

SAMPLE CHAPTER

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

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Chapter 1

Sunday: 0435 hrs

"Baby," Jewell said.

"Huh?"

"Baby. Wake up." She nudged me awake. "It's the phone."

So, that's what that horrible sound was in my dreams.

"Tell me something I don't know," I groaned.

It rang again.

Doesn't sound much better when I'm awake, I thought.

I rolled out of bed to get it. First, I reached for the pad and pencil I kept on the nightstand. Only then did I answer the phone.

"Diaz," I mumbled, looking at the clock. I wrote the date and time on the notepad. I already knew who was calling.

"Morning, Sheriff," James, the night dispatcher, said. He sounded serious.

"What's going on, James?"

Something had to be happening. After all, why bother me at this ungodly hour of the morning if it wasn't bad?

"Sheriff," he said. "It's bad. Tom's been shot."

"What?" I asked, a little too loudly.

Jewell rolled over. Alarm was in her voice when she asked. "What's going on?"

"It gets worse," he said. "Bryan was assaulted at a traffic stop. It's the same place where Tom got shot."

"What happened?" Jewell asked.

"Go back to sleep, Baby," I said.

She wouldn't. A phone ringing in the early hours of the morning was always bad news.

She'd worry,

"Things are still a little sketchy," James said. "I've just told you everything I know."

"One more time with clarity. What do we know?"

"Just that. We've two officers down. Jerry is heading towards the scene. Manassa One will probably get there before he does. EMS has been paged out."

"Where does our information come from?"

"A trucker at the scene. She said Tom's body armor saved him, but he's still hurt. Bryan is incoherent and drifting in and out of consciousness. He looks to have suffered some head trauma."

"Where did this happen?"

"This side of the state line on 285."

"Who's out there now?"

"Just the trucker. Like I said, I'm getting people down there."

And that's why he called me. As sheriff, I had people who did this stuff for me. Other people who would have been drug out of their warm beds into the chilly dawn to work.

But Pam (my undersheriff) and RJ (chief detective) were out of town in Napa, California, following up on a case.

My only other detective, Tom, was a victim.

That meant dragging me out of bed.

"Does Robert know about this?"

"I'm calling him when I get off with you."

"James. What do you know?" I asked.

"Bryan started on a chase. Tom went to back him up. The trucker says Bryan shot Tom."

"I'll be out the door in five and heading that way. Thanks."

I hung up and reached for my pants and boots.

"What's going on?" Jewell asked. She had listened to the exchange on the phone.

"Tom's been shot," I said. "And Bryan's been assaulted."

"Bryan?"

"Antonito 4, Glinda's husband," I explained.

"One of your dispatchers' husbands? Oh, Jesus," she said. It was an actual prayer and not a curse. "How are they?"

"Tom's body armor stopped the bullet, but he's a hurting unit. Bryan is injured and incoherent."

I fumbled for the same clothes I'd worn earlier. In some ways, what I wore was almost a uniform to me. Jeans, boots, a white shirt, and a black vest. Now that I was sheriff, I'd gone back to wearing the attire I was most comfortable with.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah." Then I understood what she was asking. "Was I doing it again?"

"Yes," she answered.

I took my holster from the nightstand and put it on. My badge went on next, and it gleamed in the darkroom.

"Was it the dream?"

From the other drawer and a locked box, I took out the Colt Python George McDonald gave me a few months before.

Flipping open the cylinder, I confirmed the pistol was loaded.

I closed the cylinder and holstered it. Quickly, I checked and made sure I had my wallet and phone. I had them both.

"Yes," I replied.

"Got everything you need?" Jewell asked, doing her own double check for me.

"I think so. I'll call when I know more."

"You be careful out there," she said. "You think you'll need my kind of help?"

"I'm sure Tom is going to need some work."

Coming that close to being killed had to have messed with the wiring in his head. He'd work through it. But he wouldn't do it alone.

Jewell was wide awake. She figured if I was up, she should be.

"Love you," I said and bent over to give her a quick kiss. Her lips were warm, and they made me wish I could stay.

Too bad.

I had to go to work.

Quickly, I walked through the living room and then the kitchen. Before reaching the back door, Barr-Killer looked up at me.

The pup slept in the kitchen on the braided rug in front of the gas fireplace. That made it his favorite place to be.

I gave the dog a quick scratch behind the ears. Then, grabbing my keys, I was out the door. A moment later, I was in the Suburban and heading out the driveway.

“Conejos SO (Sheriff’s Office), Conejos 1,” I called over the radio.

“Go ahead, Conejos 1.”

“Show me 10-8 (In service), 10-76 (Going to) to the State Line.”

“Copy you’re 10-8 and 10-76 to the state line. Time 0435 hours.”

