



# Montana Justice

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She ran to save her life.  
Now the man she once betrayed is her only hope.

Home to both the Resting Warrior Ranch and Pawsitive Connections, Garnet Bend, Montana is a small town full of big heroes. Anyone would want to live there.

Anybody but Piper Matthews.

She swore she'd never come back after what her father did to the town and what she did to Sheriff Lachlan Calloway. But desperation has a way of rewriting promises. With a baby in her arms and nowhere left to run, Piper returns to the only place that ever felt like home.

Lachlan never expected to see Piper again—especially not with a child that has his eyes. The woman who once disappeared without a word is now sleeping under his roof, guarding more secrets than she's willing to share.

She says she's done running. But Piper's past is closing in fast—and it's darker, more dangerous, and more tangled up in Lachlan's world than he could ever imagine.

In a town built on quiet loyalty and buried lies, the truth is about to break everything wide open.

**Total Pages (Source):** 99

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Piper Matthews

The rumble of the eighteen-wheeler's engine had become white noise hours ago, but the ache in my ribs kept me from sleeping. Every bump in the highway sent a fresh spike of pain through my torso, a reminder that my father's fists were as quick as his temper.

As if I'd needed that reminder any time in my twenty-six years.

I pressed my back against the passenger seat, trying to find a position that didn't make me wince.

"You know, I've been driving this route for a decade now, and I swear the scenery just keeps getting prettier," Eddie said, his weathered hands steady on the wheel. He'd been talking almost nonstop since I'd climbed into his cab three hours ago, chatting about everything from his grandkids to the best truck-stop coffee in Montana.

Normally, talkers annoyed me—too much noise, too much attention—but Eddie's rambling was oddly comforting. Like background music that kept the darker thoughts at bay.

"My youngest granddaughter just started kindergarten," he continued, pulling out his phone to show me a picture while we waited at a red light. "Smart as a whip, that one. Reminds me of my daughter at that age."

I managed what I hoped passed for a smile, though the simple act of moving my facial muscles sent a dull throb through my lip that was still tender on the inside. Eddie had seen me messing with it, but I'd told him I'd taken a spill off my bike. He'd accepted the lie without question, the way kind people did when they didn't want to pry.

The pain in my side flared as the truck hit another pothole, and I had to bite back a gasp. Three days. Three days since I'd finally had enough. Since I'd realized that staying meant dying, and running meant maybe—just maybe—living.

“You okay there, hon?” Eddie glanced over with genuine concern. “You’ve been pretty quiet.”

“Just tired,” I said, which wasn’t entirely a lie. Exhaustion had settled into my bones like lead, the kind of bone-deep weariness that came from a lifetime of hypervigilance and fear.

“Well, I’m heading up to Billings if you want to stay on that long.” He gestured toward the horizon. “Young woman like you, traveling alone... Billings has more opportunities. More places to blend in if you need to.”

The careful way he said it made me wonder if my story about visiting family out west had fooled him as much as I'd thought. But Eddie seemed like the type of man who'd helped runaways before, who understood that sometimes the only choice was to keep moving.

“I appreciate the offer,” I said. “But I think I’ll figure it out as I go.”

A green highway sign flashed past in the gathering dusk: Garnet Bend - 10 miles.

My heart stuttered. Garnet Bend. I hadn't thought about that place in years. Hadn't let

myself think about it. But seeing the sign brought back a flood of memories—some bitter, some surprisingly sweet. And we'd be going right through there.

“Actually,” I heard myself say, “would you mind dropping me off in Garnet Bend?”

Eddie's eyebrows rose. “Garnet Bend? You sure?”

“I'd forgotten this place existed.” I kept my voice light, casual. “Old friend lives there. Figured I'd stop by and say hello.”

Another lie, but this one came easier. The truth was too complicated—that Garnet Bend held some of the only happy memories I had from childhood. That a boy with kind brown eyes—older than me, but who didn't treat me with annoyance—had helped fix my bike tire when I was ten. Then years later had paid for the groceries I didn't have enough money for one time at the store.

I didn't explain that sometimes, when the world felt too dark, I'd close my eyes and remember what it felt like to be seen as something other than a burden or a target.

“Garnet Bend's a nice little place,” Eddie said. “Got maybe a couple thousand people. Pretty town center, lots of local businesses. Mountain views that'll take your breath away.”

I nodded, though I barely heard him. I winced as I twisted and pain radiated across my ribs, before smoothing out my features. The last thing I needed was Eddie deciding I needed medical attention. Hospitals meant questions, questions meant records, and records meant my father could find me.

The next twenty minutes crawled by. I stared out the window at the darkening landscape, trying to ignore the way my hands were shaking. This was stupid. Garnet Bend was a risk—not because anyone would recognize me, but because going back

felt too much like hope. And hope was dangerous when you had nothing left to lose.

But I was broke, hurt, and desperate. And desperate people didn't have the luxury of avoiding risks.

Eddie took the Garnet Bend exit and wound through tree-lined streets toward the town center. Even in the fading light, I could see that the place had grown since I'd left. New shops lined Main Street, and the old buildings had been restored to their original charm. It looked like the kind of place tourists would stop to browse antique stores and eat homemade pie.

"Where do you want me to drop you?" Eddie asked.

"Downtown is fine. Anywhere along Main Street."

He pulled over in front of a bookstore with cheerful yellow awnings and light spilling from its windows even though it was closed at this evening hour.

## Page 2

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“You take care of yourself, hon,” he said as I grabbed my backpack from the floor. It contained everything I owned: two changes of clothes, a toothbrush, a half-empty bottle of painkillers I’d stolen from a gas station in Nevada, and seventeen dollars in crumpled bills.

“I will. Thank you, Eddie.”

His smile was paternal, worried. “You sure you don’t want me to wait? Make sure your friend is home?”

“I’m sure. Really.”

The night air was crisp with the promise of winter, and I pulled my jacket tighter as Eddie’s truck disappeared down Main Street. I stood there for a moment, breathing in the familiar scent of pine and mountain air. This place had been home once, before I’d learned that home was just another word for temporary.

I walked toward the cluster of businesses that made up Garnet Bend’s downtown. Most of the shops were closed for the evening, but warm light poured from Draper’s Tavern, and I could hear laughter and conversation spilling out onto the sidewalk. Through the windows, I could see it was busy.

Perfect. Crowds meant opportunities. Crowds meant I could blend in, observe, find someone with money and poor situational awareness.

I paused outside the tavern, checking my reflection in the window. The black hair dye I’d used three months ago had faded to a dark brown, nothing like the blonde I’d been

born with. The break in my nose from two years ago had changed the shape of my face just enough that even I looked different to myself sometimes. Nobody would recognize me. I was sure of it.

The tavern was packed. Every table was occupied, and the bar was lined with locals nursing drinks and engaged in animated conversation. There was a festive atmosphere, like people were celebrating something, though I couldn't tell what. Perfect cover for what I needed to do.

I found an empty stool at the far end of the bar, trying to look like I belonged. Moving carefully to avoid aggravating my ribs, I slipped my backpack under my feet where it wouldn't draw attention.

"What can I get you?" The bartender was a woman in her fifties with graying hair pulled back in a practical ponytail.

"Just water for now," I said, then picked up the menu. "I need a few minutes to decide."

She nodded and set a glass in front of me. I opened the menu, my stomach clenching as I scanned the prices. Even the cheapest appetizer cost twelve dollars—nearly everything I had left. But I had to order something. Sitting here nursing free water would look suspicious, and suspicious drew the wrong kind of attention.

My mouth watered as I read the descriptions. Loaded potato skins. Buffalo wings. A burger with hand-cut fries. When was the last time I'd eaten a real meal? Two days ago, maybe three. Time had started blurring together somewhere around Fargo.

"Rough day?"

I looked up to find a man sliding onto the stool beside mine. He was probably in his

fifties, with thinning hair and the kind of rumpled clothes that suggested he'd been driving for hours. A trucker, most likely, just like Eddie.

"Something like that," I said, offering him a cautious smile.

"I'm Buck," he said. "Just rolled into town. You local?"

"Carol," I lied smoothly. "And no, just passing through. Visiting family out of state."

"Well, let me buy you a drink while you're here," Buck said, signaling the bartender. "What'll it be?"

Relief flooded through me. "Actually, a soda would be great." Alcohol on this empty of a stomach wasn't a good plan. "Thank you."

Buck ordered himself a beer and the soda for me, and I felt some of the tension leave my shoulders. One small problem solved. Now I could nurse my drink and figure out my next move.

As Buck launched into small talk about the weather and the drive from wherever he'd come from, I let my gaze wander around the room. The crowd seemed to be centered around a large table near the back, where a group of people were laughing and raising their glasses in what looked like repeated toasts. Someone's birthday, maybe, or a promotion.

That's when I saw him. Lachlan Calloway.

He sat at the center of the celebration, his dark hair catching the golden glow from the overhead fixtures. He was laughing at something someone had said, his whole face lighting up in a way that made my chest tighten with something that had nothing to do with broken ribs.

He looked older—lines around his eyes that hadn't been there when I'd left eight years ago—but he was still achingly, impossibly handsome.

And he was the last person I should be thinking about right now.

I forced myself to look away, to focus on Buck's rambling story about traffic in Seattle. But my eyes kept drifting back to Lachlan's table, stealing glances like a teenager with her first crush—and hell if that hadn't been exactly what he was.

"You seem distracted," Buck observed, following my gaze. "Know someone over there?"

"No," I said quickly. "Just wondering what they're celebrating."

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Buck shrugged. “Could ask. Small town like this, probably half the bar knows.”

The last thing I wanted was to draw attention to myself by asking questions. I took a sip of my drink and tried to refocus on my situation. I needed money, which meant I needed a mark. Buck was friendly enough, and truckers usually carried cash. But something about the way he was looking at me—like he was calculating something—made my skin crawl.

Or maybe that was just the pain talking. Everything hurt right now, from the physical injuries to the deeper ache of being completely alone in the world. I’d been running on adrenaline and desperation for days, and now that I’d stopped moving, exhaustion was catching up with me.

“So, what kind of family you visiting?” Buck asked.

“Uh, cousins,” I said. “Haven’t seen them in years.”

The lie was getting easier to tell, which should have worried me more than it did. But lies had been survival tools for so long that truth felt like a luxury I couldn’t afford. And lies had always come easily. I was Ray Matthews’s daughter after all.

I glanced back toward Lachlan’s table, and this time, our eyes met across the crowded room. For a heartbeat, I thought I saw recognition flicker in his expression. Then someone said something that made him laugh, and he turned away.

My heart was pounding so hard I was sure Buck could hear it. Eight years. Eight years since I’d seen Lachlan, since my family had been run out of town in disgrace.

He'd been there that night. I didn't remember much, but I remembered that. But that didn't mean he remembered me. Why would he? I'd been nobody then—just another piece of Matthews family trash that had finally been swept away.

“You okay?” Buck's voice seemed to come from far away. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

I realized I'd been staring, my soda forgotten in my hand. “Sorry. Just tired. It's been a long day.”

Buck leaned closer, his voice dropping to what he probably thought was a comforting tone. “Maybe you should get something to eat. Low blood sugar can make you feel real strange.”

He was right about needing food, but wrong about the cause of my distress. I looked down at the menu again, trying to focus on the prices instead of the way my chest felt like it was caving in. Seventeen dollars. That was all I had between me and whatever came next. Not enough for food and a place to sleep. Not enough for anything, really.

Unless I did what I'd come here to do.

I studied Buck more carefully, noting the way his wallet created a slight bulge in his back pocket, the decent watch on his wrist. He seemed like the type who'd carry cash—older guys usually did. But as the minutes passed, his friendly demeanor started to shift into something that made my stomach clench.

His hand found its way to my back, fingers splaying across my spine right where one of Dad's kicks had left a particularly tender bruise. I had to bite back a gasp of pain.

“You know,” Buck said, his voice dropping lower, “a pretty girl like you shouldn't be traveling alone. Lot of dangerous people out there.”

The irony of that sentence coming from him wasn't lost on me. "I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you can." His fingers pressed harder against my back, and I fought not to flinch. "But maybe you don't have to. I got a room at the truck stop a few miles from here. Clean bed, hot shower. You look like you could use both."

There it was. The proposition I'd been dreading. I'd hoped Buck would stay in the friendly zone long enough for me to figure out how to get his wallet without having to pay for it with my body. But desperation was apparently written all over me like a neon sign.

"That's very kind," I said carefully, "but I should really?—"

"Come on now, don't be shy." His grip tightened, fingers digging into the bruised muscle. "You're broke, aren't you? I can tell. That look in your eyes, like you're calculating the cost of everything. I've seen it before."

My chest tightened with panic. This was escalating too fast, and I couldn't afford to make a scene. But Buck's hand was sliding lower now, and the smell of his cologne mixed with cigarettes was making my head spin.

"I'm not interested," I said, trying to keep my voice level.

"Sure you are." His smile turned predatory. "Why else would you be talking to me? Pretty girl like you doesn't chat up truckers unless she needs something."

He wasn't wrong, and we both knew it. But I couldn't do this. Not that I was above it. I'd had to use my body before when my father had forced it. But I didn't want to do that now. The thought of it made me want to crawl out of my own skin.

“Let go of me,” I said, but Buck’s grip only tightened.

“Don’t be like that, honey. I’m offering you a good deal here. Food, a place to sleep, maybe a little traveling money if you’re real nice to me.”

My ribs burned as I tried to shift farther away. What was I going to do? I was trapped—too hurt to fight, too broke to leave, too desperate to have many options.

“Everything okay here?”

The voice came from behind us, deep and familiar in a way that made my heart stop. I turned slowly, hardly daring to believe what I was hearing.

## Page 4

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Lachlan Calloway stood behind my stool, and up close, he seemed even more imposing than I remembered. His presence filled the space around us, commanding and protective all at once.

I had no idea if he remembered me at all. Nothing suggested he did.

Buck's hand was still on my back, and I saw Lachlan's gaze drop to it, then back to my face. Something dangerous flickered in his expression—a coldness that transformed his features from handsome to absolutely lethal.

“We’re fine,” Buck said, but his hand on my back slid away. “Just having a conversation.”

“Is that right?” Lachlan's attention shifted to me, and I felt pinned under his stare.

“I’m fine,” I managed.

Buck was smart enough to know not to push his luck. “Guess I’ll see you around, Carol,” he muttered and stood, slinking toward the other end of the bar.

Lachlan watched him go, then turned back to me. “Mind if I sit?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice. He slid onto Buck's abandoned stool, and suddenly, the space between us felt charged with possibility and danger in equal measure. “I’m Lachlan Calloway.”

He didn’t remember me. There was no reason on earth that should hurt me, but

somehow it did.

“I’m C?—”

“You’re Piper Matthews. I know exactly who you are.”

## Chapter 2

### Piper

My heart hammered against my ribs as Lachlan said my name. He remembered me. After eight years, he actually remembered me.

The sound of my real name on his lips sent a shiver through me that had nothing to do with the mountain air seeping through the tavern’s windows. For months now, I’d been Carol or Lisa or whatever name seemed safest in the moment. Hearing “Piper” felt like putting on clothes that actually fit.

“You do remember,” I managed, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Of course I remember you.” His brown eyes held mine, and I could see genuine warmth there—no pity, no disgust, just... recognition. Like I was someone worth remembering. “Piper Matthews. You lived on Elm Street with your family. Your bike chain used to come off all the time.”

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it, rusty from disuse. The sound surprised me. When was the last time I’d laughed? Really laughed, not the fake sound I used to deflect attention or smooth over awkward moments with strangers.

“That stupid bike. I swear it had a vendetta against me.”

“I fixed it for you once. You were maybe ten years old, sitting on the curb looking like the world had ended because you couldn’t get home.”

I couldn’t believe he remembered. I’d been crying that day—not about the bike, but because I’d come home from school to find my mother sporting a fresh black eye and my father in one of his rages. The broken chain had just been the final straw.

But Lachlan had knelt down on that dirty sidewalk in his good clothes and gotten grease on his hands fixing my bike. Then he’d walked me halfway home to make sure it didn’t break again. He’d been sixteen. Most sixteen-year-olds were too self-involved to do much of anything.

It had meant everything to me. Knowing he remembered it too made something clench in my heart.

But memories weren’t going to get me food. I pressed my lips together and took a sip of my soda, using the moment to scan the room again. I needed to figure out who might be carrying cash and might be distracted enough that I could lift some from them.

“So what was the celebration about?” I asked, nodding toward the crowded table where his friends kept raising their glasses.

Lachlan’s whole face lit up, transforming him from merely handsome to absolutely devastating. “We were celebrating me officially being named sheriff of Garnet Bend.”

Sheriff. My blood went cold for a heartbeat before I forced myself to smile. Of course he would be sheriff. Of course the one person in this town who’d shown me kindness had grown up to be the very person whose job it was to arrest people like me.

“That’s incredible,” I said and meant it, despite the irony. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. I can hardly believe it myself. Charlie Garcia finally decided to retire after thirty years, and the town council chose me to replace him.”

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That explained the festive atmosphere and the multiple rounds of toasts I'd witnessed. His friends had mostly left, but I let my gaze drift around the room again, automatically cataloging details. The man in the corner booth had pulled out his wallet three times to buy rounds—definitely carrying cash. The woman at the small table by the window kept checking her phone in a designer purse that probably cost more than I'd seen in six months.

But even as I mentally tallied potential marks, part of me was genuinely happy for Lachlan. Sheriff was exactly the kind of job he'd been meant for.

“You always wanted to be in law enforcement, didn't you?”

“Yeah. My father wanted me to go into real estate brokerage with him, but that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to help people.”

That's exactly how I remembered him. He'd been one of the few people in town who'd looked at me like I was a person instead of the garbage the town thought I was because of the Matthews name.

I remember how I'd cried for three days after he'd left for college when I was twelve, because he'd been the only bright spot in my increasingly dark world. He'd never known about that, of course.

“Makes total sense,” I said. “Did you go to college?”

“Yeah, Montana State. Majored in Criminal Justice. Then came back here and became a deputy.” He grinned. “Actually, I'm the youngest sheriff in Garnet Bend's

history, which means I've got a lot to prove.”

The pride in his voice was unmistakable, mixed with just enough uncertainty to make him seem human instead of perfect. I found myself leaning forward slightly, drawn in despite myself.

“What about you?” he asked. “Did you end up going to college? I know you had the smarts for it.”

The question stabbed deeper than it should have. I'd dreamed about college once upon a time, spent hours in the school library researching programs I'd never be able to afford. Business, maybe, or advertising. Something that would let me use the quick thinking and people-reading skills I'd developed out of necessity for something good instead of just survival.

Instead, I'd spent the last eight years learning how to read people for entirely different reasons. How to spot who carried cash versus cards. How to identify the ones who wouldn't make a scene if they caught me. How to disappear into a crowd when things went wrong.

“College wasn't really for me,” I said, the lie sliding out smooth as silk. “I'm more of a free spirit, I guess.”

Lachlan nodded, but I caught something in his expression—like he could sense there was more to the story. Those perceptive brown eyes had always seen too much. I needed to redirect again, and fast.

“So you always knew you wanted to come back to Garnet Bend?”

He nodded. “Always. This place... It's home, you know? And with everything that's happened here in the past few years, all the good changes, I wanted to be part of

that.”

“Changes?”

As he told me about the Resting Warrior Ranch and Pawsitive Connections, I found myself genuinely fascinated despite my situation. A place for people dealing with PTSD, a program that trained therapy animals—it sounded like something out of a dream. The kind of help people like my mother could have used, if she’d ever been willing to admit she needed it.

“That’s wonderful.” I truly meant what I said. The idea that this little town had become a beacon of hope for people who needed it most... It was exactly the kind of thing I would have expected from a place that had produced someone like Lachlan.

But even as we talked, part of my mind was calculating. The woman by the window had left her purse hanging on the back of her chair when she’d gone to the bathroom five minutes ago. The man in the corner had definitely had too much to drink—his wallet would be easy pickings if I could get close enough.

I hated myself for thinking it. Hated that I was sitting here with the one person who’d ever made me feel like I might be worth something, and all I could think about was how to steal from his neighbors.

But I had less than twenty dollars to my name and nowhere to sleep tonight. Good intentions wouldn’t fill my empty stomach or keep me from freezing to death under some bridge.

And they definitely wouldn’t keep me safe from my father.

“Resting Warrior and Pawsitive have been really good for the local economy too,” Lachlan continued. “New shops, restaurants, people. The town’s thriving in a way it

never did when we were kids.”

When we were kids. The phrase hung in the air between us, heavy with unspoken history.

“When you were still here,” he corrected quietly.

There it was. The topic we’d been carefully avoiding. My family’s disgraceful exit from Garnet Bend eight years ago, driven out like the criminals we were.

I stared down at my hands wrapped around my glass, noting how the bruises on my knuckles had faded to a sickly yellow. “That was a long time ago.”

“I was there that night.”

My head snapped up. “What?”

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“When your family was forced to leave. I was a new deputy then—barely twenty-four, green as grass and trying to prove myself. Sheriff Garcia had me there as backup when he and Mayor Davidson paid your father the visit.”

Heat flooded my cheeks as the memories came rushing back. The sound of heavy boots on our front porch. The way my father’s face had gone white when he’d seen who was at the door. How he’d tried to bluster and deny everything while my mother had quietly started packing our few belongings like she’d been expecting this moment for years.

It hadn’t been legal exactly. But it hadn’t been entirely illegal either, and everyone knew my father had been running cons on half the town for months. He’d taken Mrs. Henderson’s life savings with promises of doubling her money through some investment scheme. He’d convinced the Johnsons to mortgage their farm to fund a business opportunity that never existed.

The authorities could never prove it—my father was too careful for that—but the people who mattered in Garnet Bend had known. And they’d decided they’d had enough.

“I saw your father loading boxes into that old truck,” Lachlan continued, his voice gentle. “Saw your mother helping, moving like she was hurt. And I saw you.”

“Lachlan—”

“You looked back. Right before you got in the truck, you looked back at the town like you were memorizing it.”

I had been. I'd known even then that I might never see Garnet Bend or Lachlan again. That I was leaving behind the only place that had ever felt remotely like home, even if that home had been more like a prison.

"I always wondered what happened to you after that," Lachlan said softly. "Whether things got better once you grew up and got out on your own."

The question was so loaded with assumptions I didn't know where to begin correcting them. Things hadn't gotten better. I'd never gotten out on my own. Every day since we'd left this town had been an exercise in survival, in keeping my head down and my mouth shut and my bruises hidden.

My father had made it clear what would happen if I tried to leave. What he'd do to my mother in retaliation. The beating I'd taken three days ago had been a gentle reminder compared to what he was capable of when he felt truly threatened.

But I couldn't tell Lachlan that. Couldn't explain that Ray Matthews's grip on his family was absolute, that he'd rather see us all dead than lose control. That even now, at twenty-six, I was still trapped in the same nightmare I'd been born into.

"Yeah, I've been all over," I said instead, carefully avoiding responding to his actual statement. "Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico. Picked up work where I could find it. Waitressing, mostly, some retail. Never stayed anywhere too long."

"Sounds like quite an adventure."

If only he knew. If he knew about the truck stops where I'd slept in bathroom stalls. The diners where I'd washed dishes for cash under the table. The men like Buck who'd tried to trade meals for things I wasn't willing to give, but had had to on occasion.

“Something like that.”

“And you just decided to come back through Garnet Bend?”

“I was in the area.” Another lie, but easier this time. “Figured I’d see how the old place was doing.”

Lachlan studied my face, and I had the uncomfortable feeling he could see right through me. He’d always been perceptive, even as a teenager. It was probably what made him good at his job.

Made him dangerous to people like me.

I forced myself to look around the room again, to remember why I was really here. The drunk man in the corner was getting louder, more careless. His buddies were focused on some story he was telling, not paying attention to their surroundings. If I timed it right, slipped away to the bathroom at just the right moment...

“Well, I’m glad you did,” Lachlan said, pulling my attention back to him. “It’s good to see you, Piper. Really good.”

The sincerity in his voice made my throat tight. When was the last time someone had been genuinely happy to see me? Not because they wanted something from me, not because they were relieved I wasn’t dead, but just...happy I existed?

“So...you’re the sheriff,” I said, desperate to change the subject and stop the dangerous warmth spreading through my chest. “That’s got to be exciting. And scary.”

“A little of both,” he admitted. “Like I said, I’m the youngest sheriff in the town’s history, which means I’ve got something to prove. But I’ve got good people working

with me, and Charlie's staying on as a consultant for the first few months to help with the transition."

"You'll be great at it. You always had this way of making people feel safe."

The words slipped out before I could stop them, too honest and revealing. But Lachlan's expression softened in a way that made my chest ache.

"Thank you. I try. I really do. Sometimes I?—"

My stomach chose that moment to let out a growl so loud it could probably be heard over the music and conversation. Mortification flooded through me as I pressed a hand to my abdomen, trying to muffle the sound.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I haven't eaten much today."

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Or yesterday. Or the day before that, really. The gas station beef stick I'd bought this morning certainly hadn't been a full meal.

Lachlan was already signaling the bartender. "We need to fix that right now. Let me buy you dinner. What sounds good?"

"Oh, you don't have to?—"

"I want to. Please."

The kindness in his offer made my chest ache. I looked down at the menu again, at prices that might as well have been in a foreign currency for all the good they did me. Twelve dollars for an appetizer. Eighteen for a sandwich. Numbers that represented more money than I'd had in my pocket in weeks.

"The burger looks good," I said quietly.

"Two of the loaded burgers," Lachlan told the bartender. "And whatever sides she wants."

"Fries are fine."

"Make it the sweet potato fries," he added. "They're incredible here."

I hadn't had sweet potato fries in... God, I couldn't even remember how long. The small kindness of it—choosing something I might enjoy instead of just the cheapest option—threatened to undo me completely.

While we waited for the food, Lachlan told me about his plans as sheriff, about community outreach programs and his hopes for building stronger relationships between law enforcement and the town. I found myself genuinely engaged, asking questions and laughing at his stories about dealing with drunk tourists and runaway cattle.

The food arrived, and I had to force myself not to inhale it like a starving animal. The burger was perfect—juicy and seasoned just right, with fresh lettuce and tomato that actually tasted like it had been grown in soil instead of a lab. The sweetpotato fries were crispy outside and fluffy inside, dusted with some kind of seasoning that made my taste buds sing.

“Good?” Lachlan asked, and I realized I’d actually moaned out loud.

“Incredible,” I said, not bothering to hide my enthusiasm. “I can’t remember the last time I had a meal this good.”

Something flickered across his expression—concern, maybe, or curiosity about what my life had been like that a simple burger seemed like such a luxury. But he didn’t push, just smiled and kept eating.

As the evening wore on, I found myself relaxing despite everything. The conversation flowed easier than it had with anyone in as long as I could remember. Lachlan told me about the changes in town, about people we’d both known, about everything and nothing.

But even as I laughed at his stories and shared carefully edited tales of my supposed adventures, part of my mind was still working. Still calculating. The crowd was thinning as people headed home, which meant fewer opportunities. The drunk man in the corner had finally left, stumbling out with his friends without me managing to get close to him.

I should have been panicking. Should have been figuring out my next move, scanning for new opportunities. But sitting here with Lachlan, feeling safe and full and genuinely cared about for the first time in longer than I could remember... I didn't want it to end.

I couldn't bring myself to leave this bubble of warmth and normalcy to face the cold reality of my circumstances. Not yet.

I'd figure out tomorrow, tomorrow.

"Last call," the bartender announced, and I looked around in surprise to realize we were among the final customers left.

"Wow," I said. "I didn't realize how late it was getting."

"Time flies when you're with good company," Lachlan agreed, pulling out his wallet to settle our tab.

I watched him pay, noting the neat way he kept his bills organized, the decent watch on his wrist, the quality of his jacket. He was doing well for himself, clearly. Not rich, maybe, but comfortable. Stable.

Everything I'd never been.

The thought whispered through my mind before I could stop it: He'd be an easy mark. Trusting, distracted by old memories and whatever he thought he saw in me. If I played this right, I could probably get enough to keep me going for weeks.

The idea made me sick to my stomach.

I grabbed my backpack and we walked outside together, and the mountain air hit my

lungs sharp and clean. The temperature had dropped since I'd gone inside, and I pulled my jacket tighter around myself, trying not to wince as the movement pulled at my sore ribs.

“Where are you staying?” Lachlan asked.

The question I'd been dreading. “I'll just grab a room at that little motel on the edge of town.”

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Lachlan shook his head immediately. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” The words were out before I could stop them. Oh God, was I not allowed to stay in town from all those years ago? Not that I had the money to do so anyway.

“The motel’s completely booked. A bunch of bigwigs from the county in town. Every room in a fifty-mile radius is taken.”

“No problem.” I tried to keep the panic out of my voice. “I’ll figure something out.”

Lachlan was quiet for a moment, studying my face in the glow of the streetlights. Then he said, “Come stay at my place.”

“What?”

“I’ve got a guest room. It’s nothing fancy, but it’s clean and warm and the bed’s comfortable.”

The alternative was sleeping in an alley or under a bridge, and my body couldn’t take that right now. Not with my ribs the way they were, not with winter coming.

And the truth was, I felt safer with Lachlan than I had felt anywhere in years. For reasons I couldn’t explain or justify, I trusted him. Which was either the smartest or stupidest thing I’d ever done.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Absolutely. It’s the least I can do for an old friend.”

An old friend. Was that what I was? The label felt both too little and too much at the same time.

“Okay, that would be great,” I said softly. “Thank you.”

His smile was warm and genuine, lighting up his whole face in a way that made my chest tight with longing. “Great. Do you have a vehicle? Want to follow me?”

I shook my head. “No, I caught a ride.”

His smile fell away. “Come on. Let’s get you somewhere warm.”

As we walked toward his truck, I told myself I could handle this. One night of safety, of warmth, of feeling like I mattered to someone. Then tomorrow, I’d figure out my next move. Find someone else to target, someone who wouldn’t look at me like I was worth saving.

Someone who wouldn’t make me remember what it felt like to want to be better than what I was.

For tonight, for just tonight, I was going to let myself pretend that I was someone who deserved kindness. Someone who belonged in a place like this, with a man like him.

Even if I knew it was a lie.

Chapter 3

Piper

Lachlan's house sat nestled between towering pines on a quiet street a couple minutes outside downtown, the kind of place that whispered stability and permanence. White siding, dark green shutters, a porch light that cast a warm, welcoming glow.

