

# **The Fifteenth Letter**

Falcon's Bend Series, Book 3

by Karen Wiesner and Chris Spindler

Swimming Kangaroo Books

Arlington, Texas

*The Fifteenth Letter*  
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Also, a huge debt of gratitude to Debbie and Randy Fritter, who drove around Madison and the surrounding areas looking for just the right sections of town to set our showdown.

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*"His sights were always fixed on unmade discoveries, unfinished initiatives, imperfect gains, and frustrated crusades."*

~from *Columbus* by Filipe Fernández-Armesto

*"A professional thief is a man who wakes up every morning thinking about committing a crime the same way any other man gets up and goes to his job."*

~Willie Sutton in *Where the Money Was: The Memoirs of a Bank Robber*  
written by Willie Sutton with Edward Linn

## Prologue

**November 23, 1989**

SERENA SALIM BARELY noticed when a third nail tore under her anxious gnawing.

"How much longer?" young Roman whispered.

Though her mothering instincts kicked in infrequently, she recognized the fear in her boy's voice. She could say or do nothing beyond reach for his hand. Without hesitation, he pulled away and put his face against the passenger window.

Nels and Zeke had been inside for so long now. Had something gone wrong? Or had Nels gotten greedy again? He was a man who would go back for just one more penny—the proverbial cherry atop a mountain of decadent cake.

This one couldn't go wrong, not with all Zeke's planning. On and on, Nels had raved about how brilliant Zeke Carfi was; he'd thought of everything. Nothing could possibly go awry.

But they should have been back a long time ago.

Serena swore under her breath in Korean. This would have solved all their problems. No more hand-to-mouth. No more of Nelson's crazy schemes to "make ends meet," most involving his shop of rare books, Antique Books, Ltd., that was never profitable on its own. When Nels

met Zeke a year ago, Zeke'd taught him how to make money the easy way. This one final heist would set them all up for life.

*Where are they?*

She leaned forward near her son and looked down the block to the front of the bank across the street set far back from the road. Eisner Bank & Trust looked calm and peaceful this day, though people no longer milled in and out.

She shook her head. Something had happened.

"We should get out of here," she murmured.

Roman turned to her, his dark gaze confused. "But Dad's not out yet. We can't leave him."

"They should have been out—" she started when the sound of sirens broke through the menacingly still autumn air.

Roman dove out the door of the van just as fast. Serena swore again, plunging out after him down the street. She caught him only inches from the sidewalk in front of the bank. With every bit of her strength, she dragged him kicking and screaming to the van. At fifteen, the boy was no longer as small and weak as he'd been, but her desperation allowed her to do what she had to.

"We can't leave him!" he cried as they reached the sliding van door.

"We won't." She knew she had to give him the promise to make him calm. "But we must watch from here."

He allowed her to hold him. Behind him, Serena forgot how to breathe while police cars and an ambulance surrounded the bank. She and Roman waited. Minutes ticked by, minutes that felt like hours. Like vultures, reporters descended on the place in helicopters and trucks.

She and Roman were too close, but she knew Roman would fight her and call attention to them if she insisted they get back in the van or leave. Until he'd seen his father, he wouldn't budge.

Her mind raced as she tried to imagine what had taken place, what had gone wrong. She barely noticed how ragged her son's breathing had become.

*Nels screwed up. He always does. Roman may worship his father and believe he can do no wrong, but I know better. I know exactly what he is: a thief from start to finish. But I didn't care; I would have done anything to escape my father. Anything. And I won't go back. What a fool I was to trust Nels.*

Finally, the police swarmed out amid the reporters. For a moment, Serena noticed nothing in the throng. Then wheels appeared. Atop the gurney was a long and narrow black bag.

"Dad ..." Roman began, lurching suddenly out of her shocked embrace.

A crowd of interested citizens had gathered. Serena knew they were safe within it, but she caught her son once more, holding him back. "Where's Dad? Where's my dad?" he murmured, his tone frantic.

Serena felt Roman go rigid. She glanced at him, then followed the direction of his gaze. Zeke emerged, hands bound, surrounded with police officers on all sides. His eyes lifted for only a moment as if he sensed her presence. Regret and sadness overwhelmed his expression. Serena knew. In that moment, she knew. Nels was dead. Zeke had betrayed her husband. The heist had gone bad because Zeke turned on Nelson. What else could explain a death they'd never figured into their careful plans?

"We have to find my dad!"

Serena shook her head. "We must go. Now. Don't fight me. We must be at the shop when the police come."

The urgency in her voice must have convinced him. He allowed her to rush him back across the street and into the van.

By the time they arrived at their apartment over the small bookstore, Serena's heart had turned to stone within her. She sat while Roman turned on the television, looking for news. Mutely, she watched the reporter talk about the robbery at Eisner.

Nelson had been about to shoot the bank manager for refusing to cooperate, and Zeke had stopped him. Zeke had killed his own partner to prevent the death of an innocent. She watched Zeke defend himself, meek as a mouse, his handsome face lined with regret. "I tried to talk to Nelson, tried to get him to reconsider. I only meant to stop him by putting a bullet in his shooting arm ... but he shifted." The shot had caught Nelson right in the heart. He'd died before they wheeled him out of the bank.

Serena's eyes narrowed as the reporter went on to interview the bank manager who praised Zeke for "coming to his senses" and standing up against a murderous, greedy thug.

*I have nothing. The bastard left me with nothing. How will I take care of myself?*

The sound of her father's hated voice filled her memory, as did the feeling of his fist slamming into the small of her back. Serena choked on a sob, not daring to close her eyes to dark memories she'd spent so many years hiding from.

*Can't go back there ... rather die. No one can make me.*

"He killed my dad," Roman spat, interrupting her thoughts, "and the public decides he's a hero for it. A goddamn hero."

Serena glanced at her boy, recognizing the rage building in him. She couldn't move as he picked up a baseball bat and sank it into the TV screen with all his strength. He screamed in fury at the injustice of losing the father he'd idolized.

Cringing, Serena covered her head when he flew around the room, destroying everything in his path. Tears leaked from her eyes in terror. Once more, she was the little girl huddling in fear, willing herself to become invisible to the tirade around her.

"Stop. Stop, Roman, please," she whimpered.

For a long time he seemed not to hear her pleas. Then silence came, and she still didn't move, especially when she felt him standing before her. Sobs overwhelmed her. Protective gentle arms came around her, and she lifted her head. Her gaze met her son's unexpectedly tender one.

"We have nothing. He's left us with nothing," she told him bitterly. "I can't take care of you, Roman. I can't go back home."

"I'll take care of you, Mom. I promise. We have the maps. Dad told me about the maps he and Zeke stole—the ones Dad kept in the safe, away from Zeke. They're worth a fortune. You won't have to go back home, Mom. We'll make this right."

Zeke had betrayed them all. He would pay. How could anything ever be right again?

It wouldn't, not until she had her revenge.

## Chapter One

*Tuesday, November 23, 2004 ...*

*Fifteen years later...*

FALCON'S BEND PATROL officer Amber Carfi let out a rich luxurious belch followed by a sigh of relief. She was about to mutter, "Yeesh, another boring shift. 'Least it's almost over," when her partner turned to her, scowling. "That was real nice, Carfi. You got a man inside there tryin' to get out or what?"

Why did he always surprise her when he chose to get on her about her decided lack of manners and feminine sensibilities? She shook her head at him. Sitting up in the passenger's seat of the patrol car, she pushed the bottle of Diet Coke she'd downed in three long gulps into the holder. Warren Jensen could do disgust better than anyone. His face looked specially designed for it. "You got a Miss Manners in there trying to get out, Jensen?" she countered. She looked away to pedestrians going about their business.

The past few shifts had been dead boring. The most action they'd had was a DUI and a welfare check on old man Curran, and she and Jensen had gotten the House Watch cards yesterday. An unexpected dog that guarded the house while the owners were on vacation almost chewed up Jensen.

They were heading back to the station now, and bored or not, Amber always preferred working to taking time off. When she was alone she got antsy, especially around the holidays. Like her, Jensen had no family so he usually agreed to fill some hours together doing whatever.

The radio crackled and Dispatch came through, "One-Baker-One, copy a 10-90 in progress."

