

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**CHRISTINA
DODD**

RIGHT

MOTIVE

A NOVELLA

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New York Times bestselling author
Christina Dodd**

“Christina Dodd reinvents the romantic thriller. Her signature style—edgy, intense, twisty, emotional—leaves you breathless from first page to last. Readers who enjoy Nora Roberts will devour Dodd’s electrifying novels.”

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“Dodd’s gripping voice will appeal to fans of Sandra Brown, Nora Roberts

“Dodd’s gripping voice will appeal to fans of Sandra Brown, Nora Roberts,
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Right Motive (ebook novella)

Wrong Alibi

For additional books by Christina Dodd, visit her website,
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Right Motive

Christina Dodd



Honey, thank you for another wonderful idea and all the help in creating *Right Motive*. Here's to another eon of earth-cooling together.

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CHAPTER ONE

ALASKA

Rockin Police Department

A Tuesday morning in August

POLICE CHIEF RODOLPHE DUMAS looked up as Officer Gabriella Donatti put down her phone, stood up from her desk and turned in a circle, arms extended in despair. “April Fools’ Day has come and gone,” she called to the ceiling. “Is it Halloween already?”

He noted, also, that their dispatcher, Stu Helgeson, hung his head out of his office, watching and grinning.

Dumas liked Donatti; she was tough, intelligent, quick-witted and, in his never-to-be-spoken opinion, cuter than a speckled pup under the porch.

A long-legged speckled pup—the female was curvaceous and nearly six feet tall, which made her six inches taller than him, and that was if he lied about his height. If he was twenty years younger—okay, thirty years younger—he would have gone all out to woo her. He might have a kink in his neck, but the pain would be worth it.

Plus she was a gosh darned good officer, the first female officer hired in the Rockin Police Department in years upon years (the former police chief had been female, and such a disaster everyone had done their best to forget her), and if this call had been serious, she would have been on it like stink on a skunk.

This sounded like the usual prank and he asked affectionately, “What’s up, *chère*?”

Deadpan as all heck, she said, “Bigfoot has been sighted west of here, near Denali National Park.”

Grins bloomed across the length and breadth of the office.

Dumas had been in law enforcement for over thirty-three years, first in Louisiana—he was Cajun to his bones—and now in Rockin, Alaska. “Of course he has. Did whoever call this in get a photograph?”

“Not just a photograph.” Donatti paused dramatically, then said, “A *video*. Which proves without a doubt that Bigfoot is in the area because no one in the history of Photoshop has ever tampered with a video.”

Grins widened.

“Why me?” Donatti asked.

“That’s rhetorical, right?” Officer Howland leaned back in his desk chair.

“Because you’re the newest, which automatically means you’re holding the short straw.”

“That’s easily solved.” She turned to Dumas. “When are you going to hire someone else?”

“Soon.” His gaze skittered around at his officers, never resting on any too long. But it didn’t require much to make a few avoid his gaze.

He still had officers hanging on from the previous police chief’s administration. He’d had no reason to replace them—but only because he hadn’t caught them in the act of...whatever unlawful activity they were involved in. “Officer Donatti, your partner’s out today.”

“Jim Kittilia. Yes, he’s out sick.” She didn’t use air quotes, but Dumas saw them anyway.

He hoisted himself out of his chair and adjusted his belt. “I’ll ride along with Donatti. I have not yet met Bigfoot. That must be a rite of passage.”

A ripple of laughter around the room.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath on that.” Blake Schofield had been born here, raised here, had been an officer here for all his twenty years in law enforcement, and was the self-appointed purveyor of local knowledge. “Especially not in broad daylight. For the most part, he’s a nocturnal creature.”

“Ah, well. It’s a beautiful day out, and Donatti might need backup while dealing with this wild creature.”

Another ripple of laughter.

“Ito, you’re in charge.” As Dumas walked out, he was aware the sentiment in the department was oh-so-slowly shifting his way. When he’d first arrived as the newly appointed police chief of the municipality of Rockin, he was all smiles and affability, shaking hands, laying on the thick Cajun accent, convincing them he was the chief they imagined—maybe corrupt, possibly lazy, certainly none too bright.

When he’d told them he was there to kick butt and take names but he’d forgotten his pencil, they’d smirked. Then he’d called three of them in, right in a row, and fired them, boom, boom, boom.

They were the easy ones: Officer Gerasimova, who took a call and always took the long way around; Officer Nichols, who arrested women for jaywalking and ignored the guys drag racing down Main Street; and Officer West, who beat up his girlfriend, had a restraining order slapped on him—and ignored it.

Dumas did not kick dogs or gratuitously hit women—or anyone, for that matter. His job was to protect and serve, and he took that duty seriously. Ignoring the restraining order was unlawful, and when he fired West, he said so.

West had called Dumas “dumbass”—because Dumas had never heard that

insult before—slammed down his sidearm, the keys to his patrol car and a few other essentials, and stormed out.

Dumas had taken five minutes to don his bulletproof vest and pick a team to provide backup in case of trouble. The cops had headed to the girlfriend's place of employment, and got there in time to find West aiming a loaded shotgun and holding the whole diner hostage while his girlfriend begged him to shoot her and spare the kids.

Dumas had drawn his sidearm and ordered West to stand down.

West had swiveled toward Dumas, ready to shoot.

Dumas had nailed him in the chest right over the heart. Didn't kill him, sadly; West wore his own bulletproof armor. But the bullet knocked him backward, and another fast shot removed his elbow and, with it, the shotgun, saving the good people in the diner from harm.

Unfortunately, while more officers arrived to handle the situation, Dumas enjoyed a hospital visit to remove stray buckshot from his thigh and forehead. The doctors had wanted to keep him for observation. He'd brushed away their advice, taken pain relievers and returned to work.

He'd limped in to find his backups giving a full accounting of the episode as the rest of his officers drank coffee and buzzed with excitement. One look at the bandage on his face and the bruise that spread out around it, and they'd hopped fast to their desks or out to their patrol cars.

With not an ounce of his former affability, he'd said, "Did I neglect to mention that I won the Southern Regional Small Arms Championship?"

Silence.

A mutter from Officer Marroquin, "Hadn't heard that."

And another from Officer Schofield, "Congratulations, Chief."

Dumas had limped toward his office, groaning and making much of his injuries. They might think he was old, but all of them knew buckshot from a gun fired ten feet away could have been deadly. In the doorway, he'd turned. "Also the World Championship, but I don't like to brag. Gentlemen, the good ol' boys' club of Rockin law enforcement is officially at an end. You all comprehend that?"

Most of them had returned his gaze and nodded.

But he'd taken note of those who never quite met his eyes.

Within five minutes, Dumas had called Officer Ito in, put him in charge of screening applicants for the new openings in the Rockin Police Department.

The first hire had been local, from the Alaska State Troopers, a guy who lived in the Rockin outskirts and wanted a job closer to home. That was Erik Chee. Then they'd picked up Colton Joshi from Anchorage, and Gabriella Donatti had applied from Nevada. Her excellent recommendations, her driving skills

applied from Nevada. Her excellent recommendations, her driving skills—Nevada's roads were similar to Alaska's in their long, empty stretches that in an emergency allowed great speed—and the summers she'd spent in Rockin had given her the edge over other applicants. Her pilot's license sealed the deal; in Alaska, every officer, whether it was the Alaska State Troopers or the local metropolitan police, covered vast amounts of territory.

Most important, Dumas had known she would overcome the resistance of the all-male department; she could get along, and it had been fun watching the guys discover that if they gave her trouble, she had the personality to hand it right back and top it with a shovelful of manure.

Now Police Chief Dumas was close to having his perfect law enforcement office. Only one thing remained undone...

CHAPTER TWO

DUMAS HEADED OUTSIDE with Officer Donatti to the police vehicle. The sun shone, the air was clear, and the temperature hovered at sixty-five degrees; a perfect Alaskan August day.

Donatti offered the keys. “Sir, do you want to drive?”

“I’m along for the ride.” Dumas climbed into the passenger seat of the Ford Expedition and checked his smartwatch; he was all about technology. In police work, it made sense to have communication, a timer and a million apps at the end of his arm. And, gosh darn it, the watch told him the time, too!

Donatti backed out of her parking space and headed out the gate onto the street. “Are you checking my driving?”

“No, *chère*. I read the report. You’ve got the stuff.” More than the stuff. “No, I’ve got to leave to catch a rat.”

Donatti glanced at him in surprise.

She’d missed all the excitement of his early days as police chief, and because she was the only female police officer and not included in the men’s gossip, she didn’t quite comprehend the turmoil before she’d arrived.

He wasn’t going to tell her. “What brings you to Alaska?”

“I could ask you the same,” she said.