"Home sweet home," he said, pulling into the driveway.

I clutched my backpack tighter as we walked to the front door. On the small porch, I spotted hiking boots kicked carelessly beside the entrance and a welcome mat that actually looked welcoming instead of like a cruel joke.

Inside, the house was thoroughly, devastatingly normal. A leather couch that had molded itself to its owner's preferences faced a stone fireplace. Sports magazines shared space with a crossword puzzle on the coffee table—half finished, like he'd been working on it over morning coffee. The kitchen opened into the living room, and I spotted a single plate and mug in the sink—evidence of an ordinary morning routine.

"Sorry about the mess," he said, following my gaze.

"This isn't mess." I set my backpack down carefully, fighting not to wince as the movement pulled at my ribs. "This is what a home looks like."

Everything about this place spoke of permanence. Of someone who expected to wake up in the same bed tomorrow, who had favorite coffee mugs and a preferred spot on the couch. Who belonged somewhere.

"Can I get you something to drink? Water, soda, beer?"

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“Water would be perfect.”

I watched him move through his kitchen with unconscious familiarity, pulling a glass from the cabinet like he'd done it a thousand times before, filling it from a filter pitcher in the refrigerator. Such ordinary actions, but they fascinated me. This was his space, his rhythm, his peace.

The glass was actual glass, not plastic. Heavy and solid in my hands. When he passed it to me, our fingers brushed, and the contact sent electricity shooting up my arm. From the way his breath caught, he felt it too.

“Guest room's upstairs,” he said, his voice slightly rougher than it had been moments before.

The narrow staircase was lined with framed photos. I caught glimpses as we climbed—formal ceremonies, group shots with friends, moments that told the story of someone who'd chosen his path deliberately.

The guest room was simple but comfortable—a double bed with a blue quilt that looked handmade, a dresser that had the soft patina of age and care.

“Bathroom's right across the hall. Clean towels are in the linen closet.” He paused in the doorway, hands buried deep in his pockets. “Make yourself at home.”

He was leaving to go to his room. Of course he was. Did I really expect anything but the perfect gentleman out of him? That was why I was here, right? Because I'd known that was what he would do: offer me a place to rest that was safe and clean and warm

without any expectations in return.

From anybody else, that would be a godsend. But with Lachlan, I found I wanted more.

I knew this was my last night in Garnet Bend. That after tomorrow, I'd never see him again. The thought should have made me sad, but instead, it made me reckless. Made me want to reach for something good, even if I could only have it for a few hours.

"Lachlan," I said, taking a step closer, stopping him as he turned. "Wait."

He studied me with those deep brown eyes, wondering what I would do.

"I..." I wasn't sure what to say. I'd had sex before, of course, both for good and bad reasons, but I'd never really been in a situation where I was the one initiating things solely because I wanted to be with the man. "Can I stay with you tonight? Not just in your guest room. With you."

"Is that what you really want?" His voice was deep. Thick.

"Yes."

"Yes. But I want you to know, we don't have to have sex. We can just hold each other, if that's what you need."

I wrapped my arms around my middle. Maybe he wasn't interested in sex with me. I couldn't blame him. "Is that what you want?"

He stepped closer, slowly reaching up and tucking a strand of my awful dark dye job behind my ear. "I'm a healthy man, and you're a beautiful woman who has intrigued me—albeit in a different way—since you were a teenager. All I'm saying is that we

don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with. We can take things slowly."

No, we couldn't. Because I'd be gone in the morning. "I want you. Tonight."

His hands came up to frame my face, thumbs brushing across my cheekbones with devastating tenderness. The simple touch sent heat racing through my veins, made me lean into his palms like a flower turning toward the sun.

"Piper," he said, my name rough on his lips.

When he kissed me, the world contracted to just this—his lips moving against mine with patience and reverence. Not taking, but giving. Not demanding, but asking.

I melted into him, fisting my hands in his shirt as longing flowed over me like a tide. This was what I'd dreamed about during those endless nights when violence echoed through thin walls. This connection, this feeling of being wanted instead of used.

He slid his hands into my hair, tilting my head back so he could deepen the kiss. I gasped into his mouth, and he took advantage, his tongue sliding against mine in a way that made my knees weak.

I pressed closer, feeling the hard planes of his chest against my breasts, the evidence of his arousal against my core. My hands found the hem of his shirt, tugging upward, desperate to feel skin against skin. I ignored the twinge of my ribs and the soreness of my lip from where Ray had hit me. I wasn't going to let any of that into this room.

He broke away from my mouth, trailing kisses down my throat while I worked his shirt over his head. When I finally got it off, I ran my hands over his chest, memorizing the feel of warm skin and lean muscle.

"God, Piper," he breathed against my neck, his hands skimming down my sides to the

hem of my sweater.

He lifted it slowly, his fingers trailing fire across my skin as he exposed my stomach, my ribs. When the fabric cleared my head, his eyes darkened as they took in the simple white bra I wore.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured, his hands settling on my waist.

He traced the edge of my bra with one finger, making me shiver. Then his hands were on my breasts, cupping them through the thin cotton, his thumbs brushing over my nipples until they peaked against the fabric.

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I arched into his touch, a soft moan escaping my lips. He reached behind me, unclasping my bra with practiced ease, and when it fell away, he groaned low in his throat.

“So beautiful,” he said again, his hands replacing the fabric, skin against skin now.

The sensation was overwhelming. I’d never been touched like this—with reverence, with desire that felt clean instead of dirty. When he bent his head to take one nipple into his mouth, I gasped and threaded my fingers through his hair.

He lavished attention on my breasts, his tongue and teeth making me writhe against him. Heat was building low in my belly, an ache I’d never felt before. When he slid his hand down to cup me through my jeans, I nearly came apart.

“Lachlan,” I breathed, my hips moving against his palm.

He popped the button of my jeans and slid the zipper down slowly. He slipped his hand inside my panties, and when his fingers found me wet and ready, he groaned against my breast.

“Christ, Piper. You’re so wet.”

One finger slipped inside me, and I cried out at the sensation. He added another, his thumb finding my clit in a way that almost made stars explode behind my eyelids. I was grinding against his hand now, chasing a release I’d never experienced with another person.

“That’s it,” he murmured against my ear. “Let go for me.”

His fingers moved faster, deeper, and when he curled them just right, I shattered completely, my body convulsing around his hand as pleasure crashed through me in waves.

I was still shaking when he kissed me again, his fingers slipping out of me to work my jeans down my legs. He lifted me and carried me into his room, laying me on the bed, his hands everywhere—skimming over my ribs, trailing down to remove my panties.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice rough with desire but his eyes serious. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to do this. At any point you want to stop, just say the word...”

Instead of answering with words, I reached for his belt buckle. His sharp intake of breath when I freed him from his jeans made heat pool between my legs again.

He eased back to grab a condom from the nightstand, rolled it on, then moved back toward me, almost predatory in nature, but in the best way.

When he stopped suddenly, gaze glued to my torso, I knew he’d spotted the purple bruising along the side and back of my ribs on the right side.

“What happened?” His fingers hovered over the marks.

“I’m clumsy,” I said, the lie coming automatically. “Fell down some stairs a few days ago.”

He studied my face for a long moment, and I could see him processing, questioning.

“I promise, I’m fine. A lesson in not trying to carry too many bags of groceries at once.”

Evidently, that lie had enough detail to make him think I was telling the truth. Finally something my father taught me coming to good use.

I wrapped my hand around him, and any lingering concerns he had seemed to dissolve under the heat building between us. He moved over me, once again kissing his way down my body. This was different from anything I’d experienced before. He touched me like I was something precious, his hands and mouth worshipping every inch of exposed skin.

When he finally slid inside me, I gasped at the exquisite feel of him stretching me. I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him deeper. He groaned my name, his forehead pressed against mine as he moved inside me with slow, deliberate strokes that built heat low in my belly.

I’d never felt anything like this—the stretch and fullness of him, the friction that made me gasp and arch beneath him. When he reached between us to touch me where I needed it most, I shattered completely, crying out his name as waves of pleasure rushed over me.

He followed me over the edge moments later, his body going rigid as he buried his face in my neck.

Afterward, he held me against his chest while our breathing returned to normal. His heartbeat under my cheek was steady, strong, hypnotic. For the first time in my life, I understood what peace meant.

“Come on,” he murmured eventually, pressing his lips to my hair. “Let’s get cleaned up.”

The shower was another revelation. Endless hot water, soap that smelled expensive, and Lachlan's hands in my hair, working shampoo through tangles with infinite patience.

When I turned in his arms under the spray of water, when I kissed him with streams running down our faces, he lifted me against the shower wall and loved me again with the same devastating intensity. This time, I cried out his name without shame, let him hear exactly what he was doing to me.

We dried each other afterward with fluffy towels. He found me one of his T-shirts to sleep in—soft cotton that hung to my knees and smelled like his laundry detergent.

He put us in bed and pulled the covers around us both and gathered me close. I pressed my face into the curve of his neck, breathing him in, memorizing everything about this moment. His scent. The sound of his breathing. The weight of his arm around my waist.

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I wanted to stay awake, to permeate every second inside my mind for the years to come. But my body had other plans. Too many days of hunger and fear left me with no choice but to rest now that I'd found a moment of safety.

Sleep claimed me like a benediction, dreamless and deep.

The need for water and to use the bathroom woke me up just before dawn.

Lachlan's arm was still around me, his breathing deep and even against my neck. For a moment, I just lay there, soaking in the warmth of his body against mine, the impossible luxury of feeling safe. I wanted to stay here forever.

But wetting the bed would probably not come across as very romantic. I slid slowly and silently away from Lachlan and stood, loving how he reached for me, even in sleep.

I used the bathroom and got my water, deciding to get back into bed and sleep some more. I didn't know if he had to work today, but I might as well enjoy this time while I could.

Then I saw it through the window.

A dark sedan sat across the street, engine running despite the early hour. The distance made it impossible to see details clearly—no license plate, no faces—but something about it made my blood freeze in my veins. The way it sat there, waiting. Watching.

My father drove cars like that. Stolen, borrowed, bought with cash from whatever con

he was currently running. And Ray Matthews was nothing if not patient when it came to hunting his prey. He'd taught me that patience was the difference between getting caught and getting away clean.

I told myself I was being paranoid. That it was just some early commuter waiting for a carpool or someone picking up a friend for work. But twenty-six years of survival had honed my instincts to razor sharpness, and every single one of them was screaming danger.

Even if it wasn't him, it could be. And if my father found me here, with Lachlan, he wouldn't just kill me. He'd make my life hell first. For daring to think I deserved this. Then he'd probably do something bad to Lachlan too.

I couldn't let that happen. Not to Lachlan. Not to the man who'd given me the most beautiful night of my life, who'd made me feel like I might actually be worth saving.

Moving with the practiced silence I'd learned as a child—how to get dressed without waking an angry father, how to move through a house without making floorboards creak—I pulled on my clothes. Every movement was agony, not just from my healing ribs but from the knowledge of what I was about to do.

The T-shirt he'd given me went into my backpack. I couldn't bear to leave it behind. I needed something to remember this by, some tangible proof that this night had actually happened.

In the kitchen, his wallet sat beside his keys like an accusation. My hands were shaking as I picked it up, each second of hesitation another stab of self-hatred. I opened it carefully, as if it might explode.

Three hundred dollars in cash, maybe a little more. His driver's license with a photo that made him look younger, more optimistic. And tucked behind his insurance card,

a photo of him with his family—parents, brother, sister—all of them smiling.

The kind of family that said “I love you” instead of “You’re worthless.” The kind of people who called each other on birthdays and worried when someone was late coming home.

I took all the cash and left everything else, telling myself it was mercy. That stealing his credit cards would have been worse, would have left a paper trail that could hurt him down the line.

But I knew what I was really doing. I was destroying the most perfect thing that had ever happened to me because that’s what the Matthews family did. We destroyed everything good we touched.

The coat closet by the front door yielded a heavy winter jacket that would keep me warm for the cold nights coming in. From the kitchen, a sharp paring knife that could serve as protection if I was desperate enough to need it.

Each theft carved another piece from my soul. I was murdering the woman who’d existed in his arms last night, killing her as surely as if I’d put a gun to her head. That woman had been soft and trusting and worthy of love. This woman—the one stealing from the man who’d shown her nothing but kindness—was exactly what everyone had always said she was.

Ray Matthews’s daughter. A thief and a liar who brought nothing but trouble wherever she went.

A note seemed necessary, though words felt impossible. What could I say? Thank you for the best night of my life before I destroyed it? I’m sorry I’m exactly the trash you always knew I was?

In the end, I managed only: I'm sorry. —P

It wasn't enough. Nothing would ever be enough to explain or excuse what I was doing. But it was all I had.

Then I slipped out the front door and into the gray dawn, leaving behind the only man who'd ever made me believe I might deserve love.

The sedan was gone when I looked back, which somehow felt worse than if it had still been there. Gone meant they were moving, repositioning, maybe getting closer. Or maybe it had never been my father at all, and I'd just destroyed the best thing in my life over shadows and paranoia.

Either way, it was too late now.

I pulled Lachlan's stolen jacket tight around myself and started walking toward the highway, toward whatever waited in the darkness ahead. The jacket smelled like him—clean and safe, with a hint of pine. The memory of his hands on my skin, his voice whispering my name like I was something precious, would have to sustain me through whatever came next.

Because that was all I'd ever get. One perfect night with a man who'd seen something good in me, something worth protecting.

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I'd repaid his kindness by robbing him blind and disappearing like the criminal I'd always been.

It was who I was.

### Chapter 4

Lachlan Calloway

I wasn't used to waking up groggy.

Then again, I wasn't used to bringing a beautiful woman whom I barely knew to my house and having ridiculously good sex with her for half the night. So maybe groggy was acceptable. Or at least understandable.

I kept my eyes closed for a moment, savoring the memory of last night. The way Piper had felt in my arms, the fucking sexy sounds she'd made when I'd touched her, the look in her eyes when she'd asked to stay with me. Not just in my guest room. With me.

I'd been shocked when I'd first spotted her across the crowded tavern last night. My brain had needed a full thirty seconds to process what I was seeing. Piper. Little Piper Matthews, who'd cried over her broken bike chain when she was ten years old.

Except she wasn't little anymore. She was a woman now, beautiful and guarded and carrying herself like someone who'd learned to expect the worst from the world. But when she'd smiled at me, really smiled, I'd caught a glimpse of the girl I

remembered.

I'd meant what I'd told her about thinking of her over the years. Wondering if she'd escaped to college, if she'd found someone who saw her worth, if she'd managed to build something good despite Ray Matthews's poison.

If she'd found a better life than the one she'd had in Garnet Bend.

Her family being run out of town that night eight years ago had never sat right with me, not for Piper or her mother. Ray Matthews had been a Grade A bastard who'd deserved prison, but we could never make the charges stick. Nobody mourned his departure.

But watching Piper that night—eighteen years old and terrified, stuffing her few belongings into garbage bags while her world collapsed around her? That had been wrong. She'd been collateral damage in her father's war, punished for crimes that weren't hers.

So, seeing her again? It had been a mixture of a ton of things: relief that she was alive and relatively healthy, guilt that I hadn't been man enough to question out loud what was happening that night eight years ago, and attraction.

Like, punch-in-my-gut attraction.

Last night had been incredible. Not just the sex, though that had been mind-blowing in ways I hadn't expected. It had been the connection between us that had really drew me in. The way we talked like we were old friends, comfortable and laughing. Sex had been an unexpected, and fucking fantastic, bonus.

I stretched, running a hand down my face, wishing she were still curled up next to me like she'd been when she fell asleep. She must be in the bathroom or something. I'd

give her some space. I understood the need for it.

But then I couldn't stop thinking about that bruise on her ribs. Dark purple, days old, covering way too much area to be from any accidental fall down the stairs. I hadn't pressed last night. But I wanted to find a way to talk to her about it. See if I could get her to open up. Was she on the run from some sort of abusive ex?

She'd been hitchhiking when she'd arrived in Garnet Bend—caught a ride, she'd said, like it was no big deal. But hitchhiking was dangerous as hell, especially for a woman alone. What kind of situation had she been running from that risking her safety with strangers had seemed like the better option?

And she'd devoured that burger like she hadn't eaten in days. Now I was wondering if that might actually be true.

I wanted to feed her. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to let her know she was safe here—both in my house and in Garnet Bend. I could help her find work here if she wanted to stay. She was smart and capable. Hadn't made it to college, but that didn't matter. There were still plenty of jobs we could find for her. I'd call Lark Monroe over at Pawsitive Connections. She always had work with her animals.

And damn it, I wanted to take Piper out for a real date. I wanted to rewind things back to the beginning and do this right—court her properly instead of jumping straight into bed, no matter how incredible that bed had been.

But fuck, I was getting way ahead of myself here. No need to hire the wedding band just yet, for Christ's sake. How about just making some breakfast. I slipped out of bed, pulling on boxers and a T-shirt before padding downstairs.

The coffeemaker gurgled to life as I started it, filling the kitchen with the rich scent of dark roast. I grabbed two mugs from the cabinet and set them on the counter. I

opened the refrigerator, mentally cataloging ingredients for what I could make. Fortunately, I always had breakfast food in the house. Eggs, bacon, toast, maybe some of those frozen hash browns. She definitely could use the calories.

How many eggs would she eat? Two? Three? I was a fucking mother hen here, but I didn't even c?—

My wallet sitting open on the counter caught my attention. It wasn't folded next to my keys like how I'd left it last night—how I left it every time I set it down in the house, so I wouldn't lose it.

My hands were steady as I picked it up, but something cold was already spreading through my chest. For the first time, I was aware of the utter silence inside this house. A silence that had covered the place since I woke up, but I'd been too busy writing my wedding vows to pay attention to it.

I flipped the wallet open, knowing what I'd find but hoping I was wrong.

Empty. Every bill gone. I'd had about \$300 from my recent trip to the ATM.

The small note under my keys caught my eye. I folded it open slowly.

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I'm sorry. —P

I didn't know how long I stared at that fucking thing, and then like a fucking asshole, I walked around my house, just in case I'd misunderstood.

Cash gone. Apology note. What the hell was there to misunderstand?

Then anger hit, hot and immediate. I'd trusted her. I'd been her fucking mark. She'd seen me for the pansy I was and played me exactly right. She was no better than her father.

Last night, her eyes had been constantly moving across Draper's Tavern, cataloging details. I'd attributed it to nervousness, but what if she'd been casing the room? Looking for marks, for opportunities?

The way she'd deflected personal questions, steering the conversation back to me whenever I got too close. I'd thought she was being modest, but con artists were good at redirecting attention, weren't they?

Then when we'd gotten back here, when she'd looked at me with those big eyes and said she wanted to be with me... Had that been real at all? Or had she already been calculating how much she could take?

The doubt was acid, seeping into every memory from last night. The way she'd responded to my touch—was that genuine desire or a performance? The soft sounds she'd made, the way she'd clung to me afterward—had any of it been real?

Much more likely: I was just another stupid man who'd been thinking with his dick instead of his brain. Maybe I'd walked right into the trap with my eyes wide open, believing what I wanted to believe until it was too late.

My phone rang, cutting through the spiraling thoughts. I grabbed it without checking the caller ID.

"Calloway."

"Well, good morning to you too, sunshine." Beckett Sinclair's familiar voice carried a note of amusement. "You sound like you wrestled a bear and lost."

Beckett. One of my best friends since middle school. I loved the man like a fucking brother but did not want to talk to him right now. Not when I was reeling over just how much of a fool I'd been with Piper.

"Just tired," I said, running a hand through my hair. "What's up?"

"Calling to grovel appropriately for missing your big celebration last night. Had a work emergency."

Beckett worked for the recently founded Warrior Security, the Resting Warrior Ranch's tactical team. So work emergency could be anything from unfinished paperwork to a death threat.

But probably not the latter since we would've heard about that in an official capacity. "Everyone okay?"

"Yeah, nothing but a thing."

I didn't press.

“I also heard some very interesting news at Deja Brew this morning. That Sheriff Calloway was seen leaving Draper’s around closing time with a very attractive brunette on his arm. Margie Henderson was practically vibrating with excitement when she told me what she’d heard—apparently you two looked ‘quite cozy’ at the bar.”

I should have known. In a town the size of Garnet Bend, gossip traveled faster than wildfire. “Margie Henderson needs a hobby.”

“Margie Henderson has made gossip her hobby for the past sixty years, so she’s damn good at it.” Beckett’s voice carried the grin I could picture on his face. “So come on, who’s the mystery woman? Anyone I know?”

“Piper Matthews.”

A pause. “Matthews... Wait. Like, Ray Matthews’s daughter from back in the day? I don’t really remember her much. She would’ve been pretty young when they left, right?”

“Eighteen. Just about to graduate high school.”

“And now she’s back in town, looking for a reunion with Garnet Bend’s finest?” There was teasing in Beckett’s voice, the comfortable ribbing that came with twenty years of friendship. “Must’ve been some reunion for you two to be making the rounds at Draper’s.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Uh-huh. So what was it like?”

I looked down at my empty wallet and that fucking note. “She’s not in town

anymore.”

“Oh shit. Is she like her dad? Was she trying to con people?”

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“Nah. She didn’t need to find a mark. She had me. I was dumb enough to fall for the big-eyed sob story myself.”

I waited for the jokes. I wouldn’t blame him. Hell, I could already think of a few myself.

But he didn’t. “You sleep with her?”

I scrubbed my hand down my face. “Yeah.”

The silence stretched longer this time. When Beckett spoke again, his tone had shifted, becoming more careful. “You want to talk about it?”

“Nothing to talk about.”

“Lach—”

“It’s nothing, Beck.” The words came out sharper than I’d intended. “Just a one-night thing. She was passing through, we caught up on old times, and now she’s gone. End of story.”

“Roger that.” Another pause. “On to more important things. You ready to start your first official day as sheriff?”

“Yeah.” And what a way to start—allowing myself to get robbed blind. Wouldn’t that instill confidence in the people trusting me to protect them.

“You’ll do great. Hell, you’ve been doing half Charlie’s job for the past two years anyway. Now you just get the fancy title and the headaches that come with it.”

“Just what I’ve always wanted.”

“Hey, if you need to blow off some steam later, I’m buying drinks. Maybe we can find you a brunette who sticks around longer than twelve hours.”

I think I’d had my fill of taking anyone home. “I’ll let you know.”

“You do that. And dude, whatever happened last night, don’t let it mess with your head on your first day. You’ve got this.”

After I hung up, I stared at the phone for a long moment. Beckett would be worried now, but he wouldn’t push. He’d wait for me to come to him if I needed to talk.

But there was nothing to talk about. I’d made a mistake, trusted someone I shouldn’t have, and paid the price for it.

At just over \$300, I’d gotten off cheap.

I walked back upstairs to get ready for work. In the shower—the same shower where she’d kissed me with water streaming down our faces—I tried to wash away the scent of her, the memory of her hands on my body. But some things couldn’t be scrubbed clean.

By the time I was dressed in my uniform and ready to leave for the station, I’d managed to lock down the anger and categorically refused to accept that any of it might be hurt rather than just being pissed off.

Lesson learned.

But as I drove through the quiet streets of Garnet Bend, I couldn't stop myself from looking for Piper. Scanning the sidewalks, checking the bus stop, wondering if she was still in town or if she'd already moved on to her next target.

I'd probably never know why she'd done it. Why she'd made love to me like it meant something, only to rob me blind before dawn. Why she'd looked at me with such apparent trust and longing if all she'd wanted was my money. And why the fuck I'd been so blind to it all.

What a way to start my career as sheriff.

## Chapter 5

Lachlan

The crisp October morning air carried the scent of wood smoke and fallen leaves as I walked down Main Street, making my rounds. A year into the job as sheriff, and I still got a kick out of this part—being visible in the community, checking in with people, making sure they knew their law enforcement was accessible and approachable.

“Morning, Sheriff!” Mrs. Yang called from the doorway of her florist shop. “I just put on a pot of coffee in the back—that dark roast you like. Want a cup?”

“Thanks, Mrs. Yang. Maybe I'll swing by after I finish my rounds.”

The older woman beamed and disappeared back into her shop, and I continued down the sidewalk. The morning light filtered through the changing leaves, casting everything in warm golden hues. Tourists browsed the antique shops, their cameras clicking as they captured the quintessential small-town charm that had become Garnet Bend's calling card.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:00 am*

Despite the inauspicious start that first day, my first year as sheriff had been everything I'd hoped for and more. Sure, there'd been some genuine excitement—mostly when we'd worked with Beckett and the Warrior Security team on cases that spilled over from their work at the Resting Warrior Ranch. A kidnapping attempt on one of the veterans that had us all on edge for weeks. Some corporate espionage involving a pharmaceutical company that had turned dangerous fast. Those cases reminded me that even in small towns, real threats existed.

But for the most part, it had been exactly what I'd signed up for: a chance to lead and care for the people in a town I loved. The rhythm of it suited me—the mix of genuine police work and community problem-solving that came with being the sheriff of a place where everyone knew everyone else.

The day-to-day reality was a blend of serious calls and the kind of small-town disputes that would seem ridiculous to big-city cops but mattered deeply to the people involved. Just last week, I'd spent forty-five minutes mediating a heated argument between Mrs. Patterson and Mr. Garfield over whether his prize-winning roses were technically growing onto her property. The quarrel required a measuring tape, the original property survey, and two cups of Mrs. Patterson's famous sweet tea to prove that, no, three inches of rosebush overhang did not constitute trespassing.

The week before that, I'd been called to settle a dispute between the Methodist church and the Baptist church over whose turn it was to use the community center for their annual fall festival. Turned out both congregations had booked the same weekend six months ago, and neither was willing to budge. Took some creative scheduling and a promise from me to work security for both events to sort that one out.

“Sheriff Calloway!”

I turned to see Harold Powis hobbling toward me on his cane, his weathered face set in lines of righteous indignation. Harold was eighty-three, a retired railroad worker who’d lived in Garnet Bend his entire life and had strong opinions about everything from the town council’s landscaping choices to the best types of whiskey.

“Morning, Harold. What’s got you all worked up today?”

“I’ll tell you what’s got me worked up. That damn Allen boy keeps parking his motorcycle in front of my driveway! Third time this week I’ve had to hobble out there and ask him to move it so I can get my car out.”

The Allen “boy” was Todd Allen, who was twenty-six years old and worked at Murphy’s Hardware. But Harold had been calling him “boy” since Todd was twelve and had crashed his bicycle into Harold’s prized garden gnome.

Some habits died hard in small towns.

“Have you talked to Todd about it directly?”

“Course I talked to him! Kid just grins at me like I’m some doddering old fool and says sure, he’ll move it, no problem. Then the next damn day, there it is again! Right in front of my driveway like he owns the place.”

I pulled out my small notebook and jotted down a reminder. Todd was a good kid—man—but he had a tendency to be forgetful when it came to things that didn’t directly affect him. “I’ll stop by the hardware store and have a word with him. Maybe suggest he park in the employee lot behind the store instead of on the street.”

Harold’s expression softened immediately, the anger melting away. “Appreciate it,

Sheriff. Also, while I've got you?—”

The radio clipped to my shoulder crackled to life, saving me. “Sheriff Calloway, this is dispatch.”

I pointed to it. “I need to take this, Harold. We'll talk soon.”

The older man shuffled away, his cane tapping against the sidewalk.

I pressed the button on my radio. “Go ahead, Jenny.”

“Got a call from Garnet Bend Grocery. They need you down there for a shoplifting situation.”

“Copy that. On my way.”

I changed direction, heading toward the grocery store three blocks over. Shoplifting wasn't uncommon—tourists sometimes got sticky fingers with local crafts or souvenirs, teenagers occasionally tried to pocket candy or energy drinks when they thought no one was looking. Usually Dave Bellomy, the store manager, handled minor theft himself with a stern talking-to and a phone call to parents for underage offenders. For him to actually call in law enforcement meant either the theft was significant or there were other complications.

The automatic glass doors of Garnet Bend Grocery slid open with their familiar whoosh, releasing a burst of air conditioning that carried the scents of fresh bread and floor cleaner. I spotted Dave immediately—he was pacing behind the customer service counter, running his hands through his graying hair in the agitated way that told me this wasn't a routine shoplifting case.

Dave Bellomy had given me my first real job when I was sixteen—bagging groceries

and pushing shopping carts in the summer heat, teaching me the value of honest work and treating customers with respect regardless of how much money they spent. He was a good man, fair but firm, the kind of employer who remembered your birthday and asked about your family when you came through his checkout line. In all the years I'd known him, dating back to when I was a punk teenager more interested in girls than work ethic, I'd rarely seen him this genuinely agitated.

“Dave? What’s going on?”

He looked up, and relief flooded his weathered features. “Lachlan, come on back to my office. I need to talk to you.”

I followed him back. Evidently, whatever was said, he didn’t want to be fodder for small-town gossip. “Talk to me. What happened?”

“We’ve got someone in the break room. Caught shoplifting about twenty minutes ago.” Dave glanced around, lowering his voice even though we were in his office. “Thing is, it was baby formula. The hypoallergenic kind for babies with allergies and stuff. It was a small can, but it isn’t cheap.”

My eyebrows rose. Dave’s level of distress seemed disproportionate to the crime.

“What else did they take?”

“That’s just it—nothing else. She paid for everything else she had. Bread, peanut butter, some crackers. Had the money right there in her hand, counted it out proper-like. But when she was heading for the door, trying to juggle all her bags, the formula can fell right out of her coat pocket and hit the floor.”

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“Fell out?” I pulled out my notebook, more from habit than necessity. “Could it have been an accident?”

“That’s what I’m thinking, but Angela was working register three, saw the whole thing happen. The customer was juggling her purchases, trying to get everything organized, and the can just tumbled out. Could’ve been completely innocent, but...” Dave shrugged helplessly, his hands still fidgeting with anxiety. “Angela called it in to the station before I could stop her. Standard procedure, you know? Any theft over twenty dollars gets reported to law enforcement. She was just following protocol.”

I could see Dave’s dilemma written all over his face. Store policy dictated one thing, but his conscience was telling him something else entirely. “You don’t think it was intentional.”

“Hell, Lachlan, I was ready to just let it go. Pay for the formula myself and send her on her way with a gentle reminder to be more careful. Thirty dollars isn’t worth destroying someone’s life over. But Angela had already made the call, and I couldn’t exactly tell her to forget about it. What kind of message would that send about following procedures?”

Dave had always been caught between being a by-the-book manager and being a human being who cared about his community. It was one of the things I’d always respected about him—he found ways to do right by people while still running a successful business.

