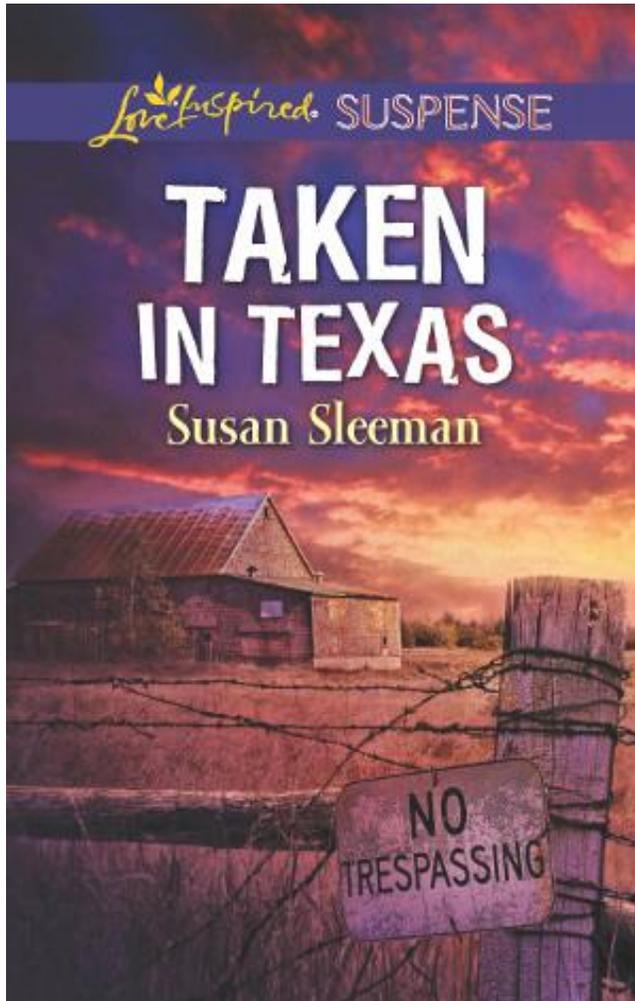


TAKEN IN TEXAS SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

McKade Law Book 4 – Feb/2019

ISBN-10: 1335231927

ISBN-13: 978-1335231925

A cowboy protector from her past...

A McKade Law novel

Working her first case as deputy sheriff with her ex-boyfriend, Detective Cord Goodwin, Kendall McKade is determined to track the kidnappers—even if it makes her a target. Desperate to find the abducted victim, his aunt, Cord must keep Kendall safe... while also caring for his recently orphaned nephew. Teaming up threatens to rekindle Cord and Kendall's relationship, but first they must solve a life-threatening mystery.

CHAPTER ONE

Some calls went wrong. Terribly wrong. Deputy Kendall McKade's gut screamed this was one of those calls.

Take care, a warning voice whispered in her head.

Kendall didn't like what she was seeing. Caution was the game here. Plenty of caution.

She wouldn't race up to the front door. Burst inside to check on the seventy-four-year-old aunt her nephew was having a hard time reaching.

She climbed out of her patrol car. The steamy heat of the night hit her hard as she took a long look at the single-story home hunkered down under tall cypress trees. Overcast skies cast ominous shadows on the rural property. She'd hoped for a light burning inside the house, but it was as black as the murky night clinging to the foundation.

That alone sent Kendall's alarm bells ringing.

She reached inside her car and flicked on the headlights, flooding the area with bright light.

An older model Cadillac sat in the drive, the windows coated in thick Texas dust as if it hadn't been driven for days. Had to be Eve Smalley's car. Her nephew hadn't been able to get a hold of her, and there wasn't a family member, caretaker, housekeeper or anyone else who would be on the property. No one but Eve and her nephew had a key to the house.

A deputy made a routine morning check, but Mrs. Smalley didn't answer the door. When they notified the nephew, he said she never went out at night and asked them to check back.