Was she telling him to mind his own business? Or was she being evasive? “Every summer, I came up from Louisiana to fish and hike. I used Rockin as my base. I like the place, I like the people. A lot of odd folks, eccentrics. Rockin reminded me of home, only not so darned hot. When the police chief got removed for sexual misconduct, I thought about it, decided to take the post and moved up here.”

“It’s an appointed post.”

“Yes.”

“You were sure you were going to get the job?”

“I said people in Rockin were eccentric, not stupid. Of course the city council would hire me.”

She laughed. “Good. Yes. Well. I’m the same as you. My whole life, I’ve come up in the summer.”

“You have relatives here?”

“In the area. I’d come up, learn about the wilderness, so different from Nevada, hike and fish. It was like Girl Scout camp on steroids.” She cast him a humorous glance. “And it’s not so darned hot here.”

He chuckled. “We have a lot in common.” She hadn’t been telling him to mind his own business. But she hadn’t told him everything. Not by a long shot.

He waved a dismissive hand. “How far are we going?”

“We’re going to the Magnussons’ place. It’s outside of Denali Park. Assuming—”

The dispatcher rang through, and Donatti shut up.

Dumas answered. “What is it, Helgeson?”

“Sir, it’s a full moon, so of course the crazies must be out in force, because we just got another Bigfoot sighting. It’s from a female in the warehouse district.”

“Female’s name?”

“Laila Shockley.”

“She got a record?”

“Not even a parking ticket. You want me to send a couple of officers?”

“Who’s available?”

“Schofield is here cleaning up his paperwork. I’m sure I could convince him he’d rather take the call.” Paperwork was a necessary drudgery. “Jim Kittilia just walked in.”

Dumas glanced at Donatti, who was eloquently expressionless.

Jim Kittilia had been easy to spot as the officer most likely to get canned next. Skinny, mustached, constantly smiling, a shoulder-slapper and one of those guys who conveniently “forgot” he had to pay for the Girl Scout cookies he ordered from Howland’s seven-year-old daughter.

Dumas was pretty sure Donatti detested Kittilia, but she gritted her teeth and didn’t complain. It would have done her no good; Kittilia had seniority, and the fact he smiled too widely was not a valid reason for termination.

And when Dumas told her he listened seriously to complaints of sexual misconduct, she had looked him in the eyes and said, “It only ever happens once.” Which was not an answer, but he was both glad he’d spoken to her and reassured.

Dumas said to the dispatcher, “If Kittilia is still sick, send him home. I don’t like my officers spreading germs.”

“He looks okay to me,” Helgeson said. “Jittery, like he’s had too much coffee.”

I’ll bet. “The call from out near Denali—no one’s in danger?”

“Nope, nothing but an unconfirmed sighting,” Helgeson assured him.

“Then we’ll take this call, too. Might as well get all my Bigfoot credits in one fell swoop.”

Helgeson gave them the address and without looking at the GPS, Donatti turned toward the warehouse district. “I’ll bet you never had these problems in

Louisiana,” she said.

Dumas laughed softly. “You have never heard of the Rougarou?”

Donatti shook her head.

“It has the head of a wolf and the body of a man, and roams the swamps killing and mutilating man and beast.”

“Sounds like a werewolf.”

“Yes, the legend comes from the French Loup-Garou.” With the mingled humor and horror of a lifelong Catholic, he said, “He especially hunts those who do not keep the Lent.”

“Uh-oh.” She echoed his tone.

“Are you in trouble?”

“When I was in high school, there was that hamburger on Friday. But there were extenuating circumstances!”

“What kind of circumstances?”

“I was in a Catholic boarding school, got to escape for a few hours, and it was then or never.”

He shook his head sadly. “The road to hell is paved with excuses.”

“You’re good with the guilt,” Gabriella said sourly. “You could be a nun.”

“Sadly, no. I have, in my life, celebrated all seven sins.” As Donatti parked at the end of the alley behind the abandoned furniture warehouse, he indicated the woman standing beside the dumpster, checking her phone and looking annoyed. “That would be our reporting citizen.”

Laila Shockley wore black ankle leggings, a starched button-up shirt long enough to reach almost to her knees and tennis shoes that cost a billion dollars, give or take.

He knew about the price of the shoes; they were the kind his ex-wife liked to wear, and liked him to pay for.

But clearly Laila Shockley paid for her own footwear.

Dumas snapped his fingers. “That’s why her name is familiar. I’ve seen it on signs around town.”

“Who is she?”

“Laila Shockley owns a local real-estate firm.”

“Right! And the Due North Apartments—that’s my apartment building.” Donatti prepared to exit the car. “This changes things a bit.”

He placed his hand on Donatti’s arm. “Why?”

“If she’d been homeless...”

Gently, he said, “No, *chère*. We treat the citizens, no matter who they are, with complete respect. A homeless person has no property, no reason to lie. They have eyes to see, they are overlooked, and we hear their reports and thank

them most kindly.”

“Yes, sir. I hear you, sir.”

“I know that you do.”

Together, they exited the car.

Ms. Shockley waited for them to come to her.

Her straight black hair had been styled short at the top and long on the sides, and her jewelry was minimal. She held a flashlight in one hand and her phone in the other.

He recognized that type of flashlight; used in high beam, the light could blind an attacker, and the sharp, jagged edge around the bulb could be used to jab and slice. Laila Shockley had come to the warehouse district prepared to defend herself.

His respect for her edged higher. “Ms. Shockley? I’m Police Chief Rodolphe Dumas of the Rockin Police Department. This is Officer Gabriella Donatti. We understand you want to make a report of...?” He let the question dangle like a hook at the end of the line.

“Bigfoot. Yeti. Whatever you want to call it.” She was snappish and defensive.

He pulled out his notebook—with a certain generation, he still used a notebook and pencils, as he found it set them at ease—and asked, “Do you mind if I record this conversation?”

“Actually, I do.” She took a breath. “But I’ve already made a fool of myself by calling this in, I’m going to get trouble all over town, so what difference does it make? Go ahead and record.”

He tapped the app on his watch and ran through the formalities: her full name, her address and telephone number, everything they would need to fill in all the forms. He kept notes, too, in case the recording wasn’t clear. Then he asked, “What can you tell me?”

“First, I want to say I’ve lived in this town my entire life. I own a real-estate firm and multiple properties, and I don’t drink or do drugs.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded.

She studied him, looking for sarcasm. Detecting none, she continued, “I today concluded a deal on this warehouse.”

“You *bought* it?” Donatti asked.

Ms. Shockley handled Donatti’s incredulous question with admirable calm.

“Yes. I closed on it a few hours ago.”

“May I ask for what purpose?” Donatti asked.

“Is that a law enforcement question?” Ms. Shockley asked.

“No, ma’am. I’m genuinely confused. I don’t know why anyone would buy in

this part of town.” Donatti glanced around. “It’s old and it’s dirty. The windows are broken out. Last week, the fire department was called to douse a fire in a warehouse two buildings over, set by a bunch of underage drinkers who thought it would be funny to burn the place down while they were in it. Last winter, a body was found frozen under an old piece of machinery.” She lifted one foot. “There are rats.” Clearly, the last was for Donatti the ultimate horror.

Ms. Shockley listened patiently to Donatti’s recital, then told her, “With the recent upturn in Rockin’s fortunes, there will be a market for upscale condominiums. I came to do a tentative layout. There’ll be shops on the main floor and loft-style condos above.”

Donatti was scandalized. “Who would open a shop in this area? The shops will be vandalized every night—and every day. Or buy a condo? The owners will be mugged in broad daylight!”

“The reclamation of the town has to start somewhere. Think about it. It’s within walking distance of downtown. Foot traffic will go both ways. Once the revival has started, nothing will stop Rockin.” Ms. Shockley smiled at her own pun.

Dumas cleared his throat. “Ladies, I am fascinated, too, but we’re here for a purpose. Ms. Shockley, can you tell us what you saw today?”

Ms. Shockley got serious in a hurry. “I was up there.” She pointed up at the open third-story window. “I was looking out at the alley thinking about how this was going to be so great.”

Donatti looked from the window then down to the alley, at the dumpster and the grime. She clearly didn’t possess Ms. Shockley’s imagination and vision, and saw only what was here. But in a law officer, that could be an advantage.

“I heard a noise in the dumpster, this frantic scratching. At the end of the alley, I heard a moaning and a mama bear rushed over and clawed at the dumpster. Because her baby had somehow climbed in after all that great-smelling trash and he couldn’t get out. Mama had her other cub with her.” Ms. Shockley hesitated as if this part was tough. “I was thinking I had to call a wildlife officer. You know—Alaska State Troopers who know what to do with bears.”

“Thanks for not considering us,” Dumas said.