“Conejos SO. Call Conejos 15. Tell him what happened. He’ll be taking the lead on this.”

“Copy that, Conejos 1.”

And that’s what internal affairs does, I reminded myself.

I took a deep breath. This would be his first real outing as our Internal Affairs officer.

I glanced at the digital clock on the dash. I was at least forty minutes away from the state line. Since the emergency was over, there was no point in running lights and siren.

I had a lot to think about during the drive.

“Buddy,” I said, “I hope you made a good call bringing him back.”

Of course, it was Tony’s fault that he came back at all. When he handed the reins of command over to me, I’d never expected to see him again.

And then one day, he was sitting in my office.

“Damn good cup of coffee,” Tony Madril, the former sheriff, said.

He’d called and asked to see me. It had been almost two months since he’d handed over his badge, his department, and his job to me.

I had no idea why he wanted to see me.

“Where did you learn to make Black Gang coffee?”

“Pastor Morgan taught me.”

“Did you go through the ceremony?”

“Of course,” I said. The supposed ceremony was a joke, but I’d heard of it.

It was said that the secret formula for the coffee could be passed on only at a full moon and a high tide. King Neptune, or at least part of his family, had to attend. Along with them was the required entourage of mermaids, sea monsters, and Atlanteans.

That the Secret of the Coffee had been passed on to a mere landlubber had to violate the recipe. But then, no one was objecting.

“It was wearing the bra on my head that was uncomfortable.”

The addition of wearing a bra on the head was my attempt to inject some humor into this.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“It’s a joke.”

Tony had never seen *Weird Science*, so the joke went flat.

“You and RJ.” He shook his head. “I still don’t know what forty-two means.”

“How’s retirement?” I asked, changing the subject.

“It’s not what it’s supposed to be.”

I let him talk. I knew where he was going. Or hoped I did.

I wondered when the allure of working at doing nothing all day would wear off.”

“Oh?” he laughed. “Doing nothing all day is hard work.”

He took a sip of coffee and smiled as he did. I’d been a good student of the coffee arts.

We went to Hawaii,” he said. “And you know what.”

“What?”

“I got seasick!”

“I thought you were a Marine. Didn’t they put you guys on boats?”

“I was never on any of the big ships. Just troop ships. I got sick on them, too.”

“Did a lot of TV watching. Almost seven hundred channels, and there’s nothing worth watching,” he complained. “All I could think about was doing something useful with myself.”

I smiled. Yes, this is working out.

“I’m glad you stopped in.”

“Oh?”

Leaning forward, I asked, “Do you want your job back? I mean if a simple resolution made me Sheriff, I suppose it can give it back to you.”

The answer was what I had expected.

“No. The job’s yours.”

Rats, I thought. No getting away from it.

“How about something part-time?”

He put his coffee on the desk. I had his attention. “What do you have in mind?”

I opened the top desk drawer and pulled out a sheriff’s badge. It identified the wearer as a member of the Conejos County Sheriff’s Office.

This badge differed from the ones everyone else wore. This one was silver, not gold, and read “Internal Affairs Division.” The title of “Investigator” was on it.

I put it on the desk in front of him.

“What’s this, Will?”

“It’s a badge, Tony.” I said it as if that explained everything.

He picked it up. The word “Investigator” caught his attention.

“Remember a few months ago I wanted to start an Internal Affairs Division?”

He ran his hand over the points of the star that made the badge. “Yeah.”

“The job of Internal Affairs Investigator is yours if you want it.”

“Michael approved this?”

“Of course!”

Michael, the County Administrator, could be tight-fisted with a buck. But he owed me for helping bring The Moving Wall to the county months before.

Michael nodded, smiled, and found the money.

I hated to admit it, but I was getting good at this politics thing. That was reason enough to get out before I got stupid and ran for the Senate.

He put the star in his pocket. “What exactly do I do?”

I’d found some books on the subject. Reaching into another drawer, I took them out and pushed the books across the desk to him.

“If a deputy has an accusation made against them, you investigate it. A deputy does something stupid, you investigate it. If there’s use of force in an arrest, you investigate it.

“You’ll do this for every agency in the county, plus fire, and EMS.

“You then make recommendations. Were things done right? Are we talking about writing up a new policy or reprimanding an officer? If needed, you would also press criminal charges.

“But if there’re no issues, you say so.”

“Sounds like I won’t be popular in this role.”

“That’s why I didn’t just go hire someone off the street. I needed someone the troops already respect.”

“That’s one nice thing about getting old,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“If you piss people off, who cares?”

“One other thing. Shootings. You’ll work with CBI and the DA’s office if we ever have another.”

“Like what happened with Max?”

