

Betrayed Trust

Complimentary Chapter

Chapter One

Sergeant Laura Saunders' heart thrashed against her chest as she swerved around traffic, racing through red lights and stop signs. She rounded the corner into the middle-income neighborhood and screeched to a halt behind an unmarked car. Blue lights lit up the street as multiple police cars had responded to the call. She spotted the Child Abduction Response Team (CART) van already on site.

Yellow-and-black crime scene tape stretched across the well-groomed lawn. News media vans parked along the curb, and reporters exited with microphones and camera operators. Officers blocked their entry.

She bolted from the car, ducked under the yellow tape, and hurried up the front steps where an officer stood guard, and flashed her badge at the officer. A tall, dark-haired man dressed in khaki pants and a navy Polo held the door open while her co-workers spilled inside.

Laura paused in the doorway, pulled out her notepad, and recorded the scene, the vehicles, people, and anything else she saw. Cries filled her ears. Her stomach plummeted.

"Matt Richards." The clean-cut, blue-eyed man holding the door extended his hand. "I'm an investigator with Child Protective Services." His dry tone lacked emotion.

"Sergeant Laura Saunders." She shook his hand. "Why are *you* here?"

"CPS received an anonymous call reporting suspicious bruising on eighteen-month-old Emma Rayburn. The mother says the accusation is a lie. She'd never hurt her baby, but that's what they all say. Regardless, the child isn't here."

"Innocent until proven guilty. Remember?" Laura stepped inside the tiled foyer from the mid-summer heat, and cool air flowed over her. "Do you always act on anonymous calls? Are you certain the baby didn't crawl under a bed and fall asleep?"

"I'm not sure of anything at the moment. Since the CART team arrived, I couldn't bring myself to leave. And, for the record, I take every call serious."

"You said there were reports of abuse?" She eyed him.

"Only one call. The person didn't identify himself. People are skittish about reporting someone to the authorities, especially if it's a family member or friend." He abandoned his post at the door and trailed behind her. "I received the information yesterday. Kind of odd."

She swung around. "How so?"

"Women usually report abuse."

"I'll need those phone records." She lifted the notepad and jotted down a reminder. "Stick around. I may have more questions."

"Sure." He squared his shoulders and held out a business card. "Should you need anything after tonight, my office and cell numbers are on the card."

"Thanks." She gripped the card, and her fingers touched his warm hand.

She slipped it into her uniform pocket and entered the living room. Lavender curtains with a deep purple symmetrical design complimented the shiny hardwood floor. Officers flooded the house. Lieutenant Weathers stood by a white leather sofa where two younger women sat.

"Laura." He motioned her closer. "This is Tami Rayburn, mother of the missing eighteen-month-old." He pointed across the room. "The man pacing is her husband, Daniel Rayburn. His co-worker, Nicholas Bartholomew, is sitting on the hearth."

Laura surveyed the room and pinpointed each person. "Got it." She turned to Mrs. Rayburn. "I'm sorry about your situation." A silent connection ripped her heart.

"Mrs. Rayburn," Lieutenant Weathers continued, "this is Sergeant Laura Saunders. She's the detective who will handle your case. She will stay in contact and keep you updated."

"Thank you." Mrs. Rayburn twisted a tissue with her fingers. Her words stammered. "Please, call me Tami."

Laura turned to the other woman. "And how are you related to the Rayburns?"

Lieutenant Weathers spoke up. "This is Janice Brock, the child's nanny. Tami hired her before the baby's birth. She's the one who reported the child missing."

Two sets of red, swollen eyes stared back at Laura. A pile of used tissues lay on the glass-topped coffee table. Tami caressed a fuzzy pink blanket with the name *Emma* embroidered under a cream-colored llama applique. Ms. Brock interlocked her arm with Tami's.

"Tell me what happened and how you discovered the child missing?" Laura glanced around the tidy and clean room. A basket of small toys sat in the corner, and a baby's activity walker rested by the French patio doors. Tiny fingerprints smeared on the glass.

Mr. Richards leaned against the doorjamb with a furrowed brow. How long had he been there before she arrived? Did he have a viable reason to doubt the parent's claims? Tami's comment redirected her attention.

"I woke up this morning with a migraine. So, I took an Imitrex and went back to bed." Tami's lips quivered. "Daniel left early for a staff meeting at the office, and Janice arrived around seven. She's an angel to put up with our crazy schedules, and she takes good care of Emma."

Mr. Rayburn's fast approach caught Laura's attention. She firmed her stance and held her head high. Lieutenant Weathers stepped beside her with his hands resting on his waist.

"You've got to find Emma." He shook a finger in her face. "Do you hear me? Find our baby."

The room fell silent. Officers inched in behind Mr. Rayburn.

"We're doing everything we can to get her back." Laura studied the man's body language. His abrupt actions and agitated huffing emanated grief, something she knew well. "Do you mind if I call you Daniel?"

"Call me whoever you want. Just find our baby." His nostrils flared.