Ms. Shockley was amused but at the same time—she was scared. And horrified. And thrilled. She didn’t know what to think. But she was reporting what had happened as she saw it. “The mama bear was roaring, the baby inside the dumpster was crying, the baby at her side was crying. I got out my phone to dial 911. Then this pickup drove up. This guy got out.”

“What was the make of the pickup?” Dumas kept his pencil poised over the

page.

“Green.”

“Can you tell me more?”

“Faded green.”

He grinned at her. “Noted. You don’t know makes and models.”

She nodded. If she had a sense of humor, she had lost it in the events of the day.

“How about this?” He pointed the pencil toward the end of the alley. “Full-size? Four-door? Any damages to the body or bumpers?”

She squinted as if trying to see into the past. “Full-size. Two-door. Older model, probably more than twenty years old. He parked so the pickup blocked the end of the alley.”

Donatti wandered that direction, her gaze on the debris that littered the ground. On the street, she examined the pavement, looking for, Dumas knew, tire tracks.

Ms. Shockley continued, “I was watching the driver’s side. No dings that I recall, but as I said, the paint was faded. Dull.”

Dumas wrote that down. “Go on. Tell me about the guy.” He deliberately used the same term she had.

Ms. Shockley had it figured out now. “He was tall.”

“Approximate height?”

Ms. Shockley shook her head. “Not going to guess. Not from that angle.”

Dumas grunted. Exactly the right answer. If she was making it up, she would have given him a solid answer.

“He was wearing jeans and a khaki-green button-up shirt, ironed, and he was in the kind of shape that makes women turn to look. The clothing looked heavy-duty, like a logger would wear. Hiking boots.”

“Race? Eye color? Hair color?”

She opened her mouth, and there she stuck, unable to say what she wanted.

He lowered his notebook. “Ms. Shockley, we were told we were investigating a Bigfoot sighting. Just...say it.”

“He was blond. All over, from what I could see.” With one hand, she gestured in a small circle. “He looked young. And human. Humanoid.” She faltered again. “I feel like I’m in a *Star Trek* episode.”

“You’re sure you saw this man.”

Ms. Shockley coolly focused on Dumas. “I’m reporting exactly what I observed.”

“You were viewing him from three stories up, and in dim light. Could it have been a costume?”

“Come on, Dumas, from the next block, the house...”

“Sure, except for the part about the bear.”

“Ah. The bear.” Interesting and interesting. “I almost forgot about that.”

“The man... Bigfoot slammed the driver’s side door. At the sound, the mama bear turned and roared at him. She was so upset, I thought—she’s going to charge, and he’s blocked himself in with her.” Ms. Shockley’s voice rose. “But he roared back at her.”

“He roared back at her,” Dumas repeated.

“This full-throated roar, like a beast.”

Dumas glanced at Officer Donatti. She had returned. She was sort of smiling and watching him as if waiting for his reaction to have one of her own.

“That was when I really paid attention to the...the man.”

“You weren’t paying attention to him before?” Donatti asked.

“Yes, but my attention was torn between him and the three bears.” Ms. Shockley halted. “Bigfoot and the three bears. My God, it’s a children’s story!”

Donatti snorted.

Dumas frowned at her. “So the young man roared?”

Donatti took one step back.

“It was a full-bodied, convincing roar,” Ms. Shockley said.

“What did the bear do?” Dumas asked.

“She acted like she was glad they understood each other, and went back to clawing at the dumpster. The guy got a ladder out of the back of his pickup, walked up to the dumpster, leaned the ladder against it, climbed up a step and looked in. Then he climbed down, lifted the ladder and lowered the end inside.”

With her gaze, Donatti measured the height of the dumpster. “I’d say that was seven feet. If this guy could take one step up and look in, he was over six feet.”

“I said he was tall.”

“I’m five-eleven. If we measure me against the dumpster—” Donatti walked toward it.

“Don’t step on that puddle!” Ms. Shockley commanded.

Donatti froze.

“That’s the blood,” Ms. Shockley explained.

CHAPTER THREE

RIGHT. “WHOSE BLOOD?” Dumas asked.

“Bigfoot’s.” Ms. Shockley managed to shock both officers. “If you’ll let me finish...”

Dumas gestured. “Please do. He placed the ladder inside the dumpster and...?”

“Baby Bear came right up. Those little guys can really climb.” She sounded affectionate and amused. “But then he was clinging to the top rung, afraid to jump down. Mama Bear was roaring at him, then roaring at Bigfoot, and I didn’t know what was going to happen. Bigfoot grabbed that garbage can—” Ms. Shockley gestured at a battered aluminum can “—carried it over and flipped it upside down. He climbed up there to get the baby. The baby came into his arms. It was so sweet.” She had that coo in her voice some women got when it came to men and babies.

“Was the cub hurt?” Donatti hadn’t budged from her place in the alley.

“Baby Bear was fine, but the garbage can was old and rusty.”

They all looked at the can.

“All of a sudden, the side bent, Bigfoot’s foot went through the rusty bottom, and he was falling with Baby. Somehow he landed on his feet, but Baby panicked and grabbed him, and slashed his shoulder and chest. Those sharp baby claws opened up his shirt, and blood started rolling. It stained the material and dripped on the ground.” Ms. Shockley indicated the puddle.

“Officer Donatti, would you be so kind as to collect a sample of the blood?” Dumas was telling Gabriella something she should have known immediately to do.

Now she jumped and looked at him as if feeling a little green around the gills. “Sure!” She hustled over to the patrol car.

Did the sight of blood make her sick? Not a good thing in a police officer. He’d have to keep an eye on that. He walked to the sticky, rapidly congealing puddle, pulled out his clean handkerchief and dabbed it around the edges. When he had a decent sample, he pulled a plastic bag out of his shirt pocket, put the handkerchief inside and turned back to Ms. Shockley. “When the cub slashed him, what did Bigfoot do?”

“He dropped the f-bomb.”

“You heard him?”

“Oh, yeah. He was good and loud.”

“He can speak?”

“English and bear.”

They watched Donatti return with a lab kit and kneel by the puddle. “It’s blood all right,” she told them.

Ms. Shockley said, “With all that blood, I was afraid Mama Bear would be tempted to take a bite out of him, but he didn’t seem worried. He put the cub down by Mama Bear and while she was making much of her baby, Bigfoot walked to the truck. He got in and started the engine. I thought he was leaving. He pulled forward, backed up at an angle, got out—he had retrieved a towel from the cab and he was holding it to his chest—lowered the tailgate and called the bears.”

“He called them?” Dumas was starting to think Alaska was as wildly eccentric as Louisiana.

“Rumbled something. Mama Bear seemed to understand. She ran toward the truck bed and jumped in. The bigger cub made the jump. Baby Bear, the one who was stuck in the dumpster, needed help, so Bigfoot picked her up and put her in. She was fine with that.”

“Then they drove off?”

“Yes, but... Yes, but first he looked up at the window where I was standing and he waved.”

Donatti said “Damn!” and stood up fast.

CHAPTER FOUR

DUMAS THOUGHT DONATTI was responding to the report of the wave, but she was cupping one hand in the other and squinting at it.

She had blood, fresh blood, welling up in her palm.

He and Ms. Shockley hurried over.

“I put my hand down on a piece of glass.” Now Donatti really did look green. “So stupid!”

The splinter glistened dully in the pad below her left index finger.

“Not stupid.” Ms. Shockley pulled a tissue out of her purse and leaned over Donatti’s hand. “Glass is everywhere.” She eased the shard out of the skin and tossed it aside. She pressed the tissue over the cut. “But you can sure see the blood welling up.”

“Does she need stitches?” Dumas asked, because Ms. Shockley seemed remarkably at ease with the situation.

“No. An antiseptic wipe and a butterfly bandage should do the trick.” Ms. Shockley pulled both from her purse. She saw Dumas and Donatti looking at her, wondering why she was so prepared. “I’ve got two teenagers,” she explained. “My daughter plays soccer and my son’s in karate. If you want to break a bone, I can splint that before we transport you to the hospital.”

“No, thank you, ma’am,” Donatti said. “This is enough.”

Ms. Shockley finished cleaning and bandaging the wound.

Dumas put his hand under Donatti’s arm to give her support. “Why don’t you go lean against the wall? I’ll get the blood sample.”

“It’s okay. I got it already.”

“Before or after you cut yourself?”

“I think I got enough before.” But her eyes shifted away from his.

So she wasn’t sure.

She straightened. “Thanks, Chief. I’m okay now. I can do what needs to be done. While you finish the interview, I’ll put the blood sample in the camera bag and take pictures of the evidence.”