Jensen reached for the radio, but she pushed his hand aside insisting, "I'm primary, remember?" She'd been hoping for another chance to be primary officer, a very new perk after her two years on the force.

She brought the receiver up to her mouth and spoke into it. “Copy from Third and Main. Go ahead.”

From behind the wheel Jensen grimaced, knowing as well as she did that, technically, they were off-duty as of six minutes ago. “Silent alarm at Falcon’s Bend Bank & Trust was called in,” Tammy in Dispatch told them. “No confirmation from employees at this time. No confirmation on the number of perps or weapons.”

They were obviously in the area of responsibility closest to the bank. “Copy. Show us en route,” Amber responded.

Someone in the bank had tripped the alarm to alert the police without tipping off the robber. Jensen put on the lights without the siren.

A moment later Dispatch reported, “One-Baker-One, Two-Adam-Two, affirm on cover from Sixth.”

“Copy.”

“One-Baker-One, your CR is 2-4-3-3-3, that’s twenty-four thousand three-thirty-three, at sixteen-o-six hours.”

Amber wrote the case report number as it was given, followed by the time. All the while, she made her plans. Contact and cover procedure was indicated.

“You want me to take primary?” Jensen asked.

She snorted at him. “No way.” She’d only gotten a taste of the power in the last two weeks. Her first real action didn’t intimidate her. She couldn’t wait to get the party started.

After coordinating by radio with backup officers Rosch and Bradley as to where to set up when they arrived, she got to work securing the perimeter. Then she made the call to Dispatch to ascertain if the robbery was currently in progress or had already occurred at the scene, and if the suspect remained inside the bank.

“We’ve had confirmation from the bank president. The subject is on foot, fleeing through a back exit on the south side of the bank with an unreported amount of money.”

“Copy. Weapon confirmation?”

“A weapon has not been confirmed. Repeat—no weapon confirmed.”

Amber growled in frustration.

Jensen drew to a stop and she slid out of the car. From her crouch beside the open door, she relayed from her handheld where she and Jensen and their vehicle were positioned, then gave the team orders concerning their own positions. “Rosch, Jensen and I are coming in from the north on Second Street. You and Bradley come in from the south.”

Amber heard Jensen behind her as she rose and skirted around the bank, finding cover in thick bushes. When she peeked around the side of the building, she saw the perp clear as day—a mask over his face and a plastic shopping bag in his hand. He was running down Second Street, his

back to her. Amber shoved her gun in the holster, broke cover, and shouted to Jensen that they had a rabbit.

She took off at a fast sprint. With adrenaline already flowing through her, she had no trouble catching up to the guy. "Police! Stop now and give yourself up!" she called from ten feet away.

The head in the mask swiveled back, giving her ample opportunity to launch herself forward in a football tackle. While they fell she simultaneously reached for handcuffs and confirmed that the perp was definitely male. Knee in his back to hold him down, she grabbed for his arms as he struggled beneath her. A second later, she had him cuffed.

From a behind, she heard the crackle of a handheld radio. Jensen was relating that the rabbit was in custody. She rose at her partner's approach, picking up the plastic bag. Inside, she saw a short stack of twenties. For a minute she could hardly believe it. The wad couldn't have amounted to more than a couple hundred bucks, if even that. He'd wasted his time for a single fix ... or whatever the hell he needed the money for.

Rosch and Bradley arrived and hauled the perp to his feet.

"Didn't anybody ever tell you crime doesn't pay?" Amber said, reaching up to pull off the guy's mask. "Especially for the few lemon drops you manage to steal."

The perp chuckled. "How would you know, girly? You ever try it?"

Amber gave him a scolding prod in the gut with her nightstick. "Matter of fact, bank robbery runs in my family, smart-ass. Now move. You're under arrest."

## Chapter Two

“GENE PALANUIK,” AMBER said when Jensen approached with a donut and coffee. “Three misdemeanors on his record, all for robbery. I’m running his prints through NCIC and Wisconsin CIC now, but I can’t imagine how we’re gonna get anything with the state of the guy’s fingers.”

She snatched the donut from Jensen just before he could bring it to his mouth. He watched with a look of annoyed amusement as she chomped the treat in four big bites.

They’d booked Palanuik, filled out a custody sheet, taken mug shots, and gotten ready to take prints when they saw the perp had mutilated the pads of his fingers. The wounds looked at least thirty-six hours old. He’d had no word of explanation for what happened—if he’d mutilated himself, or why—beyond demands to call his lawyer. He’d moaned like a helpless lamb the entire time they took his prints. Unless he was a fugitive with an outstanding warrant, Amber could only guess the guy had planned the robbery and the razor-bladed prints had been done to thwart the police if he got caught. Amber couldn’t fathom why he hadn’t just worn gloves instead of mutilating himself, yet as crazy as his previous actions were, he hadn’t lied to them about his name. She’d pulled his record up as soon as he’d made his call to a Madison lawyer.

“Any news on the lawyer?”

“If she’s from his locality like Palanuik says, she won’t be here for a couple hours.”

Amber nodded. Madison was a good two hours from Falcon’s Bend, which was the dinky little town she and Jensen had grown up in. God only knew what Palanuik had been thinking in coming to this Packer-loving, one-horse town to do his dirty deed.

But she was too darn hungry to think about anything except her stomach at the moment. “Any more donuts?” she asked, jumping up and leaving her station to cross over to the break area. He followed. The usual unappealing scent of burnt coffee greeted her.

“Soon as we’re off we’ll get something to eat,” Jensen promised, snagging a donut from the box before she could wolf them all down.

“Rosch and Bradley finish their supps?” she asked with a mouthful. She’d gotten Jensen’s supplemental report before she’d even started her log. She was still new at being primary.

“Soon.”

Jensen glanced away, and Amber couldn’t help noticing his expression seemed a little weird. “What’s up?”

He shrugged, watching her pour coffee from the sludge machine. “You did good on the bust.” He spoke gruffly. Jensen had been on the payroll for over ten years—he’d received countless commendations in his career. He was well respected by his superiors, co-workers, and the local public. She considered him her closest, most treasured friend of the world. In short, his opinion mattered to her.

While Amber was respected as a hustler around the department, her partner of two years, and friend for almost five, rarely gave her compliments unless she did better than her best. A flush of unexpected happiness filled her cheeks, and she had to look away as she muttered, “Thanks.”

They both sipped their god-awful coffee, and Amber sneaked a look at her partner. She and Jensen had been friends long before they became partners on the FBPD. They met at a high school football game when his deceased wife’s brother introduced them. Just a year prior to their meeting, she’d been on the varsity football team, though many had tried to prevent it, and she’d kicked ass there. In Falcon’s Bend football ruled. Amber had been the first girl to ever make the team. Jensen had admitted to being a long-time fan of hers the night they met. Correspondingly, his enthusiasm for his job had rubbed off on her early on. He’d encouraged her to go into police work when she’d wondered what to do with her life. She’d focused on it with single-minded determination once she decided police work was what she wanted.

After being pressured by Falcon’s Bend’s only female lawyer and various local women’s rights groups to hire a woman, Chief Kurt Sobczynski had buckled. In truth, Amber had been the only qualified female applicant in the bunch. She’d also been more qualified than any of the men who applied.

Jensen’s previous partner, Dennis Lambert, had served over thirty years as a full-time officer on the FBPD. Amber had slid in as his replacement almost effortlessly. So far, she’d endured more than her fair share of slurs about being hired only because the chief had had the screws put to him about it. She’d proved the naysayers wrong when she excelled in her position.

She considered Jensen her best friend, but there were times—like now—when things got heavy between them, uncomfortable. She couldn’t

even say why beyond that the males who worked there teased the two of them, spreading rumors that they worked together, played together, and yeah, slept together. Jensen was ten years older than her twenty-four years—she wasn't immune to his good looks. But she'd worked hard to maintain a professional relationship when they were on duty. Praise from him made her feel damn good, but it also made her uncertain of herself and where she stood with him.

She was relieved when one of the two detectives, Danny Vincent, joined them at the coffee station. In addition to being a full-time investigator at the Falcon's Bend Police Department, Danny was an amateur artist. At one time, he'd considered making it a career, but a short stint in New York as a starving artist had reputedly cured him of the delusion. Now he did it as a hobby and occasionally worked as a sketch artist when they needed one.