"Come on, man." Mr. Bartholomew placed his hand on Daniel's shoulder. "These people are here to help."

Daniel wrenched from his co-worker's touch and backed away. He swiped a hand over his distraught face and resumed pacing.

"Mr. Bartholomew," Laura said. "How long have you known the Rayburns, and how did you hear about Emma's disappearance?"

"I was in his office when Janice called." He averted his eyes toward Daniel. "He was visibly upset. I figured I'd better drive him home. We've been co-workers for about six years."

"Any idea who would take Emma?"

"Me? No way." He shifted his feet. "Don't let me get my hands on whoever's behind this."

"Leave the investigation to us." Laura turned back to the ladies. "What about you, Ms. Brock? Tell me what happened."

"Just call me Janice. I-I don't know anyone who would do such a horrendous thing." She picked at her fingernail. "I put Emma down for a nap about ten-thirty, and she went right to sleep. I closed the nursery door and returned to the kitchen. She normally sleeps for about an

hour in the mornings. When I didn't hear her cry after an hour and a half, I checked on her and discovered she wasn't in her bed."

"Then what did you do?"

"I opened Tami's bedroom door to see if Emma was in bed with her. When she wasn't there, I searched the house, but there were no signs of her. I woke Tami and called Daniel. How could she have disappeared? She's only a baby."

"Let me get this straight. About what time did you discover Emma was missing?" Laura wrote in her notepad.

"About noon. I made her lunch and went to get her up, but like I said before, she wasn't there."

Muscles pulled tight across Laura's shoulders at the firm probability of an abduction.

Mr. Richards pushed from his stance against the doorjamb. "Has Emma ever crawled out of bed by herself?" He shoved both hands into his pants pockets.

"No. She tries but hasn't been successful," Janice said.

"Does anyone get frustrated with her crying? Feel the need to spank or shake her?" Mr. Richards pressed.

Laura straightened and lowered her brows at Mr. Richard's intrusion to her questioning. She turned back and analyzed the ladies' reactions.

Tami's mouth flew open. "Of course, she cries, and I do everything I can to calm her. What kind of monsters do you think we are? I'd never spank my baby or do anything abusive. I love her."

"Asking hard questions is my job." Mr. Richards crossed his arms. "And I have to file a report with my findings."

Laura detected in his firm, half-accusing tone he had more driving him than his job. She had a responsibility to fulfill, too. Figure out who took Emma, find her, and bring her home.

Her phone pinged. "Excuse me."

She read the text message from an off-duty co-worker. "Watch your back. Slade Childers was paroled and released two weeks ago. Word on the street is, he intends to make good on his threat against you."

Hair bristled on the back of her neck. Finding this child was more important than threats from a paroled convict. She slid the phone into her pants pocket and scanned the room.

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Matt evaluated the scene and noted the parent's body language. Had they hurt their baby and were trying to cover it up? Tears wouldn't prove innocence. He zeroed in on Daniel's braided belt, a grim reminder of the crisscrossed welts left on his back and legs as a kid.

Heat rushed to his face. No child deserved abuse, regardless of the reason. If only he could read their thoughts. Some people won trophies for their acting. Were they telling the truth? His gaze landed on Sergeant Saunders. She'd have to interrogate everyone, but he had doubts.

He admired her professionalism and appreciated her authoritative demeanor. Her wide stance and look of steel had him questioning what driving force lay behind her determination and confidence.

"Are you aware of the accusations CPS received yesterday?" She said to Janice.

"Someone reported abuse against Emma."

Sergeant Saunders' calm tone in such a crucial situation showed control and maturity. Her questioning tactics and patience fascinated him. Patience wasn't one of his strong suits.

Janice threw her hand against her chest. "I heard, and I can't believe anyone would say such awful things about Tami and Daniel. They're a loving family and would never harm their child."

"Has Emma ever frustrated you or made you angry?" Sergeant Saunders asked.

"No. Never." Janice stiffened. "I'd never hurt Emma. She's a happy baby and a joy to care for."

Sergeant Saunders closed her notebook and tucked it into her pocket. "Excuse me, ladies. I'm going to look around." She pivoted on one foot and walked away.

Matt followed her down the hall. She came to an abrupt halt and stared at a large family portrait hanging on the wall. He stepped beside her.

"It's a shame to think anyone would harm a little one like this, but it happens." He chewed on his lip and glanced back at the parents.

"Brown-eyes, light brown ringlets." Sergeant Saunders held up her cell and snapped a picture. "Abductions happen. Pray, no one's hurt her."

"Agreed, although prayer hasn't worked for me. Investigating and pursuing people solo works better for me."

He leaned closer to the portrait. Emma's little arms and legs showed no signs of bruising. Didn't mean the accusations were false, but the happiness beaming on the parent's faces had him rethinking the validity of the anonymous abuse report. Had someone maliciously reported mistreatment of this child?

Sergeant Saunders bypassed several officers standing in the hall and disappeared into a room. He turned the corner and found her staring at her phone. She dropped it in her pocket.

"What's your take on the parents and their friends?" Matt asked.