“You do that.” He watched her walk to the dumpster and start photographing the scratches on the brick wall and metal sides, damages caused by Baby Bear as she climbed inside. He kept a close eye on Donatti as he continued speaking to Ms. Shockley. “So Bigfoot waved at you? He knew you were there all the time?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t make any noise. Maybe he smelled my cologne?” she suggested uncertainly.

“What did you do when he waved?”

“I jumped so hard, I lost my grip on my phone.”

Dumas transferred his attention to an increasingly distressed Ms. Shockley.

“You dropped it?”

“I was filming the whole thing. I had a good grip on the phone, holding it out there, then that thing waved at me, and I jumped and I dropped it...”

“Ma’am, did you drop the phone three stories?”

“Yes!” She pulled it out of her purse. “It has a good, sturdy case on it, but three stories and a puddle of water, and it’s done for.” She showed him the phone. The screen was shattered; it looked as if the case was the only thing holding it together. “Do you know what that man did?”

“Bigfoot?”

“Yes, Bigfoot. When my phone hit the ground, he grinned.”

“Are you saying there’s no video record of the morning’s happenings?”

Dumas had either been played by an expert actress, or she was telling the truth exactly as it had happened. “How did you call in the, uh, sighting?”

Donatti finished up and put the camera into the case.

“When you push this button five times—” she showed him the side of her phone “—it calls 911. I took a chance. It worked. Then it made a frying noise...” She stared at the phone as if she’d lost her best friend. “I’ve got replacement insurance, but I don’t have time for this. Not now. This afternoon, I’ve got three construction firms coming to look over the project and start their bids.”

Dumas shut his notebook and tucked it into his pocket. “We’ll leave you to do what you need to do.”

That got her attention. She looked him right in the eye. “You’re not going to do anything about this, are you?”

“Officer Donatti has taken photos of the bear scratchings on the wall and in the dumpster. We have the blood. We’ll have it tested.” He was kind but firm.

“But nobody committed a crime,” Ms. Shockley concluded.

“That’s right, ma’am. You’re not even the first person to call in a Bigfoot sighting today.”

She put her hand to her forehead. “I don’t know what else to call him, but calling him Bigfoot seems politically incorrect somehow.”

Dumas nodded. “Probably is. But I don’t know what else to call him, either.”

Donatti said something under her breath.

“What did you say?” Ms. Shockley asked.

“I said *yeti*.” Donatti was definite in her opinion.

“Isn’t yeti what the creature is called in the Himalayas?” Ms. Shockley asked.

“Yes, but if you figure humans crossed the land bridge from Asia to America

in successive migrations, then the yeti could have, too.” Donatti made a good case.

“Maybe Sasquatch would be more polite?” Ms. Shockley mused. “Or I could use the creature’s name if I knew it.”

Donatti laughed. “Yes, that would probably be the most politically correct.”

Dumas wasn’t feigning confusion. “I believe no scientific evidence of Bigfoot exists?”

“Absolutely none,” Ms. Shockley said.

“Then why are you two discussing the beast...creature...as if it does?”

“Because I just saw it. Him. Definitely a him.” Ms. Shockley passed a trembling hand over her forehead. Now that she was done giving her account, she seemed to lose all the starch in her spine. “Once I get my new phone, I’m going to cancel my appointments. Before the kids get back from day camp, I’m going to pick up some sushi, go home and eat it with a glass of white wine, and take a nap. I’ve never given a police report before, and I sure as hell have never had a Bigfoot sighting before.”

“Then we shared an experience, because I’ve never taken a Bigfoot report before.” Dumas passed her his business card. “If you think of anything else, please call the Rockin Police Department or me personally.”

Ms. Shockley took the card and put it in her pocket, then retrieved her card case and handed one to him and one to Donatti. “Thank you. I’ll do that. I’m sure we’ll speak again soon, Chief Dumas.”

As they walked away, Donatti asked softly, “Chief, did she just ask you on a date?”

“Not at all. It’s a small town. We simply agreed we would speak again soon.”

Donatti nodded. “That’s what I thought. A date.”

CHAPTER FIVE

DUMAS CHECKED HIS WATCH. “Donatti, what do you think? Are you up for the drive out to the original Bigfoot sighting? We can hand this off to someone else and run you to the hospital to be disinfected and maybe get a stitch and a tetanus shot.”

“I’m up for the drive.” She grimaced at her bandage. “It’s not deep, just a scratch.” She looked up, saw the expression on his face and laughed. “It’s the thing girl officers say to boy officers to make them think we’re tough.”

“I remember hearing it in Louisiana, too.”

“Actually, it feels like I sliced off a hunk of flesh, but assuming Ms. Shockley is right, I don’t need stitches, so we might as well take the call. It’ll distract me.” She climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Right.” He took shotgun again. “How long will it take us to get wherever it is we’re going?”

“We’re headed north toward Denali State Park and ultimately Denali National Park. The ETA to the Magnussons’ is forty-five minutes to an hour, depending.”

He looked at his watch again. Nothing yet, but he was getting antsy. “Let’s shoot for forty-five.”

She flipped on the vehicle’s red-and-blues. “Can do.” In town, she kept it at a modest thirty-five miles per hour. As soon as they reached the city limits and the open highway, she put her foot down on the accelerator. The powerful vehicle cruised between the Talkeetna Mountains and the Alaska Range, and the peaks gleamed sharp and white against the blue sky.

“Every time I see those mountains with their heads poked out of the clouds, I am in awe. And when Denali deigns to uncover itself...” He trailed off, his gaze on his watch.

“Formerly Mount McKinley, Denali is the Native American name and means ‘high’ or ‘tall.’ At 20,310 feet, it’s the tallest mountain in North America. Denali State Park is 325,000 acres. Denali National Park is 4.7 million acres. The preserve is 1,334,118 acres, for a total of 6,075,030 acres. There are 124 permanent employees. Average number of miles patrolled by dogsled each winter is 3,000. The park is teeming with moose, wolves, caribou and, yes, bear.”

He looked up. “And Bigfoot.”

She agreed, “And Bigfoot.”

“You sound like a Wikipedia entry. Is there a reason for all this detail?”

“I was trying to keep you entertained so you wouldn’t keep looking at your watch. You’re making me nervous. What are you waiting for?”

No harm in telling this officer. “With me out of the office, I’ve got a little business I’m expecting to take shape.”

“Really?” She didn’t take her eyes off the road, which was a good thing considering the speed they were traveling. She didn’t say anything more, either, but he could tell she was thinking. After twenty minutes, she came to some conclusion because she nodded. “Okay.”

Dumas knew when he took the job of police chief that the easy part would be the big cleaning at the beginning. He’d fired West, Gerasimova and Nichols knowing full well the other rats would skitter back into the darkness and be harder to catch.

So he watched and wondered. What crimes would he catch his officers committing? There were many time-honored methods of supplementing a law enforcement officer’s usually meager salary. Would it be human trafficking? Selling drugs?

Of course, the protection racket was a good possibility. It almost always started innocently. While making his rounds, an officer drops by the restaurant that advertises free coffee and meals for police. That policy was smart on the part of a restaurant owner; when armed officers frequented a business, few thieves wanted to take the chance of robbing the place. But with some officers, free coffee and meals escalated to free gifts for his/her kids, free clothes and shoes, free service for the private car. Then...then all those freebies led to real trouble. *Pay me to protect your business or you won’t be in business any longer.*

Who was the business owner supposed to complain to? The police?

Back in his youth, when Dumas sought adventure in New Orleans, he’d helped break up a protection racket. He hadn’t really expected to find one in Rockin, but there you go. With the old police chief, corruption started at the top and dribbled down through the whole department.

Today, Dumas planned to bring down the Rockin protection racket and make a couple of his officers—Kittilia and one he’d been unable to detect—very, very sorry they’d ever disregarded the law.

He glanced at his watch. As happened in Alaska, they had moved beyond cell-tower range, so he observed, “You seem to know where we’re going.”

“I do.” Donatti slowed way, way down and made a left onto a smaller highway, then almost at once onto a gravel road. “These are my relatives, the ones I visited every summer, and I’m *extremely* surprised to hear they called in a Bigfoot sighting. Stunned, in fact.”

Interesting that she hadn’t mentioned the relationship sooner. Dumas poked at

her a little. “They don’t believe in Bigfoot? Or Bigfoot sightings are such a common occurrence out here, they wouldn’t bother to call it in?”

“Something like that.” Which wasn’t an answer. “Shawn is a wildlife specialist. Theresa’s a homeopathic healer.”

Dumas perked up. “Voodoo?”

“Herbs.”

“Sounds like they’re an interesting combination.”

“They are.” Donatti steered around a sharp corner.

The trees parted. The sun struck the windshield of a blue SUV, the expanse of a lush green lawn and a small, old, well-tended home with a two-car garage. In the side yard, deer fencing surrounded an extensive garden, and behind that a tall shed painted a dark shade of red with a greenhouse was set off to the side.