For the past two years, Danny and the other full-time investigator, Pete Shasta, had been trying to get her to relax her militarily respectful manner with them. It hadn't been easy. Going from "sir" to "Lieutenant Shasta and Vincent" and finally to first names had taken a crowbar of resolve. She still felt weird being so informal with them, but everyone in the department used either first or last names and remained respectful to each other for the most part.

Danny asked about the robbery bust, but before Amber could answer, the receptionist called out that the Palanuik's lawyer had arrived.

Amber and Jensen looked at each other in surprise. The woman entered through the visitor's door. She was tall with nearly waist-length gorgeous hair and a face that would fit a supermodel better than a lawyer despite her expensive professional attire. Amber couldn't help noticing that every cop in the general vicinity came out of the woodwork to get a look at the lady lawyer.

Once she set down her cup, Amber stepped out to meet her. The lawyer's attitude was surprisingly cool when she introduced herself as Kiah Roberts, Gene Palanuik's defense.

"Patrol Officer Amber Carfi," Amber responded. "I'll take you back to your client."

As she steered the woman forward, Amber glanced back to give her male counterparts a disgusted look. One by one, they scurried back into their holes.

"Where you from?" Amber asked.

"Madison." The woman spoke with a heavy Italian accent.

Amber nodded, keying in the code to open the booking room. "Any idea what happened to your client's hands?"

"I don't know what you mean," the lawyer said without any emotion or interest.

"Getting fingerprints was hell... for both of us."

As soon as the door opened, Kiah Roberts walked in and zoned on her client without so much as a glance back at Amber.

“Well, she got here awfully fast,” Jensen said when Amber returned to him and Danny.

“She must’ve been in the area. Wonder why,” Amber said.

Both men shrugged. Amber went back to her station and came up with Palanuik’s wife’s phone number a minute later. She’d just dialed when Rosch dropped two files on her desk. She nodded her thanks for the supps just before the call went through. The voice that answered wasn’t pleasant. “Diane Palanuik?” she verified.

“Yeah. That’s me. Who’s this?”

“Mrs. Palanuik, this is Officer Amber Carfi from the Falcon’s Bend Police Depart—”

“What’s the bum done this time?”

Amber tamped down on her surprise and told the woman the charges. She could tell the woman couldn’t care less when she said she hadn’t seen her “jerkwater husband” for three days. Asked about Gene’s hands, she responded even less favorably—how the hell should she know what he did with his hands, his arms, his worthless hide?

Amber hung up with knowledge that the wife had filed divorce papers the previous day. The woman had officially taken all the crap she ever would from Gene.

“The wife didn’t know, didn’t care where he was, yet his lawyer seemed to know ... even seemed to be standing by until she was needed,” she muttered to herself.

The click of heels made her lift her head to see Kiah Roberts appear once more. Her face was filled with anger. Wordlessly, she disappeared out the visitor’s door.

“Let’s get Palanuik cuffed again and over to the jail so we can get some dinner,” Jensen said.

The idea of dinner put everything else out of Amber’s head.

## Chapter Three

“HE’S GONNA GET a slap on the wrist,” Amber grouched when Jensen turned down the residential street to her duplex fifteen minutes later.

“His lawyer won’t have any trouble getting him bail either,” Jensen agreed.

She could hear the fatigue in his voice. They’d been on since six in the morning—a twelve-hour shift. She felt tired, hungry, and just plain cranky at how unsatisfactory that last bust had been. Too many questions went unanswered, and she wasn’t the type to sit around waiting patiently for the answers to come to her. But there wasn’t much she could do until things played out.

She lived in an older building in a nice, though geriatric, neighborhood in Falcon’s Bend. On the left of the property was a two-car garage, set slightly back from the duplex. Amber’s was the closest apartment to the ill-kept cement garage approach. Other than a few bushes that looked all but dead, the huge catalpa tree that prevented a clear view of the road from inside the apartments tended to drop its endless supply of dead flowers and fruit pods onto the grass where they then blew into the street. Amber had raked a dozen times already this fall, but she knew she’d probably have to do it again before the snow signaled winter was there to stay for its designated season.

She and Jensen had spent the previous summer replacing shingles on the roof and painting the whole of the building—at her expense. If things worked out financially, she wanted to replace the roof next spring. Both her and her neighbor’s leaked often, though Amber and Jensen had done temporary fixes that hopefully wouldn’t give out before winter.

The landlord did nothing but come around early every month to demand rent and taunt her two-year-old golden retriever, Sam. She cut the grass in summer, shoveled the sidewalk in the winter, and fixed everything that broke in her place and Mrs. Frederick’s.

Jensen’s pickup rolled up to the duplex, and he parked at the curb. Her neighbor was an elderly widow who got out infrequently. Amber

checked on her at least once a day and ran errands for her when she could.

Easing out of the cab of his truck to the ground, Amber called to her dog that was waiting for her on the stoop. He came as far as he could on his rope attached to his dog house beside the steps, and she kneeled in front of him. "What's new, Sammy? You miss me?" He woofed happily and licked her face while she scratched behind his ears.

When she stood, she unhooked him and then glanced up at Jensen. "You wanna give him a little walk while I change?"

Sam gazed at Jensen and barked warmly. Jensen ruffled his fur affectionately. "Come on, boy. Let's stretch our legs."

Amber made quick work of clearing up Sam's dump area, then let herself into her apartment. She felt no urge whatsoever to replace any of the barbells on the rack in the living room, let alone pick up the clothes she'd dropped there while she rushed around that morning.

Standing on the oversized rug near the door, she yanked off her boots, then shrugged out of her coat. She hung it on the tree near the old cuckoo clock she and her father had made together when she was little.

It wasn't until she turned toward the kitchen that she sensed something off, something indefinable. Her small, cramped living room looked as much of a wreck as usual. Why did she feel like something had moved? Her couch, reclining chair, footstool, and weight bench were all where they'd been earlier. Nothing had moved on her huge entertainment center at the back wall. Surround sound, 32-inch television, and stereo still intact. Even the bookshelves with materials thrown wherever they fit when she finished with them had the same layer of thick dust. Six months of mail covered her coffee table, spotlighted when she pulled back the curtains on the picture window overlooking the front lawn and the constantly weeping tree.

The air smelled different than it had earlier. The scent of expensive perfume teased her nostrils, but she shook it off. She sure didn't wear perfume. Had to be Mrs. Frederick's laundry. The scent of her dryer sheets tended to fill the area all around the duplex whenever she did a load.

*I'm too hungry to think about this now. A workout at the gym. Then a huge dinner somewhere. Maybe that new, all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet. Oh, yeah, that'll work.*

Neither she nor Jensen cooked often.

Amber snagged a few slices of lunchmeat from the fridge on the way to her bedroom at the end of the hall. Already she worked on the buttons of her uniform. Her bedroom was wall-to-wall clothes. She had a system for doing laundry, but the piles of clean and dirty clothes never went down much in-between loads. The only organized portion of her

bedroom was her closet. Crisp uniforms hung tidy-as-you-please on evenly spaced hangers.

Even with socks on, the bare wood floor felt like slabs of ice under her feet. She removed her Kevlar vest and changed into comfortable jeans and a Green Bay Packers sweatshirt.

A nose full of perfume hit her again when she put her gun in the shoulder holster under her pillow. Once again she experienced the overwhelming sense that someone had been there recently. It was a gut feeling that couldn't be verified visually in the typical wreck of a room.

*Jensen's right. I really need to clean this place—whether or not I have time to do it.*

Stuffing her gym bag with what she needed, she heard the front door. She glanced into the mirror over her dresser. The tight ponytail she wore throughout the day had come undone hours ago. She finger-combed wispy strawberry blond hair into place, then added a touch of Vaseline to her lips before she went out.

Sam stood in the kitchen lapping up water from his dish. She set down her bag and got out a can of dog food. Once she scooped it onto a plate for him, she grabbed a handful of leftover popcorn from the counter. Turning to the archway separating her kitchen from her living room, she saw Jensen near the weight bench, holding a pair of lacy underwear—her one feminine vice—in his large tan fingers. He looked at the scrap like he'd never seen anything quite like it before.