“Where is she now?”

“Break room in the back. Told her to wait there while we sorted this out.” Dave’s weathered hands drummed against the counter. “She looks pretty rough. Pale, tired. I don’t want to make her life harder.”

“Any idea who she is? Local?”

“Definitely not from around here—I know pretty much everyone in town and all the regular customers. She seemed nervous, kept looking around like she expected trouble. Paid with cash, small bills mostly, like she’d been saving up.”

“Let me go talk to her. See what her story is.”

“Thanks, Lachlan. You remember where the break room is? Behind the deli.”

“I remember.”

I made my way through the employee area, past the time clock where teenage employees punched in for their after-school shifts, past the bulletin board covered with work schedules and safety reminders and a flyer for the upcoming Halloween costume contest. The break room door stood partially open, and I could see someone sitting at the small table inside, but the angle prevented me from getting a clear view of her face.

I knocked on the doorframe, keeping my voice gentle and professional. “Ma’am? I’m Sheriff Calloway. I’d like to ask you a few questions about what happened today.”

She stiffened and turned slowly to face me. My hand froze on the door handle for a heartbeat before I pushed it open.

Piper Matthews sat at the break room table, and the sight of her hit me like a physical blow to the chest.

She looked like a ghost of herself. My heavy winter coat—the theft of that had pissed me off way more than the cash she’d taken—hung way too big on her frame, but at least under it, she looked like she had gained some weight, which she’d desperately needed.

Her face, though, looked gaunt and hollow. Sharp cheekbones stood out in harsh relief, and dark circles shadowed her eyes like purple bruises. Her hair was back to being its natural blonde, and pulled back in a messy ponytail that looked like it had been styled by exhaustion rather than design.

Anger exploded through me, swift and brutal and tinged with something that might have been hurt if I’d been willing to examine it too closely. I tamped it all down as best I could.

“What are you doing here, Piper?”

She flinched at my tone but didn’t look away, meeting my gaze with those hazel eyes I’d thought about far more often than I cared to admit over the past year. “Hello, Lachlan.”

“Don’t.” I stepped into the room and shut the door behind me, suddenly aware of how small the space was, how her presence seemed to fill every corner despite her diminished appearance. “Just don’t. What are you doing in Garnet Bend?”

“I—”

“And what’s this bullshit about stealing baby formula? What kind of sick scheme are you running now? Planning to resell it to desperate mothers who can’t afford it? Because that would be a new low, even for a Matthews.”

If possible, she got even paler. “No, it’s not like th?—”

“Oh, it’s not? Then enlighten me, Piper.” I didn’t even care that I wasn’t allowing her to get a word in. This definitely wasn’t how I would normally talk to a suspect. I’d ask a single question and let them do most of the talking. “Tell me what brilliant con you’ve cooked up this time. Decided that sleeping your way through town to steal money was not the way you wanted to go? Decided to go the stealing baby formula route instead?”

“It was an accident.”

I almost laid into her again, but her voice made me stop. It was barely above a whisper, tinged with defeat and an utter lack of fight.

“Accident,” I repeated, my voice flat with disbelief. “Explain.”

“I was going to pay for it. I have the money.” She reached into her pocket with trembling fingers and pulled out a small wad of bills, setting it on the scarred break room table between us. The money was mostly ones and fives, the kind of small bills that suggested someone living hand-to-mouth, scraping together whatever they could find. “I paid for everything else. The formula was in my pocket because I was trying to keep my hands free to carry...everything, and I forgot about it when I was checking out.”

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I stared at the money, then back at her face, looking for signs of deception. But all I saw was bone-deep exhaustion and a wariness that spoke of someone who'd been running on empty for far too long.

“What do you need baby formula for?”

The question came out harsher than I'd intended, driven by suspicion and the old hurt I'd thought I'd buried. Piper's hands moved to the front of the coat—my coat—and slowly, carefully, pulled down the zipper.

Strapped to her chest in a worn baby carrier was an infant. Dark hair, maybe a couple months old, sleeping peacefully against her chest.

The sight knocked the wind out of me completely.

Piper had a baby.

### Chapter 6

Lachlan

I stared at the top of the baby's head, my mind struggling to process what I was seeing. The infant was so small, almost fragile-looking, dark hair peeking out from under a tiny knit cap, completely oblivious to the tension crackling through the break room.

“What's going on here, Piper?”

“I’m babysitting.” The words tumbled out quickly, like she’d been rehearsing them. “For my cousin. She had to go on a trip for a few days, and the formula she left us was making his stomach upset. He’s been crying for hours, so I thought I’d try the hypoallergenic kind to see if it helps.”

Every instinct I’d honed over years in law enforcement was screaming that something was off. The explanation was too neat, too convenient. And the way she avoided my eyes while she spoke, focusing instead on adjusting the baby carrier with trembling hands—classic signs of deception.

“And you just happened to stop to buy formula in Garnet Bend?”

“I was already heading through this area.” She zipped the coat back up carefully, her movements protective around the sleeping infant. “I didn’t want to wake him by taking him out of the carrier, so I kept him under my jacket. That’s why I put things in my pocket instead of using a basket. I forgot the formula was there when I went to check out.”

The story had holes big enough to drive a truck through. But the baby was real and clearly needed care. And despite everything that had happened between us, I couldn’t bring myself to believe Piper would use an innocent child as part of some elaborate con.

Could I?

I studied her face, looking for tells, for the subtle signs that would give away a lie. But exhaustion had carved deep lines around her eyes, and her skin had a gray pallor that indicated genuine fatigue rather than nerves about being caught in deception.

The baby stirred against her chest, making soft sounds, and her hand immediately moved to support his head through the fabric of the coat. The gesture was so natural,

so protective, that it made something twist in my chest.

“Stay here,” I said finally. “Don’t move.”

I stepped out of the break room and found Dave pacing behind the customer service counter, his anxiety written in every line of his weathered face.

“Well? What’s the story?”

“She says it was an accident. Claims she was trying to keep her hands free by putting items in her pockets instead of a basket, forgot the formula was there when she checked out.” I kept my voice neutral, professional. “She’s got a baby with her—says she’s babysitting for her cousin.”

Dave’s expression immediately softened. “Look, if she’s got the money to pay for it and it really was just an oversight...”

“She’s got the money.” I glanced back toward the break room. “Thirty dollars cash.”

“Then let’s just call it a misunderstanding and move on. I don’t want to press charges over something like this, especially not with a baby involved.”

Relief flooded through me, though I couldn’t entirely say why. “You sure about that?”

“Positive. Life’s hard enough without making it harder over an honest mistake.”

Honest mistake. I kept my mouth shut.

I nodded and headed back to the break room, where Piper sat exactly where I’d left her, one hand resting protectively on the baby carrier. She looked up when I entered,

and I caught a flash of hope in her eyes before she quickly looked away again.

“Dave’s willing to let this go as an honest mistake. You pay for the formula, and we’re done here.”

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Her shoulders sagged with relief so profound I thought she might slide right out of the chair. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank Dave. He’s the one showing you mercy you probably don’t deserve.”

The words came out harsher than I’d intended, but I didn’t take them back. I couldn’t afford to let my guard down around her again, baby or no baby.

We walked back through the store in silence, Piper clutching the money in her hand like a lifeline. Dave rang up the formula himself, his smile gentle as he looked at the baby carrier.

“How old?” he asked.

“Almost five months,” Piper answered quietly.

“Beautiful baby. My grandson’s about that age—they grow so fast at this stage.”

Piper managed a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Thank you.”

Almost five months. I did the math in my head. Couldn’t possibly be mine. Glad I didn’t need to worry about that, but also, I didn’t want to think about the fact that she’d already been pregnant with another man’s baby that night we had sex.

I followed her out of the store, noting how she moved carefully, like every step required conscious effort. The baby carrier added bulk to her frame, but now that I

knew what was causing it, I could see how truly thin she'd become. The coat—my coat—hung on her like she was a child playing dress-up in adult clothes.

“Where's your car?”

She pointed to an older Honda Civic parked at the far end of the lot, rust eating at the wheel wells and a spider web crack across the passenger side of the windshield. At least she had transportation this time instead of hitchhiking.

“Whose baby is it, really?”

“I told you. My cousin's.”

“What's your cousin's name?”

“Sarah.” The answer came too quickly, like she'd been prepared for the question.

“Sarah what?”

A pause. “Matthews. Sarah Matthews.”

“Where does she live?”

“I don't see how that's any of your business.”

I stopped walking, and she was forced to stop too, turning to face me with obvious reluctance. “Everything that happens in this town—including anyone wandering through accidentally forgetting to pay for stuff—is my business, Piper. Especially when it involves someone with your family's track record.”

The baby made a soft sound, and she automatically swayed slightly, a soothing

motion that looked completely natural. Whatever else was going on here, she clearly knew how to care for an infant.

“You planning to stay in town long?”

“Just passing through. I’ll...be gone tomorrow.”

The smart thing to do would be to escort her out of town immediately. But she looked like she might collapse at any moment. The dark circles that shadowed her eyes were more distinct now, and there was a slight tremor in her hands. I might not want her here, but she didn’t look in too good of shape to drive very far.

“Where are you planning to stay?”

“The motel.” There was only one in town, so that limited her options.

I fell into step beside her as we left her dilapidated car where it was and walked the two blocks to the Pineview Motel.

It was a relic from the 1960s, all angles and turquoise paint that had faded to a sickly green. But it was clean and affordable, and Mrs. Aldridge who ran it was good people.

“I’ll wait here,” I said, positioning myself just inside the glass doors where I could keep an eye on things.

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I told myself I was just making sure Piper didn't cause any more trouble. That this was about protecting the town, not protecting her. But as I watched her approach the front desk, something twisted in my chest at how small she looked, how carefully she moved.

Mrs. Aldridge looked up from her paperwork with a welcoming smile. "Good afternoon, dear. How can I help you?"

"I'd like a room for the night, please."

"Of course." Mrs. Aldridge's gaze dropped to the baby carrier, and her expression warmed further. "What a little sweetheart. They're just precious at that age." Mrs. Aldridge pulled out the registration book. "I'll need to see some ID, and we'll need a credit card or cash deposit."

Piper fumbled with the wallet, her movements clumsy with exhaustion. When she handed over her driver's license, I saw Mrs. Aldridge's expression change, her welcoming smile fading as she read the name.

"Piper...Matthews?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Aldridge's face went stone-cold. She set the license down on the counter like it had burned her fingers. "Matthews. As in Ray Matthews?"

Piper's shoulders tensed, but she nodded. "He's my father."

“Your father.” Mrs. Aldridge’s voice was flat, controlled, but I could hear the anger simmering underneath. “Your father who convinced my Gary to invest our retirement savings in some bogus land deal nine years ago. Who took forty thousand dollars from us that we never saw again.”

The silence stretched between them, heavy and venomous. Piper stood perfectly still, her face almost ghostly white.

“Gary worked thirty-five years at the railroad,” Mrs. Aldridge continued, her voice growing harder with each word. “Thirty-five years of twelve-hour shifts and overtime and missing Christmas mornings because the trains don’t stop for holidays. We were supposed to retire to Arizona, buy a little place with a garden where Gary could grow tomatoes.”

“Ma’am, I?—”

“Instead, Gary worked until the day he had his heart attack. Died at sixty-eight years old in the railroad yard because we couldn’t afford for him to retire. Because your father stole our future and left us with nothing.”

The baby began to fuss, picking up on the tension radiating from Piper’s body. She swayed automatically, trying to soothe him, but it didn’t seem to be working this time.

“I have money,” she said quietly. “I can pay for the room.”

“I don’t want your money.” Mrs. Aldridge slid the driver’s license back across the counter. “I don’t want anything to do with Ray Matthews or his family. Find somewhere else to stay.”

“Please. I have a baby with me. I just need one night.”

“Should have thought about that before you came back to a town your family destroyed.”

The words hit Piper like physical blows. She stood there for a moment, swaying slightly, the baby’s cries growing louder. Then she picked up her license with trembling fingers and turned away from the desk.

She walked past me without even glancing in my direction, her face a mask of humiliation and defeat. The automatic doors slid open, and she stepped out into the cold afternoon air.

I followed her back to her car, anger rising in my chest. Not at Mrs. Aldridge—I understood her pain, her need for justice that would never come. But at Piper, for putting herself in this situation. For coming back here and expecting anything different.

“Well,” I said as she fumbled with her car keys, the baby still crying in the carrier. “What did you expect?”

She didn’t respond, just opened the back door of the Honda and began the careful process of transferring the baby from the carrier to a car seat that had seen better days. Her hands were steady despite everything, practiced in the motions of caring for an infant.

“Choices have consequences, Piper. Your family made their choices nine years ago, and you made another one when you ran out last year.”

She still didn’t say anything, just buckled the baby into the car seat and closed the door. When she turned to face me, her eyes were bright with unshed tears, but her voice was steady.

“You don’t have to worry about seeing me again.”

Something about the quiet finality in her tone made me irrationally angry. “Good. Because if I did see you again, I might remember that the statute of limitations hasn’t run out on theft. I might decide to press charges for what you stole from me a year ago.”

She flinched like I’d struck her. “I’m sorry about that. I know it doesn’t make it right, but I am sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t give me back my three hundred dollars. And it sure as hell doesn’t give me back my favorite coat.” I gestured to the jacket she was wearing. “That coat has sentimental value. It was my grandfather’s.”

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Without hesitation, she began shrugging out of the coat. “Here. Take it back.”

But as she tried to pull it off, something went wrong. Her face went white, and she swayed on her feet like a tree in a strong wind. I saw her eyes roll back just as her knees buckled.

I caught her before she hit the asphalt, her slight weight almost nothing in my arms. The baby’s cries grew louder from inside the car, and I could feel Piper’s body trembling against mine.

Fuck.

“Piper? Piper, can you hear me?”

Her eyes fluttered open almost immediately, confusion and embarrassment warring in her expression. “I’m okay. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not fine.” I helped her stand but kept my hands on her arms, steadying her. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“I... This morning. I had something this morning.”

The lie was transparent. I could see it in the way she couldn’t meet my eyes, in the sharp angles of her cheekbones and the way my coat hung on her frame like a shroud.

The baby was working himself into a full meltdown now, his cries echoing through the air around us. Piper tried to step toward the car, but I could feel her legs shaking.

“You can’t drive like this.”

“I’m fine.”

“You just collapsed in a parking lot. You’re in no condition to drive anywhere, especially not with a baby in the car.”

She tried to pull away from me, but the movement made her sway again. “I’ll figure something out.”

The temperature was dropping as the sun sank lower, and the baby’s cries were growing more desperate. Whatever was going on here, whatever game she might be playing, I couldn’t let her drive off in this condition. Not with an infant depending on her.

I pulled my coat back around her shoulders, hating myself for the softness in my voice. “Come on. You and the baby can stay at my house tonight.”

“What?”

“One night. You get some food and some sleep, then you leave first thing in the morning.” I opened the driver’s side door of her car. “I’ll follow you to my place.”

“I can’t?—”

“It’s not a request, Piper. You’re a danger to yourself and that baby right now. I won’t have that on my conscience. You come with me, or I put you in lockup and we call social services to get the kid.”

I felt like shit as what was left of the coloring in her face faded away until she was stark white. But I wasn’t letting her drive any distance when she was like this.

It was a safety thing, nothing else.

She got into the car without another word, her movements slow and careful. I waited until she had the engine started before walking back to my truck, cursing myself with every step.

One night. Food and sleep, then she'd be gone again.

I could handle one night.

## Chapter 7

Lachlan

Piper was still unsteady on her feet as she climbed out of her beat-up Honda, one hand gripping the doorframe while the other supported the baby car carrier. The late-afternoon sun cast long shadows across my driveway, and I could see her still swaying slightly.

“Inside,” I said, my hand moving to her elbow to steady her. “Sit down before you fall over.”

She didn't argue, which told me everything I needed to know about how close to the edge she really was. I got her inside and settled on the couch in the living room, the baby right beside her, still in his little basket. She leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes, her face a whitish-gray color.

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“Don’t move,” I told her. “I’ll get your things from the car.”

The Honda’s trunk held a single small suitcase that had seen better days and a diaper bag that looked like it had been through a war. That was it. Everything she owned in the world, apparently. The suitcase was so light I wondered if there was anything in it at all.

One night, I reminded myself as I carried the bags inside. She would get some food and some sleep, then she would be gone in the morning. This wasn’t my problem to solve.

But as I set the bags down by the front door, I couldn’t ignore how thin she’d gotten. How exhausted she looked. How that baby was depending on her for everything, when she clearly had nothing left to give.

Not my problem. Fuck.

I walked back into the living room to find her exactly where I’d left her, eyes still closed, breathing deep and even. The baby had settled too, no longer fussing. Good. They both needed the rest.

My stomach chose that moment to growl, reminding me I hadn’t eaten since the sandwich I’d grabbed for lunch six hours ago. If I was hungry, she had to be starving. The peanut butter and bread she’d been buying at the store suggested she was living on the bare minimum. Who knew for how long.

I headed to the kitchen without asking if she wanted dinner. She needed food, period.

The question was what to make that would be quick but also substantial.

Spaghetti with meat sauce would work. I always kept ground beef in the fridge and pasta in the pantry—bachelor survival food. I could have something ready in thirty minutes, maybe less.

The routine of cooking gave me something to focus on besides the questions burning in my mind. Why had she come back to Garnet Bend, of all places? And why did something about her story feel off, like pieces of a puzzle that didn't quite fit together?

I browned the ground beef, added a jar of marinara sauce, and set water to boil for the pasta. Simple, but it would give her the protein and calories she desperately needed. While the sauce simmered, I found myself staring out the kitchen doorway toward the living room, where I could just make out the top of her head over the back of the couch.

Way too many questions. I was already trying to gear myself up for the fact that I might not ever get any answers to them.

The timer chimed, pulling me back to the present. I drained the pasta, plated up a generous serving with the meat sauce, and grabbed a fork and napkin. She needed fuel more than fancy presentation.

When I walked back into the living room, I found her awake but barely. She'd taken the baby out of the carrier and laid him on the couch beside her, one protective hand resting on his tiny chest. The infant was sleeping peacefully, his little face relaxed and content.

"Here." I handed her the plate, noting how her hands shook slightly as she accepted it. "Eat."

“Thank you.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, but I caught the genuine gratitude in it.

I wanted to sit down, to ask her all the questions piling in my mind. But it was more important that she eat.

“I’ve got some work to catch up on in my office,” I said instead. “Take your time.”

It was a lie. I didn’t have any pressing work. But she needed space to eat without feeling like I was interrogating her, and I needed distance to think clearly about what the hell I was going to do with this situation.

My home office was down the hall from the living room, far enough to give her privacy but close enough that I could hear if something went wrong. I settled at my desk and pulled up some case files on my computer, trying to focus on the mundane details of small-town law enforcement.

Forty-five minutes passed before I heard it—a soft fussing sound coming from the living room. Baby sounds. I saved the file I’d been trying and failing to read and headed back toward the front of the house.

Piper had fallen asleep on the couch, her plate balanced precariously on her lap. She’d managed to eat most of the pasta, which was something at least.

The baby was awake now, making soft sounds of displeasure at being left alone. As I approached, he turned his head toward me, and I got my first clear look at his face.

The world tilted sideways.

I’d seen those eyes before.

Every time I looked at old photographs of myself as a child. Every time I looked at pictures of my father or grandfather.

Hell, every morning in the mirror.

Dark brown, almost black, with long lashes that would probably make women jealous when he got older. The exact same shade and shape as mine. As my family's.

The baby—Caleb, she'd called him—had my eyes.

My hands were shaking as I reached for him, lifting him carefully from the couch. He was so small, so light, but he settled against my chest like he belonged there. Like he'd been waiting his whole short life for this moment.

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“Oh God.” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Piper stirred at the sound, her eyes fluttering open. For a moment, she looked confused, disoriented. Then she saw me holding the baby, and her face went white.

“This isn’t your cousin’s baby, is it?”

She stared at me for a long moment, and I watched the last of her defenses crumble. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she shook her head.

“No. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you outright. He’s yours. Caleb is yours. Ours.”

The confirmation hit me like a physical blow, even though I’d already known. Had felt it in my bones the moment I’d looked into those familiar eyes.

I had a son.

“But you said he was five months old.” My voice sounded strange to my own ears, like it was coming from very far away.

“I... They... He...was born early.” She wiped at her tears with the back of her hand.

“Preemie. Nothing dangerous, just was a little before they...wanted him to come.”

Ice flooded my veins. “Is he okay now? Any complications? Problems?”

“He’s fine.” She sat up straighter, her voice gaining strength when it came to defending her child. Our child. “Small for his age, but healthy. The doctors said he’ll

catch up.”

“Why didn’t you tell me right away?” The question came out harsher than I’d intended, but I couldn’t help it. “When you found out you were pregnant, why didn’t you?—”

“How?” Her voice cracked. “I’d stolen from you and run away while you were sleeping. What was I supposed to do, show up on your doorstep and say ‘Hey, sorry I robbed you. And guess what, we’re having a baby’?”

She had a point, but it didn’t make the hurt any less sharp. “You could have tried.”

“I thought about it.” She drew her knees up to her chest, making herself small. “Every day for months, I thought about it. But I didn’t have anything to offer you except more problems. I didn’t even have a place to live.”

The baby—Caleb—made a soft sound against my chest, and I looked down at him again. Those eyes, so familiar and yet so new.

My son. Jesus Christ, I was somebody’s father.

“Where have you been living?” I asked.

She looked away. “Nowhere. Everywhere. I’ve been moving around a lot.”

“With a premature baby.”

She flinched. “I’ve been careful. I’ve taken good care of him.”

I could see that she had. Despite everything—despite being broke and homeless and obviously exhausted—Caleb looked healthy and well-cared-for. Clean clothes,

properly fed, obviously loved. She'd been putting his needs above her own, which explained why she looked like she hadn't eaten a decent meal in months.

"Piper." I waited until she looked at me. "Where do you plan to go from here? Do you have a plan at all?"

Her face crumpled. "No. I don't have anywhere to go. I don't have any money, I don't have a job, I don't have..." She trailed off, wrapping her arms around herself. "I came back here because I was hoping maybe you'd help. Even though you hate me. I know I don't deserve it after what I did, but I was hoping..."

"I don't hate you."

The words came out before I could think them through, but they were true. I was angry, yes. Hurt and confused and completely blindsided by everything that had happened in the past few hours. But I didn't hate her.

I didn't trust her either.

Caleb shifted in my arms, making soft baby sounds, and something primal and protective stirred in my chest. This was my son. My child. Whatever else was happening here, whatever lies or half-truths Piper might be telling, this baby was mine.

And I wasn't going to let him be homeless and hungry because his mother had made some bad choices.

"I want you to stay," I heard myself say.

Her head snapped up. “What?”

“Here. Both of you. I want you to stay here.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know yet. We’ll figure out the details as we go. But right now, you and Caleb need a safe place to be, and I need...” I looked down at the baby in my arms. “I need to wrap my head around the fact that I’m a father.”

Relief flooded her face so completely that I thought she might start crying again. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We’re going to have to figure out a lot of things. Legal stuff, practical stuff...” I trailed off as Caleb began to fuss more insistently. “Is he hungry?”

She nodded, color rising in her cheeks. “He eats every few hours. I can try to nurse him, but I haven’t been producing enough milk lately. That’s why I needed the formula.”

There was something in her voice, some hint of shame or embarrassment that made me think there was more to the story. But Caleb was getting more agitated, his soft fussing escalating toward actual crying.

“Will he need a bottle after you nurse him?”

“Probably.” She wouldn’t meet my eyes. “There’s a bottle in the diaper bag, and instructions are on the formula can.”

“Okay.” I handed Caleb back to her, trying not to notice how perfectly he fit in her arms. “You feed him as much as you can, and I’ll get the bottle ready.”

She nodded and headed toward the guest room with Caleb, leaving me standing in my living room trying to process everything that had just happened.

I had a son. An almost five-month-old son named Caleb who had my eyes and my...everything, probably. The resemblance was unmistakable once you knew to look for it.

In the kitchen, I found the formula can and read the instructions twice to make sure I got the measurements right. The diaper bag yielded a bottle that had seen better days but looked clean enough. I followed the directions carefully—boil water, let it cool, measure the powder, mix gently.

My first bottle for my son. Not exactly how I’d pictured this moment going, back when I’d imagined having kids someday. I’d always figured there’d be more preparation involved. Nursery furniture and baby books and months of anticipation.

The bottle was ready by the time I heard footsteps in the hallway. I looked up to see Piper approaching with Caleb still fussing in her arms.

“Any luck?”

She shook her head, that same embarrassed flush coloring her cheeks. “Not much. He’s still hungry.”

I held out the bottle, and she took it gratefully. The moment the silicone nipple

touched Caleb's lips, he latched on and began drinking eagerly, his little hands curling into fists against the bottle.

"There we go," I murmured, watching him eat. "Better?"

Piper's eyes filled with tears again as she watched our son. "Thank you. For everything. I know you didn't sign up for any of this."

Neither had she, I realized. Whatever had brought her back to Garnet Bend, whatever had driven her to steal formula and collapse in parking lots, she was just trying to take care of our child the best way she knew how.

I still had a thousand questions. Still didn't trust her completely. Still wasn't sure what the hell we were going to do about any of this.

But for right now, watching Piper feed our son in my kitchen while the last light of day faded outside the windows, it was enough.

## Chapter 8

### Lachlan

The coffee in my mug had gone cold hours ago, but I kept taking absent sips anyway, my mind churning through everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours.

I had a son. The thought hit me fresh every time, like a punch to the gut that somehow felt good and terrifying at the same time. Caleb. Those dark eyes that were so familiar, the way he'd settled against my chest like he belonged there.

But also, what the hell did I know about being a father?

This was not the way I'd planned it. Having a child hadn't even been on my bingo card for anywhere in the near future, much less fucking yesterday.

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But I had a five-month-old son and a woman I couldn't trust living in my house, and now I guessed I was supposed to figure it out as I went.

And I would.

The protective instinct that had kicked in the moment I'd looked into Caleb's eyes was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Fierce and immediate and absolutely terrifying. This tiny person was depending on me, and I had no idea what I was doing.

And Piper. Beautiful, broken Piper, who'd stolen from me once and might do it again. Who'd kept my son from me for months but had also clearly sacrificed everything to take care of him. How was I supposed to balance being grateful that she'd brought Caleb to me with the fact that she'd lied about everything else?

Sleep had been impossible last night. After she'd gone to bed in the guest room with Caleb, I'd paced my house for hours, wrestling with questions I couldn't answer. What if she ran again? What if I woke up and they were both gone?

That last thought had driven me out into the night. An hour drive to Billings, to the twenty-four-hour electronics store where I'd bought three wireless cameras and a GPS tracker. Another stop at a phone store that stayed open late.

The nanny cams were sitting throughout my house now—one in the living room behind a plant, another in the kitchen tucked between some cookbooks, a third in the hallway. The tracker was a different story. I'd spent twenty minutes crouched beside her beat-up Honda in my driveway at two in the morning, attaching the small device

to the underside of her bumper.

Illegal as hell. I could lose my job if anyone found out. But I'd rather face a misdemeanor charge than lose my son.

The cell phone sat in my desk drawer, still in its box. I'd give it to Piper later, tell her it was so we could stay in contact. She needed one anyway—what if there was an emergency with Caleb and she couldn't reach me?

After a couple hours sleep, I'd woken up still not sure what I should do or say. Did she need help with the baby? She hadn't asked for another bottle, so instead, I'd made breakfast for the two of us—scrambled eggs, toast, bacon—while Piper sat at my kitchen table looking like she expected me to change my mind and throw her out at any second.

“Coffee?” I'd offered, holding up the pot.

“Please.” Her voice had been barely above a whisper, and when I'd set the mug in front of her, she'd wrapped both hands around it like she was trying to absorb its warmth.

Those dark circles under her eyes were still pronounced, her movements careful and measured. She'd eaten slowly, mechanically, cutting her eggs into tiny bites and chewing each one thoroughly. Like she was forcing herself to consume every calorie.

“You'll be okay here today while I go to work?” I'd asked.

“We'll be fine.” She'd glanced toward the living room where Caleb was sleeping peacefully in his carrier. “I don't want to be any trouble.”

“You're not trouble. Either of you. Rest when you can. You still look exhausted.”

The words had come out rougher than I'd intended, and she'd flinched slightly.

She'd nodded, focusing on her toast. "Thank you. For letting us stay."

I'd wanted to say more, but Caleb had started fussing, and she'd immediately turned her attention to him, that protective instinct taking over. The conversation had died there, buried under the weight of everything we hadn't talked about.

Now, sitting in my office with case files spread across my desk, I couldn't concentrate on anything. The nanny cam app on my phone showed a live feed from my house, and I'd already checked it twice this morning. Both times, everything had looked normal. Piper feeding Caleb, changing his diaper, talking to him in soft tones.

A knock on my office door pulled me from my thoughts. "Come in."

Beckett Sinclair pushed through the door, followed by Hunter Everett. Both men looked serious, which immediately put me on alert. Hunter ran Warrior Security at the Resting Warrior Ranch, and when he showed up at the sheriff's office, it usually meant trouble.

"Morning, Lach." Beckett settled into one of the chairs across from my desk, like he had dozens of times since I'd become sheriff. "We need to talk."

Hunter remained standing, his posture alert and focused. "We've been hearing rumors. About illegal firearms trafficking in the area."

I leaned back in my chair, forcing myself to give them my full attention. "What kind of rumors?"

"The kind that usually turn out to be true." Hunter's expression was grim. "We've got contacts throughout the state—other security firms, law enforcement, people who

keep their ears open. Multiple sources are saying there's a significant operation moving weapons through this part of Montana."

Hunter had been Special Forces before taking over Warrior Security. His cousin, Lucas Everett, helped run Resting Warrior with six other former SEALs. All good men I'd gladly have at my back anytime. Hunter wasn't one to cry wolf. If he was bringing this to me, it was serious.

"Automatic weapons," Beckett added. "Military-grade stuff that shouldn't be in civilian hands. The kind of firepower that ends up in the wrong hands and gets people killed."

"Any specifics? Names, locations, time frames?"

"That's the problem." Hunter shook his head. "It's all vague so far. Whispers about someone moving serious hardware through rural areas, using hunting cabins and abandoned barns for storage. Someone smart enough to stay under the radar."