Donatti parked.

They got out and looked around.

Dumas started up the steps to the porch.

But Donatti yelled “Auntie!” and ran toward the shed.

Dumas followed more slowly, observing his officer, the woman who stepped out of the shed to greet her, the shattered greenhouse glass on the ground, and the scattering of dirt, pots and plants on the outside tables.

The two women hugged, kissed cheeks and hugged again.

Dumas could see the family resemblance.

Donatti had gotten her height from a different side of the family; the middle-aged woman was about five foot five. Her skin was smooth and tanned, and when she pulled off her gardening hat, she revealed short white hair spiky with sweat. Gently she seized Donatti’s bandaged hand and asked an anxious question.

Donatti spoke in a low, reassuring tone.

Theresa gave her terse instructions.

While Donatti picked at the corner of her butterfly bandage, Dumas walked toward them, looking more closely at the door on the shed that had been ripped open, the broken greenhouse windows, and the pots that had been smashed and their contents scattered. Someone—Bigfoot?—had a bad attitude.

The older woman turned to observe him. She extended her hand, but her dark eyes judged him, and not favorably. “I’m Theresa Magnusson. Welcome to my home.”

Donatti jumped in with all her manners and an anxious charm she had never shown before. “Theresa, this is Police Chief Rodolphe Dumas. Sir, this is one of my dearest relatives in all of Alaska, Theresa Magnusson.”

“Mrs. Magnusson, it’s a pleasure.” He put his hand in hers.

The two of them shook briskly.

“Please call me Theresa.” She didn’t immediately release him; instead she added her left hand to the mix, cupping his fingers while the warmth of her seeped into him. He relaxed, and so did the woman, the hard core of hostility melting away. She answered a question he had not asked. “Yes. You’re right. This land is where you now belong.”

Maybe he had a few doubts. But he’d never said so aloud. “I’m thinking Bigfoot isn’t the only magic here.”

She let him go at once. “What? What about Bigfoot?”

“We got a Bigfoot report from this location.” Donatti sounded drily amused.

Theresa frowned. “From here? Who called it in?”

“An anonymous call from a burn phone.” Donatti painfully finished peeling off the bandage.

“I’ll *bet* it was anonymous.” This report had made Theresa angry, but she took Donatti’s hand and examined it, then pulled her toward the shed. Theresa disappeared inside and returned with a small corked ceramic pot. She opened it and smeared an herbaceous green paste on the cut.

Donatti yanked her hand back. “That stings!”

“It’s supposed to,” Mrs. Magnusson said. “It’s a disinfectant, and next time, you’ll think twice before you cut yourself in a filthy alley.”

Dumas pulled out his notebook and pencil. “Mrs. Magnusson, do you mind if I record this?”

Mrs. Magnusson shot him a withering look. “Yes, I mind!”

“I’ll take notes, then.” He held his pencil in readiness. “Where were you when the damage occurred?”

“Delivering Rose Tingelhoff’s baby.” Theresa spoke to Donatti. “A healthy boy. Mother and child are doing well, Rose is delighted at last to have her son, and George declared a moratorium on any more babies.”

Donatti’s indignation at being smeared with herbs softened, and she spoke to Dumas. “Auntie is the midwife for a lot of women who live out here.” She waved her good hand around at the encompassing wilderness.

“A wonderful skill and I know the women are grateful to have her.” He made note that Theresa Magnusson had been accounted for during the time of the destruction. “Theresa, you haven’t seen Bigfoot?”

“Every day and every night,” Theresa said tartly. “What do you think? I live in the middle of the woods, out of the mainstream of society, so I must be in constant communication with a giant hairy beast!”

“I’ll take that as a no.” Dumas wrote in his notebook. “You’ve been vandalized. If it’s not Bigfoot, who do you suppose it is?”

“Police Chief Rodolphe Dumas, I am a homeopathic healer.” She disappeared into the shed and came back with a mundane collection of gauze wraps and adhesive bandages. “I do good work. I heal people. I listen to their worries, and I make them feel better about themselves, their choices and their situations. Rumors claim I’m a psychic and a mind-reader. Maybe it’s true, maybe it’s not, but what is true is that I frighten the ignorant, and they do not like to be frightened by what they don’t understand. Periodically they come, always when I’m gone. They break in, and they wreak havoc. Although...never this much damage.”

“The Rockin law enforcement is prepared to help at any moment.” Dumas kept eye contact.

Theresa scowled.

“Auntie,” Donatti chided in a soft voice.

Theresa took a breath. “Right.” To Dumas, she said, “Your predecessors were not concerned with problems beyond the city limits and most certainly not interested in crimes against the *oddities* as she—the former police chief—called us.”

Dumas jumped on that. “Us?”

“My family and me.” Theresa reached out and grasped Donatti’s uninjured hand. “My first thought when facing this kind of crisis is to clean up and move on. Thank you, Police Chief Dumas, for assuring me and my husband we are no longer alone.”

“I moved to Alaska to remind myself of the good people who live in this world. Through no fault of anyone but my own, I had lost sight of that while in Louisiana.” The divorce, the death of his son, another loss, of a different kind, of his daughter... Sometimes it seemed Alaska would give him his soul back. In the winter darkness, he might at last see the light.

Now Dumas glanced around. “You have security cameras located in strategic locations.”

“Yes.” Theresa pulled Donatti closer, and used gauze and tape to cover her wound and the green herbaceous paste. “These people who come—they usually appear from the woods with ski masks to hide their faces, spray paint the security camera lenses, then do their nasty work. The one today—he’s angry. Eager. I can smell it.”

Dumas started to ask about that. But no, not yet. “It would seem whoever vandalized you knew exactly how to gain the advantage.”

A profound moment of silence followed his pronouncement.

“Yes,” Theresa agreed. “It’s almost as if these people knew exactly what to do to create the most harm. The anonymous caller—what did they say?”

“This person said they had some... something... and some... Discomforting...”

“This person said they had come up your drive and saw Bigfoot running away from your garden and shed. In fear, this valiant person fled... This person had a mechanical voice.” Donatti produced her phone and showed Theresa the video that had been delivered to the police station. “Have you seen footprints to match this monster?”

“I’ve seen no monster footprints.” Theresa spoke with teeth clenched.

A tall blond man wearing rugged gear and hiking boots jogged out of the surrounding forest.

“Except his.”

CHAPTER SIX

THERESA SMILED FONDLY as she watched the giant man come toward them. “Police Chief Dumas, my husband, Shawn Magnusson.” She caught Shawn’s sleeve as he stalked toward Dumas. “Shawn, Police Chief Dumas is a good man.”

Mr. Magnusson looked down at her.

Peace and calm passed from her to him.

The woman had a gift.

Mr. Magnusson removed his backpack and placed it against the wall of the shed. He extended his hand to Dumas and shook firmly. “It’s good to meet you, Police Chief Dumas.” He had an accent—Minnesotan, maybe, or the upper Michigan peninsula, that kind of singsong Scandinavian intonation that made Dumas want to drink lager and dance the polka.

Theresa was right. The guy must make monster-size footprints. He was easily six foot four, built like a body builder and Dumas’s hand was engulfed in his. “Good to meet you, sir.”

“Sir?” Startled, Magnusson grinned. “I don’t hear that very often. I’m Shawn. Call me that. First names—it’s an Alaska thing.” He released Dumas and opened his arms to Donatti. “Honey, give your ol’ uncle a hug.”

Donatti jumped at him and got crushed in his embrace. When he set her away, she was laughing.

So was he. But when he looked around at the damage, he quickly sobered. “What happened here?”

“Vandals. And a Bigfoot report,” Theresa said.

“Damn it to hell!” Shawn’s fair complexion changed to ruddy red in his cheeks and at the tip of his nose, and his blue eyes snapped. “What are you going to do about this?” he asked Dumas.

“In this particular instance of vandalism, I’ll apprehend the culprit today,” Dumas said. “Or die trying.”

“What about when it happens again?”

“If—” Dumas emphasized the *if*, “—other instances occur, I will solve them, too. But you will have to call them in. And press charges.”

Donatti rubbed her palms together.

Dumas met Shawn’s angry gaze. “But for the moment, sir, may I ask where you’ve been while this damage occurred?”

Donatti grimaced.

“In the woods tracking a poacher. It’s my job.” Despite his wife’s interference, Shawn was definitely projecting antagonism.

“Alone?”

“Yes. Alone.”

“Did you catch a poacher?”

“I caught a man walking the woods with a hunting rifle, but he had all the necessary permits and was practicing for the season.”

Theresa and Donatti snorted.

Donatti explained, “That *probably* means the hunter had yet to make a kill, he’d already removed it, or he’d hidden it very well.”