Amber swallowed a strange lump that filled her throat. What the hell was he doing? And why did she feel so ... ugh, she didn't even know. But she felt a little crazy watching him awed by her intimates. Heat flooded her face.

*Yeesh, I need to go on a date. I need to get laid bad if I get turned on seeing Jensen hold my underwear. Mac Henderson asked me out a couple times at the beginning of the year. So he's got a beard like Santa Claus? I'll convince him to shave it.*

Jensen suddenly sensed her presence and looked up. His lined but handsome face filled with brick-red color. But, as usual, he fell back into old ways. "You need to clean up this pigsty occasionally, Carfi." With that, he tossed her underwear across the room to her.

She just barely caught it, glaring at him. "Easy for you to say. Your mother-in-law does your laundry and cleaning. I don't have the luxury."

"You ready to go or what?" he demanded, averting his gaze. Unfortunately, it landed on a matching push-up bra hanging wantonly off the barbell on the stand. The stunned look on his face almost made her laugh like a loony. Somehow she contained herself and even rescued him with a flippant, "I'll clean if you loosen your tight ass, Jensen. Now, I need to check on Mrs. Frederick before we go."

## Chapter Four

WARREN JENSEN GREETED everyone he passed in the Bend Fitness Club on his way to the locker room. Most were acquaintances and asked where Amber was, as if he and his partner were joined at the hip.

*Maybe we are. On duty and off. We're not just partners, and everyone knows it, even if I insist I don't have the slightest interest in Amber as more than a friend and a colleague. We're more, but less than the next level of friendship between an unrelated man and woman.*

Warren grimaced at his own indecision about one Amber Carfi and chose a locker. As he changed into workout gear, the door of the locker room opened, and Detective Danny Vincent walked in with a gym bag in hand.

“Hey,” Warren said, distracted by thoughts of Amber put into his head by her damn sexy unmentionables. Didn’t make sense that someone with so little girlishness wore stuff like that. Not that Amber didn’t have the body for it.

His wife—his childhood sweetheart—had died of ovarian cancer four years before, but he’d never gotten over Jen’s death. That had nothing to do with Amber any more than the ten-year age difference between them had anything to do with ... well, anything. Like he claimed to all, it made her off-limits. He’d always found a tomboy with a good dose of softness the sexiest kind of woman, but Amber had little if any softness.

“You hear if Palanuik made bail?” Warren asked Danny, pulling off his shirt.

Danny shook his head. “Not yet. He’s got a killer lawyer though. He’ll get off light. Probably won’t even go to trial since she’ll get the prosecution to accept a plea bargain.”

Warren nodded, grimacing. “Amber won’t be too happy about that.”

“Suppose it hits too close to home,” Danny offered, sitting down to tie his shoes.

Warren looked up, a little surprised. “What do you mean? Her dad?”

“Well, her old man did get thirty years for robbing a bank.”

“She never mentioned this having anything to do with that,” Warren muttered.

But it’d been clear to Warren that Amber had a bee in her bonnet today—and not simply because of the cold showers in the girls’ locker room, a constant complaint with her. He and Danny left the locker room and met Amber near the weights.

As soon as they started working out, she jumped into talking about Gene Palanuik.

“Doesn’t make sense that Palanuik would rob a bank for a hundred bucks, more or less, if he planned the whole thing by mutilating his fingers just in case he got caught,” she groused between reps. “And why was his lawyer in the neighborhood? It’s like she expected him to do it—followed him to Falcon’s Bend and was standing by after he got caught. And she looked pissed when she left.”

“You told Palanuik robbing banks runs in your family,” Danny pointed out.

An expression of what had to be guilt danced across Amber’s surprisingly delicate features. “Zeke’s done his time,” she said softly, her tone a little rough. “But it probably won’t help. He won’t get parole this time either.”

Despite the testimony she gave at Zeke’s parole hearing recently, Warren didn’t have any doubt it would fall on deaf ears this time too, like all the other times. Amber had spent years since the scandal defending her father, refusing to let anyone entertain the notion that she might be ashamed of him. What she really felt ... well, Warren wasn’t sure she’d even talk to him about it, and he was the closest thing in the world to her best friend.

“I’m gonna check out the lawyer tomorrow,” she decided.

“Good luck getting anything this close to a holiday,” Danny offered.

She grimaced, but Warren well knew the look of determination on her face. He didn’t have a single doubt she’d get what she was after, one way or another.

## Chapter Five

*IT'S IRONIC HOW a man can commit a crime he regrets, yet still wake up every morning longing for the adventure of a heist, longing for the haul no one knows exists.*

Zeke Carfi sat at the edge of his bed, hands together. His every sin seemed to press him a little further down with the still strong desire he had for one last treasure hunt. One image dispelled his lust for adventures and riches. Amber ... God, Amber. His little Elfy. The way she'd testified on his behalf at his annual parole hearing a few weeks ago ... To this day, tears filled his eyes whenever he thought about the boundless faith she had in him with the words she'd spoken.

He had nothing else in the world but his baby girl. Violet was gone, killed in a car accident three years ago on the way to a family reunion she'd unexpectedly been invited to in Sioux City. Only luck had made sure Amber was unavailable that weekend and couldn't attend with her mother.

Any dreams Zeke harbored of getting back the woman he'd loved with all his heart had gone up in flames with that accident. But he'd been fooling himself anyway. While Violet brought Amber to visit him in prison, she'd refused to see him herself. She'd ignored his letters. Cut him so deep, he'd never recover from it. Yet there was nothing to forgive.

Zeke's fingers stroked the Egyptian necklace Violet had given him when he was nineteen. The cartouche was supposed to protect him in the afterlife. Had Violet been wearing the matching one he'd given her the same year? He'd never know the answer. But Violet's anger toward him, toward his crimes against her and their daughter had been justified. He didn't begrudge her any of it. His only regret was that she'd never forgiven him.

Yet he still had a chance with his daughter. If he ever got out of this prison, he'd win Amber's trust back. He'd go to her as soon as he could. And, when everything seemed safe, then—and only then—would he consider his hidden treasure that would cure his restlessness and allow him to live in peace and financial security for the rest of his years. Maybe

he'd be able to forget the forbidden longings he still contended with every damn day.

After fifteen years of being denied parole, he fully expected the same to come of the last hearing. His exemplary behavior would count for nothing. Amber's beautiful testimony would have fallen on uncaring hardened ears.

Zeke looked up when his cellmate, Felix Engleburt, turned over on his thin mattress. Ironically, Zeke had learned in this place the necessity of seeing the good in others, however slight. Felix had brutally murdered his wife and her lover, unwilling to tolerate any stain of disloyalty. Yet that same need for loyalty had brought Felix and Zeke together as confidantes. Zeke had told Felix things he hadn't even told his own daughter, knowing Felix alone wouldn't give him up.

"You still haven't opened it," Felix said, inclining his bald pate toward the number-ten envelope on Zeke's bed beside him. "What if it's your parole grant?"

Zeke shook his head. Felix knew as well as he did that the decisions of the parole board were written on a sheet of paper, folded, stapled, and delivered to the prison after everyone up for parole was interviewed so they could all be delivered at the same time.

No, he knew what this was. Every year on the anniversary of Nelson's death, he received a letter reminding him of his crimes against Nelson Salim. The fifteenth letter had arrived that morning. Zeke had known it would be the same as the others before, the first two being the only two he'd opened and read. Accusations, bitterness, blame. On the bottom, Nelson's widow would have scrawled her name in what looked like blood.

By all rights, Zeke should have destroyed them. Instead, he placed them carefully unopened in the box he kept his few personal belongings. Somehow, these letters were as much a part of his prison sentence and history as his crimes. Until he was set free, could win his daughter's trust back, and retrieve his treasure, he would accept his just due.

## Chapter Six

*Thursday, November 25 ...*

LIETENTANT PETE SHASTA slipped up behind his wife of three blissful years and wrapped himself around her like a boa constrictor. “Maybe the turkey can take care of itself for an hour.”

“Hmm, do you need a little taking care of?” Lisa murmured, turning her head toward him. He could hear her smile even if he couldn’t see it.

