “Staying focused is important.” He cocked his head toward Tracy, swiping his finger down

the bridge of her nose. “I know I don’t need to remind you two that your *focus* needs to be on school more than anything else, right?” He smiled, but suddenly a hint of worry fell across his face as he read a missed message on his cell phone. He snapped it shut and the color drained from his face. “Did you notice who was in that car that pulled up?”

“Somebody Denny knew,” Tracy answered. Her dad smoothed his hand across his brow. “What’s wrong, Daddy?”

A swirl of cold wind lifted between them. She noticed the heaviness settle in his face and reflexively shifted her eyes back toward the curtain.

Mark grimaced. “Cold gets to me a little more than it used to. That’s all.” Tracy studied him, knowing the weather had nothing to do with her father’s sudden change.

“Jared, I need a favor...” Sims’ voice trailed away as he guided Jared deeper into the yard. Tracy kicked at the dirt and waited, watching her warm breaths invade the cold night air to pass the time. When the men returned, she heard the last of her father’s sidebar.

“...best hurry since the weather’s turning. And be sure to go the back way. Oh, and I finished up that last security block for the computer system at work today. Remember that series I showed you last night?”

Tracy rolled her eyes. Jared had spent more hours in front of computers with Mark Sims than Tracy cared to remember. As her dad showed Jared the internal systems of every computer he mastered, Jared was slowly gaining knowledge of the most expert computer techniques. Tracy sighed under her breath, wondering how much of her Christmas break would be spent watching the two of them hunched over a keyboard.

“Sure thing. So the codes worked like you had hoped, huh?” Jared asked.

Mark glanced toward the living room window. “Exactly like I showed you. Remember the sequence?”

Jared nodded, disinterested. “Umm, Mr. Sims, you know I’ll be around over Christmas break. Let me know if you need some help feeding the cattle or cutting firewood or anything. I know it’s tough between work and the farm.”

Sims hesitated and while Jared didn’t notice it, Tracy did. His evasion struck her hard, knowing that her dad had always welcomed Jared’s help around the farm. And then it hit her. *Denny*. She whirled toward the house and felt her cheeks heat in anger.

“Yeah, we’ll see.” He jabbed a soft blow to Jared’s shoulder and held his gaze for a moment. “Get on home, Son. Stay off the main road and steer clear of any cars. That four-wheeler is hard to see at night.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll bring it back tomorrow night.”

Mark hesitated and then nodded toward the house. “Come on, Trace. Let him get home.”

Jared cuddled Tracy under his arm and walked her toward his truck to get his gloves. Just as he opened the driver’s door, he noticed a pungent burnt oil smell. In the glow of the cab light, he spotted a shiny liquid underneath the cab.

“Son-of-a...!” He slammed his fist against the truck bed.

“What’s wrong?” Tracy pressed.

“Damned thing’s leakin’ something! Smells like oil or brake fluid,” he scowled, but softened as Tracy rubbed his back. “It’ll wait ‘til tomorrow. Your dad wants me to take your four-wheeler anyway. Wants me to tune it up before dove season kicks in,” Jared snickered. “Just like your ol’ man to pick the coldest night of the year for me to drive it home.” He grabbed his gloves from the truck cab and tossed



her his keys. “In case he needs to move it. Be sure and tell him it sprung a leak so he doesn’t drive it.”

The light snow had begun to accumulate in the grass so Jared clutched Tracy’s hand and hurried her toward the porch. Her eyes fell.

“What?” he asked as he smoothed her long hair.

“Stay with me.”

“Ha! I don’t think your dad would go for that,” he chuckled.

“Just a little longer.”

“You need to get in out of the cold. Look, T., your uncle probably won’t stay long. Besides, we have Christmas vacation coming up.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “And our date tomorrow night.” His kiss soothed her, but she felt a sudden shiver when he turned and rushed to the barn. Over his shoulder, he called out to her. “I love you, T.! See you in the morning.”

He ducked into the barn and heard her reply those same special words. They warmed him like a cozy quilt and as he pulled her words around him, he began to count the hours until he could see her again. He popped the gear into neutral and backed the four-wheeler from the barn. Turning the key, its engine sputtered to life unexpectedly on the first attempt. Gas fumes violated the fresh air and as he straddled the seat, he noticed Tracy watching from her upstairs bedroom. The soft ceiling light spun around her hair like a halo and for a brief second, he held that vision – *his angel*. With one final wave he shifted the gear, accelerated, and disappeared into the cold, dark night.