"And it's not just guns." Beckett's jaw tightened. "We're hearing about opioids too. Fentanyl, specifically. Someone using the isolation of rural communities to move drugs without detection."

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Fuck. Fentanyl was already enough of a problem in most communities without someone deliberately pushing it. I definitely didn't want Garnet Bend to be in the middle of a drug ring.

"How credible are these sources?"

"Credible enough that we're bringing it to you." Hunter moved to the window, scanning the street outside with professional awareness. "One of our contacts in Billings picked up chatter about veterinary clinics being used as distribution points. Feed stores, livestock transport companies—businesses that wouldn't normally draw attention."

"Rural operations are perfect cover," Beckett agreed. "Who's going to question a delivery truck going to a farm or ranch? Who's going to search hay bales or feed sacks?"

I thought about Garnet Bend's layout—the ranches and farms that surrounded our small town, the vast stretches of empty land where someone could operate without being seen. The hunting cabins scattered throughout the mountains, most of them unoccupied for months at a time.

My phone buzzed with a notification from the nanny cam app. I glanced down reflexively, and my stomach dropped.

Piper was holding Caleb, pacing back and forth across my living room. But she wasn't soothing a fussy baby—she was sobbing. Her shoulders shook with the force of it, tears streaming down her face as she held our son against her chest. Caleb

looked calm, content even, which made her distress all the more alarming.

What the hell?

“We need to get on top of this immediately,” I managed, forcing myself to look up at Hunter and Beckett. “I’ll start shaking down contacts of my own.”

Hunter nodded. “Agreed. When we find something concrete, we’ll bring it right to you.”

I nodded, but my attention was split. Why the hell was Piper crying like that?

“Everybody needs to be careful, and we need to do this by the book so we can make the arrests stick. You guys call me before making any moves yourself.” I glanced at the app again and frowned. Piper was now pacing almost frantically.

Beckett studied my face with the perception that came from twenty years of friendship. “You okay? You seem distracted.”

“Just thinking through the implications.” It wasn’t entirely a lie. “If there’s a trafficking operation using our area as a pipeline, we need to be smart about how we approach it.”

“Agreed.” Hunter headed for the door. “We’ll coordinate with you before taking any action. This needs to be handled carefully.”

“I’ll put my deputies on alert, have them pay attention to unusual traffic patterns, unfamiliar vehicles,” I said, already planning to cut this meeting short.

After they left, I immediately grabbed my phone and opened the camera app. Piper had stopped crying, but I could see she was still upset. Her face was blotchy and red,

and she kept wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. She'd put Caleb down for a nap on the couch, carefully arranging pillows around him to keep him safe.

Her movements were slow, deliberate, like each action required conscious effort. She stood over our son for a long moment, her hand hovering protectively above him, before turning away.

I switched to the kitchen camera and watched her open the refrigerator. She stood there for a long moment, scanning the contents—leftover spaghetti from last night, sandwich meat, fruit, yogurt, a dozen other options. Then she closed it and headed to the pantry.

When she emerged, she was carrying the peanut butter and bread she'd bought at the grocery store yesterday.

Anger flared in my chest. Why was she choosing the cheapest, least nutritious food available when I had a mostly fully stocked kitchen? Was this some kind of self-punishment? A way of maintaining distance between us?

I watched her spread a thin layer of peanut butter on one slice of bread, then put everything away and eat the meager sandwich slowly, mechanically. Just like this morning, like she was forcing herself to consume it rather than enjoying it.

When she finished, she leaned against the kitchen counter and buried her face in her hands. I could see her shoulders shaking again, could see the moment she almost lost her balance and had to grip the counter to steady herself.

This wasn't right. Whatever was going on with her—exhaustion, malnutrition, something else—it was getting worse, not better. And I was sitting here spying on her through cameras instead of being there to help.

I was already reaching for my jacket before I'd consciously decided to leave. "Jenny," I called to my secretary through the open office door. "I'm heading out for the rest of the afternoon. Personal business."

Jenny looked up from her computer with surprise. "Everything okay, Sheriff? You haven't taken personal time since...well, since ever."

"Family emergency," I said, which was close enough to the truth. "Transfer any calls to Deputy Martinez. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

As I drove through town toward my house, I pulled out my cell phone and dialed Dr. Faith Rankine's office. Faith was relatively new to Garnet Bend—young, fresh out of residency, with a modern approach that was different from old Dr. Jamison, who'd been treating half the town since before I was born.

"Dr. Rankine's office, this is Susan."

"Susan, this is Sheriff Calloway. I need to speak with Dr. Rankine if she's available. It's urgent."

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“Hold on, Sheriff. Let me get her.”

Faith came on the line within seconds. “Lachlan? What’s wrong?”

“I need a favor, Faith. A big one. I’ve got someone at my house who needs medical attention, but she won’t come to the office. Any chance you could make a house call?”

“A house call?” Faith’s voice carried surprise. “I don’t usually... What kind of medical attention are we talking about?”

“Severe exhaustion, possible malnutrition, some kind of fainting spells. She’s got a baby with her, and I’m worried about both of them.”

“Is this an emergency? Should I call an ambulance?”

“No, nothing that immediate. But I don’t think she’ll come to you, and I can’t force her. She’s... It’s complicated.”

Faith was quiet for a moment. “You’re talking about someone you care about.”

It wasn’t a question, and I didn’t deny it. Could I care about someone I didn’t trust? Apparently the answer was yes, because despite everything, the thought of Piper suffering made my chest tight with worry.

“Can you help?”

“Give me your address. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

Relief flooded through me. “Thank you, Faith. I owe you.”

“Just take care of whoever needs taking care of, Lachlan. We’ll worry about favors later.”

As I pulled into my driveway, I could see Piper through the living room window. She was sitting on the couch next to Caleb, her head in her hands again. Whatever was wrong with her, it was more than just being tired.

And I was going to find out what it was, whether she wanted to tell me or not.

## Chapter 9

Lachlan

I’d worn a path in the hardwood floors between the kitchen and living room by the time Dr. Rankine’s examination of Piper had stretched past the thirty-minute mark. Each creak of the floorboards upstairs made me pause, listening for voices, for some indication of what was happening.

Caleb slept peacefully in his carrier on the coffee table, completely oblivious to my anxiety. Piper had brought him out here after Dr. Rankine had examined him. He looked so small, so vulnerable, and the protective instinct that had slammed into me yesterday hit fresh. This was my son. Mine. And if something was seriously wrong with Piper—if she was sicker than I’d realized—what would happen to him?

The thought made my chest tight. I’d been a father for less than twenty-four hours, and I was already terrified of screwing it up.

Footsteps on the stairs made me freeze mid-pace. Dr. Rankine appeared in the doorway, an old-fashioned medical bag in hand and her expression carefully neutral in that way doctors perfected when they had difficult news to deliver.

“Is Piper okay?” The words came out rougher than I’d intended.

“She’ll be out in a few minutes. She gave me permission to discuss details with you.” Faith settled into the chair across from where Caleb was sleeping and smiled at him. “The good news is that there’s nothing seriously wrong medically.”

Thank God. Relief flooded through me, but something in her tone kept me on edge. “But?”

“She’s exhausted. Severely so. And she’s dealing with what I’d call classic new-mother syndrome—overwhelming stress, anxiety about caring for the baby, self-doubt about whether she’s doing everything right.” Faith’s gaze shifted to Caleb, her expression softening briefly before returning to business. “She was particularly concerned about her milk production.”

Something in my chest eased at that. The fact that Piper was worried about feeding Caleb properly told me her priorities were in the right place, at least when it came to our son.

“Is it a problem?”

“It’s not ideal, obviously, but it’s not a problem. And, like I assured her, it’s not very uncommon when a mother is under extreme stress or not getting proper nutrition.”

“Is that why she collapsed yesterday?”

“Partially. Her body’s been running on empty for longer than is sustainable. When

you add the stress of caring for an infant, and..." Faith paused, studying my face. "Lachlan, I need to ask—what do you know about Piper's recent history? Where she's been, what her living situation has been?"

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Ice settled in my stomach. “Not much. She showed up yesterday out of nowhere. Why?”

Faith was quiet for a long moment, clearly choosing her words carefully. “I found evidence of old injuries. Healed fractures, scar tissue consistent with repeated trauma. Some of it looks to be several years old.”

I remembered those bruises on Piper’s ribs a year ago that she’d claimed were from falling down stairs. And the way she’d flinched when I’d touched her back at the tavern, how she’d moved like someone accustomed to pain. My teeth clenched.

“How old are we talking?”

“Hard to say exactly without X-rays, but I’d estimate the pattern goes back years. Multiple incidents. Some had to have been from when she was a child or teen.” Faith’s voice was gentle but firm. “The good news is that I didn’t find any recent injuries or fresh bruises. Whatever situation she was in before, she’s been out of it for at least a couple months.”

So, right around the time Caleb would have been born. Had becoming a mother finally given her the strength to leave whatever hell she’d been living in?

I scrubbed a hand down my face. “Did you ask her about it?”

“I tried. She deflected, said she was clumsy, had some bad falls over the years.” Faith’s expression told me exactly what she thought of that explanation—the same thing I’d thought of it. “Lachlan, I’ve seen enough domestic violence cases to

recognize the signs. Whatever she's been through, it was significant and prolonged."

I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. I had no doubt the abuse had been happening when she'd lived in Garnet Bend when she was younger. And, like so many who suffered from abuse as a child, it looked like Piper had fallen into familiar patterns as an adult.

"How can I help her with her current health?" That was what I needed to focus on now.

"Rest. Proper nutrition. And stress reduction, though I realize that's easier said than done." Faith pulled a small prescription pad from her bag and scribbled something quickly. "I'm prescribing a vitamin supplement with extra iron. She's borderline anemic, which explains some of the fatigue and dizziness."

I took the prescription, my mind churning through implications. "What else?"

"Time. And patience. Trauma like this doesn't heal overnight, and new mothers often feel like they're failing, even under the best circumstances." Faith closed her medical bag with a decisive snap. "She's going to need support, but she's also going to need space to feel safe. Don't push for information she's not ready to give."

The warning was clear enough. Whatever secrets Piper was carrying, forcing them out of her wasn't going to help anyone.

"I need to ask—what's your relationship to Piper? Are you family? A friend? Is this professional interest or personal? I'm trying to understand the support system she has in place."

There was no point in dancing around it. "Caleb is my son."

Faith's eyebrows rose slightly. "I see. And how long have you known about Caleb?"

"Since yesterday."

"That's...quite an adjustment for everyone involved. Congratulations?"

I looked over at Caleb. "Yes, definitely congratulations are in order. Surprised, yes. But not unhappy."

"Then congratulations with no question mark." Faith stood, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "I'm going to take off. She should be out in just a second."

"Thank you, Faith. I owe you one."

I didn't know her very well. She'd moved to Garnet Bend just over a year ago, just before I became sheriff. Kept mostly to herself. And, if I wasn't mistaken, had secrets of her own.

She smiled. "Being one of the first people able to congratulate you on being a father is thanks enough."

We shook hands, and she turned toward the door.

"Oh, and one more thing. Piper asked me specifically about breastfeeding versus formula feeding. I assured her that while breastfeeding has benefits, formula is perfectly adequate nutrition for babies. A lot of mothers put unnecessary pressure on themselves about this, especially when they're dealing with other stressors—Piper definitely is. She was almost hysterical about it. I assured her that Caleb looks absolutely fine."

After Faith left, I stood in my living room staring at the prescription in my hand,

trying to process everything I'd learned. Years of abuse. Old fractures and scar tissue. The kind of systematic violence that broke people down piece by piece.

No wonder Piper looked at me like she expected me to hit her when I'd confronted her about the stolen formula. No wonder she'd flinched away from my touch.

The soft sound of footsteps on the stairs made me look up. Piper appeared in the doorway, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail and her face still pale. She'd changed into different clothes—jeans that hung loose on her frame and a sweater that looked like it had seen better days.

I held up the prescription, watching her face for any reaction. "Here's the prescription for some vitamins with iron. We can get it filled here in town."

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“She said I was just tired. That this sort of thing happened to new moms. Plus, postpartum depression and stuff...” She trailed off, wrapping her arms around herself in a gesture that was becoming familiar.

“Hey, what matters right now is that you and Caleb are both okay.” I moved closer, slowing when she tensed slightly as the distance between us shrank. “The important thing is that you’re both healthy.”

“Yeah.” She stared down at the ground.

“Piper.” I waited until she looked at me. “You and Caleb can stay here as long as you need. I meant what I said yesterday.”

“How can you trust me after last time?”

The short answer was, I didn’t. But that didn’t need to be said out loud. “You made a mistake. But I know you were in some sort of bad situation. Plus, things have changed now. I’m not going to kick you and my child out in the cold over \$300 and a coat.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“So you’ll stay? No running off again?”

“Yes, we’ll stay. I need help.” She stared at the floor as the words came out.

Maybe I was a fool, maybe she was playing me once more, but the need to comfort

her was almost overwhelming. “We all need help sometimes. I’m glad you came back here.”

She looked up. “Yeah. Because of...Caleb.”

“Hell yeah, I’m thankful to know my son. But you’re his mother, so you’re important too. To him. To me.”

I definitely wasn’t going to admit how much I’d thought about that night with her over the past year. Yeah, I’d been pissed, and even hurt, but that hadn’t mattered one fucking bit to my subconscious when it had woken me up in the middle of the night, hard as stone, thinking about Piper and how her body had felt.

My dick evidently didn’t care if she was trustworthy or not.

Subject change time. “I’m sure we could help you find a job in town. Something flexible that works for your situation.”

The change in her was instantaneous and terrifying. All the color drained from her face, and she took a step backward like I’d struck her. “A job?” Her voice cracked on the words.

“Nothing immediate. Just eventually, when you’re ready?—”

“No.” The word came out sharp, panicked. “I can’t leave Caleb with someone else. I can’t. I want to have him with me. I need to?—”

I held up my hands, confused by the intensity of her reaction. “Hey, it’s okay. I just meant?—”

“You don’t understand.” She cut me off, her breathing shallow and rapid. “I can’t

leave him. Not even for a few hours. Something could happen, someone could?—”

“Hey.” I moved toward her slowly, noting how she tracked my every movement like she was ready to flee. “It’s okay. We don’t have to talk about work.”

“I just can’t.” Tears were starting to gather in her eyes now. “He’s so little, and I don’t know anyone here, and what if something happened while I was gone?”

The explanation sounded reasonable enough—new-mother anxiety was a real thing. But something about the depth of her panic felt like more than normal worry.

“Piper, breathe.” I kept my voice calm, nonthreatening. “Nobody’s going to make you leave Caleb before you’re ready.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, that defensive gesture that was becoming familiar. “I’m sorry. I know I’m being ridiculous. It’s just...”

“It’s not ridiculous. He’s your baby. Of course you don’t want to leave him. You’re a good mom. You would never leave him.”

Instead of calming her down, the words seemed to break something open inside her. Her face crumpled, and she burst into tears—not the quiet tears from before, but gut-wrenching sobs that shook her whole body.

I couldn’t stop myself. I pulled her into my arms, and she didn’t resist this time, collapsing against my chest like she’d been holding herself together through sheer force of will.

“Hey. It’s okay.” I held her as she cried, one hand rubbing gentle circles on her back. Whatever this was—postpartum depression, exhaustion, trauma from whatever she’d been through—she needed to let it out.

She fisted her hands in my shirt as she sobbed against my chest, and I could feel how thin she'd gotten, how fragile she felt in my arms. How long had she been carrying all this alone?

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“I’m sorry,” she finally whispered, pulling back just enough to look up at me with red-rimmed eyes. “You must think I’m losing my mind.”

I reached up to brush the tears from her cheeks, noting how she leaned into the touch despite herself. “I think you’re exhausted and overwhelmed and dealing with more than anyone should have to handle alone.”

Before I could say more, Caleb started fussing from the couch, and her attention instantly shifted.

“I need to get him.” She moved past me quickly, her focus entirely on our son.

She lifted Caleb from his carrier with practiced ease. The transformation was immediate—so much of her tension melted away as soon as she had him in her arms.

“Hey, baby boy,” she murmured, swaying slightly to soothe him. “Mommy’s here.”

I stood there watching them, trying to piece together what I was seeing. The old injuries Faith had found. Piper’s obvious exhaustion and malnourishment. The way she’d stolen formula rather than ask for help. Her terror at the thought of leaving Caleb with anyone.

It painted a picture of someone who’d been hurt, badly and repeatedly. Someone who’d learned not to trust, not to depend on others. But beyond that, I was just guessing.

“We’re not going to worry about jobs right now,” I said finally. “Your only

responsibility is to take care of yourself and Caleb.”

She looked up at me, still cradling our son against her chest. “And you’re okay with that? With us just...staying here?”

“I’m okay with it.” What I wasn’t okay with was not knowing what had happened to her, what she was afraid of, why she looked at me sometimes like she expected me to hurt her. But pushing for answers wasn’t going to help either of us.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I know this isn’t what you expected.”

“No,” I agreed. “It’s not. But that doesn’t mean it’s bad. We’ll figure it out as we go.”

It was the only choice we had.

## Chapter 10

### Lachlan

The familiar warmth of Draper’s Tavern wrapped around me as I pushed through the heavy wooden door. Pool balls cracked against each other from the back corner, and someone’s laugh—too loud, probably three beers in—cut through the general din of conversation. The wooden floor stuck slightly under my boots where someone had spilled something sweet.

I had a son.

The thought slammed into me again, making my chest tight. My hands actually trembled as I shoved them deep into my pockets. Three days. Three days of staring at Caleb’s face and seeing my own eyes looking back. Three days of watching Piper move through my house like a ghost, clutching our child like someone might snatch

him away.

Ourchild. Jesus.

Behind the bar, Marcus caught my eye and raised an eyebrow in question. I nodded, and he started pulling a pint without a word. The glass was cold against my palm when he slid it across, condensation already beading on the surface.

“Lach! There you are!”

Beckett’s voice carried across the tavern. I turned to see him at a corner table with Lucas and Hunter. My shoulders tensed. Part of me wanted to take my beer and disappear, find some dark corner to sort through the mess in my head. The anger that kept bubbling up at odd moments—while brushing my teeth, making coffee, watching Piper feed Caleb. Fury at her for running, for stealing, for keeping my son from me.

But these men were brothers in every way that mattered. I forced my feet to move.

“Look who finally emerges from hibernation.” Hunter’s sharp gaze tracked over me, cataloging everything. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks. Really needed to hear that.” I dropped into the empty chair hard enough to make it creak.

“Seriously, though, where’ve you been?” Beckett leaned back, studying me. “Jenny said you took personal time a couple days ago. Thought she was going to fall over from shock.”

“Something came up.”

Lucas set down his paperwork. “The kind of something that has you white-knuckling that glass?”

I looked down. My knuckles were indeed white around the pint glass. I forced my grip to loosen, took a long pull of beer that tasted like sawdust in my mouth.

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“Lach?” Beckett’s voice had lost its teasing edge. “What’s going on?”

My phone felt like a lead weight as I pulled it out. My thumb hovered over the photo for a heartbeat—Caleb smiling, one tiny fist curled against his cheek. I set the phone on the scarred wooden table and slid it toward them.

“I have a son.”

The silence stretched like a held breath. Hunter reached for the phone first, his expression shifting from surprise to something harder.

“When did this happen?” Lucas asked.

“He’s almost five months old.”

“Five months?” Beckett’s head snapped up, his mental math quick. “That would mean?—”

“About a year ago, yeah.” The beer turned bitter on my tongue. “Remember when I told you about Piper Matthews?”

Hunter’s eyes narrowed. “Who’s Piper Matthews?”

Beckett laughed. “She’s the woman studly here had a one-night stand with this time last year. She and her family lived here when she was a kid, before they got run out of town because her father was scamming people.”

I didn't even want to get into that. "She was passing through a year ago, and we hooked up. She took off the next morning without a word."

Beckett was still chuckling. "Come on, now. Don't leave out the best part."

I let out a sigh, glaring at my best friend. "When she left, she helped herself to the cash contents of my wallet and my favorite coat."

Lucas picked up my phone, studying the photo with tactical intensity. "And you're sure the baby is yours? Math isn't quite right."

"Caleb was born early."

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Piper tell you that?"

My jaw clenched, but I pulled up the comparison photos. Baby pictures I'd spent hours staring at last night instead of sleeping. Me, my brother, my sister. The Calloway chin, the dark eyes, even the way his hair stuck up in the same spot mine always had. I showed the images to my friends.

"Jesus." Beckett whistled low. "That's definitely your kid."

"When did you find out?" Lucas asked.

"Three days ago. She showed up at the grocery store trying to steal baby formula."

I told them everything. The words came out choppy, broken. How she'd collapsed in the parking lot. The way she'd sobbed when she finally admitted Caleb was mine. Dr. Rankine's examination, the old injuries that made bile rise in my throat.

"So, she's staying with you now?" Hunter's voice had gone flat. "The woman who

robbed you.”

“She and Caleb, yeah.”

“And you’re just okay with that?” Hunter leaned forward, his scarred hands flat on the table. “She steals from you, disappears for a year, shows up with a baby she claims is yours?—”

“Heismine.” The words came out sharp enough to cut.

“Fine. But what’s her angle? Why now? Why come back here when she could have hit you up for child support through the courts?”

My muscles coiled tight. “She’s not doing well. Exhausted, malnourished?—”

“Convenient.” Hunter’s mouth twisted. “Shows up looking pathetic right when she needs something.”

“You didn’t see her, Hunter. She nearly passed out. She’s been barely eating so she could feed Caleb?—”

“According to her.”

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“According to the doctor who examined her.” My fist hit the table, making our glasses jump. The conversation at the next table stuttered to a stop before resuming. “Jesus, Hunter, she’s got old fractures. Scar tissue from years of abuse.”

“Could be from anything. Bar fights, accidents?—”

“Or from getting the shit beat out of her repeatedly.” Lucas’s quiet voice cut through. “I know what abuse victims look like, Hunter. So do you.”

Hunter sat back, his expression still skeptical. “I’m just saying, the timing is suspicious. She could have reached out months ago. Why wait until she’s desperate?”

“Maybe because she knew I’d react exactly like you are right now?” The words tasted like copper. “Maybe because she was scared?”

“Or maybe because she was with someone else and that didn’t work out, so now she’s coming to you as Plan B.” Hunter’s gaze didn’t waver. “Look, I’m not trying to be an asshole?—”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“—but someone needs to ask the hard questions. You’re letting her live in your house. What if she takes off again? What if she’s playing you?”

My hands clenched and unclenched under the table. Part of me—the part that had woken up to an empty bed and a missing wallet—agreed with every word Hunter was saying. But then I pictured Piper’s face when she held Caleb. The way she’d

positioned herself between him and the door, even while sleeping on my couch.

“If she is, then she is. He’s still my kid.”

“So what do you want to do?” Beckett asked, always the peacemaker.

“I want to be a father to Caleb. That’s not negotiable.” The certainty steadied me.

“But Piper...”

“More complicated?”

“Yeah.” I rolled the glass between my palms, watching the amber liquid swirl. “I can forgive what she did. But something’s off. She cries all the time and seems terrified of everything.”

“Could be a general trauma response,” Lucas offered. “When Evelyn first came to the ranch, she jumped at shadows for months. Of course, ended up she had a psychotic ex who was after her.”

I stared into my glass. If someone came after Piper the way Evelyn’s ex had come after her, I would do everything in my power to protect her, no matter the circumstances.

“She won’t talk about much of anything. I don’t know where she’s been or what’s been happening. She just said she’s been moving around.”

“With a premature baby.” Hunter’s tone made it clear what he thought of that story.

The man was a good friend, former Special Forces when he’d been in the military. He’d seen and done some shit in his life and had paid a high price for it. He didn’t trust easily.

There was nobody I'd rather have at my back during a fight. But he needed to stand down.

"What are you suggesting I do, Hunter? Kick her and my son out? Demand a DNA test?" My voice had gone dangerously quiet.

"I'm suggesting you protect yourself. Get a legal custody agreement. Document everything. Install some security cameras if you haven't already?—"

My face must have given something away because Hunter stopped mid-sentence.

"You already did." A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "Good. Smart."

"I'm not an idiot."

"Never said you were. Just making sure you're thinking with your brain and not—" He gestured vaguely.

"My dick? Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"That's not what he meant," Lucas intervened. "We're worried about you. This is a lot to process."

"You think I don't know that?" The words exploded out of me. "You think I haven't been up every night wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do? How to be a father to a baby I just met? How to help a woman who flinches when I move too fast? Christ, I'm completely out of my depth here."

The admission hung in the air. My chest heaved like I'd been running. At the next table, someone dropped quarters into the jukebox, and Johnny Cash's voice filled the sudden silence.

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“You’re doing fine,” Beckett said quietly. “Better than fine. You’re stepping up.”

“Hunter’s not wrong, though.” I forced the words out. “I don’t trust her. Not completely. I want to trust her, but...”

“But she’s already betrayed that trust once.” Hunter’s voice had gentled. “Look, I get it. And you helped me with Jada last year, put everything on the line, no questions asked. So what I’m saying is not just me being an asshole. It’s me trying to look out for you.”

“What would you do?” I asked him directly. “If it was your kid?”

Hunter was quiet for a long moment. “Same thing you’re doing, probably. Try to protect the kid while keeping one eye on the mother. It’s a shit situation.”

“Yeah. It is.”

We drank in silence, the weight of it all pressing down. I scrubbed a hand over my face. I didn’t want to talk about the Piper situation anymore. Not until I got it more figured out in my head.

“Speaking of shit situations.” I pulled my phone back from the middle of the table. “We had another overdose this morning.”

Three heads snapped up.

“Another one?” Lucas’s voice was grim. “That’s two this week.”

“College kid from Billings, visiting friends at Montana Tech.” My jaw tightened. “Fentanyl-laced pills. They couldn’t revive him.”

“Fuck.” Beckett ran a hand through his hair. “How old?”

“Nineteen.” The number sat heavy in my gut. “Kid had his whole life ahead of him. Now, his parents are driving down from Great Falls to identify the body.”

“Same source as the last one?” Hunter had shifted into tactical mode.

“Similar pills, same blue marking. The state lab is running tests, but I’d bet money it’s the same batch.” I took another pull of beer, trying to wash away the image of that kid’s face. “The high school’s implementing emergency protocols. Training staff on naloxone administration, keeping doses in the nurse’s office.”

“It’s spreading fast,” Lucas observed. “Two deaths in a week means there’re probably dozens more using who haven’t overdosed yet.”

“That’s what keeps me up at night.” Well, that and everything else. “We need to find the source before more kids die.”

“Could be connected to the weapons trafficking we’ve been tracking,” Hunter said. “Same networks often run multiple products. Use the same distribution channels, same storage facilities.”

“Any new intel on that?”

“Actually, yeah.” Hunter pulled out his phone, showing me a map with several locations marked. “Increased activity around these abandoned properties north of town. Vehicles coming and going at odd hours, lights when buildings should be empty.”

I memorized the locations. “I’ll get extra patrols up there. Quiet surveillance for now—we don’t want to spook them before we know what we’re dealing with.”

“Warrior Security team can help with that,” Hunter offered. “We’ve got some new surveillance equipment that might be useful. Thermal imaging, long-range cameras.”

“I’ll take whatever help you can give.” Pride had no place when kids were dying. “This is bigger than what my department can handle alone.”

“What about bringing in the DEA?” Beckett asked.

“Already made the call. They’re stretched thin, said it could be weeks before they can send anyone.” My frustration bled through. Small towns weren’t always the DEA’s priority. “By then, how many more kids will be dead?”

“So, we handle it ourselves,” Lucas said simply. “Between your department and Warrior Security, we’ve got the resources.”

“Carefully,” I emphasized. “By the book. I want arrests that stick, not cowboys playing hero.”

Hunter’s smile was sharp. “When have we ever played cowboy?”

“Jada’s kidnapping ring any bells?”

“That was different. That was personal.”

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“This is personal too.” The words came out harder than I intended. “Every dead kid is personal when it’s your town.”

We sat with that for a moment. Outside, the October wind rattled the tavern’s windows, reminding us that winter was coming. More darkness, more cold. More places for dealers to hide.

“We’ll coordinate tomorrow,” Hunter said finally. “Set up a surveillance schedule, pool our intel.”

“Good.” I stood, suddenly exhausted. “I should get home.”

“To your ready-made family.” Beckett’s attempt at lightness fell flat. “Hell of a week for you, Lach.”

“Yeah.” I pulled on my jacket. “Hell of a week.”

The cold air hit me as I stepped outside, sharp and clean after the tavern’s warmth. Somewhere in this town, dealers were peddling death to kids. Somewhere else, weapons were being stockpiled for God knew what purpose.

And in my house, a woman and child waited. One I didn’t trust; one I’d die to protect.

Hunter was right. It was a shit situation.

But it was mine to handle.

## Chapter 11

Piper

Over the next week, my life became a routine, even as it felt like living on borrowed time.

I couldn't let Lachlan know what was really going on.

I tried to act as normal as possible, plus make myself as useful as I could so that Lachlan wouldn't have reason to get rid of us. Not that he was going to put his son or the mother of his child out on the street. He was too honorable for anything like that. But I needed to be here, in this house, for as long as I possibly could.

For long enough to find my way out of an impossible situation.

I should've been thrilled with a week of blessed normalcy. Plenty of food and a roof over my head and someone to help with Caleb when I need a break... And I was thankful for those things. Thankful that Lachlan had insisted I take Caleb in for a well-baby doctor visit and get him caught up on his immunizations. Provide reassurance that Caleb was thriving and healthy and had everything he needed.

Then pretend like that knowledge didn't make me want to sob and rage against the world. Because that wouldn't make any sense at all. So I'd pasted a smile on my face and told Lachlan I was thrilled.

I'd been trying for days to find a way to ask Lachlan about his work without seeming suspicious. Casual questions that died on my lips because they sounded forced even to me. How could I explain my sudden interest in law enforcement?

But I needed information. And I needed it as fast as possible.

The weight of what I had to do pressed down on me constantly. Every time Lachlan smiled at Caleb, every time he touched my shoulder in passing, every time he looked at me like I might actually be worth saving—it felt like another layer of guilt settling over my shoulders. He was being so kind, so patient, so generous with his home and his heart. And I was going to repay that kindness by betraying him.

But I didn't have a choice. I'd learned long ago that choice was a luxury people like me couldn't afford. And that was doubly true now.