He eased her around and then back into his arms. “That I do, baby.”

Though they received quite a few invitations from relatives and friends to join their Thanksgiving celebrations, they’d decided mutually to spend this one alone. Pete and his partner at FBPD had just wrapped up a case that had taken a month of his time, his mind, his energy. When he was working, he didn’t eat right, rarely slept, and couldn’t focus on anything but solving the puzzle driving him insane. And, whether he liked it or not, not much else could distract him, not even his drop-dead gorgeous wife.

Pete drew her up into a deep kiss that left no doubt about his intentions. She softened in his arms, and he knew he wouldn’t have any trouble convincing her to let the turkey take care of itself.

“What do you want for Christmas?” he asked gruffly, snaking his hands down her back over her thin sweater. The house was warm and filled with the scents of the holiday. Even with just the two of them, Lisa had gone all out: turkey, fragrant stuffing, cranberries, and pies. They’d be eating leftovers until Christmas.

“Your birthday is coming up first,” she said, her face flushed with desire. “You still haven’t told me what *you* want for that.”

“How about another day and night home alone with you? I don’t need anything else.”

She lifted her neck when he nuzzled her ear. Pete brought her hips against his, and she purred sensually at the evidence of his ache for her. When he thrust against her, a glazed look entered her smoky eyes.

“Actually ...”

The uncertain word made him draw back from the arousal building between them. “What?”

“Your mother called me, Pete,” she admitted, spots of color still burning in her cheeks. “About your birthday. She really wants to be here.”

His mother? For as long as Pete could remember, his mom had never been happy when he was growing up. She’d complained about being a housewife to a cop who worked long hours and most weekends. She refused to get a job or career of her own. His parents fought nearly all the time. After they finally divorced just before Pete graduated from high school, he found out dirty little secrets he wished had stayed buried: his sister revealed their mother’s countless affairs, the way his dad pretended they never happened, his mother’s sickening claim that she “put up with it all” for her children. She’d had the guts to tell everyone she stayed as long as she had just for them, never for herself.

A part of Pete couldn’t forgive her. Refusing to see his mother with excuses for his absence, he’d buried himself in college, his police training, then his job as detective at the Falcon’s Bend Police Department. A brief miserable marriage to a woman just like his mother had brought Pete to the point of at least allowing himself to see his mother. By then, she was being supported by the men who came and went through her life like new models of a car. The worst came when his wife and mother hit it off like long-lost friends. Donna accepted Pete’s financial support of her and her extravagant lifestyle, insisting she too wanted to be a housewife. But things soured quickly, no doubt spurred on by his mother’s restless whispering in her ear. Pete turned a blind eye, just like his father had, to the many rumors of Donna’s affairs until she finally forced him to accept it. She’d ripped his heart out to get him to see it.

He hadn’t talked to his mother since the divorce. Until now, his mother hadn’t tried to contact him either. What was she playing at?

Pete shook his head at Lisa. “Just you and me, okay?”

“But it’s your birthday,” she said softly. “Your friends and family want to celebrate with you.”

He didn’t want to think about his mother—it always led to thinking about Donna and his fear that he might lose Lisa. She didn’t like his long hours and distraction with cases any more than Donna had. But Lisa was nothing like his ex-wife. He’d gotten to the point in his life where he believed he’d never have what he wanted, needed, loved most of all. The thought of his mother touched on those old worries he’d finally convinced himself were behind him.

Lisa must have seen his withdrawal. “You’re right. Let’s not talk about it now. Where were we?”

Determined to forget she’d ever brought up irreconcilable subjects, Pete swung her up into his arms and carried her into the living room. Simmering winter forest potpourri filled his nostrils as he sat on the couch and brought her down on top of him. When she eased up and pulled over her head the sweater she wore, Pete forgot everything except her bare breasts and caramel skin, her soft silkiness, and the scent of lilacs in every hollow.

This was what he wanted all holidays to be like for them—just the two of them. They got that so infrequently. He made love to her, willing away the mere idea that he wasn’t worthy of her and that she would tire of him someday and soon.

“I should check the turkey,” she murmured when they lay naked and content in each other’s arms.

She made no move to go, and he didn’t let her. Instead, he pulled her close to him and kissed her until she went completely limp again. He looked into her face, brushing her silky long hair back.

“What was that for?” she asked breathlessly.

“I love you. The only thing I need in this life is you, Lisa.”

When her mouth turned up in a soft smile, he brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. The look in her sienna-colored eyes almost made him forget anything vaguely like his failures ... and reconciling with his mother.

“What are you thinking, Pete?” she murmured.

Before he could kiss her and show her his thoughts again, his cell phone buzzed. Annoyed, he leaned down for his pants and worked the vibrating phone out of his pocket. When he flipped it open and put it to his ear, Lisa sat up, used to him being called at all hours of the day regardless of what was happening between them.

“Shasta here.”

“We’ve got an accident,” FBPD Dispatch told him.

“Specifics?”

“The victim’s dead. Gene Palanuik—the guy Officers Carfi and Jensen picked up for bank robbery on Tuesday.”

*The guy who got out on bail yesterday.*

“He was run down by a 1999 silver Toyota Camry an hour ago. No plates, but we have a witness who saw the hit and run.”

## Chapter Seven

“EVERYTHING OKAY?” JENSEN asked, pulling his pickup into Amber’s driveway.

It wasn’t the first time he’d asked her that today. He’d asked more than once during their shift, and she supposed she owed it to him to tell him something beyond. “Holidays suck.”

“My mom was killed in a car accident three years ago on Thanksgiving. On the way home from visiting relatives. I couldn’t get off work.” With police school and her part-time job, she hadn’t even tried.

Jensen knew all of it, but she couldn’t help repeating it to him anyway.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

One little word. That was all he offered her, yet it made her want to connect somehow with him. Four years ago he’d lost his wife, his childhood sweetheart and wife of almost a decade. Did he still miss Jen whenever the holidays came around? Amber knew his wife’s family, including Jen’s brother Scott, still asked him to join them at holidays. Scott had moved back to Falcon’s Bend when Jen got sick. Jensen no longer accepted their invitations. *Because of me? Or because seeing them causes him to relive his pain?*

Jensen didn’t talk to her or anyone else about his wife, the love of his life according to everyone who knew them, or about her three-year battle with ovarian cancer. He’d tried to talk to Amber about it once recently, and she still cringed whenever she remembered. She wouldn’t blame him if he never talked to her about anything personal again after that blowout.

“I don’t think my dad got parole,” she said because the tension grew like a fog between them. “It’s been two weeks. We would’ve heard something by now.”

“Probably.”

“Let’s go in before the food gets cold. I’m starving.”

“When are you ever not?” Jensen laughed. While he hefted the bags of take-out Thanksgiving dinner, she grabbed the movie Rosch had

presented them with before the briefing that morning. “Little something to make your holiday merry,” he’d said.

While Amber didn’t trust the guy as far as she could throw him, the movie was one both she and Jensen loved—*Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. They had time to pop it in before the Cowboys and Bears game started.

“I’m gonna change,” she said, unlocking her front door after giving her dog the usual warm greeting.

“Lemme drop these bags in the kitchen, and I’ll run Sam around the building. You need to check on your neighbor?”

Amber shook her head. “Her daughter picked her up last night for Thanksgiving I’ll check on her first thing tomorrow morning.”

If Jensen noticed she’d done a superficial pass at cleaning the living room, he didn’t say anything while they walked to the kitchen together. He dropped the bags on the glass-topped table, and she headed to her bedroom.

She changed into velvet sweat pants and a loose T-shirt. Sitting on her bed, she took off her black uniform socks and replaced them with thick skid-proof socks. Jensen wasn’t back in with Sam by the time she emerged. She opened the bags until she found the one with the turkey. She tore off a drumstick. Gnawing on it, she grabbed the video and took it to her VCR. Jensen came in once she had it in and flipped the channel to three.

“We’ll let the previews run while we load up our plates.”