## Chapter 2

Four years later -- Monday midday

Lunchtime in downtown Newport created such a traffic frenzy that residents longed for the safe quiet streets of yesteryear. Not only were there very few decent restaurants to sit and have a quiet noon meal, but the local high school allowed open-campus lunch which afforded students the privilege of driving into town for their half-hour lunch period. The generally accepted rule was that if you happened out of your office during the latter part of the lunch hour, you had better be prepared to dodge careless teenage drivers and deviants who sometimes got their kicks by throwing full styrofoam cups of pop toward unsuspecting passersby.

Tracy Sims and her long-time friend, Lauren Mayfield, worked in research at the *Tribune*, the local newspaper that prided itself in providing all the important news, sports, and gossip for Newport and the surrounding area. Tracy worked a part-time freelance schedule which coincided nicely with her budding career as a song lyricist. Having gained the admiration of the staff, she was considered a lead writer and along with Lauren was handed the top leads at the newspaper.

Mondays and Wednesdays were usually hectic since they were the deadline days for the Tuesday/Thursday publications. But as the April weather was so tempting, Tracy and Lauren had chanced a quick getaway to the community park with their brown bag lunches, hoping to unwind from the stress of working under Stan Dothan, Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper.

“Hey, follow me for a second. There’s Lowell. I want to see what he knows about all the FBI activity that’s going on.” Tracy hustled to corner the local sheriff. Her floral dress danced around her 5’7 frame as her light brown waves swung with every step. Lauren, whose new Italian stilettos were no match for Tracy’s low-heeled flats, watched from a distance as Tracy nestled to Sheriff Lowell McClain’s side and surrendered to his burly hug. As an old friend of her family, he held a special bond with Tracy, so Lauren allowed them a private moment before she entered the conversation.

“You two girls are gettin’ prettier every day! I’d best keep a closer eye on those fellas.”

Lowell McClain was a landmark in Newport, Oklahoma. Not only had his fifty-plus years of law enforcement earned him the respect of the county, his loyalty to the small town and his dedication to protecting the citizens made him everybody’s friend. Whenever times got too hard, or at the first sign of bad weather, busted cattle fences, or minor fender-benders, McClain’s was usually the first encouraging smile you’d see. And when harvest time came around, he rolled his sleeves up like everybody else and pulled an extra eight-hour shift to help bale a neighbor’s hay crop.

“Now, what can I do for you ladies?” he asked as his glasses slid to the tip of his nose.

His overhanging belly had grown another inch in the night it seemed. His ruddy face brightened in their company, and as Tracy inched closer, his cheeks blushed slightly more than usual. Under different circumstances, Tracy would have enjoyed his company. But the mangled cigar protruding from his mouth reeked of bitter, decaying tobacco. She hoped she could withstand the stench long enough to get some answers.

“What’s all the federal presence about, Lowell? Stan Dothan said something pretty big must be going on to have

all these agents snooping around.” Although she jogged four miles three times a week and was the picture of health, Tracy’s shorter legs took two steps for his one as she scurried beside him. She was also hindered by the Oklahoma wind. It was a fight to keep her cotton dress at bay.

Lauren, model-slender and much too refined to chase down a story in her new teal Christian Duphrane suit, drifted closely behind. Her cropped auburn hair lifted in the breeze as she floated like a goddess toward the courthouse.

With a sudden spark rimming his tired eyes, Lowell spun around. “Now Tracy, you know I can’t tell you that. Stick to the news that the town needs to know.”

“Please, Lowell. Just give us something so we can know if it’s worth pursuing.” Sheriff McClain pivoted so abruptly Tracy fell against him.

“You need to stay away from this! Now Fraz...uh, nobody wants the *Tribune* snooping around their private business.” He adjusted his footing for a possible escape, but Lauren blocked his way. Her looks could have stopped any man in his tracks, but with those *I dare you to move* piercing gray eyes, Lowell had no chance.

“Wait, Lowell, please,” Tracy begged. “I don’t understand. Who is this about?” She pinned him with her gaze and stood erect, determined to get her facts. Lowell bowed his back and shifted away from her drilling glare.

“This - is - not a story you want to involve yourself in Tracy.” He wiped his brow and with a desperate turn shot a plea toward Lauren. “Girls, listen, some things are best left alone and this is one of them. Suther...uh, some of the businesses have private legal matters that don’t need to be released to the public, so please, just pursue the stories that really matter.”

Lauren's face burned scarlet as she caught his blunder. Her deadly eyes chased McClain down as he ducked around Tracy for cover. Unaware of Lauren and McClain's silent scuffle, Tracy grabbed his arm and tried her luck again.

"Lowell, you know I won't pursue anything that isn't newsworthy. But you have to admit, those FBI agents have been busy on something for over a week now, and that means only one thing: crime."