So, I'd done what I could. I'd learned Lachlan's schedule by heart. Which coffee mug he preferred—the blue one with the chip on the handle that he'd gotten from some police conference years ago. How he liked his eggs scrambled loose, not firm, with just a pinch of salt. The way he always checked the locks twice before bed, a habit that spoke of someone who took protecting what mattered to him seriously. The way he paused outside Caleb's makeshift nursery every night, just listening to our son breathe.

I'd made Lachlan dinner each night and kept the house tidy—neither things I minded doing, but hated that I was doing them to try to get him more comfortable with me.

So I could betray him.

I placed the heel of my hand against my chest, trying to ease the ache there. Trying to stop my heart from continuing to shatter. It didn't help.

The burner phone buzzed against my hip as I finished folding laundry, and my blood turned to ice. I'd been dreading this moment all week, knowing it was coming and there was nothing I could do about it. Even more, that it would just get worse from this moment on.

I'd dreaded it but also longed for it all week, knowing it was my only chance. My

onlychoice.

I glanced around Lachlan's living room, turning so my back was to the small camera tucked behind the plant on the bookshelf. He thought I hadn't noticed the cameras, but I'd spotted all three the second day I was here. The one in the kitchen between the cookbooks, nestled so carefully it looked like part of the decor. The one in the hallway near the stairs, angled to catch anyone coming or going. I understood why he'd installed them—he didn't trust me not to run again, and after what I'd done to him before, I couldn't blame him.

I looked at the phone. A message from Ray, my father. Not that it would be anyone else. He was the only one with this number.

Time for an update. Call me.

Caleb was napping in his carrier, his little face peaceful in sleep. My heart clenched as I looked at him—so perfect, so innocent, so blissfully unaware of the forces that threatened to tear his small world apart. He looked so much like Lachlan when he slept, the same long eyelashes that would probably make women jealous when he got older.

I could wake him, put him in the stroller, take him for a walk around the neighborhood. Lachlan wouldn't question it—I'd been taking Caleb out every day that the weather was nice, establishing a pattern of normal new-mother behavior. What Lachlan didn't know was that each walk had also been practice for this moment, rehearsal for when I'd need to step outside his protection to face the nightmare that still controlled my life.

"Come on, baby boy," I whispered as I gently transferred Caleb to his stroller. He stirred but didn't wake, his tiny fist curling against his cheek in a gesture that made my heart ache with love and longing. At least he was safe. At least I could keep him close, could protect him from Ray. It wasn't enough, but it was something.

The October air was crisp with the promise of winter, and I pulled Lachlan's jacket tighter around myself as I pushed the stroller down his quiet street. The coat still smelled like him—pine and soap and something indefinably masculine that made me feel safer just wearing it. But the safety was an illusion, a comfort I couldn't afford to believe in.

I walked three blocks before stopping at a small park with empty playground

equipment and bare trees stripped of their leaves. Far enough that if someone told Lachlan they saw us, it would make sense—a new mother taking her baby for some fresh air, nothing more sinister than that.

My hands were steady as I dialed the number I'd memorized years ago. The phone rang twice before Ray's gravelly voice filled my ear, and I was transported back to childhood, to all the times I'd heard that voice through thin walls, promising violence to anyone who crossed him.

"Piper."

"I got your message."

"About fucking time. You've been radio silent for a week."

I closed my eyes, steeling myself for what was coming. The familiar dance of submission and survival I'd learned at his knee, perfected through years of fear and desperation. "I told you I needed time to establish myself here. To gain Lachlan's trust."

"Trust." Ray's laugh was harsh, bitter, devoid of any warmth or humor. "You always were naive, sweetheart. Men like Calloway don't trust women like you. He'll use you, and when he's done, he'll throw you away like garbage."

Given the circumstances, I wouldn't be able to blame Lachlan if he did toss me out like trash. I was fooling myself if I thought someone like him could ever really care about someone like me.

"What do you want to know, Ray? I don't have a lot of time."

"Everything. What's he working on? Is he onto me at all? Gotten word about the guns

or drugs I'm moving through the area? I need details. Real information. That was our deal."

I pushed the stroller gently back and forth, the motion automatic, soothing. Caleb made a soft sound in his sleep, and I reached down to adjust his blanket, buying myself a few seconds to think. "I don't know what's going on. We don't talk about his work."

"Then start talking about it."

"I can't just?—"

"You can and you will." Ray's voice dropped to the dangerous quiet that had terrified me as a child, the tone that meant someone was about to get hurt and it was probably going to be me. "You're living in his house, sleeping under his roof, playing happy family with his kid. Find a way to get the information I need."

"I haven't been able to learn anything useful. Lachlan keeps his work at work."

"Then get closer. Make him trust you. Make him want to share. You managed to seduce him once—do it again."

The casual cruelty in his voice made me want to vomit. The night with Lachlan had been the most beautiful experience of my life, a moment of genuine connection and tenderness in a world that had shown me precious little of either. And Ray wanted to turn it into just another con, another manipulation in his endless arsenal of weapons.

"I'm trying, but?—"

"Try harder. You know what will happen if you don't give me what I need. Don't put me in that position, Piper."

My free hand moved instinctively to my chest, to the place where my heart was breaking into smaller and smaller pieces. Yes, I knew what would happen. And no matter what, I couldn't allow it.

“Please.” The word came out as a whisper, broken and desperate. “Let me see her. I need to know she's okay.”

“She's fine. Your mother?—”

“I need proof,” I cut him off, hating how small my voice sounded, how broken. “I need to know you're not lying.”

“You'll get proof when you give me what I want. Until then, you follow orders and keep your mouth shut. She's comfortable, she's fed, she's safe. It will stay that way as long as you do what you're told.”

The words were meant to be reassuring, but they felt like knives sliding between my ribs. Comfortable wasn't the same as happy. Fed wasn't the same as loved. Safe wasn't the same as free. And all of it depended on my continued compliance, my willingness to betray the man who'd shown me more kindness in a week than I'd received in years.

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“Ray—”

“I’m not negotiating with you, Piper. You know the rules. You’ve always known the rules. Do what you’re told, and everyone stays safe. Disappoint me, and there will be consequences. Real ones. Get back to me with info. Soon.”

The line went dead, leaving me staring at the phone with tears burning my eyes.

I sat on a park bench and let myself cry for exactly three minutes—long enough to release some of the pressure building in my chest, not long enough to risk someone noticing and asking questions I couldn’t answer. Then I wiped my face clean and walked back to Lachlan’s house, pushing the stroller and humming softly to Caleb like I was just another normal mother enjoying a beautiful fall day with her child.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I fed Caleb when he woke, changed his diaper, started dinner like the perfect houseguest I was pretending to be. Chicken and rice with vegetables—simple, nutritious, the kind of meal a grateful woman would prepare for the man generous enough to shelter her and her child. The familiar motions gave me something to focus on besides the sick feeling in my stomach, the knowledge of what I was going to have to do.

I was seasoning the chicken when Lachlan came home, his key turning in the lock just before six p.m. He came home at the same time every day, unless he texted me on the phone he’d given me to say he’d be late. The reliability of it should have been comforting, but instead, it made the guilt worse. He was so consistent, so dependable,

so fundamentally decent. And I was about to repay that decency by stabbing him in the back.

“Something smells incredible,” he called from the entryway, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Just chicken.” I kept my voice light as he appeared in the kitchen doorway, tall and solid and radiating the kind of quiet competence that made me feel safe despite everything. “How was your day?”

“Long. Productive.” He moved to the sink to wash his hands, rolling up his sleeves in a gesture that shouldn’t have been attractive but somehow was. Everything about him was attractive—the way he moved with unconscious confidence, the way his eyes lit up when he looked at Caleb, the way he treated me like I was someone worth protecting instead of someone to be used.

“How’s my boy?”

“Good. He had a longer morning nap after our walk, which meant a fussier afternoon, but he’s settled now.” The lie came easier than it should have, practiced and smooth. I’d gotten too good at lying, at pretending to be something I wasn’t.

“Walk?”

“Just around the neighborhood, down to the park. He likes the fresh air, so I might try to do it more. Just bundle him up. Dr. Rankine says sunshine is good for us. Vitamin D.” Another lie, stacked on top of the first one like building blocks in a tower that would eventually collapse and crush everything underneath it.

Lachlan nodded, drying his hands on the kitchen towel. “Good. The exercise is probably helping you too.”

Was it my imagination, or did he study my face a little too carefully when he said it? Did he suspect something, or was I just paranoid? It was impossible to tell, and that uncertainty made everything worse.

“Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes,” I said, turning back to the stove to avoid his gaze.

“Perfect. I’ll go change.”

We ate together at his kitchen table, making small talk about Caleb’s sleep schedule and the weather. I tried to steer the conversation toward his work, but every attempt felt forced and obvious. He was careful about what he shared, professional even in his own home. Smart. Too smart for someone like me to manipulate.

After dinner, he helped me clean up before disappearing into his office to catch up on paperwork. I put Caleb down for the night, settling him into the portable crib. I paced back and forth, no closer to figuring out how to get info for Ray than I was when I got off the phone with him.

Maybe barging into Lachlan’s home office was the solution. Just start asking questions like I maybe wanted to get a job in law enforcement or just even at the station. I had to do something.

I was reaching for his office door’s handle when I heard his voice on the other side, low and professional. I stopped.

“—your intel about this drug smuggler feels solid.” I pressed myself against the wall, straining to hear every word. “We should have the checkpoint in place on Highway 37 by seven a.m., just like we discussed. We’ll be stopping every car.”

I closed my eyes, memorizing every detail even as my heart broke a little more. That

was near where Ray was operating. If Ray or any of his crew were on that small state highway tomorrow, they would get caught. I couldn't let that happen.

“Yeah, Beckett, I know it's a long shot. But if there really are traffickers moving through that area, it's the most logical route. Remote enough to avoid attention, but still accessible to major transport corridors.”

Beckett. That had to be Beckett Sinclair from Warrior Security, the man Lachlan had mentioned as one of his closest friends. Another detail for Ray, another piece of the puzzle he was building.

“We'll have three units stationed there, plus backup if needed. The checkpoint will run from seven a.m. to seven p.m. tomorrow. Full twelve hours. If anyone's moving anything illegal through that stretch, we'll catch them.”

Twelve hours. Seven a.m. to seven p.m. Three units plus backup. A full day of law enforcement presence exactly where Ray needed to avoid it. The information was perfect, complete, everything he could have asked for and more.

I heard Lachlan finish his call, so I rushed back to the living room before he could emerge from his office, settling onto the couch with a magazine like I'd been there the whole time. He said goodnight without suspicion, headed upstairs to bed like this was just another ordinary evening in our ordinary life.

But there was nothing ordinary about any of this. There was nothing ordinary about the choice I was about to make, the betrayal I was about to commit. I was going to destroy the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I was going to do it willingly, because the alternative was unthinkable.

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I waited until I heard his shower running before pulling out the burner phone. My hands shook as I typed the message, each letter feeling like a small death.

Highway 37 checkpoint tomorrow 7am-7pm. Three units plus backup.

I stared at the words for a long moment before hitting send, watching them disappear into the digital ether where they would find their way to Ray and set in motion whatever plan he was working on. The response came faster than I'd expected, as if he'd been waiting by his phone.

Maybe this intel will earn you something special.

I stared at the message, hope and fear warring in my chest. Something special. Did he mean what I thought he meant? After weeks of begging, weeks of desperate requests that had been met with silence or vague reassurances, was he finally going to give me what I needed most?

The phone buzzed again, and this time, it wasn't a text. It was a photo.

The image loaded slowly on this crap burner phone in an app Ray had installed, and when it finally appeared on my screen, my heart flipped upside down. My breath caught in my throat, and I pressed my hand to my mouth to muffle the sob that wanted to escape.

I stared at the image, trying to memorize every single detail before the photo faded to nothing after thirty seconds, programmed to delete itself and leave no trace.

The phone slipped from my trembling fingers as I collapsed onto Lachlan's couch, crying silently into a throw pillow.

But that image had been proof that my cooperation was buying what I needed most. Proof that the sacrifices I was making, the lies I was telling, the trust I was destroying—all of it had a purpose.

I had to believe that was enough.

## Chapter 12

Lachlan

I shifted in the driver's seat of my cruiser, eyes fixed on the checkpoint my deputies had set up on Highway 37. The late-morning sun cast sharp shadows across the asphalt, and I'd been sitting here for three hours watching absolutely nothing happen.

Deputy Martinez waved through another minivan filled with what looked like a family heading out for a weekend trip. That made thirty-seven vehicles so far, and not a single one had triggered any red flags. No nervous drivers, no suspicious cargo, no attempts to turn around when they spotted the checkpoint.

The intel had seemed solid. Warrior Security's contact had been certain that drug smugglers were planning to use this route today, sometime between seven and noon. But noon was twenty minutes away, and we had nothing to show for it except frustrated deputies and annoyed civilians.

My radio crackled. "Unit Three to Sheriff. Another clean vehicle. Honda Accord, elderly couple heading to Billings for a doctor's appointment."

"Copy that." We were all frustrated. Nobody needed to say it out loud.

A knock on my passenger window made me look up. Beckett stood outside, hands shoved in the pockets of his tactical jacket. I knew he'd be showing up sooner or later. I unlocked the door and he slid in, bringing the scent of coffee and gun oil with him.

"Figured you could use some company," he said, handing me a to-go cup from Deja Brew. "Black, no sugar, just how you hate it but drink it anyway to prove you're tough."

"Thanks." I took a sip of the bitter brew, grateful for the caffeine hit.

Beckett's sharp gaze swept over the scene ahead of us. "Any luck?"

"Not a fucking thing."

Beckett muttered a curse. "Our intel wasn't solid. Shit. I thought for sure it would be."

I scrubbed a hand over my face. "It seemed solid to me too. But...nothing."

Somebody trafficking weapons and drugs through my own backyard didn't sit well with me. We were starting to hear more chatter about it.

"Yeah. I'm honestly more concerned about the fentanyl than I am the weapons. Had a teen nearly die a few days ago."

"Shit." Beckett's jaw tightened. "That's new for us."

"Yeah. We've been lucky so far—Garnet Bend's been mostly untouched by that garbage. But if someone's trying to establish a pipeline through here..." I didn't need to finish. We both knew what fentanyl had done to communities across Montana.

“Don’t worry. Between Warrior Security and the department, we’ll catch these assholes. If not today, then soon.”

I sure as hell hoped so.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, watching Martinez check the back of a pickup truck before waving it through. The driver looked more confused than nervous, probably wondering why there was a random checkpoint on a Tuesday morning.

“How are things at home?” Beckett asked, his tone casual but his eyes knowing. We hadn’t talked about my home situation again since I’d mentioned it to him, Lucas, and Hunter at the tavern a week and a half ago.

“Fine.” The word came out more defensive than I’d intended.

“Lach.”

I sighed. “They’re... It’s good having them there. The house feels less empty. Piper cooks these amazing dinners, keeps everything clean without me even asking. She’s trying so hard to contribute, to not be a burden.”

“But?”

“But she’s sad all the time. She tries to hide it, puts on this smile whenever I’m around, but I can see it in her eyes.”

“Like postpartum depression stuff?”

“It has to be more than that. Last night...” I paused, remembering the sound that had pulled me from sleep around two in the morning. “I heard her crying. Not just a few

tears, but full-on sobbing like her heart was breaking.”

Beckett was quiet for a moment. “Did you go to her?”

“I stood outside her door for ten minutes trying to decide. In the end, I figured she needed privacy more than comfort from someone she barely trusts.”

“You sure about that?”

I wasn’t sure about anything when it came to Piper. Every instinct I had was twisted up where she was concerned. Part of me wanted to protect her from whatever was causing her so much pain. Another part reminded me that she’d stolen from me once and could do it again. Or worse even, disappear with my son.

And then there was the part that just wanted to hold her, to recreate that one perfect night we’d shared a year ago.

“She needs something,” I admitted. “Dr. Rankine says the fatigue and mood swings could be postpartum depression, but I think it’s more than that. But I have no idea what.”

“You know, Lark’s been looking for help at Pawsitive Connections,” Beckett said, his tone carefully neutral. “Nothing too strenuous, just feeding animals, cleaning stalls, maybe helping with the therapy sessions. The kind of work that keeps your hands busy and gives your mind a break.”

I glanced at him. “You think that would help Piper?”

“I think sitting in that house all day with nothing to do but think about whatever’s eating at her isn’t helping. And Lark’s good with people who are struggling. Patient. Understanding. Plus...” He shrugged. “She wouldn’t mind if Piper brought the baby.

Actually told me once she thinks having babies around is therapeutic for some of the animals.”

The idea had merit. Piper needed purpose, needed to feel useful beyond cooking and cleaning. And maybe being around Lark and the animals would help her open up, start healing from whatever trauma she was carrying.

“I’ll talk to her about it,” I said.

“Good.” Beckett checked his watch. “Want me to stick around until you call off the checkpoint?”

“Nah, no point in both of us wasting our whole day. Thanks for the coffee and the conversation.”

“Anytime, brother.” He climbed out of the cruiser, then paused with the door open. “Lach? Whatever’s going on with Piper, she’s lucky to have you looking out for her. Even if she doesn’t realize it yet.”

That didn’t feel true, but I didn’t argue the point.

After he left, I waited another few hours, just in case, before finally calling it. “All units, stand down. Pack up the checkpoint and head back to regular patrol.”

The relief in Martinez’s voice was obvious. “Copy that, Sheriff. Hopefully we’ll have better luck next time.”

Next time. At this rate, every criminal in the state would know we couldn’t execute a successful operation if our lives depended on it, even when we had what felt like solid intel. The drive home felt longer than usual, my mind churning over the failed checkpoint and what it might mean.

I pulled into my driveway to find Piper's beat-up Honda in its usual spot. Through the front window, I could see her in the kitchen, Caleb in his bouncer on the counter while she cooked. The domestic scene made something loosen in my chest, even as I wondered how long it would last.

"Hey," I called out as I walked in, hanging my duty belt by the door.

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Piper turned from the stove, and I caught a flash of genuine concern in her eyes before she carefully schooled her expression. “You’re home early. How did everything go today?”

“Frustrating.” I moved to the sink to wash my hands, needing a moment to let go of the job before fully entering this space. “We had a lead that didn’t pan out. Spent all morning running a checkpoint that yielded absolutely nothing.”

“I’m sorry.” She bit her lower lip, a gesture I’d noticed she did when she was thinking hard about something. “That must be really disappointing.”

The depth of understanding in her voice surprised me. Most people would offer empty platitudes or change the subject, but Piper seemed to genuinely grasp how much these failures weighed on me.

“It’s part of the job,” I said, drying my hands. “Some days you win, some days you waste everyone’s time. But yeah, it’s frustrating.”

“Still.” She turned back to the stove, stirring something that smelled like heaven. “I was thinking... Would it be okay if I made you something special for dinner? There’s this recipe I’ve always loved. I started it but then couldn’t remember everything. I’d need to look it up online to remember all the ingredients.”

She said it so carefully, like she was asking for something unreasonable instead of simple internet access. That’s when it hit me—she didn’t have a smartphone, didn’t have a laptop, had no way to connect to the outside world except through the basic phone I’d given her for emergencies.

“Of course,” I said, guilt twisting in my gut. “You can use my computer anytime. I should have offered before now.”

“I didn’t want to assume...”

I moved to Caleb’s bouncer, lifting my son into my arms. He gurgled happily, reaching for my face with tiny hands. “Hey there, little man. You being good for your mama?”

“He’s been perfect,” Piper said softly. “He had a long nap this morning, which helped me get some cleaning done.”

“You don’t have to clean constantly, you know. The house won’t fall apart if you take a day off.”

She made a noncommittal sound, and I knew she’d keep cleaning anyway. It was her way of contributing, of earning her place here. No amount of reassurance from me seemed to shake her belief that she had to constantly prove her worth.

“Would you mind logging on to your computer now to look up the recipe?”

“Why don’t you just go ahead and look it up?” I shifted Caleb to one arm and rattled off the password, watching her memorize it with intense focus. Such a simple thing, access to information most people took for granted, but she treated it like I’d handed her something precious.

Like she was surprised I’d give her access to the outside world.

Fuck, was that how she felt? Was that why she was crying last night and felt sad all the time? Did she feel like she didn’t have any options? Like she was trapped here in some sort of gilded cage?

I'd never meant to make her feel that way, but that didn't mean I hadn't.

"Actually," I said, remembering Beckett's suggestion, "there's something else I wanted to talk to you about. A friend mentioned that Pawsitive Connections is looking for help. It's the therapy animal program out near Resting Warrior Ranch."

Piper's hands stilled on the spoon she was holding. "A job?"

"Don't worry, you could bring Caleb. You wouldn't have to leave him with a babysitter." I didn't want her to have a total breakdown like she had last week when I'd mentioned a job. She wasn't ready to leave him, and that was fine.

I probably should've confirmed with Lark this was true before making the offering, but I knew the woman pretty well. I'd call in a favor if I had to.

"Just part time, nothing too demanding," I continued. "Feeding animals, cleaning stalls, maybe helping prep for some of the therapy sessions. The woman who runs it, Lark Monroe, is really understanding about people needing flexibility. Plus, you'd be able to be outside some. Out of this house."

"I don't know..." The hesitation in her voice was clear.

"You don't have to decide right now. I'd just like for you to try it for a couple days, see if it's a good fit. If not, then we'll figure something else out. But I think it would be good for you to get out a little more. So you're not alone with this little man all the time."

She nodded slowly. "What about me working at the sheriff's office part time?"

"With me?"

She nodded.

The fact that she wanted to work with me eased a tightness in my chest I hadn't even realized had been there. I wasn't the problem. I wasn't the reason she was crying at night when she thought no one could hear. If she would entertain the thought of working down at the station, then it wasn't me she was trying to stay away from.

But, unfortunately, her working there wouldn't pan out. "I don't think that's what you want. You couldn't bring Caleb to the station. We can't have a baby there. He'd have to stay with a sitter or day care."

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She paled at the statement. “Oh.”

I shifted Caleb to my other arm and reached out and cupped her shoulder gently, relieved when she didn’t pull away. “Let’s try Pawsitive for a few days and see how you like it. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll see what else I can find.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

She leaned into my hand—just for a second. A quiet, intimate gesture that made us both go still. The air between us shifted, thick with everything unspoken. The pull that hadn’t gone away, despite everything.

Almost without thinking, I traced the curve of her cheek with my thumb. Soft. Warm. I moved closer?—

Then stopped as Caleb let out a gurgle and reached a tiny fist toward his mother’s hair. She and I both laughed as I untangled the strands he’d grabbed and was trying to fit into his mouth.

Once she was loose, she turned back toward the stove. “I’ll finish making dinner.”

“Don’t you need the recipe from the computer?”

She froze. “No, I, uh... I think I remember it now. I don’t need to look it up.”

“Okay, great.”

But whatever had just passed between us was gone. Vanished like it hadn't happened at all.

Her defenses were back in full force—rigid and unyielding, just like her spine as she stirred the sauce with mechanical precision.

Worse, her head was bowed again, that familiar, quiet sadness settling over her like a shadow she couldn't shake.

I'd always prided myself on reading people. On spotting trouble before it boiled over. On knowing what someone needed before they ever had to ask.

But not with Piper. The more time I spent around her, the less certain I was about anything.

And that had to change.

## Chapter 13

### Piper

The morning air at Pawsitive Connections carried the scent of hay and horses, mixed with something earthy and alive that made my chest loosen from all the stress, even if just for a moment. I adjusted Caleb in his sling against my torso, his warm weight a constant reminder of why I was doing all of this, and headed toward the main barn.

“Morning, sunshine!” Lark Monroe called out from where she was filling water buckets, her voice carrying a slight rasp, like she'd spent years shouting commands across fields. Her auburn hair was twisted up in what looked like a pencil—no, was that a hoof pick?—and her movements had an athletic grace that spoke of someone who'd learned to be quick on their feet. “How's our littlest helper today?”

I glanced down at Caleb, who was contentedly sucking on his fist. “He slept almost through the night last night. I think he likes it here.”

The formula had been helping him stay fuller longer. I keep reminding myself that Dr. Rankine had said there was nothing wrong with formula. That it gave a baby all the nutrients he needed.

I had to believe that was true. Given everything, it seemed like such a tiny detail to be concerned about, but still, I was.

“Smart kid. Being around animals is good for the soul.” Lark twisted off the hose with more force than necessary, a brief flicker of something crossing her face before her bright smile returned. “Speaking of which, I want you to meet someone special today.”

Before I could freak out, she led me deeper into the barn, past stalls containing horses of various sizes and colors. Each one turned to watch us pass, their dark eyes curious but calm.

At the very end of the barn, in a larger stall with fresh straw bedding that smelled like summer, stood a bay mare whose sides were swollen with pregnancy.

“This is Duchess,” Lark said softly, her whole demeanor shifting as she approached the horse. Her hand moved along the mare’s neck in practiced strokes, and I noticed a thin white scar running along Lark’s forearm that disappeared under her rolled-up sleeve. “She’s due any day now. First foal for her, so we’re keeping watch round-the-clock.”

Duchess lowered her head toward me, nostrils flaring as she investigated this new person. The mare’s breath puffed warm against my shirt, right where Caleb’s head rested, and my son made a small sound of contentment.

“May I?” I asked, lifting my hand slowly.

“Go ahead. She’s got the best judgment of character on the whole farm.”

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I hoped not, or else she might bite my arm right off.

I stroked Duchess's velvet nose, and she leaned into the touch with a soft whicker, no teeth in sight. The trust in her dark eyes made my throat constrict. Even this innocent creature believed I was worth something. My hand trembled against her coat.

"Well, look at that," Lark murmured, tilting her head as she studied us. "Duchess usually takes weeks to warm up to new people. You must have good energy."

If only she knew the truth. My energy was toxic, spreading to everything I touched.

"I've set up that corner area for little man for when you need your hands free," Lark continued, but she was watching me with those sharp green eyes, cataloging something I couldn't name. She gestured to a small alcove near the tack room. "Portable crib, changing station, and there's a baby monitor so you can hear him from anywhere in the barn. I tested the range myself—works all the way out to the round pen."

The thoughtfulness of it made my throat tight. Especially since I wouldn't be working here long. Ray would never allow it. "You didn't have to go to all that trouble."

"No trouble." Lark's laugh had an edge to it, like humor was armor she wore. "Besides, babies are good for the horses. Helps with desensitization training. Win-win, right?"

She bounced on the balls of her feet as she talked, a restless energy that reminded me of a horse ready to bolt. I wondered what she was running from.

“Come on,” she said, already moving. “Let me show you the feeding routine. Fair warning—I’m particular about it. Borderline obsessive, actually. Each horse has their own specific grain mix, supplements, and feeding schedule. I’ve got it all on laminated cards, color-coded and everything.”

Yesterday, Lark had introduced me to the basics of Pawsitive—the barns, the training rings, the fields. Mostly a chance for the two of us to get to know each other.

But today was more for specifics. The next hour passed in careful instruction. Lark showed me each horse’s feeding card, explaining their dietary needs with an intensity that bordered on fierce. Her hands moved constantly as she talked—adjusting halters, straightening buckets, picking invisible bits of hay from her jeans.

“This is Maverick,” she said at one stall, where a massive black gelding pinned his ears at our approach. “Former police horse, came to us with some trauma. Only gets two pounds of grain, no treats—he’s already too food-aggressive.”

The physical work felt good as I learned the routine. My muscles, soft from months of running and hiding, protested as I hefted hay bales and grain buckets. Sweat gathered between my shoulder blades despite the cool morning air. Caleb dozed through most of it, lulled by my movement and heartbeat.

When he started to fuss, making those small, hungry sounds I knew so well, I glanced at the corner Lark had prepared.

“Go ahead,” she said, somehow reading my hesitation. “I’ll finish up the grain. Take your time.”

I settled Caleb in the portable crib after feeding him what little I could provide, supplementing with formula until his belly was full. The monitor crackled to life as I clipped the receiver to my belt—another kindness that felt like judgment for what I

was about to do.

The repetitive motion of mucking stalls gave my body purpose while my mind churned. The pitchfork was heavier than I'd expected, the wooden handle worn smooth by countless hands before mine. Each forkful of soiled bedding sent up dust that made my nose itch. My shoulders burned after just one stall, reminding me how weak I'd become.

"You're trying too hard," Lark said, appearing at the stall door with two bottles of water. She demonstrated with her own pitchfork, a fluid motion that used her whole body. "Let the tool do the work. It's like dancing—find the rhythm."

Dancing. I almost laughed at the comparison. When was the last time I'd danced?

Never. I'd never danced. I couldn't even remember twirling around as a kid.

I accepted the water gratefully, the cold bottle shocking against my overheated palm. "Hard work doesn't bother me."

"I can see that." She took a long drink from her own bottle, then surprised me by plopping down right there in the barn aisle, legs stretched out in front of her. After a moment's hesitation, I joined her. "You know what I love about horses? They don't lie. Ever. They can't. Everything they feel is right there on the surface."

She picked at the label on her water bottle, shredding it into tiny pieces. "Humans, though? We're all liars. Every one of us. The only difference is what we're lying about and who we're protecting with those lies."

My chest tightened. It was as if she could see what was happening in my mind. "That's a cynical view."

“Is it?” She turned those penetrating green eyes on me. “When’s the last time you went a full day without lying about something? Even little stuff—‘I’m fine’ when you’re not, ‘It’s okay’ when it isn’t.”

I couldn’t answer that. Didn’t want to.

“Lachlan’s not a liar,” I said instead.

“No,” she agreed, a soft smile replacing her intensity. “He’s not. Which is probably why he needs people like us around—to balance out all that noble honesty.” She stood in one fluid motion, dusting off her jeans. “I’ll be in the office doing paperwork. First aid kit’s in the tack room if you need it for those blisters forming on your hands.”

I looked down, surprised to see she was right. Red patches had popped up at the base of my fingers where I’d been gripping the pitchfork too tightly.

After she left, I finished mucking three more stalls. My shirt clung to my back with sweat, and those blisters had progressed from threats to promises of pain. But the exhaustion felt clean somehow. Earned.

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I didn't want to leave this place and quit a job that I was already falling in love with. But I didn't have any options.

When I was sure Lark was absorbed in her office work—I could see her through the window, surrounded by stacks of papers and chewing on what looked like a red licorice rope—I pulled out the burner phone.

My hands shook as I dialed, leaving smears of dirt on the keys. The phone felt heavier each time I used it, weighted with accumulated betrayals.

“About time you checked in.” Ray's voice slithered through the speaker like oil.