Nodding, he shed his jacket, hanging it on the tree piled with coats, hats, and scarves. He changed in the department locker room every day, so he already wore civilian clothes—old jeans and a button-down shirt. She liked the way he dressed. Okay, what she really liked was the way his clothes fit him. She’d noticed his virility the day they met, and truthfully, every day they’d spent together since. Having someone like him rooting for her at her games—a cop, a good guy known around town—had been a rush for her. She’d spent so many years in the shadow of her father’s notorious crimes. Her sportsmanship was yet another thing that made people talk, but no one would have said a bad word about Jensen, least of all her. His intentions toward her were all good. He was a source of encouragement to her. He’d been the one to finally convince her she *could* be on the right side of the law even though her dad had been so far on the wrong side of it.

*Why do I have to notice Jensen so darned much? I’ve never had a girl friend in my life, so I’ve got nothing to compare this friendship to. But I doubt I’d notice how good MaryJane smelled, or how flat her abdomen is. How her old jeans cradle her flat but seriously grabbable ass. Yeesh, Billy Crystal was right. Men and women can be friends, but the sex thing’ll always get in the way.*

Stupidly, Amber’s face filled with heat when she handed Jensen a plate from the sink drainer. He was good looking. She’d have to be blind

not to notice it. Tall, muscular, tan, sexy as hell, he had blondish-brown hair that he kept trimmed and spiked in front, more out of how it'd ended up than by design. He was clean-shaven whenever he had to be, but she liked it best when he wasn't.

*Come on, you idiot, say something so you don't have to be thinking about sex with a guy you're never gonna go down on—or anything else that interesting. And that's all it'd ever be if this relationship ever went that way. He'll never get over Jen, especially not for an unsexy quasi-female like me; but he's here now. He used to hide out or volunteer to work shifts for other guys so they could spend the holiday with family. Now he spends holidays with me. Doesn't that have to mean something?*

"I still can't believe the judge didn't fall for Kiah Roberts's defense of Palanuik," she forced herself to say, reaching for a biscuit she proceeded to slather with butter. "I expected him to get off, considering his prior offenses were misdemeanors, and he got away with only a hundred bucks from robbing the bank."

Amber had turned up little about Kiah Roberts.

"Trial or no trial, she may get him off yet."

Amber grimaced. After setting Sam's plate of Thanksgiving goodies on the floor between the kitchen and the living room, she picked up her own ten-pound plate and followed Jensen into the living room. She nearly collided with him when he stopped in the middle of the floor. He seemed incapable of moving when she skidded to his side and glanced up at him. His deep brown eyes were fixed on the television. Amber followed his gaze and saw, not Steve Martin growing steadily more furious at the thought of the flight home he could miss as his boss agonized endlessly over his ad concepts, but a bare-naked woman with breasts the size of beach balls sitting backwards on some guy's face. Just like Jensen must have when he saw it, Amber went dead still, staring in shock as the woman on the screen leaned forward open-mouthed toward a male part that was outrageously huge and stiff.

*Rosch ... you! Oh man, how the hell would that thing fit in her? Disgusting!*

Against her will, she peeked at Jensen and then down to the front of his not-tight not-loose jeans. Her face went up in flames. Awake or asleep, she'd thought about having sex with Jensen often, but she'd forced herself never to think about him in the sense of ... of what that woman on the TV screen was doing to the ecstatically happy guy under her that very minute even if it had flittered through her mind only minutes ago.

Jensen turned to her, and she heard cries and moans in the background. Deep red color had flooded his face too. He studied her flushed face in a way she couldn't even begin to fathom, so she neatly compartmentalized it into embarrassment and muttered, "That bastard Rosch. I can't believe I trusted him to do something nice."

"I'll knock him into next week."

"I'll help you."

The phone rang, and she gratefully set her plate on the newly cleared coffee table to answer it. Jensen turned off the movie and immediately took the unclean video out of her machine. But she wasn't thinking about it anymore when Lieutenant Shasta told her Gene Palanuik had been the victim in a hit and run accident. He was dead.

*But his last moments were spent wishing his lawyer hadn't gotten him out on bail.*

## Chapter Eight

*Friday, December 3 ...*

WHILE AMBER HADN'T been too keen on giving up her case to department detectives now that it had become murder, Pete had to admit she'd been an asset with their research. They hadn't found out who drove the silver Camry involved in the hit-and-run, but Amber uncovered a few nuggets about Gene Palanuik. He'd been married once before, divorced on account of infidelity the first time, and had a child with the first wife. He'd been employed at Antique Books, Maps & Collectibles, Ltd. in Madison at the time of his death.

Danny, Pete's lifelong best friend, listened in on the interview with the owner of the store, Wolfgang Romin, on the speakerphone in their small corner office.

"I knew very little about Gene, Lieutenant Shasta," the man said with a very thick accent that Pete couldn't place but thought could be Korean. "He did his job, but I wasn't aware he had financial problems that might have led him to rob a bank. Perhaps I could have helped him if he'd only spoken to me about it."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Pete asked.

"Oh, perhaps a week ago. I was beginning to wonder where he was."

"Did he often go a day or more without coming in to work?"

"He only came in infrequently. He was something of a gofer for me. He made a lot of pick-ups and deliveries."

"So you weren't aware of the damage to his hands?" Pete asked, leaning back slightly in his desk chair. "Specifically his fingertips?"

"I'm afraid you have me at a loss, Lieutenant. I don't know what it is you're referring to."

"His fingertips had been sliced up multiple times with a razor blade."

Romin paused. “As I said, I haven’t seen him for several days. If he had an accident involving his hands, I know nothing about it. However, Gene wasn’t the brightest man.”

When Pete wrapped up the call with that all-too-obvious observation, a tap came on their door. Amber looked in and waited for Danny to usher her in officially. “I just had a thought. Maybe Gene Palanuik is an alias. I mean, based on the history we’ve got on him, we only know about the last fifteen or twenty years of his life. He had to be at least forty-five years old. So how come we’re not finding anything on him before that time?”

Pete ran a hand through his thick orange-red hair. “We’re runnin’ the prints through NCIC.”

“For what that’s worth,” Amber scoffed. “It’ll be a miracle if they can get a match with the mess we turned in.”

“If you wanna try to run down an earlier identity, it’s your time,” Pete invited, and she nodded, glancing back as officers filed toward the briefing room, roll call for the next shift.

Pete and Danny stood and followed Amber across the department to the large room. The chief bored them with the usual list of announcements before shift reports came.

“We have a parolee being released in our jurisdiction,” the chief said, waking a couple of the men. “Instead of being returned to the county of commitment, the parole board has decided it’s in the best interest of Zeke Carfi to be released here in Falcon’s Bend. They feel Officer Carfi’s support will allow him the best chance of a successful parole.”

The entire room turned to look at the shocked and emotional quagmire on Amber’s face which quickly gave way to her sitting up straighter and masking her reaction.

Cool and calm she asked, “When will my father be released, sir?”

“Approximately two weeks,” the chief told her.

Pete saw Jensen put a hand on the back of Amber’s chair and lean in close to her. Whatever he whispered put the emotion back in her pale green eyes when he eased off.

## Chapter Nine

*Thursday, December 9 ...*

“I KNOW YOU don’t want to talk about this, honey, but your mom called again.”

From where he was shaving, Pete looked in the bathroom mirror at Lisa behind him. While he knew her expression of proceeding carefully, he also saw determination in her face.

“Just hear me out. After Bruce left me, my parents were furious with me. They just thought my first husband was the greatest guy in the world. I couldn’t get myself to tell them the truth.”

Lisa’d had a full hysterectomy at the age of twenty-six for menstrual problems. Her jackass husband of four years hadn’t been able to come to terms with it and divorced her. While Pete realized she’d had an up and down relationship with her parents, he’d never guessed her ex-husband was the reason why.

“I was so angry that they wouldn’t side with me no matter what. But a couple years passed, I met you, and I wanted them to know you too, wanted them to see that I was finally with the perfect guy. So I called my mom and told her the truth about everything. Turned out they were never mad at me about Bruce. I guess before, during, and after the divorce, I’d been unconsciously shutting them out—so much that I just believed they were upset about my divorce from Bruce and blamed me for it. I was hurting too bad to see the truth, and I shunned all their efforts to tell me.

“My point is that I think your mom misses you, Pete, misses her family. She wants to be a part of your life again, in some way maybe to make up for her failures in the past.”