With an urgent spin, he shot daggers at Lauren. Her highlights blazed like fire, swirling around her face as a warm pungent gust of exhaust from a nearby truck blew toward them. A standoff of wills ensued – Lauren, determined to hear the truth, and Lowell, determined to keep it hidden.

The awkward instant became an uncomfortable moment. Lauren mouthed an apology toward Tracy then plunged head first into a litany of questions, boring her accusing finger firmly into Lowell's chest.

"You started to say a name. Was it Frazier? Has he surfaced? Is he being investigated?"

Tracy's eyes widened and confusion washed across her face at the mention of Frazier's name.

"I didn't say anything about that, Lauren," McClain asserted. "If there is any kind of investigation going on just leave it alone and let the agents do their job. Now I've got work to do."

In one quick stride, a storm of satiny teal bolted into his path to block his escape. Sheriff McClain cowered as Lauren and Tracy quick-stepped to his side.

"You owe it to her, Lowell." Lauren jerked a thumb toward Tracy. "Now, off the record, is this about David Frazier? Is he back in Newport?"

McClain exhaled a long, labored sigh and grasped Tracy's hands. Years of secrecy and guilt churned through his

mind. But that was no match to this young angel -- the daughter he never had. So with a tenderness he thought had long been buried beneath the crustiness of his hard life, he fought to shield her from further pain.

"Tracy, when Jared left, it took you a long time to get over it. I just don't want you to get hurt again."

He shifted his stance, nabbed his cigar, and spat downwind.

"Lauren, keep this off the record, but yes, David Frazier is back and Sutherant Petroleum is being investigated. These kinds of things can get dangerous and Frazier is not the kind of man who wants his name smeared in the news, so until you hear otherwise, his company is off limits." He placed a weathered hand to Tracy's shoulder. "But Tracy, Jared is not here."

Tracy looked away, floating on a memory from years before. Present company became a blur as she pieced together a lost image from her past -- an image she had tucked away with yearbooks, teenage dreams, and her heart. *Jared*.

"We understand," Lauren offered. "Thanks for telling us."

"Tracy, I wish..." His voice cracked. Clearing his throat, he wiped his brow. "I just wish things had turned out differently."

McClain lumbered up the marble steps of City Hall. Tracy clutched Lauren's arm, unaware of the locals who were spilling from the courthouse for their lunch break. Jared's sudden disappearance and other emotional pains which haunted her years before pounded in her mind.

"Come on, Trace. We'll figure it out, don't you worry." Lauren rambled idly, searching for unrelated topics to occupy the time as they hurried toward the seclusion of the nearby park.

Once off the main road, Tracy released Lauren's arm, shuffling along as the *tap, tuh-tap, tuh tap* cadence of her sandals mimicked the rhythm of the throbbing between her brows.

"I think we're due a long lunch after the hell we went through getting this edition out," Lauren encouraged. They spotted a park bench nestled under a redbud and after brushing the blossoms away, Lauren motioned for Tracy to take a seat. She collapsed onto the bench and fell into questions.

"What do you make of it? Why is Frazier back? Do you realize how long it's been?"

Lauren nodded. "I'll make some calls when we get back to the office. Grant Reynolds may just be a local cop, but he's got to have some knowledge of this. Besides, he owes me a favor. I've got to ask you, though. How do you feel about it? I mean, I know we searched non-stop those first couple of years, but are you still even interested in finding Jared or has it been too long?" Lauren studied Tracy's face then slid half of a tuna sandwich her way. "And if you don't want to talk about it, I understand."

Tracy leaned back into the bench, unconsciously twisting a napkin in her unsteady hands.

"We were so close, Lauren. You remember... inseparable," she huffed. She thought back, remembering her seventeenth birthday and the following night which, as dream-like as it had been had turned out to be the beginning of her worst nightmare. When Jared had not called that night and had not shown up at school for exams the next day, she knew something was wrong.

Tracy attempted to eat a little more but pushed the sandwich aside and let her head fall back against the bench. "Why did I have to push Lowell? I never would have known

Frazier was back. I never would have thought about ...” She shook her head, “No! I’m not even going there. I spent far too much time thinking about Jared Frazier and I’m not going to waste my time pining over some...guy.”

“So if he *did* show up – you wouldn’t want to see him?”

Tracy smoothed the crinkled napkin across her thigh.

“That was a long time ago. I’m sure he’s moved on just like I have.” She blotted her mouth then wadded the napkin and stuffed it in the bag. “But I know one thing. I’m going to find out why his dad is back. Hearing those allegations about Sutherant Petroleum makes me even more eager.” She sat up tall and faced the sun, drawing new energy from the soothing heat.