“I'm at work. I couldn't call sooner.”

“Work.” The word sounded foreign coming from Ray, which wasn't surprising. He'd spent way more effort conning people and cheating the system to make sure he never had to work than he ever would have in a job itself. “At the police station like we talked about?”

“I tried to suggest the sheriff's office, but Lachlan said...there weren't any jobs for me at the moment.” I definitely wasn't going to bring up to Ray my terror about not having Caleb with me twenty-four seven. He'd just use it as ammunition.

“That's very disappointing, Piper.”

My heart threw itself against my chest. That tone, so calm and almost pleasant. But I knew it meant something awful was coming.

“Ray, just give me a chance. I need a little more time. He has me working at some animal place called Pawsitive Connections. I just need a chance to figure out a job at the station. I will, I promise. I?—”

“Pawsitive Connections? That’s an animal shelter place, right? A farm just outside of town?”

“Yeah, they raise and train animals. Emotional support, service, and security animals. Stuff like that.”

“How big is it? What types of animals?”

I had no idea why he wanted this information. “I don’t know. A couple different barns. Multiple horses, dogs, cats, and other animals. A llama.”

Ray was quiet. I could picture him in whatever cheap motel he was holed up in, probably with a cigarette dangling from his lips despite the no-smoking signs. Despite the fact that it might hurt those around him—he didn’t care about that at all, and it made me sick to think about.

The silence stretched until my nerves screamed.

“Actually,” he finally said, calculation dripping from every syllable, “this might work out better than I thought. Rural location, lots of traffic in and out with those therapy sessions. Delivery trucks coming and going for feed and supplies. A perfect front for us to run drugs through.”

Ice flooded my veins, a cold so sharp it made my teeth ache. “Ray, no. These are good people. They help veterans and?—”

“Did I ask for your opinion?” His voice cracked like a whip. “You do what you’re

told, when you're told. That's how this works."

"Please. Not here. Not these people."

"Getting attached already? That's your problem, Piper. You always were too soft. Too much like your mother." He paused, and I could practically see his cruel smile, the one that made him look like a skull. "Speaking of soft, how's the good sheriff? You warming his bed yet?"

Heat flooded my cheeks, shame and anger warring in my chest. "No."

"Why not? You spread your legs for him once before. Should be easy enough to do it again."

The casual cruelty made me want to throw the phone, to scream, to claw at something until this feeling went away. That night with Lachlan had been so special to me. Trust Ray to try to soil it with his poison.

"He's been respectful," I managed through gritted teeth.

"Respectful." Ray's laugh sounded like breaking bones. "Men like him are only respectful until they get what they want. Mark my words, sweetheart. Soon enough, he'll be expecting payment for all this generosity. They always do."

"Lachlan's not like that."

"They're all like that. You're just too naive to see it." His voice dropped lower, the tone that used to send me hiding under my bed as a child. "Now, about that computer access. You get his log-in yet?"

My throat constricted. I still couldn't believe Lachlan had given me his password

without hesitation. Such a simple gesture of trust. The memory of it—him holding Caleb while rattling off the numbers, with no consideration that I might abuse that access—lodged like broken glass in my chest.

“Still working on it,” I lied.

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“Work faster. I need intel on their operations, patrol schedules, anything you can find. The Highway 37 tip was good, but I need more. Much more.”

“I’m trying?—”

“Try harder. Remember what’s at stake here, Piper. Remember what happens if you disappoint me. What I’m capable of.”

The line went dead. I stared at the phone, my whole body trembling with a cocktail of fear and desperation, clawing hopelessness. Two nights ago, Lachlan had stood close enough that I could feel his body heat, his thumb tracing my cheek with such tenderness I’d nearly shattered right there in his kitchen. If Caleb hadn’t grabbed my hair, I would have kissed him.

God, I’d wanted to kiss him. Wanted to pretend, just for a moment, that I could be with Lachlan and that any chance we had with each other hadn’t been ruined from the beginning.

But kissing him would’ve been a mistake. How could I accept his affection when I was actively working to destroy him? How could I let him care about someone who would inevitably betray everything he stood for?

The baby monitor crackled, Caleb’s soft complaints indicating he was waking up. I shoved the phone back into my pocket, wiping my dirty hands on my jeans as I headed for the makeshift nursery.

“Hey, sweet boy,” I murmured, lifting him from the crib. His weight felt more

substantial than it had even a week ago—regular meals and safety working their magic. “Hungry again?”

His response was to root against my chest, little fists batting at my shirt. I settled onto the bench and got him latched, though we both knew he wouldn’t get much. My body, like everything else about me, was failing at the most basic level.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, tears burning tracks through the dust on my cheeks. I knew it wasn’t just him I was talking to, but he was the only one here to hear the words.

There had to be a way out. Some path I wasn’t seeing that would keep everyone safe. But every scenario ended the same—with Lachlan’s trust shattered and Ray winning.

And me? I had no idea what would happen to me.

Duchess whinnied from her stall, the sound urgent enough to pull me from my spiral. I finished feeding Caleb, supplementing with formula until his belly was round and full, then carried him over to the pregnant mare.

She was pacing, her sides heaving with each breath. Sweat darkened her coat despite the cool air.

“Hey, mama,” I said softly, recognizing the signs. “It’s scary, isn’t it? Knowing everything’s about to change.”

I remembered that feeling vividly, but nothing had prepared me for how far off my expectations would be.

Duchess stopped pacing long enough to bump her nose against my shoulder, leaving a smear of moisture on my shirt. Her eyes were wide, showing white at the

edges—fear mixing with instinct.

“You’ll be okay,” I told her, wishing I believed it about my own situation. “You’ll do whatever it takes to protect your baby. Even if it destroys you. That’s what mothers do.”

“Talking to the horses already?” Lark appeared beside me, that piece of licorice now tucked behind her ear like a pencil. “Careful, that’s how it starts. Next thing you know, you’ll be having full conversations and taking their advice on your love life.”

“Does Duchess look okay to you?”

Lark’s demeanor shifted instantly, all business as she entered the stall. Her hands moved over the mare with professional efficiency, checking her temperature, feeling along her sides.

“Could be early labor,” she murmured. “Or could be a false alarm. Mares are drama queens about this stuff.” She glanced at me. “Want to learn how to check?”

Before I could respond, she was showing me what to look for—the subtle signs that separated true labor from practice runs. Her hands guided mine to feel the muscle tension, the slight elevation in temperature.

“If she does go into labor, it’ll probably be at night,” Lark said, stepping back. “They like privacy for the big event. I’ll be sleeping in the office for the next few nights, just in case.”

“By yourself?”

Something flickered across her face—there and gone too fast to read. “I’m used to handling things alone. Safer that way.”

I understood that sentiment too well.

## Chapter 14

Piper

The digital clock on the nightstand glowed 2:47 a.m., casting pale green light across Caleb's sleeping face. I'd been lying awake for the past hour, waiting for the house to settle into that deep quiet that meant Lachlan was truly asleep. My heartbeat thundered in my ears, so loud I was sure it would wake the baby.

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Every nerve in my body screamed against what I was about to do, but I forced myself to move. Survival had always meant doing things that made me sick. This was just one more.

My bare feet found each safe spot on the floor—muscle memory from weeks of midnight feedings. The third stair from the top groaned if you stepped dead center. The hallway runner muffled footsteps but bunched up near the bathroom if you weren't careful. Those details mattered when you were trying to be invisible.

The house smelled different at night. Lachlan's cologne lingered in the air, mixing with the lemon wood polish and something indefinable that was just home. During the day, with sunlight streaming through windows and Caleb's baby sounds filling the spaces, I could almost pretend we belonged here. But now, shadows transformed familiar corners into accusations.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs. The refrigerator hummed its mechanical lullaby. The old radiator ticked like a countdown. Somewhere in the walls, pipes settled with tiny groans. No footsteps. No movement from above.

Lachlan's office door stood partially open, a slice of deeper darkness beyond. I'd studied those cameras until I could draw their coverage maps from memory. The hallway camera watched at chest height—drop below that, and you became invisible. The living room camera's blind spot started eighteen inches from the office door.

I sank to my knees, rug burn threatening through my sleep pants. The crawl to his office made me feel like the criminal I was, skulking through the home of a man who'd offered nothing but protection.

Inside, I pushed the door nearly closed. Just enough gap to hear disaster coming.

The computer power button glowed blue in the darkness, innocent as a land mine. When I pressed it, the start-up chime might as well have been a fire alarm. I froze, counting heartbeats. Five. Ten. Twenty.

Nothing from upstairs.

While the computer wheezed to life, I used the monitor's glow to rifle through physical files. Papers whispered against each other: incident reports, duty rosters, supply requisitions. Small-town sheriff problems that seemed quaint compared to what I knew lurked in the shadows.

My fingers found a folder tucked beneath budget reports like a guilty secret. "Warrior Security – Confidential" marked in Lachlan's neat handwriting.

Inside were preliminary reports about suspected trafficking in the area. Notes from meetings with Beckett and Hunter Everett. A few grainy surveillance photos of trucks at odd hours. One location I recognized—the old Mitchell barn that sat abandoned off Route 89. Ray had mentioned it once in passing.

They were sniffing around the edges, but they didn't have much yet. A dozen pages of suspicions and theories, but no solid connections. No names that mattered. Still, it was more than Ray knew they had.

My hands trembled as I photographed the pages showing the Mitchell barn and notes about increased truck traffic on back roads. Just enough to give Ray a warning without revealing how little Lachlan actually knew.

The computer finally loaded. Lachlan's password flowed from my fingers—his badge number plus Caleb's birthdate. He'd added that part after learning about his son,

updating all his passwords with proud-father enthusiasm that had made me want to weep.

His desktop was exactly what I'd expect—organized folders with clear labels, a photo of the Montana mountains as wallpaper, shortcuts arranged by frequency of use. Order and control in digital form.

Email first. I clicked through threads about overtime disputes and parking complaints until I found one from Beckett. The subject line read: "Follow-up on our discussion."

Lach - Touched base with my contact in Billings. Still hearing chatter about weapons movement, but nothing concrete. Might be worth increasing patrols on the back roads we discussed. Let me know if you want to set up another checkpoint. - B

That was it. They were fishing, throwing out nets and hoping to catch something. But even fishing expeditions could get lucky.

A floorboard creaked overhead.

My entire body locked up, suddenly aware of every sound I was making. The whisper of my breathing. The rustle of papers. The hammering of my heart that surely he could hear through the ceiling.

Another creak. Then footsteps, purposeful and direct.

Panic flooded my system with chemical urgency. I closed the email, cleared the browser history with practiced efficiency, dropped the phone into my pocket, and shoved the folder back under the budget reports. No time to shut down properly—the computer would have to stay on.

By the time his footsteps hit the stairs, I was on my knees beside the desk, running

my hands along the baseboards like a desperate mother searching for her baby's comfort object.

“Piper?”

The hallway light backlit him in the doorway, turning him into something out of a dream. Or a nightmare, depending on which part of me was in charge. Bare chest catching shadows and light, those ridiculous pajama pants riding low on his hips, hair sticking up in ways that should have been comical but just made him more human.

“I’m sorry,” I said, putting frustrated exhaustion into my voice. Years of lying to survive made the performance easy. “I didn’t mean to wake you. Caleb lost his pacifier somewhere, and I thought maybe it rolled under your desk when I was in here earlier.”

He moved into the room, bringing warmth and that scent that made rational thought stutter. This close, I could see the pattern of chest hair, the faint scar near his ribs from some long-ago injury. “You could have turned on the light.”

“I—I didn’t want to disturb you.” I made a show of checking along the wall, hyperaware of how my sleep shirt rode up when I stretched. “I know how early you have to get up.”

“Hey.” His voice dropped to that gentle tone that undid me every time. He crouched beside me, close enough that his body heat soaked through my thin clothes. “It’s okay. Let me help.”

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The space between us hummed with electricity. When he leaned past me to check under the desk, his shoulder brushed mine. Skin contact, brief but scorching.

“I don’t see it under here,” he said, turning to face me.

Inches. We were inches apart. Close enough to see the gold flecks in his brown eyes that appeared in certain light. Close enough to count individual eyelashes. Close enough that his exhale became my inhale, sharing air in the most intimate way possible.

“Piper.” My name on his lips, reverent and hungry. He felt this between us too.

Every smart part of me screamed to run. To make excuses and flee to the safety of my room where I could rebuild walls and remember why this was impossible. Instead, I stayed frozen, moth to his flame, waiting to burn.

His hand rose slowly, telegraphing intent. Time to refuse. Time to be smart. Time to save us both.

I didn’t move.

He slid his fingers into my hair, calluses catching on the strands. My scalp tingled at the contact, nerve endings suddenly alive and singing. He tilted my face up with gentle pressure, studying me in the dim light like I was a puzzle he needed to solve.

“I’ve thought about you,” he admitted, voice rough with confession. “Even when I was angry, even when I tried not to... I couldn’t stop thinking about that night.”

“Lachlan—”

He kissed me, and every carefully constructed defense crumbled.

This wasn't the gentle exploration of a year ago. This was months of suppressed want given form. His mouth moved against mine with desperate certainty, tongue sliding past my lips to taste and claim. I made a sound—needy, embarrassing, but I didn't care—and gripped his shoulders for balance.

Muscle shifted under my palms, solid and real. He was so warm, so hard. My fingers mapped the geography of his shoulders, finding spots that made him growl low in his throat.

He stood suddenly, pulling me with him. The world spun, then I was pressed between his body and the desk edge. Wood bit into my lower back—probably leaving marks I'd see tomorrow—but the discomfort only heightened everything else. Papers crinkled. Something fell to the floor with a soft thud. Evidence of my betrayal scattered beneath our feet, but he didn't notice.

And I couldn't bring myself to stop.

“I've wanted this,” I gasped when his mouth moved to my jaw, finding that spot below my ear that shot sparks down my spine. “God, Lachlan, I've wanted you so much.”

His response was to lift me onto the desk like I weighed nothing. Standing between my spread legs, he looked at me with eyes gone dark as midnight. This position put us at perfect height, my mouth level with his, my legs able to wrap around his waist.

His hands found the hem of my sleep shirt, fingers teasing the skin just above my waistband. “Can I?”

I nodded, beyond words as he peeled the fabric up and over. Cool air kissed my skin, raising goose bumps across my chest and arms. But then his hands were there, warm and slightly rough, tracing patterns that made my back arch.

“Beautiful,” he murmured against my throat. “So damn beautiful.”

His mouth followed his hands, lips and tongue painting heat across my collarbones. When he found the sensitive spot where neck met shoulder, I had to bite my lip hard. His teeth scraped gently, followed by his tongue soothing the sting.

Lower. His mouth moved lower, taking his time, making me squirm with anticipation. When his lips closed around one nipple, I nearly came off the desk. Hot, wet suction that connected directly to the ache between my legs. I tangled my fingers in his hair, holding him there while he lavished attention that bordered on worship.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve dreamed of this,” he said against my skin, switching to the other breast. “I’ve missed it.”

The words cracked something inside me. Because I’d missed him too—missed being touched like I mattered, missed feeling wanted for more than what I could provide. With Lachlan, I felt like a woman instead of some sort of plaything.

He skimmed his hands down my sides, finding every sensitive spot along the way. The dip of my waist. The flare of my hips. The waistband of my sleep pants that suddenly felt like too much fabric between us.

He paused, looking up at me through those impossibly long lashes. “Can I taste you?”

Heat flooded through me at his words, at the raw want in his voice. “Yes. Yes, please.” I slid off the desk and quickly removed my pajama pants, conscious of the phone in my pocket, and left them bunched up on the floor.

He took his time removing my panties, hands reverent like he was unwrapping something precious. He positioned me back on the desk, the cool wood against my bare skin made me shiver, but his hands were there immediately, warming me with long strokes up my thighs.

“Lie back,” he said, voice gone gravel-rough.

I did, feeling exposed and powerful at the same time. Papers crinkled beneath me—reports and files I’d been stealing secrets from minutes ago. The irony should have killed my arousal. Instead, it heightened everything, adding danger to desire.

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He kissed his way down my body, taking his time like we had forever instead of stolen moments in the dark. His tongue dipped into my navel, making me squirm. His teeth nipped at my hip bone, sharp enough to sting once more before his tongue soothed it away.

When his shoulders pushed my thighs wider, I had to slam my hand over my mouth. The first touch of his tongue was electric, making my whole body jolt. He made a pleased sound, vibrations adding another layer of sensation.

He explored slowly, learning what made me gasp behind my palm, what made my hips lift off the desk. His tongue traced patterns that seemed random until I realized he was spelling something. His name. Claiming me with letters and pressure and heat.

When he found the rhythm that made my thighs tremble, he stayed there, consistent and perfect. My free hand gripped the desk edge hard enough to hurt. The familiar tension built low in my belly, coiling tighter with each stroke of his tongue.

Then his fingers joined the dance, two sliding inside while his mouth continued its sweet torture. He curled them just right, finding that spot that made stars explode behind my eyelids. The dual sensation—his tongue on my clit, his fingers stroking inside—was too much and not enough all at once.

“That’s it,” he murmured against me, the words adding vibration that nearly undid me. “Let go for me, beautiful.”

One more curl of his fingers, one more perfect stroke of his tongue, and I shattered. The orgasm rolled through me in waves, each one stronger than the last. My body

clenched around his fingers while he gentled his touch, drawing out every aftershock until I was boneless and gasping.

When I finally opened my eyes, he was standing between my legs again, licking his lips like he'd just finished dessert. His hair was wild from my fingers, his mouth swollen and wet. The evidence of his own arousal strained against his pajama pants, and I wanted nothing more than to return the favor.

"Come here," I said, reaching for him.

But as I sat up, reality crashed back like cold water. The folder beneath the budget reports. The photos on my phone. The man I was actively betraying looking at me like I hung the moon.

"I should—" I scrambled for my clothes, suddenly desperate to be covered, to hide from what I'd done. What I was still doing. "Caleb will be waking soon."

"Piper, wait?—"

"I'm sorry." I pulled my shirt over my head with shaking hands, tasting him on my lips, feeling him everywhere. "I shouldn't have... This was a mistake."

His whole body stiffened at the word "mistake," and I wanted to take it back immediately. But what else could I call it? Making love to him while his computer hummed with evidence I'd stolen? Letting him worship my body while I plotted to destroy his career?

"Talk to me," he said softly, reaching for me again. "Do you not want this? Not want me?"

I shook my head silently.

“Let’s talk it through. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Everything. The word sat on my tongue like ash. Everything was wrong, starting with me and ending with the impossible situation that would destroy us both.

“I just... I can’t do this right now.”

I fled before my resolve crumbled, leaving him standing alone in his office, surrounded by the evidence of exactly how much I didn’t deserve him.

Back in my room, I pressed my back against the door and slid to the floor. My body still hummed with satisfaction, nerve endings sparking with sense memory. I could smell him on my skin, taste myself on my lips from his kiss. Between my thighs, I was swollen and sensitive, physical proof of what we’d just done.

The burner phone dug into my hip, a sharp reminder of who I really was. Tomorrow, I’d have to send those photos to Ray. Tomorrow, I’d have to look Lachlan in the eye over breakfast and pretend I hadn’t just used his trust to gather intelligence that would destroy everything he’d worked for.

But tonight... Tonight, I’d had a glimpse of what we could have been in a different world. One where I wasn’t Ray Matthews’s daughter, where I didn’t have prices on my head that only betrayal could pay.

From down the hall, I heard his footsteps heading toward his room. Slow. Heavy. The quiet click of his bedroom door felt like the ending of something that had never really had a chance to begin.

I stayed on the floor until dawn painted the walls pink and gold, replaying every touch, every kiss, every place where his mouth had marked me. Memorizing it all.

Because I knew, with the kind of certainty that came from a lifetime of losing everything good, that it would never happen again.

## Chapter 15

Lachlan

I stared at the ceiling in the early morning light, my body still thrumming with the memory of Piper beneath my hands and mouth. The taste of her lingered, sweet and intoxicating, making me hard all over again just thinking about how she'd come apart on my desk.

But it was what happened after that kept replaying in my mind. The way she'd scrambled for her clothes like the house was on fire. The panic in her eyes when she'd called what we'd done a mistake.

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I rolled out of bed and headed for the shower, needing the hot water to clear my head, and probably cold water for my dick. Under the spray, I replayed every second, looking for what had gone wrong. But I kept coming back to the same conclusion—it wasn't about what we'd done. It was about something else, something she wasn't telling me.

The guilt in her eyes had been unmistakable. But guilt about what? About wanting me?

Was she about to take off again?

She'd lived here for nearly two weeks, but she kept her suitcase in the corner of her room, still packed. She'd never fully spread out, never claimed space the way people did when they felt at home. She'd wash her single pair of backup jeans every few days rather than accumulate more laundry. Even Caleb's things stayed minimal and portable—one small bag of clothes, a handful of toys that could fit in the diaper bag.

It wasn't just about being ready to run. It was as if she didn't believe she deserved to take up space, to exist fully in any one place.

I dried off and dressed for work, trying to push the worry aside. Whatever Piper was hiding, whatever had her walking on eggshells, I'd figure it out. But pushing too hard would only make her retreat further behind those walls she'd built.

My phone rang as I was pouring coffee, Beckett's name lighting up the screen.

"What happened?" I answered, already knowing from the early hour that this wasn't a

social call.

“We’ve got a problem.” His voice carried that edge that meant Warrior Security had picked up something concerning. “Lark called. Someone was spotted taking photos of Pawsitive Connections yesterday evening. Professional-looking camera, long-range lens.”

My hand tightened on the coffee mug. “Could be nothing. Maybe someone interested in the therapy programs.”

“That’s what I thought, but then Hunter and I started talking about the other stuff going on around town you told us about.”

“The Hendricks feed store break-in?” Nothing had been taken, but someone had been in their delivery logs.

“Yes, then that thing with Dr. Paulson.”

Someone had called asking strange questions about his veterinary supply shipments. The older man hadn’t thought much of it, but he’d mentioned it when I saw him in town a few days ago.

I set my mug down hard enough that coffee sloshed over the rim. “Someone’s scouting.”

“That’s what we think. Looking for regular delivery schedules, figuring out which businesses would make good covers.” Beckett’s voice dropped lower. “Hunter’s contact in Billings confirmed there’s been increased chatter about a new pipeline opening up. Weapons and drugs, using rural businesses as waypoints. Right through this area.”

The muscles in my shoulders went tight. “But why Pawsitive? It’s too visible, too many people coming and going.”

“Unless that’s exactly what they want. Hide in plain sight. Who’s going to question a horse trailer at a horse farm? Or veterinary supplies going in and out of a place with animals used for therapy? If anything, law enforcement is less likely to look too closely.”

I thought about Piper working there, about her and Caleb spending their days in what might become a target. My free hand curled into a fist. “Son of a bitch.”

“It would be the perfect cover.”

I ran a hand down my face. “Yeah. We’ve also got reports of increased activity near the old Mitchell barn off Route 89. Deputy Torres said he saw tire tracks leading to it last week, but when he checked, it was empty. Too clean, though. Like someone had swept it out.”

“Shit. The Mitchell place has been abandoned for years. Perfect for temporary storage. What about the fentanyl angle? Any connection to that teenager who overdosed?”

I grabbed a paper towel to clean up the spilled coffee, my mind racing through possibilities. “Still trying to trace where he got it. Kid’s not talking—scared of something. Whether it’s of getting into more trouble or of being accused of being a narc, I don’t know.”

Beckett’s chair creaked through the phone. “Listen, there’s more. Remember that checkpoint you ran on Highway 37 last week? The one that came up empty?”

My jaw tightened. “Not likely to forget that.”

“We found out somebody definitely leaked info about that. We can’t figure out the source, but it was too early in the process for it to be truckers. Somebody with inside info got the word out.”

The words hit like cold water. “You think we have a leak?”

“I think it’s worth considering. This is the third operation that’s come up empty after we thought we had solid intel.” He paused. “I’m not saying it’s someone in your department, but?—”

“But information is getting out somehow.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I’ll review who had access to the checkpoint information.”

“Okay.”

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“Can you guys increase security at Pawsitive? You’re over there all the time anyway.”

“Already planned on it. If someone is nosing around, we’ll find them.”

“Keep me updated. And tell Lark to be careful.”

“Already did. She’s pissed, by the way. Something about not letting anyone threaten her horses.” He paused. “How’s Piper doing there? Lark mentioned she’s been a great help.”

“She’s...adjusting. But seems to like it there.”

We talked for a few more minutes about patrol schedules and coordination between the sheriff’s department and Warrior Security. By the time I hung up, my coffee had gone cold and my appetite had disappeared.

I grabbed my duty belt and headed for the door, then stopped short. Piper stood in the hallway with Caleb in her arms, and something about her expression made my chest tighten. She looked like she’d been caught doing something wrong, which made no sense since she lived here.

But what made me pause was her position—she stood at an angle where she could see into the kitchen but wouldn’t have been visible from where I’d been standing. The floorboard under her left foot was the one that creaked, which meant she’d been there a while, deliberately keeping her weight off it.

“Morning,” I said carefully, noting how she shifted Caleb higher on her hip like a shield.

“I was just...” Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, a nervous gesture I’d cataloged over the past couple weeks. “Sorry. I didn’t want to disturb you on the phone in case he started crying.”

“Are you okay?”

She nodded.

I studied her, the way her fingers tightened on Caleb’s clothing. She wasn’t okay.

“Piper, about last night?—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Hey.” I kept my voice gentle, the same tone I used with spooked horses and scared victims. “You don’t need to feel weird about what happened. I’m not upset that you wanted to stop. That’s always your choice, and I’ll always respect it.”

She finally looked at me then, and the guilt in her eyes was so heavy it took my breath away. “I know. I just... I shouldn’t have let it go that far.”

“Why not?” I moved closer still, close enough to see the way her pupils dilated despite her obvious anxiety. “We’re both adults. We both wanted it. Unless...” My stomach dropped. “Unless you didn’t want it. Did I pressure you? Did I misread?—”

“No.” The word came out fierce, almost angry. “No, you didn’t pressure me. I wanted it. I wanted you. That’s the problem.”

“I don’t understand why that’s a problem.”

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, that wall was back up. The one I’d been trying to chip away at since she’d been here. “We just can’t do this.”

Caleb chose that moment to start fussing, reaching for me with chubby hands. I took him automatically, settling him against my chest, where he immediately grabbed for my badge.

“No playing with Daddy’s shiny things,” I told him, redirecting his attention to my collar instead. When I looked back at Piper, she was watching us with an expression that looked like grief.

The morning sun slanted through the hallway window, highlighting the dark circles under her eyes and the tension in her shoulders. Whatever was eating at her, it was getting worse, not better.

“Listen,” I said, shifting Caleb to one arm. “I’ve been thinking about something.”

She went still, that hypervigilance kicking in. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You’ve been here for weeks now, but you’re still living like you’re in a hotel. Your suitcase is still packed in the corner of your room. You’ve got three shirts that you wash over and over instead of getting more clothes. Caleb’s toys fit in one small bag.”

Her shoulders went rigid. “I don’t want to presume?—”

“You’re not presuming anything. This is your home now. Yours and Caleb’s.” I reached out with my free hand, not quite touching her but letting her know the option was there. “I want you to feel that. To believe it. You don’t have to commit to staying

here permanently, but at least plan to stay until you're more financially stable."

"Lachlan—"

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“What if we went shopping today? Got some things for Caleb’s room—a real crib instead of that portable one and amatching changing table. Some stuff to make your room feel more like yours too. Pictures for the walls, a dresser so you can actually unpack that suitcase, whatever you need.”

The offer hung between us while she stared at me like I’d suggested something impossible. “You want to buy us furniture?”

“I want you to stop living with one foot out the door.” The honesty of it surprised us both. “I want to walk past your room and see clothes in the closet instead of a packed bag. I want Caleb to have toys scattered around instead of everything neat and portable. I want this to feel like home for both of you.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “We’re fine with what we have.”

“I know you are. But you deserve more than fine. Both of you do.”

“That’s not...” She stopped, swallowed hard. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you’re the mother of my child. Because you’re living in my house but acting like you’re just passing through. Because...” I paused, choosing my words carefully. “Because I know you’re carrying something heavy, Piper. I can see it in your eyes, in the way you jump at shadows. I can hear it when you cry. I don’t know what it is, and I won’t push you to tell me. But I want you to know you’re safe here. That this is a real home, not just a temporary shelter.”

She was quiet for so long I counted Caleb’s breaths against my chest. One. Two.

Three. Four. Finally, she spoke.

“Okay,” she whispered. “But nothing too expensive.”

“Deal.” I handed Caleb back to her, letting my fingers brush hers in the transfer. She didn’t pull away, which felt like progress. “I’ll text you when I’m heading home.”

I left before she could change her mind, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more going on than simple reluctance to accept help. There was something happening beneath the surface, but I couldn’t see the full picture yet.

But I had bigger problems than that. It looked like we had a mole somewhere in the department. And no matter what, that sucked—these were men and women I trusted. Would give my life for.

The drive to work was a blur of trying to connect dots that refused to form a pattern. By the time I pulled into the station parking lot, I already had a headache forming.

Through the window, I could see Jenny at her desk, already fielding calls. Normal day in a normal town, except nothing felt normal anymore. Not with potential drug traffickers making their presence known. Not with someone from inside our department providing them intel. Not with whatever secrets were making Piper so sad.

My phone lit up with a text from Lark:

Piper just arrived. She seems upset about something. Everything okay?

Keep an eye on her for me.

Always do. She’s good people, Lach. Whatever’s going on, she’s trying.

I wanted to believe that. Wanted to believe that tonight we'd go shopping, that she'd finally unpack, that maybe she'd start to trust me with whatever was weighing her down.

"Morning, Sheriff," Jenny called out as I walked in. "You look like you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders."

"Just a lot on my mind." I forced myself to focus on the stack of messages on her desk. "Anything urgent?"

"Mrs. Patterson called about her neighbor's dog again. And Beckett called about an hour ago looking for you."

"I've already talked to him." I retreated to my office, pulling up the duty rosters from the Highway 37 checkpoint. If Beckett was right about a leak, I needed to find it before this went any further.

This was my town—and my duty to protect it.

## Chapter 16

Lachlan

The surveillance photos Beckett had texted me looked bad enough on my phone screen. In person, standing at the edge of Pawsitive Connections' property, the evidence of someone casing the place made my jaw clench hard enough to hurt.

"Find anything?" I asked as Beckett emerged from a cluster of pines, his expression grim.