Pete finished removing the last line of facial scrub then shook his head at her. “She never believed she had any failures. She blamed all of us for ruining her life. She’ll never have any regrets.”

“It probably feels like that,” Lisa said sympathetically.

“It *is* like that. Don’t let her fool you,” Pete said, swiping a towel over his chin to remove the last trace of shaving cream. “You think she

didn't fool Donna? She's trying to do the same thing with you. She absolutely can't stand to see me happy."

Lisa's face turned hard, her eyes narrow. "You'll never lose me, Pete Shasta. Get that through your head now. I won't cheat on you, I won't start listening to your mother fill my head with dissatisfaction because of your job and all the hours you're gone or that I could do better."

Pete swallowed, shifting his gaze from her to the red hair mixed with the white foam in the sink. "You *could* do better," he muttered.

She shook her head at him when he met her gaze again through the mirror. "I love you. That'll never change. Your job is hard, but I know you *wouldn't* be the man I love without it. I'll take every minute I have with you. And I don't think your mother is trying to turn me against you." She darted for the bathroom door. "Anyway, I'll make you breakfast."

From outside came a familiar honk. Halfway through the door, Lisa recognized it as his partner there to pick him up and sighed.

"I'll grab something later," Pete assured her. "Don't worry about it."

He cleaned up the sink and went down to kiss her goodbye, not seeing the cheered up smile he wanted from her. "We'll talk more when I get home tonight, okay?"

She nodded. "I just want what's best for you, Pete. Family is important. What would you do without your brother or your dad?"

Pete didn't respond. His brother and dad had never betrayed him. His sister had moved to the other side of the country before she was out of high school. Pete barely knew her anymore, but they got along when she called once a year. But even being in the same room with his mother resembled torture. How did a person learn to trust someone who'd been so disloyal for so long?

"I don't get 'em, Van Gogh," Pete muttered after he got in their unmarked department-owned car, a beige Caprice.

"Huh?" Danny responded, pulling out onto the road.

"Women. I don't understand 'em."

Danny chuckled. "You think they understand themselves?" Though he and Melody had been getting along famously for many months now, Danny wasn't so raw a newlywed that he didn't understand how frustrating a "better half" could be.

"No, probably not," Pete conceded.

"Carfi got the info from NCIC on Palanuik," Danny said, and Pete sat up straighter.

As they both expected, Amber waited for them near their cramped office with the files. She handed them one and followed them inside.

"Like I thought—Gene Palanuik is an alias. Guy's real name is Lawrence Eugene Snyder," she said while Danny and Pete removed their

coats and sat. Pete opened the file on his desk. Across from him, Danny turned his chair to face Amber's summary. "Snyder's father was a banker arrested for embezzlement when he was nine. Mother and father had separated when he was two. A couple years later, Snyder's stepfather suffered from a gambling problem that left the family broke most of the time. Snyder was arrested for possession of a stolen motor vehicle, but he somehow got a break, the first of many it seems. Prosecutors amended the charge to the lesser offense of unlawful taking. He pleaded guilty and got a fine."

Amber paused long enough to glance up from her file. "A week later the guy joined the military, if you can believe that. I figure the local prosecutor or judge had something to do with it, part of the deal for a downgraded sentence or something. No jail time if he agreed to join."

Privacy laws prevented the military from disclosing whether a soldier signed up or was drafted, and at this point Pete figured it didn't matter which. One way or another, the guy had learned how the judicial systems could be manipulated to his advantage.

"Sent into active duty outside the United States as a technician, served for a year and a half, then returned to the States and married—had a kid. Not long afterward he was arrested on a bad check charge.

"He was back at it a year later, after a divorce and another arrest, this time for trespassing and burglary on private property—an antique shop. He was found not guilty on those charges, but they discovered he was AWOL at the time of arrest. He was returned to the army.

Couple years later, the feds nabbed him on charges for the use of a false identity. Another plea-bargain deal got him a slap on the wrist with a three-year sentence. There's nothing on file ... until now, with his alias Gene Palanuik. Now we know why it's like Snyder fell off the face of the earth fifteen years ago."

Pete thanked Amber, who handed Danny her file then closed their office door on her way out.

"We should call the current employer to make sure he didn't realize any of this," Danny suggested, and Pete nodded.

No surprise when Wolfgang Romin claimed to know nothing at all about any of it. When Pete gave him the department number and asked him to call if he had any further information, Romin mentioned that he'd be out of town for a few weeks, possibly longer—a business trip to San Francisco. He started talking about a rare book collection from a private estate going up for auction that he became obsessed about obtaining. Pete rolled his eyes and endured another minute before Danny bailed him out by dialing his cell phone from the desk line, giving him an excuse to wrap up the call.

## Chapter Ten

*Friday, December 10 ...*

SPORADIC SNOWFALLS THAT rarely amounted to anything had fallen during November, but the snow coming down this day was the real thing. Thick, slightly wet flakes called to mind childhood, snow families, angels, and sleds.

*Daddy ...*

Amber shook off the annoying anticipation she'd been experiencing since the chief announced her father's parole. Each time she got home, she both expected and dreaded seeing her father sitting on her doorstep alongside Sam. After so many years, the best Amber and her dad managed was an awkward conversation with a wall of glass between them.

*I wouldn't know how to talk to him anymore ... talk to him like he's the hero of my life the way I did before he left, before he ran full-out on the road to crime.*

Disgusted with herself, Amber pulled into her driveway and almost wished Jensen was with her so she didn't have to think about the future. Sam barked excitedly as she jumped out. Pressing her boots in the snow on the driveway and the sidewalk, she tried to forget how much bigger her father's footprints always had been beside hers. Down on one knee, she let Sam lick her face and scratched him heartily. "Let's go get the snow yellow, boy, then we'll check on Mrs. Frederick."

Sam replied with an enthusiastic bark. They walked around the house, stopping only once so the golden retriever could sniff a small bush which he then peed on.

Ordering him to stay on the doorstep, she walked into her neighbor's house, calling loudly to let her know who it was. Mrs. Frederick came rolling toward the door in her wheelchair, smiling. At seventy-one, the woman should have been in a nursing home or living with a relative long ago, but her stubborn refusal had kept her where she felt most comfortable. She accepted help from very few, and Amber counted herself honored to be among those trusted.

“Did you see the snow?” Amber asked, leaning in to give her neighbor the prescriptions she’d picked up on her way home from work. She also handed her the stack of mail she’d taken from the box.

“Snow?”

“Come and see!” Amber shouted joyfully. She walked around to the back of Mrs. Frederick’s wheelchair and steered her to the large square picture window that overlooked their front lawn facing the street.

Mrs. Frederick let out a murmur of happiness at seeing the four inches of accumulation. “I love the snow.” She looked up in sudden realization. “Oh, but that will mean you’ll be shoveling, dear.”

Yeah, since their landlord would never consider doing it himself. “Saves me a trip to the gym tonight,” Amber said with a smile, crouching next to the chair.

“Where’s that nice young man who usually brings you home?”

“Jensen had some stuff to do. He’ll be by later.”

Mrs. Frederick had long ago decided Jensen was the man Amber would marry. She’d grown tired of saying “not a chance.” Now she let it go.

“Tobias came by earlier to collect the rent.”

Amber nodded. Since she was always at work when their landlord came to collect rent, she asked Mrs. Frederick to hand hers over too. “Did he taunt Sam again?”

Mrs. Frederick looked sorry, as if she could have done something to prevent it. “Poor dog growled ferociously and whimpered.”

The bastard. Amber had no doubt he’d kicked Sam to get him to stop barking. What she wouldn’t do to get proof that he was doing it. She’d love an excuse to take the jerk down a notch. Much as she wanted to leave Sam inside on the days Tobias came, she knew he’d tear her apartment to shreds if he was cooped up for eight hours.

About two weeks ago, she’d installed a camera and recording device she’d purchased from a tech junkie catalog. The tiny camera was installed in the outer building wall above Sam’s dog house beside the doorstep. The camera supposedly employed motion-activated recording. When someone moved in front of the camera, it triggered the machine inside the house to begin recording. The scope of the camera was limited, of course, to what was directly in front of it which meant the only way Amber would be able to catch her landlord kicking her dog would be if he stood directly in front of the camera. Though Amber checked the videotape often, it appeared not to have taped anything at all since she installed it. She’d begun to think it didn’t work, the way half of the technical devices she purchased didn’t. Maybe tonight would be different.