Dumas nodded. “We have poachers in Louisiana.” He turned back to Shawn. “For the last several hours, no one can verify your whereabouts?”

“No.”

“Do you have a vehicle?”

“More than one. I have a dogsled. I have a snowmobile. And I have a 2015 Ram pickup.”

“Color?”

“Gray.”

“Granite,” Theresa corrected.

The two men’s eyes met, and for one second, they were united in silent exasperation.

Women and their colors.

But united or not, Dumas had a duty. “Shawn, may I ask if you have any injuries on your shoulders and chest?”

“Chief!” Donatti sounded appalled, and as if the idea had never occurred to her. Maybe it hadn’t. Maybe only suspicious old police chiefs could connect the incident in town with this blond behemoth.

Shawn stared with forbidding hostility.

Dumas braced himself. If this guy wanted to kill him, Dumas was dead, and he was pretty sure Donatti would help her relatives bury the body.

“No, I don’t,” Shawn said.

“Would you be willing to show me?”

To Dumas’s surprise, Shawn said in that northern Midwest accent, “Well, sure.” He opened his shirt, one slow button at a time, and pulled back the material to reveal smooth skin over massive muscles.

A. The guy worked out, which, except for the hair-all-over bit, matched Laila Shockley’s description.

B. If, earlier in the day, a bear had clawed Shawn’s chest and shoulders, he

had amazing healing properties, because the skin was smooth and unscarred.

C. Or the guy/creature in the pickup who'd rescued Baby Bear wasn't him.

Dumas would have sworn it was, yet what could he do about it? He not only had no evidence, but no crime had been committed.

"Okay, I'm done with that line of questioning." Dumas shut his notebook. "Mrs. Magnusson... Theresa, if you're reputed to have premonitions, did you have a hunch this vandalism was going to happen?"

"That's how you're going to solve the crime?" Shawn's voice rose. "By asking my wife about her premonitions?"

Dumas returned to formality. "Sir, I never claimed I don't believe in premonitions, nor did I ever say I would fail to use every tool in my arsenal to investigate criminal activity."

"Can I talk now?" Theresa snapped at her husband.

Dumas hadn't intimidated Shawn Magnusson, but his wife did. He subsided.

Theresa said, "After I delivered the baby, I cleaned up and stepped out of their door, and I knew something was wrong. A malevolent soul had crossed onto our land, and he..." She paused as if in thought. "It was a he, and he takes delight in hurting, breaking, maiming. If I'd been here, he would have... He had hoped I would be here."

Donatti made a sound of distress.

Shawn put his arm around Theresa and hugged her.

"That doesn't sound like—" Dumas paused.

"Like Kittilia," Donatti finished the sentence for him, then met his gaze. "He didn't come into work this morning. Didn't come in until after the Bigfoot call," she corrected herself. "The first Bigfoot call. He was the logical guy to do this. But he's more petty, if you know what I mean. Good-humored, but with bad morals. If it's somebody like Auntie has described—do you want me to call for fingerprinting?"

"I'm not putting you off, but not just yet." Dumas glanced at his wrist. "I'm expecting a message, and there's no signal. Do you have a hot spot nearby?"

Theresa pointed behind the house. "We can get satellite there. Usually."

He followed the steep path to the tree-bare knob of land, and when he reached the critical point, his watch vibrated. He glanced at the message, then headed back down the path as fast as he could, pebbles and dirt rolling ahead of him. As he passed the shed, he said, "Donatti, you stay, get the official report together, and help your aunt and uncle clean up. I've got to go."

Donatti's eyes flashed. He'd as good as told her he was expecting trouble. "But I'm on duty!"

"That is your duty now." Truth to tell, Dumas was glad for that excuse. In

town, things were about to get ugly. This was his problem, his solution, and he needed to handle it himself. Like the first incident with West.

Before Donatti could object more vigorously, he slid into the driver's seat, locked the doors and roared off.

Dumas turned from the gravel driveway onto the highway and drove about a mile before he spotted movement in the rearview mirror. He glanced, slowed abruptly, stared, then accelerated again.

Doesn't that just figure?

* * *

GABRIELLA DONATTI STOOD with her hands on her hips. "What the hell was that? You stay here and clean up while the big ol' police chief goes to face...whatever danger it is he's going to face?"

"What makes you think he's going to face danger?" Shawn asked.

"You heard him. He's going to solve the problem of the vandalism. Anyway, I knew something was up. He said so, and he's been constantly checking his watch like he was waiting for a sign."

Theresa stood staring at the road. In that abstracted voice that made everyone in the family pay attention, she said, "Dear, I want you to take my car and go after him."

Oh, no. One of Theresa's premonitions. That was never good.

Shawn dug in his pocket for his keys, removed Theresa's car key and fob, and tossed them to her.

Gabriella caught them and started for the silver Subaru Forester. "I don't know where he's going."

"Then you'll have to drive quickly, won't you?" Theresa closed her eyes. "He's going to a large, dim space. I can smell tires. And oil. It's got a red sign above the door into the office."

Shawn and Gabriella spoke at the same time. "Cold Road Tire."

"That helps." Gabriella slid into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Uncle Shawn appeared at the window.

She rolled it down.

"You be careful."

"You know I will," she promised, and drove like a bat out of hell toward Rockin.

Shawn watched her make the corner. He shifted from foot to foot. "Dear, I know she's our adult daughter and has proved herself capable in every way..."

"She is amazingly capable," Theresa said. "I'm so proud of her."

"I'm proud of her, too." He never took his gaze away from where she had

I'm proud of her, too. He never took his gaze away from where she had disappeared. "And I don't ever have any premonitions."

"That would be a bit much for one family."

"At the same time...how mad do you think she'd be if we wandered into Rockin today? Not to check up on her or anything, but to make sure everything is..."

"Okay?" Theresa moved toward his truck. "Well... She did take my car, and Anna Cameron is in labor. It makes sense to go retrieve it."

He dashed forward and opened the passenger door. "Let me help you." He cupped her butt as she climbed in, and asked, "Have I told you how wonderful you are?"

"Not lately." But she smiled as he hurried around to the driver's side and climbed in. As he whipped the truck around and headed out, she said, "Don't speed, dear. Trust in Gabriella's strengths."

Shawn growled softly.

But he drove the speed limit into Rockin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DUMAS DROVE WITH the siren off and the red-and-blues on, doing a hundred miles per hour on the straights. When it came to over-the-speed-limit driving, he could have given Donatti a run for her money. Give him curves, and he would have left her in his dust. He'd had more practice on narrow roads, and he'd had experience keeping an eye out for wildlife; although a moose looked radically different than an alligator, they both would trash a speeding cruiser.

The text he'd received at Magnusson's home had been from Rob Colip of Cold Road Tires, letting him know that Rob had withheld payment from Kittilia and his partner—whoever that was—and the two officers were on their way to force Colip to pay or close.

Dumas passed the Welcome to Rockin sign, slowed to the proper speed and drove into the parking lot of Cold Road Tires.

The three giant garage doors were closed.

The lights were off.

All was silent.

Dumas cruised around to the office door and parked, hoping against all hope that it was unlocked because on a Wednesday afternoon, a closed sign in the window of the local tire shop was bad. Very, very bad. When he started imagining how dire it could be, he wanted to crawl through the mail slot and take the whole place hostage.

But no. He was a modern cop bound by modern rules. Not even in Alaska could he drive up, talk the tough talk, shoot up the shop and come away polishing his badge.

He had to look on the bright side. There would be no civilians in the line of fire. At least he hoped not. He reached for the knob, turned it slowly, opened the heavy steel door, eased into the dim, empty manager's office and closed the door behind him with hardly a click.

Rob Colip had requested Dumas handle the situation himself. He didn't know—no one knew—how far the bribery racket went.

Right now, alone and facing a possible shoot-out, Dumas wasn't so sure he'd made the right decision by concurring.

Dumas released the safety on his service revolver and opened the door between the manager's office and the tire shop. He waited in tense anticipation, and when no shots were fired, he peered in.

Two cars were up on the hoists.

A car and a pickup had been pulled into the bays behind them. They blocked his view of the far side of the garage.

In the middle between the hoists, one body was sprawled lifelessly on the concrete: Rob Colip, his hands tucked beneath him as if he'd grabbed his chest as he fell.

The poor bastard. He'd set out to right a wrong and died for it.

Dumas had come too late.

He looked up, peered around, saw no one else. Kittilia and his partner were not visible from this vantage point. But they had to be here...somewhere.

Up on the hoists?

Most likely.

Behind the vehicles parked against the garage bay doors?

Also likely.

This had all the makings of an ambush.

He could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall. The smell of tires, of oil, of fear wafted toward him in waves. He imagined he could hear the mechanics calling to each other, talking to the customers, sending them away to escape this final showdown.