It took me a few seconds to answer. That slight pause was enough to let him know what I was feeling.

“How are you doing with that, Will?” he asked after a while.

“Been talking to RJ, Pam, or my wife?”

“All the above, including Robert Morgan.”

That figured.

“Not as well as I’d like,” I admitted.

“Go on,” he said.

“I killed one of my best friends.” I shook my head. “No, that’s not right. I killed my brother. Just like Cain killed Abel, I killed my brother.

“I buried him and his wife because he killed her. She was a friend, too.

“Go on.”

“It’s a lot to process. Maybe too much.”

“What are you doing about it?”

I took a breath. “Pastor Morgan wants me to join his group at Camp Victory. He says I need to work through it.”

“So?”

I shook my head.

“I think it would be a good idea.”

“Maybe for someone not running a department like this.”

“Will,” he said. “I’ve known you for a long time. You’re not good at lying to yourself.”

“I’m that transparent?”

“I know what you’re thinking,” he explained. “That maybe it could have turned out differently?”

“Of course I think that.”

“You feel guilty about shooting Max. And you’re angry with him for putting you in this situation.”

He’d hit it right on the head.

“Talk this out. Isn’t that what you told me to do a dozen months back about my cancer?”

“Not me,” I answered. “That was someone who looked like me.”

“Well, guess what,” he said. “Fr. Lopez and I have been talking it out. And the therapy your wife did on me and Pam out at the bridge was just what I needed. It opened the dikes so I would start talking.”

He was there when Pam threatened suicide. I still didn’t know what had happened beyond a lot of rocks being thrown by both into the Rio Grande. Jewell treated them as patients and said nothing about it.

“Maybe you need to,” he added.

I changed the subject and nodded towards the badge he'd put in his pocket. "I take it you're accepting the offer?"

He took a breath and looked around the walls of what used to be his office. "I don't think I'm getting a better one today."

"Good. Let me show you to your desk."

We stepped out of my office and around the corner into the common room. Once the common room had been a kitchen. It still filled that function for feeding the jail.

But we also used it for the patrol team. There were tables, chairs, and lockers for the patrol officers. It also provided us with a place for briefings, and the officers had a place to work.

The Undersheriff's office door, which opened into the common room, was closed. Pam was out on the road with the troops, as she should be.

Dispatch was off to one side of her office. That door was open.

The Detective Division was across from Pam's office and dispatch.

As I stepped out, I heard Detective Tom Sowards tell Glinda, our day dispatcher, "Don't worry. It'll work out."

What will work out, I wondered.

Glinda saw us come into the common room. She whispered something, and Tom turned with a start.

"Am I interrupting something?" I asked.

"No, Sheriff," Tom answered. "Just talking. Mr. Madril, it's good to see you again."

"Tom, meet your new cellmate," I said.

"New cellmate?"

"Tony has rejoined us on a part-time basis," I explained. "He's running Internal Affairs."

"Outstanding," Glinda said, standing and extending her hand. "Welcome back."

Tom put out his hand. "Welcome back, sir."

"Glinda, get him NCIC/CCIC (National Crime Information Center/Colorado Crime Information Center) terminal access, please. And assign him a call number."

"How about a vehicle?" Tony asked.

"You'd getting the Suburban back, if that's what you're asking. I like a vehicle that has seat warmers."

There were only a handful of cars we could assign him.

"When was the last time you started the Gray Ghost?" I asked.

"Last week," Glinda said.

The commissioners had used the Gray Ghost to get around in. When it was retired, Michael gave it to us as a backup. Not that a Chevette made a great patrol car.

Glinda took a set of keys from her desk and handed them to Tony.

"I'll put in that request for NCIC/CCIC access for you," Glinda said. "And your call sign . . ." she said, looking at her list and writing Tony's name next to a number, ". . . will be Conejos 15."

"Thank you," Tony said.

"You start Monday," I said. "Welcome aboard, Investigator Madril."

"Yep," I thought, coming back to the here and now. "Welcome back, Tony."

But it really wasn't his first case back. No, there was another, and it made me wonder how that one impacted the one that is here and now.

I was south of the county line when I saw flashing emergency lights coming towards me. As they approached, I pulled over to the side of the road and yielded the right of way.

It was one of the county ambulances.

“Conejos SO, Conejos 1.”

“Conejos 1, go ahead,” James radioed back.

“What’s the story with EMS heading towards Alamosa?”

“Antonito 4 is being taken there,” James responded after a minute.

Made sense. Alamosa had a CT scanner and a neurologist on staff.

It could have been worse, I reminded myself.

It might have been one of the Ghostbuster ambulances. Had it been Bryan or Tom, or both would have been in body bags in the back.

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