Muttering oaths to herself, Amber went back out to get her mail. Amid bills, magazines, and newspapers, she found a letter with the logo of the prison where her father was. She already knew he’d gotten paroled in

Falcon's Bend, so why the hell did seeing the letter, no doubt telling her the same, bother her so much?

Unable to face it, she tucked the letter back into the bulk of mail and went inside. She changed her clothes quickly then grabbed a beer from the fridge.

She went first to the surveillance equipment near the front door. Instead of the videotape in the same position at the beginning of the tape, she found it advanced a ways from where it'd been last time. Unfortunately, the recording had to have kicked in when the sun shone at its brightest. All the video recorded was sun glare. Yet Amber heard something under Sam's barking on the tape. She heard rustling next to the door, then a low voice saying, "Shut up, mutt." The camera suddenly went black, and Sam whimpered painfully. Amber knew he'd been kicked by whoever had been rustling around the doorstep. Tobias, her landlord? Much as she wanted to pin it on the bastard, she accepted that while the surveillance equipment worked, it didn't work well enough to give her solid evidence to make Tobias sorry he treated Sam the way he did. If questioned, he'd just say he was there to collect her rent, forgetting that she left it with her neighbor every month.

Sitting on the couch, Amber drank her beer and gave her dog a double dose of love in exchange for the pain he'd suffered earlier. She promised him someday she'd make Tobias pay.

When Sam went to take a nap on his bed in the corner, Amber stared at the stack of mail on the coffee table. Though she got as far as removing the letter from the pile, she couldn't get herself to open it. She left the standard number-ten envelope right before her eyes, wishing she had the courage to open it and face reality. Reality was that she'd spent the years since she was seven wanting to hate her old man for betraying her and her mother with his restlessness and walking out. Okay, he'd been *driven* out by her mother. She couldn't hate him. Reality was, she didn't know how she could have a normal relationship with him either. They couldn't just pick off where they'd left off.

*Where did we leave off? Oh yeah. With him unable to take the suffocating life of marriage, a child, and a nine-to-five that didn't provide the adventure he could no longer live without, even if it meant living without me and Mom.*

*I should hate him. I should because we can't just become a family again like nothing happened, as if Mom's not dead and any chance of the three of us being together isn't dead and gone too.*

But maybe she expected too much. Maybe ...

The somewhere-between-a-knock-and-a-pound on her door brought her back. She wiped moisture from her cheeks then stood just as the door opened. Jensen came in with their dinner. "Pilin' up out there," he muttered, stepping onto the clear mat and closing the door behind him. He shook the snow from his cap. Sam whined a greeting to him.

She knew he could see she wasn't her normal self, looking only for the biggest portion of the pizza he carried.

She took the extra large pizza box out of his hands while he kicked off his boots, then told him about the recording of Sam being kicked. He watched and listened to it a couple times before he concluded, "Equipment's junk. You're not gonna get anything solid on your landlord with it. Anything else up?"

Amber took a deep breath and then waved helplessly toward the coffee table. "I'll get more beer," she barked.

She caught the start of his frown, but by the time she returned with two bottles of their favored Amber Dark, he'd taken off his jacket and picked up the envelope. "You didn't open it," he commented.

"I know."

His gaze narrowed on her. "You gonna enlighten me here or not? Your old man's been paroled. This letter's probably got the details of when he'll be released."

How could he understand what she didn't talk about? She didn't even like to think about it. She'd spent all these years under the shadow of her father's crimes. She knew as well as Jensen did that people judged *her* for all of them; yet she'd put on a strong face and insisted she was proud of her father, that she'd never give up on him. Inside, she still felt like that little girl whose daddy left her and her mother when she was only seven, the little girl who'd worshipped him. He'd disappointed her so thoroughly by not being the man she believed him to be.

*If he's here, in my home, I might not be able to forgive him. I'd be stupid to forgive him anyway, let alone trust him, wouldn't I? But I'll want to. How much can I trust myself?*

After a few more seconds of studying her, Jensen's look softened. He reached for one of the beers she held. "You want me to open it?" he asked in a gentle tone he didn't use often.

Not sure if he referred to the letter or the beer, she whispered, "Okay."

He walked around to the other side of her tiny living room to sit in the chair. Amber watched him avidly as he read her father's note.

"December 15<sup>th</sup>," he told her when he looked up.

She calculated the date in her head. A Wednesday. Unbelievably, one of the usual days she had off every week, like it was meant to be. Her throat tightened.

"You want me to come with you to pick him up?" Jensen asked.

"Why would you take your day off to do that?"

He shrugged, glancing back at the letter. "Not doin' anything else."

She didn't agree, nor did he continue the offer, but she was grateful for his willingness to support her.

Together they reached for pizza.

“I thought you’d be happy your old man’s getting out.”

She nodded, taking a bite of the thick pepperoni and black olive pizza, light on the sauce—she and Jensen had the same taste in pizza. “I am, but ...” She shook her head in disgust as she chewed violently. “I don’t know what to feel.”

Surprising her a little, he nodded like he understood.

“He can’t be the person I knew if he could do the things he did. But I don’t wanna accept that he’s *not* the person I knew.”

“It’s not all cut and dried, Amber. Much as it’d be easier to dismiss somebody who’s committed a crime as a bad person, it’s not necessarily so—no more than a person who *doesn’t* have a record is a good person.”

Amber swallowed the bite she had in her mouth, nodding and sighing at the same time once the food went down. “I wish it was simple. I wish I didn’t have any doubts. It’s why I couldn’t read that letter or the ...”

No, she hadn’t spoken that out loud. Why would it slip out now?

“What?” Jensen asked, wiping sauce off his chin with a napkin.

Could she tell him what she hadn’t admitted to a single other person, including—or especially—her mother? If she told, someone else would know she might have hidden evidence for her father all these years.

“After my dad was arrested for robbing Eisner ... I got something in the mail. He’d arranged to have it sent to me before the robbery, just in case it went bad. He told me in the letter he had sent back then that he and his partner Nelson had planned the perfect heist. The only imperfect part was that Nelson was ruthless. My dad said he’d been feeling uneasy about him a lot, but more than ever, just before they held up the bank. He knew he couldn’t trust Nelson. He said he was afraid he’d lose everything he’d worked for. He was afraid he’d even lose me. I’m not sure what he meant by that, but ... my dad had told Nelson over and over that no blood was to be spilled.

“I know he’d aimed at Nelson’s arm that day, but his partner moved, and the shot killed him. How can a man who’s got no conscience, like my mom always said about Dad, feel guilt over depriving a woman of her husband and a child of his father? If he was a ruthless criminal, how could he have felt so sorry for failing me and my mom?”

“I don’t know how it works. Never met your dad. Is that all?” Jensen asked. “You said you got something in the mail that came with the letter.”

Amber nodded. “I did. There were some maps he’d had for as long as I can remember, not anything hot. The blueprint with it was for the store he and Nelson co-owned. Those came with the letter just after he was arrested. Then, a couple of days later a second package arrived; Zeke sent me his diary. He must have set this up with a mailing service before

the robbery. He asked me to keep it for him but not to open it or give it to anyone else.”

“So, what’s in the diary? Other heists he wasn’t convicted for?”

“I don’t know. I never read it. I never opened it. I barely looked at the old maps or the blueprint. It was easier to tell myself I could trust him, that he just wanted me to be there for him. I knew I couldn’t tell Mom; she never even went in the prison with me when I visited him. She sat in the car no matter how cold it was or how long I took. She would’ve told me to turn the diary over to the police.” Amber shrugged. “She never got over him, but she never forgave him either.”

“Can I see it?” Jensen asked, just like she knew he would.

As with the letter she’d received today, she couldn’t say no to him. Determined, she got the diary out from below the loose floorboard under her bed. She wanted Jensen to see what she wouldn’t allow herself to— not until she had no other choice.

*end of excerpt*

*The Fifteenth Letter by Karen Wiesner & Christ Spindler is available at*  
[www.swimmingkangaroo.com](http://www.swimmingkangaroo.com)