“Then that’s what we’ll do. I just finished the state government piece I’ve been working on so I’m free to help. You can tackle Frazier and Sutherant, and I’ll focus on the FBI. Maybe we can talk Stan into dumping some of the local interest stories on Jim Crenshaw. Lord knows he doesn’t do a damned thing anyway.” Just as Lauren rose from the bench, a cardinal swooped from the tree and knocked her off-balance. Tracy stifled a laugh.

“Careful, might be one of Jim’s homing pigeons.”

Lauren smirked then stuffed their trash into the bin. She grabbed Tracy’s hand and led her along the azalea-lined pathway. A cloudless sky stretched from east to west and the smell of freshly mown grass rode on the breeze. Familiar sounds of Newport called out from ahead – the daily train from Chickasha whistling south of town, air compressor blasts from Peterson’s Automotive, children’s laughter and chatter from the nearby elementary playground. But with every recognizable sound, random memories of Jared crossed her mind.



A cool spring breeze tempted them to ditch their remaining shift at the *Tribune*, and most days they would have stretched the lunch hour into some kind of reporting foray. But the thought of investigating an apparent crime wave in their own home town drove them forward. To lessen the distance by three blocks, they cut through the parking lot of the Methodist church. Just as they turned to cross Main Street, a familiar black quad-cab wheeled into the parking lot and cruised to a stop.

“Well, look who’s spying on you,” Lauren razzed.

“Hold up a minute. Let me see what he wants.”

Tracy smoothed her dress and shuffled over to greet Eric Williams, a computer technician with Sutherland Petroleum. His cool aqua eyes glistened as he watched Tracy approach, and when he leaned his arms over the door of his truck, Tracy’s gaze wandered to his sexy smile. And then lower to that perfectly knotted tie and that burgundy shirt that gripped his taut, rippling muscles. She grinned, remembering their arm-in-arm stroll through the mall just days before when she picked out the ensemble at Halpern’s Menswear. His spiked hair taunted her and she had to fight the urge to muss it like she had on their date the night before. He was twenty-eight, single, and the man most likely to be drooled over by women. To Tracy, he was one of the nicest guys she had ever known, and as her face brightened at his very presence, she could not deny that she was slowly falling in love with him.

“Hi, Eric,” she said, inhaling his scent.

“Hey, Babe. Just coming back from lunch?” He tendered a friendly wave toward Lauren then settled his eyes on Tracy. Sitting in the truck cab, he towered over her. To close the distance, he shifted his arm over the door jam and rested his chin on his wrist. As he spoke, Tracy’s eyes never left his face and suddenly, her whole world was inches before her.

“Yeah, we had to get out of the office for a while. How about you?” Her sun-kissed hair lifted in the breeze and as he swept it from her face, she smiled.

“Just got a burger – headin’ back to work so I can get some things finished up. I’ve got to work late tonight and tomorrow, but I was hoping to see you Wednesday night. I could get tickets to the game. Or we could try out that new sushi place in the city.”

Tracy grinned and slid her hand along the muscles of his arm.

“Or maybe just stay in,” she grinned, suddenly wishing she could crawl into his lap and not go back to work.

His smile shot a warm current to her heart and as he caressed her hand, she entwined her fingers through his. “Even better,” he winked. Their affection spoke volumes, and at the moment their gaze could not have been more sensual.

“See you Wednesday,” Tracy whispered, backing away so he could leave. Without releasing her hand, he lured her back toward his door. He pressed his lips to hers and encouraged her closer. As if on a cloud, she floated to the running board, linking her arms fully around his neck. Forgetting post-lunch plans, she parted her lips and kissed him more deeply than either had intended. Added seconds became a long, passionate minute until in the distance, Lauren cleared her throat. Tracy roused, pressing her palm against Eric’s cheek and kissing him again. He snickered under his breath as Tracy slung back her hair and craned her neck with a contented sigh.

A brief thought of Jared flashed through her mind as did his last promise: *I love you, T. See you in the morning.* That familiar voice was still so clear. But as a warm breath brushed her ear, she realized it was Eric’s voice stirring the silence.

“Is that okay?” he asked.

“What?”

“If I call you after my meeting tonight.”

She nodded then stepped from the running board, lifting her hand in a light wave as she cut across the lot. Eric shifted his truck into gear then drove away. Tracy gathered her thoughts and watched the dust trail scatter. Even before it cleared, Lauren’s questions began to fly.

“Where the hell did that come from? Why haven’t you told me you two had gotten that tight? And remind me, how did you meet Mr. Gorgeous anyway?”

“He used to work with my dad, and a few months ago he did some computer work for my uncle.”

“Ol’ Uncle Devil-eyes?”