"Oh, I found something all right." He gestured for me to follow. "Multiple

some things.”

We picked our way through the underbrush, fallen leaves crunching under our boots. About thirty yards in, Beckett stopped and pointed to the ground. The earth was disturbed in a rough rectangle, grass flattened and torn where something heavy had been placed.

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“Tripod marks,” I said, crouching to examine the impressions. Photography equipment left distinctive patterns, and these were textbook. “How many spots?”

“Three so far. All with clear sight lines to different parts of the property.” Beckett pulled out his phone, showing me photos he’d already taken. “This one overlooks the main delivery entrance. That one has a perfect view of the back training field where they park the trailers. And the third covers the employee parking area.”

I stood, scanning the tree line. Someone had done their homework, finding the exact spots that would give them maximum coverage of Pawsitive’s operations. “Cigarette butts?”

“Over here.” He led me to a fallen log about ten feet from the tripod marks. Half a dozen cigarette butts littered the ground beside it, all the same brand. “Marlboro Reds. Fresh enough that morning dew hadn’t broken them down yet.”

I bagged a couple of the butts, though I doubted we’d get usable DNA. Still, procedure was procedure. “Tire tracks?”

“Back at the access road. Someone pulled off and parked behind those bushes. Would’ve been invisible from the main road, especially at night.”

We made our way back to examine the tracks. Deep impressions in the soft ground, the tread pattern clear enough to photograph. “Looks like a truck. Heavy one.”

“That’s what I thought too.” Beckett rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture I recognized as his thinking pose. “Whoever this was, they spent hours here. Multiple

cigarettes, multiple vantage points. They were thorough.”

“Too thorough for casual interest.” I took more photos, my jaw tightening with each shot. “They were mapping the place. Learning routines, delivery schedules, shift changes.”

“Which brings us back to the timing.” Beckett’s voice dropped. “That Highway 37 checkpoint came up empty. Now, someone’s scouting businesses that would make perfect trafficking covers. It’s connected, Lach. Has to be.”

I couldn’t argue with his logic. The pieces fit too well to be coincidence. “Speaking of connected, I’ve been running some preliminary checks on department computers. Looking for anything unusual in access logs, email patterns, that kind of thing.”

“Any luck?”

“Nothing obvious. But I’m not exactly a computer expert. I can run basic queries, check log-in times, but if someone’s being clever about it...” I shrugged, frustrated by my own limitations.

“You need Travis.”

I’d been thinking the same thing, but hearing Beckett say it out loud made it real. Travis Hale was Warrior Security’s secret weapon—a computer genius who could find digital needles in virtual haystacks. He was also a hermit who’d built himself a compound on the south side of town and rarely left it.

“Think he’d do it?”

Beckett nodded. “For something like this? Yeah. Travis may be antisocial, but he’s got no tolerance for dirty cops or drug dealers. Plus, he can investigate without

anyone at the department knowing. Complete electronic surveillance without leaving a trace.”

“Set it up.” The words tasted bitter. Having to investigate my own people, suspecting someone I worked with every day of betraying their oath—it went against everything I believed in. But I believed in protecting this town more.

We spent another hour documenting the scene, but we’d found everything there was to find. As Beckett loaded his equipment back into his truck, I glanced toward the main barn where I knew Piper was working.

“I’m going to check in with Lark,” I said. “Let her know what we found.”

Beckett’s knowing look said he saw right through me, but he didn’t call me on it. “I’ll reach out to Travis. With any luck, he’ll have something for us within a day or two.”

After he left, I walked toward the main part of Pawsitive Connections, taking the long route past the training rings and smaller barns. I spotted Lark in the distance, working with one of the therapy dogs, and gave her a wave. She returned it but stayed focused on her training session.

As I approached the main barn, I heard something that made me stop in my tracks.

Singing.

Not just any singing—Piper’s voice, clear and sweet, carrying through the afternoon air. I’d never heard her sing before. Hell, I’d barely heard her sound happy. But there she was, her voice lifting in what sounded like an old folk song about horses and mountain meadows.

I eased closer to the barn entrance, staying in the shadows just inside. She was in

Duchess's stall, brushing the pregnant mare while Caleb watched from his carrier propped safely on a hay bale. Every few verses, she'd turn to our son, singing directly to him, making him wave his tiny fists.

"That's right, sweet boy," she said between songs, her voice lighter than I'd ever heard it. "Duchess likes the music, doesn't she? Makes her calm for when her baby comes."

The mare stood perfectly still under Piper's ministrations, occasionally turning her head to nuzzle at Piper's shoulder. It was like watching a completely different person—this Piper was relaxed, open, genuinely happy in a way I'd never seen.

She laughed—actually laughed—when Duchess lipped at her pocket, looking for treats. "I already gave you two carrots, you greedy girl. You're worse than Maverick, and he's supposed to be the difficult one."

This was who she could be without whatever weight she carried. Young and free and finding joy in simple things. She looked her actual age instead of someone who'd lived too much life too fast.

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She started another song, this one about a girl who loved a boy from the wrong side of town. Her voice caught on certain lyrics, like they meant something personal, but she pushed through. I found myself holding my breath, not wanting to break whatever spell had settled over the barn.

But Caleb spotted me first. His excited babble made Piper turn, and the transformation was instant. The song died on her lips. Her shoulders went rigid. That familiar wariness slammed back into place like a door closing.

“Lachlan.” Color flooded her cheeks. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” I stepped fully into the barn, hating how the light dimmed in her eyes. “You have a beautiful voice.”

She focused on the currycomb in her hand, running her thumb along the bristles. “I was just passing time. Keeping Caleb entertained.”

“Is that what you were doing? Because from where I stood, it looked like you were happy.”

The word *happy* made her flinch—like she didn’t deserve happiness. “I should finish up here. Duchess needs her water topped off, and I still have two stalls to muck?”

“Piper.” I moved closer, slow and careful, like approaching a spooked horse. “You’re allowed to be happy. You know that, right?”

She stared at me for a long moment, and I caught a glimpse of something raw and

desperate in her expression before she looked away. “Happiness isn’t really in the cards for people like me.”

“People like you?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.” I stopped just outside Duchess’s stall, giving Piper space but not letting her retreat completely. “Tell me what you mean.”

She was quiet for so long I thought she wouldn’t answer. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. “People who’ve done things. Bad things. People who don’t deserve—” She cut herself off, shaking her head.

“You deserve good things, Piper. You deserve to sing and laugh and not feel guilty about it.”

That seemed to break something in her. Her eyes filled with tears she quickly blinked away, but not before I saw them. “You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand.”

But she was already closing off again, that wall slamming back into place. I recognized a tactical retreat when I saw one, so I changed approaches.

“What time are you done here?”

She glanced at the barn clock. “About thirty minutes. Why?”

“I want to take you and Caleb to dinner. In town.”

Her head snapped up. “I can cook?—”

“I know you can. You’ve been cooking amazing meals every night. But I want to take you out. Let someone else do the cooking for once.” I saw her about to protest and added, “A real dinner. No rushing, no dishes to clean up after. Just you, me, and Caleb enjoying a meal together.”

“Lachlan—”

“One dinner. That’s all I’m asking.”

She bit her lower lip, glancing between me and Caleb. I could see the war playing out in her eyes—wanting to say yes but afraid of...something. Always afraid of something I couldn’t name.

“Okay,” she finally whispered.

“Great. I’ll help you finish up here, then we can head home to change.”

Her eyes widened. “Change?”

“Nothing fancy. Just want to make it nice.” I grinned, trying to lighten the moment.

“Been a while since I’ve been on a proper date.”

The word *date* made her freeze again, but before she could backtrack, I grabbed a pitchfork and headed for the next stall. Sometimes action was better than words.

### Chapter 17

Lachlan

Twenty minutes later, I was loading Caleb's carrier into my truck while Piper stood beside her beat-up Honda, wringing her hands.

"I don't have anything nice to wear," she said for the third time.

"Whatever you have is fine. It's Garnet Bend, not New York City." I secured the carrier and turned to her. "This isn't a test, Piper. It's just dinner."

But I could see in her eyes that everything felt like a test to her. Every kindness was something to be suspicious of, every gesture potentially hiding some darker motive. It made me want to find whoever had taught her that lesson and introduce them to my fists.

No doubt it had started with Ray Matthews, but now that she was an adult, who was responsible?

"We're going to have a good time," I told her. "Follow me home?"

She nodded, climbing into her car with movements that spoke of resignation rather than anticipation. Not exactly the reaction a man hoped for when asking a woman to dinner, but I'd take what I could get.

An hour later, after we'd both showered and changed, I found myself staring at Piper

in my hallway and forgetting how to breathe.

The dress was simple—navy-blue cotton that had seen better days, a little loose at the waist and short in the sleeves, like she'd bought it when she was heavier. But on her, with her blonde hair pulled back in a loose bun and a hint of color on her lips, she looked beautiful.

"It doesn't fit right," she said, tugging at the waist. "It's my only dress, and I haven't worn it since—" She stopped, shaking her head. "We don't have to do this."

"You look beautiful." The words came out rougher than intended, but they were true. "Absolutely beautiful."

If anything, that made her sadder. Like compliments were weapons designed to wound. I didn't understand it, but I was determined to show her they could be something else. Something real and freely given.

The drive to Rosario's was quiet except for Caleb's contented babbling from the back seat. He'd been fed and would probably sleep through dinner, which was perfect. I wanted this time with Piper, wanted to see if I could bring back even a hint of that happiness I'd glimpsed in the barn.

I wanted to get to know this woman who was the mother of my child. I should've started before now.

Rosario's was Garnet Bend's attempt at upscale dining—checkered tablecloths, candles in wine bottles, and the best Italian food in three counties. As we walked in, Piper immediately tensed.

"This is too expensive?—"

“It’s really not.” I put my hand on the small of her back, gentle pressure to keep her moving forward. “Trust me.”

The hostess, Maria Rosario herself, looked up with a welcoming smile that froze the moment she saw Piper. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees.

“Sheriff Calloway,” Maria said, her voice carefully neutral. “Table for two?”

“Three, actually.” I gestured to Caleb’s carrier. “Though the little one will probably sleep through it.”

Maria’s gaze stayed locked on Piper, recognition clear in her eyes. “I see. Right this way.”

She led us to a table in the back corner—not the nice booth by the window I’d been hoping for, but I didn’t argue. Not yet. Piper was already shrinking into herself, that brightness from the barn completely extinguished.

As we settled in, I noticed other diners glancing our way. Conversations stopping mid-sentence. Heads turning to whisper behind hands. Small-town curiosity was one thing, but this felt different. Hostile.

“They know who I am,” Piper said quietly, not looking up from her menu.

“Let them look.” I reached across the table, not quite touching her hand but letting her know I was there. “We’re here for dinner, not their approval.”

But as our water glasses were slammed down rather than placed, as our server took our order with barely concealed disdain, I couldn’t ignore it. The Rosarios had been one of the families Ray Matthews had swindled. They’d lost their entire savings, had nearly lost the restaurant.

And now they had to be thinking Ray's daughter was sitting in their establishment like she had the right to be there.

"We should go," Piper whispered after the server walked away without asking if we needed anything else. "This was a mistake."

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“No.” The word came out harder than I’d intended. “We’re not leaving. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m a Matthews. That’s wrong enough for them.”

Before I could respond, I heard familiar voices at the entrance. Lucas and Evelyn, along with Daniel and Emma Clark, were being seated at a table near ours. Lucas spotted me and waved, his face lighting up with genuine pleasure.

“Lachlan! Good to see you out and about.” He glanced at Piper with curiosity but no judgment. “This must be Piper. Lark’s mentioned you—says you’re doing great work with the horses.”

“Everyone, this is Piper,” I said, standing to make introductions. “And this is my son, Caleb.”

Emma immediately cooed over the carrier. “Oh, he’s precious! How old?”

“Almost six months,” Piper answered softly, some of the tension easing from her shoulders at Emma’s genuine warmth.

“You should join us,” Evelyn suggested, already flagging the hostess. “We can push tables together.”

Under normal circumstances, I might have declined, wanting the alone time with Piper. But tonight, the united front felt necessary. “That would be great.”

As we relocated, our server appeared again with our drinks—water for Piper, beer for me. He set them down with enough force to slosh water onto the table, his sneer directed entirely at Piper.

“Careful there,” Lucas said mildly, but his eyes had gone sharp. As a former Navy SEAL, he could project authority without raising his voice. “Wouldn’t want anyone to think you were being deliberately rude to paying customers.”

The server’s face flushed. “Of course not, sir.”

“Good.” Daniel’s smile was friendly but didn’t reach his eyes. “Because that would be a shame. We so enjoy coming here, but we’d hate to have to find somewhere else if the service isn’t up to standard. Hate to tell all the Resting Warrior crowd to do the same.”

The threat was politely delivered but unmistakable. Rosario’s couldn’t afford to lose regular customers, especially ones connected to Resting Warrior Ranch, which brought significant business to town.

The server mumbled something and retreated, but not before shooting another venomous look at Piper.

“Well,” Emma said brightly, “that was unnecessarily dramatic. Now, Piper, Lark tells me you have a real gift with the horses. Are you planning to pursue equine therapy training?”

And just like that, the conversation shifted. They included Piper naturally, asking questions but not pushing when she gave short answers. I watched her slowly relax, even managing a small smile when Evelyn shared a story about her own mishaps when first learning to handle horses.

But the reprieve was short-lived. As our food arrived—delivered by a different server who was polite but cold—Maria Rosario herself approached our table.

“I hope everything is satisfactory,” she said, but her gaze was fixed on Piper. “We pride ourselves on serving good, honest people here.”

The implication hung heavy in the air. Lucas set down his fork deliberately.

“Are you suggesting someone at this table isn’t good or honest?” His tone was conversational, but I recognized the steel underneath.

Maria’s lips pursed. “I’m simply saying that some family names carry weight in this town. The kind of weight that comes from stealing people’s life savings.”

“That’s enough.” I started to stand, but Piper’s hand on my arm stopped me.

“She’s not wrong,” Piper said quietly, finally meeting Maria’s gaze. “My father did terrible things to your family. To lots of families. I know that. I’m sorry for it.”

“Sorry?” Maria’s voice cracked. “You think sorry fixes anything? We nearly lost everything because of him. My husband had to come out of retirement, work eighteen-hour days just to keep the doors open.”

“I understand?—”

“And now you waltz in here with the sheriff like you belong? Like being Ray Matthews’s daughter doesn’t mean anything?” Maria’s voice was rising, drawing attention from other diners. “Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it? Look at you—baby but no wedding ring. Just like your father, taking what you want without thought for consequences.”

The words hit Piper like physical blows. I saw her crumble, saw the last of her walls collapse under the weight of accusation and old shame.

“That’s enough.” I stood now, my voice carrying the authority of my position. “Caleb is my son. Mine and Piper’s. And if anyone has a problem with Piper or with my child, then they have a problem with me.”

The restaurant went silent. Every eye was on us now, but I didn’t care.

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“She’s not her father,” I continued, my voice steady but firm. “She doesn’t deserve to be punished for his crimes. And I won’t stand by while anyone tries to do exactly that.”

“Lachlan is right,” Lucas added, standing as well. “I’ve seen plenty of people judged by their family’s actions rather than their own. It’s wrong, and it stops here.”

Daniel and Evelyn stood too, creating a united front. Emma remained seated but her hand found Piper’s under the table, squeezing gently.

Maria looked between us, her righteousness faltering in the face of unified opposition. “I... We have the right to refuse service?—”

“You do,” I agreed. “But think carefully about whether you want to be the kind of place that punishes children for their parents’ sins. Think about what that says about you.”

The standoff stretched for long moments before Maria finally stepped back. “Enjoy your meal,” she said stiffly, then retreated to the kitchen.

Conversation gradually resumed around us, though I could still feel the weight of stares and whispered judgments. We sat back down, and I noticed Piper’s hands trembling as she reached for her water glass.

“Hey,” I said softly. “You okay?”

She nodded, but I could see the tears she was fighting back. Emma kept hold of her

hand, and Evelyn started a determined conversation about the upcoming holiday craft fair, drawing Piper in with gentle questions about whether she might like to help with the Resting Warrior booth.

The rest of dinner passed quietly. Our food was good despite the circumstances, and by the time dessert arrived—tiramisu that Emma insisted we all share—Piper had even smiled twice. Small victories, but I'd take them.

As we prepared to leave, Lucas pulled me aside while the women gathered their things.

"She's been through something," he said quietly. "I recognize the signs."

"I know."

"If you need anything—resources, connections, or just someone to talk to—you know where to find me."

I gripped his shoulder in thanks. "Appreciated."

Outside, Piper transferred a sleeping Caleb into his car seat while Emma and Evelyn exchanged phone numbers with her, making plans for coffee that I hoped Piper would actually follow through on.

"Thank you," Piper said as we drove home, Caleb snoring softly in the back seat. "For standing up for me. You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did." I glanced at her in the dim light from the dashboard. "I meant what I said. You're not your father. You're not responsible for his actions."

She was quiet for so long I thought the conversation was over. Then, so softly I

almost missed it, she said, “Sometimes the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, no matter how hard it tries to roll away.”

I wanted to argue, to make her see herself the way I saw her—struggling but strong, damaged but not broken, worthy of so much more than she believed. But I recognized the bone-deep belief in her words, the kind that wouldn’t be swayed by simple reassurance.

So instead, I reached across the console and took her hand. She let me, her fingers cold and trembling in mine. We drove the rest of the way in silence, but she didn’t let go.

And for tonight, that was enough.

## Chapter 18

### Piper

The house felt different as we walked through the door—warmer somehow, like it had been waiting for us to come home. Lachlan flipped on the living room lamp, casting soft light across furniture that had become familiar over the past weeks. My chest ached with something I couldn’t name, a feeling too big for the space behind my ribs.

“Sit,” Lachlan said, his hand gentle on my shoulder. “I’ll put Caleb to bed.”

“I can do it?—”

“I know you can. But I want to.” He lifted the carrier with practiced ease, Caleb still deep in sleep. “You’ve had a long day. Just relax for a few minutes.”

Relax. The word felt foreign in my mouth, like trying to speak a language I’d never

learned. But I sank onto the couch anyway, watching him carry our son upstairs. His footsteps were careful on the stairs, avoiding the creaky spots I'd mapped during midnight feedings.

I should use this time to go look for something in his office, but I couldn't do it. Not tonight.

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I pulled my legs up under me, the worn fabric of my dress bunching around my knees. The material was soft from too many washes, comfortable in a way that newer clothes never were. But sitting in Rosario's, surrounded by people in their Friday-night best, I'd felt every threadbare spot.

Until Lachlan stood up for me. Until Lucas and Emma and the others had closed ranks around me like I was worth protecting.

My throat tightened. When was the last time anyone had done that? Defended me not because they wanted something, not because it benefited them, but simply because it was right?

I pressed my palms against my eyes, trying to hold back tears that seemed to live just beneath the surface these days. The weight of secrets pressed down on my shoulders, heavier than any physical burden I'd ever carried.

God, I wanted to tell him. The words lived in my throat like broken glass, cutting me every time I swallowed them down. He deserved to know. After tonight, after everything he'd done, he deserved the truth.

But the truth would destroy everything. The truth would take away the only happiness I'd found in twenty-seven years of searching.

"You okay?"

I dropped my hands to find Lachlan in the doorway, his face creased with concern. He'd loosened his collar at some point, and the casual dishevelment made him look

younger, more approachable. More dangerous to my carefully maintained walls.

“Just thinking.” I tried for a smile, felt it wobble and fail. “Thank you. For tonight. For standing up for me.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that.” He moved into the room, settling on the opposite end of the couch like he was giving me space to run if I needed it. Always so careful with me, always reading the signs I didn’t know I was broadcasting.

“Yes, I do.” The words came out fierce, surprising us both. “You don’t understand what it meant. Having people defend me like that. Having you...” I had to stop, the emotion too thick to push past.

“Hey.” His voice went soft, the tone he used with spooked horses and crying babies. “Talk to me. What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?”

I laughed, but it came out watery and wrong. “You want the truth?”

“Always.”

The word hit like a slap. Always. He always wanted the truth, and I’d done nothing but lie since the moment I’d come back into his life. Lies of omission, lies of misdirection, lies to protect lies to protect more lies.

But maybe I could give him one small truth. One piece of honesty in an ocean of deception.

“Tonight was my first date.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Your first—what?”

“My first real date. Where someone asked me to dinner just because they wanted to spend time with me. Where we sat and talked and nobody expected anything except conversation.” I pulled at a loose thread on my dress, needing something to do with my hands. “Pretty pathetic for twenty-seven, right?”

“Piper.” He shifted closer, not touching but near enough that I could feel his warmth. “We... Last year... You weren’t...”

A laugh burst out of me, surprising and genuine. “A virgin? No. God, no. That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

I tried to find words for something I’d never really examined. “I’ve had sex. Not a lot, but some. Usually because it was easier than saying no, or because I needed something and that was the currency expected.” The admission tasted bitter, but I pushed through. “But actual dating? Someone wanting to know me, not just use me? That’s new.”

His jaw tightened, and I could see him processing the implications. Adding up the pieces of a puzzle I’d only given him corners of.

“Growing up with Ray as a father didn’t exactly model healthy relationships,” I continued, needing to fill the silence, but knowing I was running a risk. “He taught me that people take what they want. That kindness comes with a price tag. That trusting someone just means they know exactly where to stick the knife.”

“Jesus, Piper.” He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up even more. “What about your mom? Surely she?”

“My mother was...issick.” The words came out flat, emotionless. Sick was easier

than weak. Sick was easier than explaining a woman who'd chosen Ray over her daughter's safety every single time. "Ray wasn't exactly the caretaking type. Someone had to make sure she ate, took her medications, didn't just fade away completely."

"So you stayed. After high school, when you could have left, you stayed."

"Where was I going to go? No money for college, no job skills except reading people and staying invisible. At least with them, I knew what to expect. I could run interference, keep Ray's temper focused on me instead of her." I shrugged like it didn't matter, like those years hadn't carved pieces out of my soul. "It wasn't much of a life, but it was the only one I knew."

"You were at the library all the time when you lived here as a kid," he said suddenly. "I remember seeing you there, surrounded by books. You were always studying something."

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My chest tightened at the memory. “I loved that library. It was quiet, safe. Mrs. Henderson would let me stay past closing sometimes, pretend she didn’t see me reading in the back corner.”

“What were you reading?”

“Everything. Fiction, nonfiction. Then as I got older, college brochures, textbooks people had donated, scholarship applications I’d never be able to submit.” I smiled at the memory, bittersweet. “I had this whole plan mapped out. Community college first, then transfer to a four-year school. Business degree, maybe marketing. Something that would let me use what I’d learned about reading people for good instead of just survival.”

“It’s not too late.” His voice was gentle but insistent. “Lots of people go back to school later. Especially new moms—online classes are perfect for working around baby schedules.”

“Maybe.” The lie came easily, practiced. Because we both knew I’d never make it to registration. Ray would make sure of that. And even if he didn’t, I was realistic about my future. Best-case scenario, I’d be in prison. Worst-case... I didn’t let myself think about worst-case.

“I mean it,” Lachlan pressed. “You’re smart, Piper. Scary smart. And now you have stability, support. There’s no reason you can’t?—”

“I should get to bed.” I started to stand, needing to escape before his faith in me made me shatter completely. “Thank you again for tonight.”

“Wait.” He caught my hand, gentle but firm. “If this was your first real date, we can’t end it yet.”

“Lachlan—”

“Stay here.” He was already heading toward the kitchen. “Don’t move.”

I sank back onto the couch, too emotionally wrung out to argue. The sounds of him moving around the kitchen were oddly soothing—the freezer opening, spoons clinking against bowls, the soft thud of cabinets closing.

He returned with two bowls of chocolate ice cream and a grin that made him look like a kid. “Can’t have a proper first date without ice cream and a movie.”

“It’s late?—”

“So?” He handed me a bowl, the cold ceramic shocking against my palms. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. I’ll get up with Caleb. We can afford to stay up past our bedtime.”

He grabbed the remote and started scrolling through options on the TV. “What do you like? Action? Comedy? Please don’t say horror—I’m man enough to admit those things give me nightmares.”

A surprised laugh escaped me. “The tough sheriff is afraid of scary movies?”

“Have you seen horror movies lately? They’re terrifying. Give me a good old-fashioned shootout any day over creepy kids and jump scares.” He paused on a romantic comedy, glancing at me sideways. “This okay?”

“Perfect.”

He started the movie, then surprised me by pulling an old quilt from the back of the couch. “My grandmother made this. Said every couch needs a proper cuddle blanket.”

“Cuddle blanket?”

“Her words, not mine.” But he spread it over both of us, creating a cocoon of warmth that smelled faintly of cedar and home.

I ate my ice cream slowly, hyperaware of every place our bodies touched beneath the blanket. His thigh against mine. His shoulder solid and warm when I let myself lean just a little. The movie played on the screen, but I couldn’t focus on the plot. My entire attention was caught by this moment—ordinary and perfect and completely outside my experience.

“Thank you,” I whispered, not sure if I meant for the ice cream or the movie or the blanket or just for being him.

He shifted his arm along the back of the couch, an invitation I couldn’t resist. I curled into his side, my head finding the hollow of his shoulder like it had been made to fit there. His arm came around me, holding me close but not tight, and I felt something in my chest finally, finally unclench.

“Better?” he murmured against my hair.

“Yeah.” My eyes were getting heavy, the combination of emotional exhaustion and unexpected safety pulling me under. “This is nice.”

I was already drifting, suspended between waking and sleeping, held safe in the circle of his arms. For the first time in longer than I could remember, I fell asleep without fear. Without planning escape routes or listening for danger or calculating the cost of

kindness.

I fell asleep feeling protected. Feeling wanted. Feeling like, maybe, in another life, I could have been the kind of woman who deserved this.

The last thing I heard was Lachlan's voice, so soft I might have imagined it. "I've got you, Piper. You're safe."

If only that were true.

### Chapter 19

#### Piper

The sound of children's laughter mixed with barking dogs and the occasional whinny created a special kind of chaos at Pawsitive Connections. I stood near the rabbit hutches, watching Evelyn chase after her almost-three-year-old son Zeke, who seemed determined to climb into the pen with the goats.

"Zeke, sweetie, we pet the goats through the fence," Evelyn called, her dark hair escaping from its ponytail as she moved. Six-year-old Avery sat cross-legged by the rabbits, carefully offering lettuce leaves with the serious concentration only a child could manage.

Emma laughed from where she supervised her four-year-old Tyson's attempts to brush one of the therapy dogs. "At least yours listens sometimes. Tyson's current life goal is to ride every animal on this property like a horse."

"Including the chickens," Jada added, emerging from the barn with fresh water buckets. Her movements were efficient, practiced from months of working here when she wasn't in school. "Last week, he tried to saddle up Big Bertha."

"The rooster?" I couldn't help but smile at the mental image.

"The very one. Lark had to bribe him with cookies to let go of the poor bird."

I'd been working at Pawsitive for three weeks now, but this was my first time

experiencing what Lark called “controlled chaos day”—when the Resting Warrior and Warrior Security moms brought their kids to visit. The property transformed from a working farm to something closer to a petting zoo, complete with sticky fingers and delighted squeals.

Caleb watched everything from his carrier strapped to my chest, his dark eyes—so like his father’s—taking in the activity with serious baby contemplation. At five and a half months, he was more alert every day, reaching for things that caught his interest.

“He’s getting so big,” Emma said, moving closer to peek at him. “Look at those cheeks!”

“He’s finally catching up from being premature.” I adjusted the carrier straps, the weight of him both grounding and terrifying. Every pound he gained was proof I was doing something right, even as I betrayed everything else.

“Mama! Mama, look!” Zeke had managed to get his entire arm through the fence and was petting a very patient goat. “Soft!”

“Very soft,” Evelyn agreed, gently extracting him. “But we need to be gentle, remember?”

Jada set down the water buckets and stretched, her college sweatshirt riding up to reveal a scar along her ribs. She’d told me pieces of her story over the past week—how she’d stalked and kidnapped Kenzie Hurst, one of Resting Warrior’s own, and nearly destroyed multiple lives. Then her memories had been permanently erased when she’d been given some sort of drug.

The parallels to my own situation felt like accusations every time I looked at her. The difference was, when Jada learned the truth about what she’d done, even though she couldn’t remember the person she’d been when she’d done it, she’d chosen to make it

right.

She'd nearly died protecting the people she'd once targeted.

I was still actively betraying mine.

"Earth to Piper," Emma called, waving a hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go?"

"Sorry. Just thinking about everything I need to get done today." I forced a smile, adjusting Caleb when he started to fuss. "Duchess is getting closer to foaling. Lark wants me to check on her every hour."

"That mare's been 'getting closer' for two weeks," Jada said. "I swear she's holding that baby in just to make Lark crazy."

"Speaking of babies," Evelyn said, corralling Zeke again as he made another break for the goats, "how are things going with you and the sheriff?"

Heat flooded my cheeks. "Things are fine."

"Fine?" Emma's eyebrows shot up. "That's not what I heard. Margie Henderson said she saw you two at the grocery store yesterday, and I quote, 'looking at each other like the sun rose and set in each other's eyes.'"

"Margie Henderson needs a hobby," I muttered.

"She has one," Jada said. "It's called gossiping about Sheriff Sexy."

I choked on air. "Sheriffwhat?"

“Oh, come on,” Evelyn said, finally giving up and lifting Zeke into her arms, despite his protests. “He’s gone from Deputy Dashing to Sheriff Sexy if you ask any of the single women in town—and quite a few of the married ones too. Those shoulders? That smile? And now he’s gone and turned into a devoted father and boyfriend? The man’s practically catnip.”

“We’re not— I mean, he’s not my boyfriend.” The word felt strange in my mouth, too normal for what we were. Too simple for the complicated tangle of want and guilt and impending disaster.

“Riiiiight,” Emma said, drawing out the word. “That’s why he looks at you like you personally hung the moon. And why you’ve been wearing that little smile all week.”

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Had I been smiling? The past seven days felt like a dream I was afraid to wake from. After our first date—my first real date—something had shifted between us. We'd been sharing his bed every night, falling asleep tangled together and waking up the same way. He'd loved me with a tenderness that made me want to weep, whispered promises against my skin that I stored up like treasures I didn't deserve. I'd loved him with a passion that had surprised us both.

I'd tried to compartmentalize it all. Lock the happiness in one box, the guilt in another, the terror in a third. If I looked at the whole picture, if I let myself think about how this would end, I'd shatter completely.