Dumas's sense of unease deepened. He knew, looking back, he'd somehow been played.

He shouldn't be alone in this. He should have called in his men.

What a crunch to his pride to admit he couldn't handle this on his own.

On the other hand, what kind of fool got himself killed for pride?

Pulling his watch close to his face, he typed a message to the Rockin police department. Come in. Come swift. With caution. He included the address.

He immediately got an affirmative, and decided to back out and wait.

Then he heard it—a rhythmic thumping, metal against metal. Something big was pounding on...a door? Was someone locked inside a closet? A customer?

Dumas stepped into the garage and shut the door behind him with barely a click. He lifted his service weapon in both hands and swept the room. Then he eased himself along the wall, one slow step at a time, toward the pickup parked by one of the doors. He was looking for the trap.

Where was Officer Kittilia? Where was his partner in crime? They weren't visible anywhere.

And *who* was his partner?

Dumas didn't believe he was wrong about Kittilia. The guy was weak, not vicious. Kittilia wouldn't have wantonly destroyed Theresa Magnusson's greenhouse. The other officer must sport a mean streak, and Dumas didn't know who on the Rockin police force that could be.

Pistol in hand, Dumas looked under the pickup. It was tall enough for a man to hide under, but no man did, and he inched between the pickup's tailgate and the garage door. On the other side of the vehicle, he peered around the taillight into the corridor formed by the truck and the car beside it. He could see Rob Colip stretched out on the floor, but no one else.

He prowled behind the trunk of the other vehicle, a sporty BMW 330i, moving more quickly but still silently. On the other side, he bent low and crept past the driver's door toward the hoist and the—

He halted. He stared.

Six feet from the BMW's front bumper, under the edge of the car-laden garage hoist, Officer Kittilia sat strapped to a folding metal chair. The chair sat on the metal plate that protected the hoist's belowground mechanism. His ankles had been taped to the chair legs. His wrists had been pulled behind him and taped to the chair seat. Broad silver tape ringed his throat. Tape covered his mouth and wrapped around the back of his head. He resembled a partially wrapped mummy.

His sweaty skin had the pale tinge of oxygen-deprivation. He saw Dumas, registered relief, then in an increase of agitation, he shifted his eyeballs—they were the only part he could move—toward the middle of the garage.

Dumas eased forward, viewed Colip's unmoving body, then returned his gaze to Kittilia. *What is it, man? Where's your partner?*

Again Dumas eased forward, all his senses straining to detect a sound, a movement. Nothing. He looked up everywhere—on the hoist, up by the high windows—and saw nothing. At last, he stepped away from the relative safety of the vehicle and looked around.

Nothing. There was nothing but Kittilia strapped to a chair and the dead or at least inert Rob Colip.

What's going on? What am I not observing?

He set the safety on his pistol, looked around again, then started toward Kittilia.

Kittilia's brown eyes bulged, and frantically he bounced up and down, awkwardly thumping the metal chair on the metal plate.

That was the sound Dumas had heard in the office.

Across the garage, the office door slammed open. "Put the weapon down, sir. Put it down!" Donatti's voice, raised in a commanding shout.

Dumas pivoted to see Donatti, service pistol extended, framed in the opening—and a completely conscious Rob Colip aiming the automatic pistol he'd kept hidden beneath his body pointed at Dumas, and at Jim Kittilia.

Donatti shot three times.

Colip shot, a blast of bullets that sprayed the walls.
As Dumas launched himself sideways into Kittilia, he had one thought.
I misread the whole situation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

That evening

POLICE CHIEF RODOLPHE Dumas leaned down to put the towel-wrapped pot of gumbo into the cooler, and groaned. He groaned as he added the rice cooker, lugged the cooler out to his car and groaned again as he hoisted the whole thing into the back of his truck.

A man in his fifties did not fling himself at a trussed-up fellow officer, taking them both down and skidding across the metal plate and then the cement floor, without consequences. He had bruises and aches he would never have noticed in his twenties. But the brief review of his life that passed before his eyes had given him an appreciation for what he had here in Rockin, and cleared away any lingering doubts about his future in Alaska.

He limped to the driver's side door, slid into the seat and pointed the truck in the direction of the Due North Apartments. He got there in time to see Donatti getting into her personal vehicle. He pulled up behind her and called, "*Chère*, can I drive you to your parents' house?"

Like a doe in the headlights, Donatti froze and stared. "My...parents?"

"The Magnussons." He pulled a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket. "I called in a favor to get the results of the blood tests early."

"Blood test?" She emphasized the singular. "The one I took in the alley? Did I contaminate it?"

"Why don't you get in and we'll talk?"

She had little choice. She could either talk now or later. So she locked her car, came around to the truck's passenger side, climbed in and belted up.

As he drove through the parking lot, he caught a glimpse of Laila Shockley going into the apartment offices.

He waved.

She stared in wide-eyed consternation, then waved in return.

Damn. He wasn't in uniform. Donatti wasn't in uniform. They were driving out together in a civilian vehicle... Being a smart woman, Laila would have questions about him and the young officer beside him.

Complications. Always complications.

He got back on the street, then hit the highway toward the Magnussons', following the same route they'd driven earlier today.

He could tell Donatti was thinking, and he waited to hear what she'd say.

Finally she asked, “What did the blood test say? One test, right?”

“Two. I took a sample of blood while you were getting the kit from the patrol car.”

“Why did you do that, chief?” She sounded more than a little annoyed.

He glanced at her. Yes, definitely annoyed, but not scared of him or what he’d do or say. Good. She knew he was a friend. “At the time, I told myself the blood was drying and we needed to make sure we got that sample. Now I think my instinct was speaking to me.”

“I was not behaving normally?”

“I couldn’t tell if you were laughing at Ms. Shockley, which seemed out of character, or if you were frightened, also out of character.”

“I was both. I wanted to do the right thing for both my family and my job, and they were in opposition. It was...weird.” She seemed to notice she had admitted she was related to Bigfoot and hastily added, “So two tests?”

“The first one, from my handkerchief, revealed the DNA of a white male, not in any database, with an interesting gene. A mutation.”

“Yeah.” She stared through the windshield.

“The second test was clearly two different persons, one male, one female. They are directly related, and the female doesn’t have that confusing gene.”

“Yeah.” She settled back in her seat. “Are you going to interrogate me about my family?”

“No.” He had it figured out. “How was the psychiatric evaluation?” Because a psychiatric evaluation was a law enforcement requirement after an officer had fired a weapon that resulted in death, and Donatti had spent the afternoon with a psychiatrist.

“The usual. I didn’t feel bad about shooting that bastard who had caused so much pain and, oh gee, intended to shoot you because you were interfering with his intimidation scheme.”

“But you made sure to show some remorse about taking a life.”

“You bet. I don’t need to be written up as a cold-blooded killer. Even though in this case—”

He waved her to silence. “Don’t say it!” Because if anyone ever asked him, he would have to make a choice between the truth and a supportive lie. “This afternoon, while we were at the hospital, I talked to Kittilia, got the whole story. Last year, before I took the job, Kittilia and Officer Gerasimova decided they were going to get into the protection-racket business. They were doing pretty well—cakes from the tea shop, greeting cards from the bookshop.”

“Dumbasses,” Donatti said in disgust.

“Then Kittilia needed tires and Gerasimova needed an oil change, and they

went to Cold Road Tires and ‘talked’ to Rob Colip, told him if he didn’t cooperate, he’d be in trouble.”

“I guess they were in for a surprise.”

“They were. He leaped right back at them. He told them he’d handle the blackmail and the collection of funds, and that if they tried to turn him in, he had them on camera for extortion.” Dumas took a breath. “He’d been waiting for just that opportunity. Turns out, he *had* been a cop in eastern Washington.”

“Bad cop?”

“The worst. I spoke to the town’s mayor. Colip ran the protection racket there, too, and they’d played hades getting rid of him. He was smart and mean, almost impossible to trap, and when they finally did, their witness was so scared they had to put her in a jail cell to keep her safe, and the mayor slept outside her cell.”

“Armed?”

“Yes, indeed. Colip struck a deal—if they’d drop all charges, he’d leave town and not come back. If they didn’t—he knew a lot of secrets.”

“Like about the mayor?”

With some humor, Dumas said, “The mayor did not admit to that. But the town was glad to see the back of Colip, and they took the deal. He came up here, I suppose with all his ill-gotten gains, and started the tire shop.”

She turned to face Dumas. “Do you realize he didn’t care about the money? He liked the power. He liked being mean to the owner of the flower shop, the owner of the bookshop. He liked having two police officers under his thumb.”