“The same. And introducing me to Eric is about the only good thing he’s ever done.”

Tracy stepped into the crosswalk - alone. Glancing back, she saw Lauren perched beside a street sign, arms akimbo.

“Details!” Lauren demanded. “You’re my best friend and you have obviously been keeping your sex life a secret,” she laughed.

“Nothing to report,” Tracy chuckled. “We’ve gone out to dinner a few times... to the movies, he helps me with the horses...”

Lauren narrowed her eyes.

Tracy threw her hands out. “We’ve been going out a few weeks now. We get together after work; we talk, he listens to my songs, we go for walks – just casual dating, okay?” Lauren glared, unconvinced. “What more can I say? He’s great. Now he just pulled up and you no doubt heard the whole conversation, so you are officially informed.”

Lauren grabbed her arm. “Tracy, that kiss was not ‘casual’ dating. It looks to me like you have fallen for this guy.” Lauren urged.

“Why does it matter?” Tracy snapped. “Alright! Yes, I’m crazy about him. And yes, we’re getting serious. Satisfied? It actually feels good to have someone in my life again.”

Tracy bolted away, but with every step she took, she felt guilt weigh her down. Too much history had passed between them to ever be angry. Lauren, she knew, understood her pain. She had lost her father at an early age – heart attack when she was eight. Since then, and especially when Tracy’s mother had died, both had clung together through every high and low life had dealt them.

Lauren watched Tracy walk away, recalling the four painful years she had spent waiting, literally hoping each new day would be the day Jared returned. “No wonder she never said anything about Eric,” she mumbled to herself. In beginning to date Eric, Tracy had essentially accepted that Jared wasn’t coming back.

Lauren raced to catch up and pulled Tracy to a stop. She gathered her into her arms and hugged her.

“Sorry,” Lauren whispered.

“Me, too,” Tracy rested her head against Lauren’s shoulder as they moseyed on.

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Sidling through the door of the *Tribune* office, Tracy and Lauren nestled into their side-by-side cubicles and busied themselves by organizing strategies to streamline their research. After reviewing what they had discovered in earlier searches, they decided to focus their efforts on past business practices and financiers of Sutherland Petroleum in hopes of finding a more solid lead regarding the FBI investigation. Additionally, by conducting more extensive research than she had in prior years, Tracy hoped to break through past roadblocks to finally discover the truth as to why the Frazier

family had left Newport in the first place. Maybe then she could move on with her life.

Later in the day, just as Tracy was about to shut down her computer for the night, Lauren sent her an instant message: *Productive day?*

Tracy's response was immediate: *Very! Meet at my car in five. We need to talk.*

Lauren closed her laptop, stuffed it into her tote bag and became a blur of motion as she exited the door. Like locking onto the aroma of her grandmother's chicken and dumplings, Lauren smelled a story coming together and could not turn away.

Tracy logged out of her computer and placed some drafts on Dothan's desk. She noticed Lauren duck through the door, so waved a goodbye to her co-workers and sped to follow. Once she rounded the corner of the building, she spied Lauren leaning against her car.

"Sooo? What did you find?" Lauren lowered her bag from her shoulder.

Tracy flashed a playful grin. "Do you have plans tonight?"

"Nothing I can't change. Why?" Pressing her finger to her mouth, Tracy tapped her lip twice. Lauren chuckled. "Want me to come over to your place?"

Tracy shook her head. "No way! I was half serious when I told you I thought my uncle had the house bugged. Let's go out tonight – just the two of us. Are you up for a little adventure?"

"Absolutely!"

## Chapter 3

Tracy followed Lauren to her house with plans to drop off her jeep. Once they pulled into the driveway, she gathered her research material, locked her yellow soft-top jeep, and then slid into the passenger side of Lauren's sleek five-speed. Lauren phoned her mother to cancel plans for dinner and as soon as the call ended, she peppered Tracy with questions.

"Okay, what's going on? Is this about Sutherland? Why all the secrecy?"

"I got Frazier's address," Tracy sang as she waved a pink sticky note in the air.

"How in the world?"

"It's all in who you know. Actually, I called Mary Luther over at the post office. I said I needed to get a package to Jared so she asked me if Mr. Frazier's temporary address would be good enough. She said he's – and I quote – 'no longer a resident but is occupying a company-owned house while he's in town' - babbled on about how Frazier has been in Newport for the past two months! She even whispered like she was supposed to be keeping it a secret."

"I don't get it. Where's his wife? Where's Jared?"

"I wish I knew. But according to Mary, he lives behind an electric fence with enough security to house inmates. Let's just head over and take a peek."

"That's fine. But fill me in on what you found today."