So if he was right, and she *was* home, why were all the lights out?

Kendall thought about her own grandmother in this situation. Her precious, sweet, dear grandmother. Maybe injured. Maybe inside, waiting for help. Or worse—maybe attacked by an intruder.

A cold knot formed in Kendall's stomach.

"Relax," she whispered to herself before she overreacted to the eerie night. "Her nephew was probably wrong, and she went somewhere with a friend. Or she's already in bed."

Kendall's pep talk did nothing to stem her anxiety. Six o'clock was *way* too early for bed, even for an older woman.

Kendall slipped into her squad car and angled her computer to access the department's record-management system. She plugged in the license plate number and waited. The screen filled with information, and Kendall quickly scanned the data.

Just as she'd thought. The car belonged to Mrs. Smalley. She should be home, so there could be trouble inside. Kendall reached for her radio to communicate with dispatch.

"221." She gave her uniform number. "I need the information for the deputy dispatched this morning to the Smalley residence."

"Copy," the dispatcher said, and silence followed for a moment. "221, deputy 228 responded to the call."

"Copy." Kendall reached for her cell phone in the pocket of her vest. She didn't have to look up the deputy's number to get a name. She knew it well. It belonged to her cousin, Deputy Dylan McKade, who was off duty now. She dialed his personal cell and waited for him to answer.

"What's up, cuz?" he asked.

"I'm calling about the welfare check you did this morning for Eve Smalley. I'm following up at her residence now and wondered if you found anything odd when you were here."

“Yeah, maybe.” His cheery tone evaporated. “The car was in the drive. Didn’t look like it’d been driven in some time, but she didn’t answer the door. I looked in the windows and saw nothing odd. Both doors were locked. There wasn’t any sign of foul play, so I couldn’t enter the home. I asked the desk sergeant to follow up with the nephew.”

“That’s why I’m here now. Nephew says the aunt doesn’t go out at night and asked us to check back, but the car’s here, and there aren’t any lights on.”

“Doesn’t sound good.” Dylan’s alarming tone raised Kendall’s concern even more. “Maybe we can get the nephew to drive over from Houston.”

Kendall swallowed down her worry. “No point in making him do so if it’s a false alarm. I’ll take a good look around first.”

“Let me know what happens, okay?”

“Sure thing.” She disconnected and stowed her phone.

She took her car keys and closed the door, leaving the vehicle running to keep the lights trained on the house. Their squad cars were equipped with a Run Lock System, so if someone tried to steal the car and engaged either the hand or foot brake, the engine immediately cut out.

She pocketed her keys, snapped off the safety strap on her holster and cautiously approached the door. She pounded hard, and her training kicked in, forcing her to stand next to the door and out of the line of fire should there be an altercation.

Kendall listened carefully—cicadas buzzing in the woods was the only sound—and then knocked again. “Mrs. Smalley, Deputy McKade here. I need to talk to you.”

A faint rustling came from inside. She waited for the door to open. It didn’t. Had she wanted the woman to be home so badly that she imagined the sound?

She pounded harder. No one came to the door. She twisted the doorknob. Locked. Time for that look around the property.

She made her way to the side of the house, running the flashlight over thick shrubs hugging the foundation. A soft breeze played across the yard but did nothing to lessen the eighty-degree temperature, raised another five degrees by heavy humidity.

Kendall stopped at the first window and peered in but saw nothing in the darkness beyond the first few feet of wood flooring. Easing ahead, her back against the house for protection, she glanced in the next window near the rear of the unfenced yard. She pressed her hands against the glass and rested her face on them. A man's silhouette flashed in the distance, then was swallowed up by the darkness.

What in the world? No one else had a key. Or should be there.

Instincts had Kendall shooting back and grabbing her radio. "221 requesting backup at Smalley residence. Possible intruder."

"Copy," the dispatcher said.