Painted white clouds on pink walls caught his attention. Llama bumper pads outlined the crib, and the crumpled sheet showed a baby once lay there. An emptiness kicked him in the gut.

"I have made no determinations yet." She pulled on a pair of gloves, popped them at her wrists, and faced the crib. "Touch nothing."

"What's your gut telling you?" He shoved his hands into his pockets.

She spun and propped her hands on her hips. "My gut says, don't jump to conclusions. Although you seem to have already formed an opinion." Her uplifted brows warned him to tread lightly.

"Guess I've witnessed too much child abuse. Parents lie even when their children sport black-eyes and broken arms. But you're right. Innocent until proven guilty."

Boom!

The house shook, and the window shattered. He dove for her, and they plummeted to the floor. His body covered hers. Car alarms sounded. Shouts from outside filled his ears.

Matt stared into caring, protective brown eyes, surrounded by delicate features. Saunders' hair clip had popped off, and long strands covered part of her face, jolting his emotions. He jumped up.

"Excuse me. I didn't mean to knock you down." He extended his hand. "Are you okay? Need some help?"

"I'm good. You?" She hopped to her feet and shook shards of glass from her hair.

He pointed at her forehead. "You're bleeding."

"Saunders." Lieutenant Weathers shouted. Heavy footsteps approached and stopped in the doorway. "A car exploded. You two, okay?" He stepped closer to Saunders. His eyebrows drew together. "You're hurt. The fire department and ambulance are on the way."

"I'll be fine." She pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at the trickling blood.

Lieutenant Weathers rushed away.

"He's right. You should get the cut checked." Matt searched for more blood.

She scooped her hair clip off the floor and twisted her long curls back in place. "I need to see if anyone got hurt and find out whose car exploded." She tore off the gloves and darted out the door.

He stepped over broken glass, baby toys, and a cracked llama lamp and peered outside. Fire engulfed a car in the driveway. His jaw dropped. *His* car. His new Ford Taurus. He darted from the room but halted on the front porch. Intense heat slapped him in the face.

His car bumper, steering wheel, and stainless-steel coffee mug littered the front lawn. Black smoke billowed. The putrid odor of burning rubber filled the air.

"My car." He raked a hand down his face. "I liked that car."

Sirens grew louder. The rumble of truck motors overpowered the roar of angry flames. Matt backed up and bumped into Daniel.

"Excuse me." Matt's insides lurched at the sight of flames devouring his vehicle. Firefighters dragged hoses across the lawn and sprayed water over the red, yellow, and blue flames. Black smoke billowed and swirled toward the sky. Through the smoldering fog, he caught sight of Sergeant Saunders with a paramedic.

"What caused the explosion?" Daniel asked.

"Not sure. Lieutenant Weathers said the fire marshal is on his way. Might have been a bomb."

"What? Who would do such a thing?" Daniel pulled his wife close.

"Authorities will handle the investigation. They'll figure it out." Matt rubbed the back of his neck. "You've got more important things to be concerned about right now."

"Stay back," a firefighter said. "It's safer inside the house."

"You heard the man." Matt laid a hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Let's go."

Tami stepped into the foyer but dropped to the floor and sobbed. "What's happening to us? Where's Emma? I don't care about cars, this house, or anything else. I just want my baby."

Daniel lifted his wife and wrapped her in a hug. "I know, honey. I do too."

Matt paused in the doorway and looked back at the remains of his car. He tightened his lips. What *was* going on here?

The billowing smoke thickened and made it difficult to decipher Sergeant Saunders's exact location. She had a tough job, and he didn't want to make it any harder. He'd comply with her authority and do whatever he could to help locate the missing child.

She emerged with a small bandage on her forehead. A strand of hair fell across her face. She tucked it behind her ear and trudged toward him. He admired her courage.

"Pretty brazen to set *my* car on fire with law enforcement all around," he said.

"Your car? I was about to ask the Rayburns if the vehicle belonged to them. Sorry for your loss. You'd be surprised how people react in situations. Desperate people do desperate things to force your attention elsewhere. Apparently, someone doesn't like what's going on." She pulled out her notepad again. "What time did you say you arrived? I'm trying to figure out who had time to access your car before police arrived."

"Two-twenty this afternoon. I didn't notice any other vehicles close by." Chills crawled up Matt's spine. Good thing she let him hang around the scene longer, or he'd be toast.

"How soon after you arrived, did the police get here?"

"Five minutes, max." Matt opened the door for her. "I hadn't been here long enough for anyone to tamper with my car except for the parents."

Her glare sent him a warning. "Don't jump to conclusions. I have a feeling the explosion was a warning and possibly a diversion to take our attention away from the kidnapping."

"Care to explain?"

"I've arrested a number of criminals, and along with the arrests come threats," she said. "Any of them can listen to police scanners and find out where I am."

She had a dangerous job, but his position measured up to hers differently. "I know what you mean. I've removed children from abusive homes and received many threats. Whoever did this was crazy enough to make his point in broad daylight."