Tracy turned away. Her sudden silence left a chill in the air.

“I’ll tell you what I know. But after tonight I want you off this project. I’ll handle it myself and you can cover my other stories while I work through this.”

“I’ll decide that.” Lauren was a year older and a year more senior at the *Tribune*; Tracy usually fell into step behind her, but not this time. The raw fear in Tracy’s eyes stopped her cold.

“Do you remember that story Jim Crenshaw ran a couple of weeks ago about a pilot that got into an argument when he had to wait so long to get his plane serviced?” Tracy fixed her attention on the windshield.

“Vaguely, over here at the Newport airstrip, right?”

“His name was Clint Burris, some hotshot on the school board in Oklahoma City. He was upset because this scuffle broke out in the airport office and it delayed his refueling. Anyway, I was reading that story – you know, just poking around about Sutherant Petroleum’s travel and shipping - and one story led to another.”

“Okay...so?”

“There was a lot more to it than what went to print. One of the witness accounts was from a Mr. Thomas Renfro, a businessman from Kansas. He witnessed everything from a back corner of the office. But his interview was never used in the piece. That got me curious so I thought I’d ask Jim Crenshaw about it.”

Tracy let her head fall against the seat.

“So what did he say?”

“He wasn’t at his desk. Probably’d gone out for a smoke. But I was standing there and I noticed an icon on his computer screen. It was the Sutherant Petroleum logo. Before I could talk myself out of it, I downloaded the file to my jump drive.”

Lauren muffled a laugh. “Tracy? -- Good job! Didn’t know you had it in you, girlfriend.” But Tracy was not smiling. She was trembling. “Wait a minute, why would Crenshaw have a computer file on Sutherant?”

Tracy shrugged. “That’s what I was wondering. But don’t say anything. You know how he is about his privacy.”

Lauren locked her lips for show. “I sure don’t want you getting into hot water with our big *award* winner. Lord knows anybody who has won a Pulitzer deserves his privacy. Jeez, he’s been a pain in my ass since he won that thing three years ago.” Lauren hunched her shoulders and sneered, mocking her most despised co-worker with an angry crease of her brow. “And don’t be messing with my shot glass collection from all over the *la-tee-da* world,” she barked. “That jerk probably never served in a single one of those military operations he brags about. God, I’d like to take one of those shot glasses and cram it up his ...”

“Okay, okay...just let me get back to the airport story. According to Renfro, Hank Tisdale, the airport manager confronted the Sutherant pilot because he spotted something in the plane he shouldn’t have. Seems the Sutherant pilot was bringing ‘suspicious cargo’ through the airport.”

“Drugs? That won’t be hard to research.”

“Wait, there’s more. That’s when the pilot shoved Tisdale and told him - and I’m quoting Jim’s notes here - ‘My bosses will not be pleased with your service.’ According to Renfro, Tisdale stuck his finger in the pilot’s chest and told him that if any shipping violations were evident, Sutherant would be reported and grounded until an investigation was complete. He even stressed that Congressional ties wouldn’t save Sutherant this time. That’s evidently when Clint Burris wandered in to file a complaint about the fuel delay.”



“So that business man, Renfro, was watching all this from the shadows?”

“Right – according to Jim’s notes he was in the back corner and was never noticed. Even told Jim that Clint Burris pitched a fit and threatened to file a formal complaint with the FAA Office and with a U.S. Congressman he knew.”

“Okay, so this is a customer service issue.” Lauren pulled to the shoulder of the road and grabbed the directions.

“No, it’s more than that. After Burris was finally cleared for re-fueling, Tisdale stepped out to help him. That’s when the Sutherant pilot made a phone call, detailing the whole ordeal to whoever was on the line. When Tisdale came back in the office, the pilot left the room.”

“So that’s it?” Lauren questioned.

“No.” Tracy lifted a copy of a newspaper article. “This is Jim’s article. It ran in the *Tribune* two weeks ago, the first week of April. It was just a low-key commentary in the editorial section. Says that flight traffic through our tiny airstrip is growing and that the city needs to increase funding to better accommodate the clients. Anyway, it has a couple of nicey-nice quotes from Burris and Tisdale talking about the convenience of the airport and how strictly they follow FAA guidelines.”

“Not quite the same report that Renfro gave. Did you find out why Jim nixed his comments?”

“No, but this past Friday Clint Burris got his name in print again – his obituary in the *Oklahoman Chronicle*.”

“What?” Lauren reached for the article as Tracy pushed it toward her.

“He was killed in what the police say was a home invasion.”

“Jeez, this should have made the news.”