A loud crash sounded inside. A shot of adrenaline hit Kendall hard. Indecision followed.

She should wait for backup. No, she couldn't. Not when this older woman could be hurt. Maybe in danger. The home was located on the far-north side of their county. It could be ten minutes or more before backup arrived, and Mrs. Smalley could be dead by then.

Kendall lifted her gun and flashlight, then eased ahead. She swung around the rear wall and took three steps up to a deck. She turned the knob on the back door. Unlocked.

Odd. Dylan said it had been locked that morning.

Kendall scanned the wood and doorjamb—saw no sign of forced entry, but the intruder could've come in a window. She pushed the door open and stepped off to the side to listen.

Silence reigned. No movement.

“Police!” she shouted. “Show yourself. Come to the door with your hands on your head.”

She waited. Counting.

One. Two. Three. Going higher and higher. Hitting twenty.

“This is your last warning,” she called out. “Show yourself with hands on your head.”

No sound. No movement.

She stepped to the door. Shone her light inside. Paused. Assessed.

The kitchen lay ahead. A door on the far wall led out of the room. She ran her flashlight over the space. Old cabinets. A small table. Worn flooring with a large puddle of dried blood.

Blood. There was blood. Something bad had happened here. Not just now, as the blood had dried. But it had happened.

Disturbing images built in Kendall’s mind, and the hairs on the back of her neck rose. She held up her service weapon. Her heart thumping, she stepped in and headed toward the door.

Silently. Slowly. Cautiously.

She pointed her flashlight into the opening before she moved forward and put herself in a vulnerable position. The hallway stood ahead of her, with several large openings on each side. Keeping her gun raised, she entered.

She turned to clear the room on the right and took a few steps into a dining room. All clear.

The floorboards creaked behind her.

She spun around. Her flashlight beam illuminated a man in his thirties with a surprised look on his face. He lifted his arms overhead. She tried to move back. Was too slow. He swung a heavy wooden rolling pin with gloved hands, hitting her square in the forehead.

A razor-sharp jolt of pain bored into her head, and a wave of dizziness hit her hard. She wobbled. Reached out to grab the wall. Couldn't find it and lurched to the side. She felt her body crumpling. Slowly. Dropping to the floor.

No. No. You have to stay up.

A karate chop hit her arm, and her gun skittered away.

She was helpless now. Unarmed, with an intruder standing over her.

No, God, please no.

She crashed to the floor.

Get your gun. Now, before he does. Find it. Protect yourself.

She tried to lift her arm but a black curtain closed over her eyes. She was in extreme danger, and she could do nothing to stave off the darkness.

Her world faded to black.

*

Detective Cord Goodwin didn't like what he was seeing.

A deputy was at his aunt's house. Fine. Good, even. He'd been trying to get ahold of Eve, and she didn't answer her phone. That was unlike her, so he'd ask the sheriff's department to do a welfare check and they didn't find her at home. They'd promised to come back out that night again. He'd just been too worried not to come in person, so the minute he could get away from his job as a homicide detective to make the drive from Houston, he did. He'd expected to find Eve home. Hoped to find her, at least. But the house was black as the night, a patrol vehicle running in the drive and no sign of the deputy. *That* he didn't expect.

There was only one thing to do about it—check it out.

He removed his off-duty weapon from his ankle holster and made an entry plan. He was facing a touchy situation. He had to announce himself or the deputy might mistake him for a prowler, but if he did call out, he would distract the deputy.

Still, it was better to announce himself than to take a bullet from some rookie who might panic. Of course, it might not be a rookie. Might be someone he'd worked with when he'd been employed by the Lake County Sheriff's Department. He could hardly believe six years had passed since then, but with very little turnover on the force, he might very well know the responding deputy.

Could even be Kendall. Wouldn't that be something, seeing her again after all these years?