“Power is indeed the great corrupter,” Dumas said. “Colip made Kittilia call in the Bigfoot story while he drove out to vandalize your mother’s greenhouse, supposedly to keep us busy, distracted and chasing our tails. But he enjoyed the destruction. That man was mean to the bone.”

Fiercely, Donatti said, “Thank God she sensed him and stayed away.”

“God’s own truth,” Dumas agreed. “After I fired Gerasimova, there was only one police officer for Colip to intimidate, and that was poor old Kittilia. I had given Gerasimova the out he needed.”

“I heard Gerasimova moved to the Lower 48.”

“He was probably afraid Anchorage wasn’t far enough away from Rob Colip.” Dumas didn’t want to complete the story, but he had to admit the truth. “When Colip came to me, told me about the officers who were blackmailing him, I fell for it hook, line and sinker. I felt there was something bad going on with Kittilia, so I asked Colip about him. He wouldn’t admit to anything—too afraid of retaliation, he told me. But he *slipped*.” His tone clearly told her it had not been a slip. “So I *knew* it was Kittilia. What a sucker I am.”

“You really are, Chief. Anything else you want to confess?” Donatti sounded good humored, but also exasperated.

good-natured, but also exasperated.

For good reason. She had bigger personal problems.

“I’ll go to confession on Sunday. The good priest will give me penance, and in the future I’ll remember not to be the old fool who imagines he can handle a sting operation alone.” He paused, then added, “I won’t be leaving you behind again.”

“Damned right you won’t.”

“Did I scare you, *chère*?”

“I’m too young for white hairs.”

“So you are. The sun is dropping below the treetops. We’ll be at your folks’ soon. Look.” He gestured to the east, where a full moon rose above the mountains. “Anything else you’d like to discuss?”

“Nope.”

“I surmise this special gene only manifests in the males of your family?”

She shot him an exasperated glance. “So if I don’t want to discuss it, you will?”

“When you were born, your parents knew you wouldn’t follow in your father’s large footsteps.” Dumas was groping his way through a tangle of thoughts. “They sent you to Nevada because...?”

“Because my aunt lived there and they knew she would put me in my Catholic girls’ school and watch over me.”

“You lived here until you were in grade school when you...?”

“You have it all figured out.” Donatti was sarcastic. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“You went to kindergarten...”

“First grade.”

“And drew a photo of your parents...?”

“I gave a report on what my father did.”

“You announced to the whole school he was a yeti who talked to animals, which promptly led to a psychiatric evaluation.”

“And a social worker who visited weekly because obviously my parents had been playing reality games with me. It didn’t help that I said my mom’s job was to see the future.”

“The other children were tormenting you. The teachers treated you with caution.”

“I had to go.” Donatti sighed. “It was the worst kind of exile, but every summer I came back and every year I understood more. Coming to Rockin was coming home.”

“*Chère*, that’s how I feel, too.”

They drove down the highway at a reasonable speed, united in their pleasure in at last finding their places in the world

in at last finding their places in the world.

At 8:35 p.m., they turned into the Magnussons' driveway. Dumas slowed abruptly; on the side lawn, he saw three bears, a mama and two babies, rolling in the grass. "Quite a coincidence," he said.

Donatti hummed a noncommittal response.

Dumas pulled up in front of the home and parked behind the three vehicles in the driveway: Theresa's SUV, Shawn's gray 2015 Ram pickup—and a twenty-year-old faded green truck.

CHAPTER NINE

ON HIS KNOCK, Theresa opened the door. “Welcome, Chief. Did you bring us your gumbo? I’m delighted. Gabriella has told us so much about it!” She sounded like she had expected him.

Well, of course she had.

“Come on in.” She stepped back to allow him to enter the old-fashioned, slightly worn living area. One oversize, warmly colored Oriental rug covered the hardwood floor. Two recliners and a couch sat in front of the large-screen TV.

The kitchen/dining area was equally worn and oh-so-homey. The blue Formica countertop sported a yogurt maker, a well-used knife block and a cooling pie on a metal trivet. The scent of baking bread filled the air, and Dumas didn’t need Theresa’s gift to know that this house had been loved and lived in.

“Your home is wonderful,” he said. “It reminds me of my great-aunt’s home in Louisiana. So hospitable!”

“Hello, baby.” Theresa enfolded Donatti in her arms, her voice warm and loving.

Now that she was here, Donatti looked wary, scared, pleased, unsure, as if she anticipated interesting revelations with who knew what results.

Dumas carried the cooler over to the stovetop. He opened it, placed the pot on the burner, flipped the heat on low and said, “Let me know when we’re going to eat, and I’ll add the filé powder.” Because you had to add filé off the heat, then serve quickly, and no reheating. He placed the rice cooker next to an ancient chrome toaster, plugged it in and turned it to warm. “I prepared the rice at home, so I can have dinner on the table in ten minutes.”

The Magnussons hadn’t eaten; five places had been set at the kitchen table, although Dumas had arrived unannounced and—“It’s a drive out here. Mind if I use your bathroom?”

“Shawn’s in there right now, but... Ah, there he is.” Theresa smiled at her husband. “Dear, look who came to dinner!”

Shawn shook Dumas’s hand. “*Mi casa es tu casa.*”

“*Gracias,*” Dumas replied easily. “I didn’t mean to make you change.”

Magnusson paused. Looked down at his clothes. “I’m wearing the same outfit I was wearing earlier today.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Dumas put his hand on the fifth chair at the table. “I think you know that.”

Donatti rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. “Listen, folks...”

“Your son can come out,” Dumas said. “I won’t be shocked. And a growing boy shouldn’t miss a meal.”

Donatti said, “Dad, I told you he had it figured out.”

“So did I.” Theresa smirked at Shawn. “But you know your father never listens to me.”

“I do, too!” Shawn said.

Theresa looked at him. Just looked at him.

“When you make sense,” he added.

Theresa smacked him in the arm, went to the door in the hallway and opened it. “It’s okay, you can come out. He’s a friend.”

The boy came out slowly, walked through the shadowy hallway and stepped into the light.

Donatti went to his side. “This is my brother, George.”

George was tall, like his father and sister, but obviously an adolescent, wearing a teen’s uniform—roomy T-shirt and frayed jeans. His feet were huge and bare, and he moved awkwardly, as if he had yet to grow into his long arms and legs.

And of course, he was hairy. All-over hairy, as far as Dumas could see, from his bare toes to the top of his head.

This was Bigfoot, son of Bigfoot, and to Dumas, the only surprise was how closely he resembled the Sasquatch of legend.

George watched for Dumas’s reaction with a mix of defiance and worry.

Dumas extended a hand. “How do you do? I’m Chief Rodolphe Dumas. It’s good to meet you at last.”

George looked at Dumas’s palm, then extended his own hand. But he didn’t quite touch; he waited to see Dumas’s reaction to that very human yet very hairy hand.

Dumas took George’s hand, used the other to cup it, and shook heartily. “I’m sorry I missed you this afternoon. I did see you in the rearview mirror.”

“I couldn’t come to meet you. Dad’s teaching me to force back the change, as needed, but I can’t do it when it’s a full moon and if I’m angry.” George’s blue eyes narrowed. “And the destruction of my mother’s shed made me very angry.”

“As it should. I can’t promise it won’t happen again, but between your sister and I, we’ve cleared away at least one of the problem areas.” Dumas stepped back. “I suspect you might have some bear scratches on your chest?”

“Yeah.” George moved his shoulders uncomfortably. “Mom stitched them and smeared her ointment on them. They itch and they hurt, but I’ll be okay. I dropped the bears off not far from here.”

“They followed you home,” Dumas told him.

“George is a natural with the animals.” Shawn sounded proud. “He understands them, and they understand him. We think it’s a meshing of Theresa’s genetics and mine that has created this empathetic young man who relates to all creatures on earth.”

“Except girls,” George muttered.

“You carry the banner and I’ll march in that parade,” Dumas told him.

When Dumas looked at him, he realized Shawn had transitioned back to his yeti form.

“Your sister saved my life today,” Dumas told George.

George smiled. “She’s a good shot, isn’t she?”

“A great shot.” Dumas turned back toward the table.

“Not better than me, though,” George added.

“A challenge.” Donatti smiled evilly. “We’ll see about that.”

Dumas liked this family. They were real, they were fond of each other, and they weren’t afraid to be themselves.

“What’s for dinner?” George asked.

“Gumbo.” Dumas started toward the stove. “Shall I serve it?”

“Yessir!” George spoke with the enthusiasm of a growing boy and started toward the table.

As Theresa bustled to the oven to remove the loaf of bread, she said, “See, Shawn? I told you I didn’t need to make anything more than two loaves of bread and a huckleberry pie.”

* * * * *



ISBN-13: 9781488078279

Right Motive

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This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

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