“Exactly. Grant Reynolds pulled up the police report and can’t believe they called it a *home invasion*. He said it looked more like an execution. The house alarm had been dismantled and Burris was killed in the kitchen while his family was upstairs getting ready for bed. And another thing: nothing was stolen.”

“They were keeping Burris quiet,” Lauren guessed.

“Wait until you hear the rest. Grant called me back today and said yesterday afternoon Tisdale and his wife got a phone call just as they were getting back from the morning church service. They thought it was a hoax; caller simply said an explosive device had been hidden on one of the inbound planes due to arrive that afternoon. Tisdale went to the airport office to check on it.”

Tracy referred to her notes.

“He called 911 from the airport at 1:15. Just as the dispatcher started her list of questions, the line went dead. Grant was dispatched and when he got there at 1:25, he found the phone line had been cut. Hank Tisdale was dead, apparently of a heart attack. They ordered an autopsy.”

“Holy shit,” breathed Lauren.

A dead hush fell over the car as Lauren digested the information. Tracy shivered then stuffed the papers into her briefcase.

“I know what you’re thinking, Lauren. You’re worried about me getting caught.”

“No, I’m worried about you ending up like Burris and Tisdale. You’ve got quite a lead here, I just...”

“This is not about a lead. I know Jared Frazier. Four years ago he and his family disappeared – without a word or a hint as to where or why they were going. I don’t know why he hasn’t contacted me, but I know there’s a reason. Now his dad is back – supposedly not wanting anyone to know. Today

I find all of this about his company. Do you really expect me to just ignore it?”

The low drone of the car engine filled the pause. Their heavy breathing exposed their nervousness.

“Tracy, with Frazier back in town it will be impossible to get information. He’s going to be on high alert if his company is about to be investigated.”

“I’ll stay out of sight, remain anonymous. Plus, nothing would go through the *Tribune*,” Tracy added. “No one would know.” But Lauren’s expression said she still was not convinced.

“Remember the rule” Lauren warned. “Know your surroundings before you’re surrounded.”

She adjusted her seatbelt and put the car into drive as Tracy directed the seven-mile route to Frazier’s temporary address. Once she had merged onto the highway, Lauren followed Tracy’s directions as she guided them north along Highway 14 until it intersected an unpaved county road.

“This is it,” confirmed Tracy. “Mary Luther said the last couple of roads along the route aren’t paved yet.”

Lauren eased the car along the gravel road, slowing in sight of a massive twelve-thousand square-foot mansion overlooking the Canadian River. The ominous front entrance had been erected about fifty yards from the road and screamed ‘Stay Away!’ for all passersby. The usual signs of welcome were absent – no mailbox, no visible address, no marked driveway, and no landscaping. The newly poured black asphalt led to a secured gate which on closer look, was manned by a stocky, uniformed guard.

Perched high on the hill loomed the mansion, a gothic, overbearing monstrosity that seemed to mock the smaller ranch style homes across the river. Random trees surrounded the main house as if to camouflage the pomposity. While two

lower-level rooms shone lights, the otherwise dark interior suggested little activity. To further hide a welcome, the first floor windows covered behind steel security bars.

As they coasted in front of the property, Tracy studied the electric fence that lined the entire perimeter of the property. Every fifty feet or so metal placards had been hung to emphasize a warning that was emblazoned in bright red lettering:

*Empire Protection, Inc.: High Voltage Area*

“Are they keeping people in or out?” Tracy probed. Reflecting on her dad’s involvement with Sutherant Petroleum and David Frazier’s powerful reputation, her mind drifted to Jared, wondering what part his life played out in all of the overbearing security.

“Good question. Let’s get out of here. This place scares the hell out of me.”

Lauren sped to the end of a cul-de-sac at the bottom of a long declining slope that ended within feet of the riverbank. “Take note, Trace. Once you pass the front of Frazier’s house, there’s no way out but to turn around.”

They made the turn in one circular loop and the view of the gloomy residence towering overhead made Tracy’s stomach churn. Lauren down-shifted and accelerated to overcome the hill and just as the gated entrance came back into view, so did a heavily-tinted black sedan exiting the property.

“Keep going! Keep going! Don’t let them see us!” Tracy ripped the seatbelt from her waist and bolted to the floor. “Get us out of here! If it’s Frazier he’ll recognize me.”

Lauren crushed the accelerator, forcing her back tires into a screeching spin. With a glance in the rearview mirror, she saw the sedan wheel onto the road and bear down fast, moving steadily closer. She ground through gears, revving the

engine to a whining roar. As she approached the intersecting secondary road, she ignored the stop sign, plodding her escape through the rural area. A snatched glimpse to the mirror confirmed the sedan was closing in without mercy.