They'd dated for a month or so. Had even gotten serious. At least for him. But she was a strong, independent woman and thought he was too controlling. She was right. He'd controlled his life with an iron fist. He'd tried to change back then, many times, but he couldn't let go of his past and couldn't manage it. So they'd simply broken up. Maybe they could have made a go of it if they hadn't worked in the same department. But they had and the breakup was ugly, and they couldn't continue to see each other. With her father serving as county sheriff, Cord was the logical one to leave the department.

He landed a job as a police officer in Houston, worked his way up to detective and hadn't seen Kendall since. Now here he was.

Could he handle running into her again? Did it matter?

If this was her cruiser, he had no choice. Something was up with Aunt Eve, and he was going to get some answers tonight, even *if* those answers came from Kendall.

He went to the door, keeping his head on a swivel as he walked. He'd been in law enforcement far too long to let his worry for his aunt overtake his safety training. He inserted his

key in the lock and pushed the door open. It swung in with a creak that was swallowed up by chirps from the loud cicadas, which were always prevalent in August.

“Hey, anybody here?” he yelled. “It’s Cord Goodwin. Eve’s nephew and Houston police officer.”

Through the living room and down the hallway, he saw a flashlight lying on the floor, the beam pointing his way. Next to it, a body lay, unmoving.

No. No.

Eve? The deputy?

Cord’s heart constricted, and his gut knotted. He almost didn’t want to know who it was, but he had to find out.

He slipped effortlessly into his officer persona, raised his gun and eased into the house, clearing each room on the way. He wanted to move faster, but he couldn’t risk someone charging out and ending his life.

He reached the hallway. The person on the floor wore a deputy’s uniform. A woman. He squinted to make out the face.

Pain pierced his heart.

Kendall. It was Kendall lying on the floor, her eyes closed.

Please, God. Please don’t let her have sustained a life-threatening injury.

Cord grabbed the flashlight and ran the beam over her body. No bloody wounds.

Good. Good. A large bump the size of a goose egg bulged on her forehead, and his aunt’s big rolling pin lay on the floor beside her.

Kendall had been blindsided. Took a blow to the head. Better than a gunshot, he supposed.

Keeping his gun fixed forward with one hand, he squatted to check her pulse. Her skin was soft and warm, bringing back memories he'd buried deep. He shook them off and moved his fingers until he located her pulse. Strong and sure.

His heart rate slowed, and he reached for her radio. "This is off-duty Detective Cord Goodwin from Houston. You have a deputy down." He relayed his aunt's address.

He heard movement in the kitchen. Looked up to see a man in the shadows looking back at them. The guy suddenly bolted toward the back door.

"Stop! Police!" Cord shot to his feet.

The guy kept running. Cord charged to the door and shone the flashlight over the yard. The fleeing suspect disappeared into the woods. Cord chased after him, but once he reached the wooded area, a motorcycle roared to life.

Cord stopped. No way could he catch the suspect on a bike. Better to find Eve and help Kendall. Eve first, as he had no idea if she'd been injured, and Kendall appeared stable. Panic rioting within him, he forced it down to go back inside and search Eve's bedroom.

He took a quick swing of the flashlight over the kitchen, coming to rest on a rusty red spot on the linoleum floor. Blood? Was that blood?

He swallowed hard and hurried across the room. Squatted. Yeah, it was, all right. As much as he didn't want it to be, he'd seen blood far too many times in his job to question it.

He shot up and rushed out of the room. Kendall still lay on the floor. As he passed her, the urge to help her almost overpowered his concern for his aunt. Almost.

Holding his breath, he pushed into Eve's room and flipped on the light. The room was undisturbed, the bed made, but she wasn't there or in the spare room, either.

He sighed out a breath of relief before a bead of worry took its place. He didn't find Eve's body. That was good. Really good. But Eve was still missing, there was blood in the kitchen and an intruder who was willing to kill a deputy with a rolling pin had fled the home.

Something was wrong here. Terribly wrong.

Buy It Now for Print and E-book