“Stay down! They’re right behind us.” Lauren ordered as she downshifted, grinding gears and spraying gravel. Tracy panted, shrinking further into the floorboard. Overhead, Lauren bawled in hysterics, “I don’t know what to do! They’re right on my tail!”

“Head to the city. Just don’t stop. I can’t let Frazier see me.”

Lauren urged the sports car forward, maneuvering backroads, fighting to get to the highway. The sedan closed in - enough that Lauren could see two male figures through the tinted windshield.

“Can you tell who it is?” Tracy wrenched the visor mirror, desperate to get a glimpse of their predators.

“There’re two of them. The glass is too dark to see more. What the hell have you gotten us into?”

“Just get us out of here!”

Lauren raced the engine, straining the transmission and barely managing to navigate the unpaved, narrow roads. “Highway’s up ahead. Hold on, this’ll be close.” She gathered speed, praying that southbound traffic would cooperate. Just as she careened the small knoll that intersected the highway, she saw a stretch of cars and a semi-truck barreling down fast.

“Oh, shit! Tracy, stay down!” The car fishtailed as she slammed on the brakes.

“What is it?” Tracy shouted.

“Traffic. Oh, God, they’re right behind us. I’m gonna go for it. Hold on!”

Lauren glimpsed to her left, seeing a possible break in traffic. In a panic her eyes shot to the mirror just in time to

see the sedan's passenger door open. A man stepped out. She strained to see his face, but the sunset's reflection blinded her. He moved from behind the door. That brief moment was all it took. She saw far more than she needed – the short black hair, the firm, chiseled face, the burgundy shirt and tie, and the stunned daze that washed over his face as he recognized her. Eric William's cold, piercing eyes were alarming enough. But when she saw his outstretched handgun pointed at her back window, she knew she had seen too much.

In slow, dreamlike motion, Lauren watched him lower the gun to his side. Unable to breathe, she stared, her pulse pounding through the death-grip on the steering wheel. Eric's glare locked on hers just as Tracy's cry shattered the air.

“LAUREN! What's happening?”

In a panic, Lauren's right foot slammed hard against the accelerator. Her left foot popped the clutch and with a lurch, the small sports car projectiled into the oncoming traffic. Tires spun in revolt - screeching along pavement as Lauren gunned the engine. She dodged oncoming cars, careening aimlessly through the chaos. A compact swerved to the right, breezing just inches from Lauren's back bumper. A pick-up skidded left, sliding sideways into the guardrail. Fiery flashes of metal shards spewed from beneath the truck bed, as metal scrapped metal. Unscathed, Lauren's five-speed spun to a stop in the median, only to launch into the other lane of highway traffic.

“Slow down!” Tracy warned.

Lauren ignored the command and barreled through traffic. Stunned drivers surrendered to the shoulder. Racing north and away from the wreckage, Lauren focused on the road ahead. She checked the mirror, fearing that the black sedan might still be in pursuit. Each breath was labored until seconds later, her pulse began to slow. The numb, bloodless

fingers of her left hand clenched the steering wheel while she ground through gears with her right.

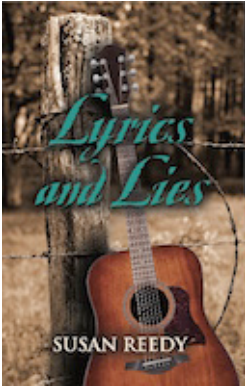
“Are they gone?” Tracy’s timid voice revealed the frightened little girl she had become. Lauren steadied her gaze on the mirror without reply, staring blindly into the past as she watched for her pursuers.

“JEEZE, Lauren! Don’t get us killed over this.” Tracy strained to pull herself from the floorboard and settled into the seat. She watched as Lauren’s grip of the wheel tightened and noticed the labored rise and fall of her chest. She heard a muffled prayer seep from Lauren’s dry lips and finally, heard her barely audible whisper.

“We lost them.”

Tracy bit her bottom lip, foregoing the tongue-lashing she had planned. She would never know just how close the pick-up had come to T-boning Lauren’s sports car.

“Well, I’m starved. My treat since they probably got your tag number,” Tracy laughed. But as she caught Lauren’s eyes flick to the rearview mirror a fourth and fifth time, she realized a much deeper, unsettled fear had gripped her friend.



*Newport, Oklahoma is home-sweet-home to Tracy and Jared, whose love story has grown stronger through facing heartache, illness, and family struggles. But when Jared suddenly disappears, Tracy is left behind, forced to rely on her research and music to endure his absence. She soon discovers an international conspiracy has invaded their small town and, when Jared resurfaces years later, she realizes that family secrets and lies have now made them prime targets of military assassins...*

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