"See?" Jada pointed at me. "That's the face of a woman who's been properly f?—"

"Children present!" Evelyn sang out, covering Avery's ears while the little girl giggled.

"I was going to say 'fomanced.'" Jada's grin was wicked. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Evelyn."

"My mind lives in the gutter," Evelyn said. "It's cozy there."

"Anyway," Emma intervened, "what we're saying is that it's nice to see Lachlan happy. He's been alone too long, throwing himself into work. You're good for him."

The words hit like solid punches. Good for him. If only they knew the truth—that I was toxic, that every moment of happiness I stole with him was paid for with betrayal. That I'd spent the week sneaking photos of Pawsitive's delivery schedules,

memorizing which companies brought supplies when, documenting every pattern Ray could exploit.

That I'd earned another precious thirty-second picture that kept me going, kept me believing this would somehow work out, even as I destroyed everything good in my life.

"I don't know about that," I managed.

"We do," Evelyn said firmly.

"Someone told Daniel that Lachlan's been whistling at work," Emma added. "Actual whistling. The man who usually walks around looking like he's personally responsible for every crime in the state."

"He takes his job seriously," I said, defensive of him even as I undermined everything he worked for.

"Too seriously sometimes," Jada said. "But lately? He's been different. Lighter, even with the stuff that's been going on. He actually smiled when he pulled someone over for speeding last week. Mrs. Multari thought he was having a stroke."

I had no idea what to say to that.

"Oh!" Emma suddenly clapped her hands. "Before I forget—you and Lachlan need to come to family dinner tonight."

I blinked at the subject change. "Family dinner?"

"First Friday of the month," Evelyn explained, finally setting Zeke down with strict instructions to stay away from the fence. "We all get together at the ranch, potluck-

style. Kids run wild, adults actually get to finish conversations, nobody has to do all the cooking or cleaning up.”

“I don’t know...” The thought of integrating further into their group, of pretending to belong when I was actively betraying one of their own, made my stomach churn.

“No excuses,” Jada said. “First-timers don’t have to bring anything. Just show up, eat, and prepare to be adopted by the pushiest, most loving group of people you’ll ever meet.”

“Lachlan might have to work?—”

“He won’t,” Emma said confidently. “Even Sheriff Sexy knows better than to miss family dinners without a real emergency.”

There it was again. Sheriff Sexy. Despite everything, I felt my lips twitch. “Does he know you all call him that?”

“God no,” Evelyn said. “He’d never leave his house again. The man can face down armed criminals, but genuine compliments make him turn red and stumble over his words.”

That was true. Just this morning, I’d told him how good he looked in his uniform, and he’d actually walked into the doorway on his way out. It had been adorable and had made me want to drag him back to bed, duty be damned.

“So, you’ll come?” Emma pressed. “Six o’clock at the lodge. You can’t miss it—it’s the big building with approximately forty thousand toys scattered across the front yard.”

Avery turned to me. “Daddy is teaching me knife throwing.”

I could feel my eyes getting wide.

“He’s teaching you foam knife throwing,” Evelyn corrected quickly. “With very soft, very safe foam knives that couldn’t hurt a butterfly.”

“Anyway,” Emma said loudly, “family dinner. Six o’clock. Be there or face the wrath of twenty well-meaning adults who will absolutely show up at your house with casseroles.”

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I thought about making more excuses, but the truth was, I wanted to go. Wanted to pretend, just for one night, that I belonged in their warm, chaotic circle. That I was the kind of woman who could be part of something good without destroying it.

“Okay,” I heard myself say. “We’ll be there.”

The children chose that moment to converge on the rabbit hutches en masse, requiring all hands to prevent a mass bunny liberation. By the time we’d restored order and convinced Tyson that rabbits didn’t need to be “freed into the wild,” it was time for them to head home.

“Remember,” Emma said as she buckled Tyson into his car seat, “six o’clock. Don’t make me send out a search party.”

After they left, I stood in the sudden quiet of the barn, Caleb sleeping against my chest. This was what I was going to lose. These women who’d welcomed me without question, who’d made me feel normal for the first time in my life. Who’d made me believe, even for brief moments, that I could be more than Ray Matthews’s daughter.

When they found out the truth—and they would, eventually—they’d look at me the way Maria Rosario had. Like I was toxic. Like I’d proved that the apple truly never did fall far from the tree.

I pulled out my phone to text Lachlan about dinner, trying to ignore the way my hands shook. Another lie of omission, another step deeper into a life that wasn’t really mine. But I’d take it. I’d take every moment of belonging I could steal, store them up against the cold that was coming.

Because winter always came. And when it did, I'd need these memories to keep me warm in whatever cage—literal or metaphorical—I ended up in.

But for tonight, I'd pretend. I'd sit at their table and laugh at their jokes and let myself believe in the fairy tale a little longer.

It was all I had left.

## Chapter 20

Lachlan

The conference room at Warrior Security had better tech than anything at the sheriff's department, which was exactly why we were meeting here instead of my office. That, and the fact that I couldn't shake the feeling that every word spoken in my own building might be finding its way to the wrong ears.

I'd started keeping all files related to the trafficking case either at home or here at Warrior Security. My own deputies didn't know about half the operations we were planning anymore. The thought made my stomach turn—these were people I'd worked with for years. But someone was feeding information to the traffickers, and until I knew who, I couldn't risk another blown operation.

The men in this room, I knew could be trusted.

Hunter sat at the head of the table, his scarred hands flat on the polished surface. The former Special Forces soldier had built Warrior Security from the ground up, creating a team that handled everything from personal protection to tactical operations. His cousin Lucas ran the therapeutic side of Resting Warrior Ranch, but Hunter handled the sharp end of the spear.

Beckett sat to my right, spinning a pen between his fingers in that restless way he had. My best friend since middle school had found his calling with Warrior Security after leaving the sheriff's department. He still had the cop instincts but without the bureaucratic constraints.

The other two men, Ryan Cooper—Coop to everyone—and Aiden McAllister, I didn't know as well, but both men had saved my life on more than one occasion, so they had my trust.

"Travis, you're up," Hunter said, gesturing to the massive screen mounted on the far wall.

Travis Hale's face filled the display. Even through video, I could see the telltale signs of someone who rarely left their house—pale skin, hair that needed cutting badly enough that it hung in his eyes, and what looked like the same black T-shirt he'd worn to our last three virtual meetings. Empty energy drink cans littered the desk behind him, and I caught a glimpse of at least four computer monitors glowing in his background. Maybe five.

Travis was Warrior Security's secret weapon—a hacker who'd been recruited by the CIA straight out of high school, spent five years doing things he couldn't talk about in places that didn't officially exist, then had some kind of breakdown and retreated to his compound on the south side of town. Hunter had somehow convinced him to do contract work for Warrior Security, all conducted remotely from his heavily secured home.

"I've been through everything," Travis said without preamble. No greeting, no small talk. That was Travis—brilliant with computers, less comfortable with people. "Every log-in, every access record, every digital footprint from your department for the past six months. Also hacked into personal devices, but you didn't hear that from me."

My jaw tightened. Three days ago, we'd had another blown operation. Perfect intel about weapons being smuggled in some animal feed. Surveillance footage showing activity, the truck's planned route, everything lined up—and then nothing. By the time we'd gotten there, the truck had obviously been emptied.

It had been just like the Highway 37 checkpoint. And the Murphy farm search.

“And?” Beckett prompted from his seat beside me. He'd been the one to suggest bringing Travis in, knowing the hacker could find digital breadcrumbs everyone else missed.

“Nothing definitive.” Travis's fingers flew across a keyboard we couldn't see, the rapid-fire clicking audible through the speakers. Data started populating on a shared screen—financial records, phone logs, access time stamps, browser histories. Months of lives reduced to data points. “Deputy Carlson has some gambling debts—poker games at the Riverside Casino, some online sports betting through offshore sites. Nothing huge but consistent losses. About eight grand in the hole over the past year.”

“Eight grand's enough to make someone desperate,” Coop observed, though his relaxed posture didn't change. “Especially on a deputy's salary.”

“Maybe,” Travis said, pulling up more records. “But his payment patterns are consistent. He's making minimums on two credit cards, keeping current on his truck loan. No calls from collectors showing up in his phone records, no liens filed. If he's feeling the pressure, he's hiding it well.”

“Or someone's helping him hide it,” Hunter suggested. “Cash payments wouldn't show up in these records.”

Travis nodded on-screen, taking a swig from what looked like his sixth energy drink. “That's the problem with digital surveillance. It only catches the stupid ones. Smart

criminals still use cash.”

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“What about Deputy Brooks?” I asked, though the question tasted bitter. Brooks had been with the department for twelve years. I’d stood up in his wedding, been to his kids’ birthday parties.

“Ugly divorce,” Travis continued, new data filling the screen. Financial records, court documents, lawyer bills. “Wife is asking for full custody of their two kids, the house, alimony. His lawyer’s fees alone are pushing twenty thousand, and that’s before the settlement. She’s got a shark representing her—Morris from Billings.”

“Fucking Morris,” Beckett muttered. “That guy could get blood from a stone.”

“Brooks just took out a second mortgage,” Travis added. “Completely legal, but it shows he’s scrambling for funds. Also maxed out a new credit card in the last month. He’s drowning.”

Aiden leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “Financial pressure’s usually the first crack. That’s how they turn good cops—find the one who’s drowning and throw them what looks like a lifeline. A few thousand here and there, nothing major at first. By the time they realize it’s a noose, they’re in too deep to get out.”

I made notes on the pad in front of me, hating every word I wrote. “What about the civilian staff?”

“Your dispatcher, Margaret Thompson, has some medical debt from her husband’s cancer treatment. About thirty thousand outstanding. But she’s on a payment plan with the hospital, never missed an installment. No unusual deposits to any of her accounts.”

“Jenny?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. Jenny had been running the sheriff’s office since before I was hired as a deputy fifteen years ago.

“Clean as they come. Same with your evidence tech, Phillips. Your janitor, Ellington, has a son with special needs—lots of medical expenses there, but again, nothing suspicious in the financials. He actually volunteers at the special needs school on weekends.”

“So, we’ve got two possibles,” Hunter summarized. “Carlson with the gambling, Brooks with the divorce. But nothing solid enough to move on.”

“Keep digging,” I said. “Focus on those two, but don’t get tunnel vision. Could be someone’s being smarter about it—cash only, burner phones, dead drops. The kind of stuff that doesn’t leave digital footprints.”

Travis nodded on-screen, pushing his hair out of his eyes, only for it to fall right back. “I’ve got automated searches running for any anomalies. If someone suddenly starts living above their means or their digital pattern changes significantly, I’ll know. Also monitoring their personal communications, but again, you didn’t hear that from me.”

“The illegal surveillance we’re definitely not doing,” Hunter said dryly. “Got it.”

“Good.” I turned to Hunter. “What about next week’s warehouse?”

Hunter pulled up aerial photos on another screen, the image sharp enough to show individual vehicles in the parking lot. “Our contact in Billings came through. Tuesday night, multiple trucks scheduled to arrive between midnight and four a.m. at this location.” He used a laser pointer to indicate a nondescript building on the outskirts of town. “Used to be a furniture warehouse, been empty for two years according to county records. Perfect for temporary storage—highway access, no neighbors,

multiple exit routes.”

“What’s supposedly in the shipment?” I asked.

“Good old standards: weapons and fentanyl,” Hunter said. “According to our sources, we’re talking serious hardware. M4 rifles, possibly some M249 SAWs, maybe even some AT4 rocketlaunchers. Military-grade stuff that’s been going missing from various armories over the past year.”

“Jesus,” Beckett breathed. “And the fentanyl?”

Hunter shook his head. “If our sources are right...a shit-ton.”

“Christ.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “The weapons are bad enough, but fentanyl is a fucking plague.”

“DEA’s on board?” Beckett asked.

“Will be here Monday to coordinate,” Hunter confirmed. “They’re bringing a six-person tactical team. Combined with Warrior Security and your deputies—the ones we can trust—we should have enough firepower.”

“We keep this tight,” I said. “No one outside this room knows the target. Not even the DEA knows the specific warehouse yet. We keep this on a strict need-to-know.”

“Fuck yeah, we do,” Beckett muttered.

“Good.” I looked around the table at men I’d trust with my life. Each one had bled for this town, for the people under our protection. “When we meet back here after dinner, I want to go through it all again, step by step. We need contingency plans. What happens if it’s an ambush. What happens if they try to run. What happens if they have

a hostage. Every scenario we can think of.”

“Already working on it,” Coop said. “I’ve got overwatch positions mapped out, approach routes planned.”

Hunter’s phone buzzed, and he spun it around toward us. “We’re getting called for dinner. Evidently, kids are threatening to eat without us.”

“We’ll reconvene after we eat,” I said. “I want all our ducks in a row for this raid. No mistakes this time.”

As we filed out of the conference room, Travis’s face still glowed from the screen. “I’ll keep digging,” he said. “If there’s dirt to find, I’ll find it.”

“Thanks, Travis,” I said.

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He nodded and cut the connection without another word. No one was even a bit surprised at the abrupt departure.

The walk across the Resting Warrior Ranch was short, but the mental shift required felt enormous. From dirty cops and drug dealers to family dinner—the constant push and pull of my life these days. The other men seemed to handle the transition easier, already joking and laughing as we approached the main lodge.

The sounds of joyful chaos reached us before we even got to the door—children's laughter mixing with adult conversation, the clatter of dishes, someone calling out to corral a wayward toddler. Through the windows, warm light spilled out onto the darkening ground, making the lodge look like something from a Christmas card.

I pulled open the heavy wooden door and stepped into organized mayhem. The smell of home cooking—lasagna, fresh bread, something cinnamon for dessert—mixed with the energy of twenty-plus people gathering for their monthly tradition.

My eyes found Piper immediately.

She stood over by the dessert table with Evelyn and Lena Willaims, Caleb secure in her arms, and she was laughing. Actually laughing—head thrown back, shoulders shaking, the sound bright and genuine enough to carry over the general din. Lena, complete with her purple-streaked hair, was gesturing animatedly, probably telling one of her outrageous stories from Deja Brew, and Piper was hanging on every word.

The sight hit me like a physical blow. She was still so sad lately when she thought I wasn't watching. I'd catch her staring into space with tears in her eyes, or find her

sitting in Caleb's room at night, rocking him long after he'd fallen asleep. Sometimes I'd wake at three a.m. to find her side of the bed empty, and I'd discover her on the back porch, wrapped in my old flannel shirt, looking at the stars like they might hold answers to questions she couldn't voice.

But here, now, surrounded by these people who'd welcomed her without judgment, she looked young and free. The weight that usually bent her shoulders had lifted, even if just temporarily.

The past week had shifted something fundamental between us. After that first date—her first real date ever, which still gutted me to think about—we'd been sharing my bed every night. Not just for sex, though, God...that had been incredible.

This morning flashed through my mind with vivid clarity—the way she'd gasped when I'd lifted her against the tile wall of the shower, water streaming over her skin as she wrapped her legs around my waist. The way her nails had dug into my shoulders when I'd thrust into her, her head thrown back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. The broken way she'd moaned my name when she came, her whole body trembling against mine while I held her through it, water turning cold around us but neither of us caring.

The memory sent heat straight through me, and I had to force myself to think about budget reports and traffic citations before I embarrassed myself in a room full of my friends and children, for Christ's sake.

But beyond the physical connection, we'd been building something. Falling asleep tangled together, waking up the same way. Middle-of-the-night feedings where we'd take turns with Caleb, half asleep but working as a team. Small touches throughout the day—her hand on my arm when she passed me in the kitchen, my fingers trailing across her back as I moved behind her. The thousand tiny intimacies that made a relationship real.

Piper saw me and started toward me through the crowd, navigating with the easy grace of someone who'd gotten used to carrying a baby everywhere. Caleb bounced in her arms, reaching for me, making happy sounds that drew indulgent looks from the other parents.

This was what I wanted. This woman who'd survived things that would break most people, this child who'd brought us together, this family we were carefully constructing from broken pieces and stubborn hope.

The investigation waiting back in that conference room, the dirty cop among my own people, the drugs poisoning our community—all of it faded in the face of this moment.

Piper and Caleb, moving toward me through the warm chaos of family dinner. Coming home to me, even if just for these few hours before duty called again.

## Chapter 21

Piper

The warmth from the fireplace mixed with laughter and conversation, creating a cocoon of belonging I'd never experienced before. I sat at the massive dining table in the Resting Warrior Ranch lodge, surrounded by people who'd welcomed me without question, and tried not to cry from the sheer overwhelming normalcy of it all.

This was what family really meant. Not blood relations who used and discarded you, who saw children as possessions or pawns. But people who chose you, who passed your baby around like he'd always been part of their circle, who noticed the slightest tension in your shoulders and immediately handed him back without making you ask.

"More lasagna?" Emma appeared at my elbow with a serving spoon poised over my

already full plate.

“I couldn’t possibly.” I pressed a hand to my stomach, genuinely stuffed for maybe the third time in my life. “I’ve already had two helpings.”

“That’s what you’re supposed to do at family dinner,” Evelyn said from across the table, bouncing her toddler on her knee. “Eat until you hate yourself a little, then have dessert anyway.”

“Speaking of which,” Daniel called out, “who made the apple pie? Because I need to know who to worship for the scent coming out of the kitchen.”

“That would be Jada,” Lena said, pointing with her fork. “Girl’s got hidden depths.”

Jada flushed under the attention. “It’s just following a recipe.”

“Following a recipe, my ass,” Hunter said, grabbing his fiancée Jada by the same part of the anatomy, then quickly added, “Sorry, kids,” when several small heads turned his way.

Some meat fell on the floor, and a couple of dogs scampered over to see if they could get it.

“Remember when Thunder decided he was afraid of butterflies?” Lark’s voice carried from the other end of the table. “This massive security dog, trained to take down armed intruders, running in circles because a monarch landed on his nose?”

“That wasn’t as bad as when Duchess figured out how to unlock her stall,” someone else chimed in. “Found her in the feed room at three a.m., looking guilty as hell with grain all over her muzzle.”

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“Like a teenager caught raiding the fridge,” Beckett added, grinning.

More stories flowed—about escape artist goats, a therapy cat who’d appointed himself supervisor of all barn activities, and several about an alpaca named Al Pacacino. Each tale was told with affection for the animals who’d become more than just part of their work.

“All right, all right,” Lucas finally said, standing up. “Who’s ready for dessert?”

A chorus of agreement rose from around the table. Several of the men headed toward the kitchen, Lachlan among them. He squeezed my shoulder as he passed, and I turned to press a kiss to his hand—a gesture that felt both natural and impossible.

The moment his skin left mine, Caleb started fussing. His hungry cry.

“I’m going to step out on the porch,” I told Lachlan quietly. “Feed him where it’s quieter.”

“Want me to come with you?”

“No, stay.” I nodded toward where Zeke was already making his way over, eyes fixed on Lachlan’s shiny badge. “You’ve got a fan.”

“Badge, Unca Lock!” Zeke announced, reaching up with grabby hands.

Lachlan’s face softened as he knelt down to the toddler’s level. “Want to see? Got to be very careful, though.”

I slipped out through the French doors onto the lodge's back deck, the cool night air a relief after the warmth inside. October in Montana meant crisp evenings that warned of winter's approach. Soon, it would be too cold for moments like this.

I settled into one of the wooden rockers, adjusting Caleb against my chest. He latched immediately, those dark eyes—so like his father's—staring up at me with absolute trust. The sounds of laughter and clinking dishes filtered through the windows, muffled but still present. Still welcoming.

For just this moment, I let myself believe this could be my life. This could be my family, my place, my?—

“Hello, daughter. If I didn't know better, I'd think you belonged in that little party.”

The voice came from the shadows beyond the porch light, and every drop of warmth fled my body. Ray stepped forward just enough for me to see his face, but not enough for anyone inside to spot him through the windows.

“Don't make a sound,” he said conversationally, like we were discussing the weather. “Just sit there with that baby and listen.”

My arms tightened around Caleb instinctively. He made a small protest noise at the change in pressure, and I forced myself to relax, to keep nursing him like my world wasn't crumbling.

“What you've done so far has been okay,” Ray continued, moving closer but still staying in the shadows. “But I need more. Real intel. The kind that comes from being in the room when plans are made.”

“I can't.” The words came out as barely a whisper. “There's no way to get more without Lachlan realizing I'm the one?—”

“Betraying him?” Ray’s laugh was soft and cruel. “Oh, sweetheart. You crossed that bridge the moment you spread your legs for him. Everything since has just been details.”

Shame flooded through me, hot and sick. Caleb pulled away from my breast, his feeding disturbed by my distress. I quickly adjusted my shirt and lifted him to my shoulder, patting his back with a shaking hand.

“I have something that will help.” Ray pulled a small box from his pocket. Even in the dim light, I could see it was a watch box. Expensive-looking. “You’re going to give this to lover boy. Tell him you bought it for him with your paycheck or some shit. I’ve seen how he looks at you—like the sun shines out of your ass. He’ll wear it.”

“What is it?”

“Recording device. He wears it to meetings, I get the intel I need, everybody wins.”

“Ray, please?—”

“Except there is no winning for whores, is there?” His voice dropped to that dangerous whisper I’d learned to fear as a child. “But you already knew that. Take the watch, Piper. Give it to him tonight. Or I stop being so nice about our arrangement.”

He set the box on the small table beside my chair and melted back into the darkness. I sat frozen, listening to his footsteps fade away, Caleb warm and trusting against my shoulder.

The French doors opened, and Lachlan stepped out. If he’d come outside thirty seconds earlier—even twenty—he would have caught Ray.

But that was it, wasn't it? Even catching Ray wouldn't have ended this hell. It would've just made it worse.

"Hey." His voice was soft with concern. "You okay?"

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I realized I was crying. When had I started crying? I wiped at my cheeks with my free hand, trying to pull myself together.

“What’s wrong?” He crouched beside my chair, one hand gentle on my knee. “Talk to me, Piper.”

“It’s nothing.” The lie tasted like dirt in my mouth. “I just... I was nervous about giving you something.”

“Giving me something?”

My hand shook as I reached for the box Ray had left. The weight of it felt enormous, like holding my own death sentence. “I bought this for you. I wanted... I wanted to thank you. For everything.”

I couldn’t look at him as I held out the box. Couldn’t watch his face as he opened it, couldn’t see the pleasure in his eyes at what he thought was a gesture of affection instead of the ultimate betrayal.

“Piper.” His voice was thick with emotion. “You didn’t have to. This must have cost?—”

“Please.” I still couldn’t look at him. “Just...please.”

I heard the box open, heard his soft intake of breath. “It’s perfect. I can’t believe you spent your money on this. I’ll treasure it.”

The sincerity in his voice broke something inside me. I forced myself to look as he fastened the watch around his wrist, the silver gleaming in the porch light. It looked good on him. Looked like something he'd chosen himself.

"Thank you," he said, leaning in to kiss me.

I turned my head at the last second, his lips landing on my cheek instead of my mouth. If he noticed the rejection, he didn't comment.

"I should tell you," he said, still crouched beside me, "I have to go back to a meeting after this. Work stuff. I'm sorry."

"It's fine." The words came out too quickly. "Actually, would it be okay if I sleep in the guest room tonight? So we don't wake Caleb when you come in?"

Something flickered across his face—hurt, maybe, or confusion. But he nodded. "Of course. Whatever you need."

Whatever I need. I needed to not exist. I needed to have never been born, never have contaminated his life with my presence. I felt filthy, dirtied by Ray's visit, by what I'd just done. The thought of Lachlan touching me—noble, honorable Lachlan with his friends who were more like family, with his genuine goodness—made me want to claw my own skin off.

"We should get back inside," he said, standing. "They'll be wondering where we are."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. As I stood, Caleb stirred against my shoulder, making soft baby sounds. Pure and innocent and untouched by the taint that ran in his mother's veins.

I followed Lachlan back into the warmth and light of the lodge, where dessert was being served and children were getting sleepy and conversations had reached that comfortable rhythm of people who knew one another well. Back into the fairy tale I'd been foolish enough to believe might be real.

But fairy tales weren't for people like me. They were for people who deserved good things, who didn't carry destruction in their DNA, who could accept love without weaponizing it.

I sat back down at the table, smiled at the right moments, even managed to eat a few bites of Jada's apple pie. But inside, I was already gone. Already running even while sitting perfectly still.

Because that's what we Matthews did. We destroyed everything we touched.

And now, with that watch ticking on Lachlan's wrist, I'd just delivered the killing blow to the only good thing I'd ever had.

## Chapter 22

Lachlan

The cold bite of outdoor air cut through my tactical vest as I crouched behind the rusted shipping container, watching the abandoned warehouse through night vision goggles. My heart hammered against my ribs—not from fear, but from anticipation. Weeks of investigations, failed operations, and dead teenagers had led to this moment.

“Alpha team in position,” Beckett's voice crackled through my earpiece. Through the green-tinted world of night vision, I could see his team stationed at the north entrance, shadows among shadows.

“Bravo team set,” came Hunter’s confirmation from the east side.

“Charlie team ready,” Lieutenant Morrison from state police added, his team covering the west approach.

The south belonged to the DEA’s tactical unit, six operators who’d arrived from Denver with enough firepower to take down a small army. Their team leader, Agent Kowalski, had initially balked at Warrior Security’s involvement.

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“Civilians have no business on a federal operation,” he’d said during our initial briefing, his crew-cut head gleaming under the fluorescent lights of our makeshift command center.

Hunter had simply smiled—that particular smile that meant someone was about to get schooled. “Would you like to spar, Agent Kowalski? Test whether this civilian can keep up?”

Kowalski had enthusiastically agreed, since he was four inches taller and at least thirty pounds heavier than Hunter. The man had been unconscious in under thirty seconds. After that, the DEA team treated Warrior Security with the respect they deserved. Men like Hunter, Coop, and Aiden had bled in places these federal boys only read about in classified reports.

“Two minutes to breach,” I said into my comms, checking my weapon one final time. The Glock’s weight felt familiar against my palm, seventeen rounds of federal ammunition plus one in the chamber. My left hand found the flash-bang grenades on my vest, confirming their position by touch.

In two minutes, we’d have answers. Weapons, drugs, and most importantly, the scumbags behind all this.

After that, I could start focusing on what really mattered—Piper.

She’d been disappearing into herself the past three days, that vibrant woman from family dinner vanishing like morning mist. Yesterday, I’d found her standing at the kitchen window, Caleb in her arms, tears streaming down her face. When I’d asked

what was wrong, she'd just shaken her head and walked away.

"Focus, Calloway," I muttered to myself. Save the town first, then save the girl.

"One minute," I announced. Around the warehouse, four teams of highly trained operators made final preparations. My own deputies—Martinez and Torres, the only ones I'd trusted with this operation—flanked me on either side. Both good men, proven clean by Travis's extensive digital surveillance.

"Remember," Agent Kowalski's voice came through the comms, "we need intelligence intact. If they've got fentanyl in there, full hazmat protocols. That shit'll kill you just from skin contact."

"Thirty seconds."

My breathing went tactical—in through the nose, out through the mouth, controlling the adrenaline surge. The warehouse loomed before us, a monument to rust and neglect. Perfect cover for the operation intel promised was inside.

"Ten seconds."

I thought about the teenager who'd died two weeks ago, foam on his lips and terror in his eyes. Thought about the weapons that could end up on our streets, in the hands of people who'd use them to destroy everything we'd built.

"Five... four... three... two..."

"Execute, execute, execute!"

The world exploded into controlled chaos. The ram hit the steel door with a sound like thunder, ancient hinges shrieking in protest. Martinez tossed the flash-bang

through the gap—I turned away, mouth open to protect my eardrums from the pressure wave.

Bang!

Even with my eyes closed, the flash painted red through my eyelids. The concussion thumped against my chest like a physical blow. Then we were moving, boots pounding on concrete, weapons up and tracking.

I was third through the breach, the muzzle of my Glock sweeping left while Martinez covered right. The warehouse interior stretched before us—a vast cavern of shadows and industrial decay. Concrete pillars marched in neat rows like tombstones, supporting a ceiling lost in darkness. My nightvision turned everything alien green, depth perception skewed in the monochrome world.

“Clear left!”

“Clear right!”

“Moving!”

We advanced in a tactical stack, each operator covering their sector. My boots crunched on broken glass—old bottles, maybe auto glass from long-abandoned vehicles. The air tasted of rust and rat droppings, thick enough to coat the back of my throat.

“Contact!” someone shouted. “Movement, second level, northwest corner!”

Every weapon swung toward the threat. My finger found the trigger, taking up the slack but not firing. Through the night vision, I saw shapes erupting from the upper level?—

Birds. Dozens of pigeons, startled by our entrance, exploding into flight with a thunder of wings. One clipped my helmet, and I bit back a curse.

“Stand down, stand down,” Hunter’s voice came through, tinged with forced calm. “Just birds.”

We pressed deeper, clearing each section with methodical precision. Stack of pallets against the east wall—I kicked one, half expecting hidden compartments. Nothing but wood rot and spider webs. A row of shipping containers lined the north side, their doors hanging open like broken teeth.

“Got something here,” Torres called out, his light playing over fresh scratches on the concrete. “Drag marks. Recent.”

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My pulse quickened. They'd moved something heavy, and not long ago. We followed the marks to a loading dock, where the scratches ended abruptly.

"Alpha team, we've got oil stains here," Beckett reported. "Fresh. Multiple vehicles, big ones from the spread pattern."

This was it. We were close.

"I need a door breach on that office complex," I ordered, pointing to a series of rooms along the west wall. "Could be their command center."

The second ram team moved up, ready to?—

"Stop! Nobody fucking move!"

Martinez's shout froze everyone mid-stride. He stood near a support pillar, his flashlight beam locked on something at knee height.

"Trip wire," he said, voice tight with control. "Almost walked right into it."

My blood turned to ice. Trip wires meant explosives, meant someone expected us. Expected us specifically.

"EOD, move up," Kowalski ordered. The DEA's explosive ordnance disposal tech hurried forward, already pulling out specialized gear. We formed a perimeter, weapons out, scanning for secondary devices while he worked.

The tech knelt beside the wire, movements careful and precise. “Wire’s intact, tension’s good. Following it to...” His light traced the nearly invisible line to a device mounted on the pillar. “Got the device. Small, maybe four inches square. Timer component visible.”

“How big?” I asked, already calculating blast radius, evacuation distances.

“That’s the thing...” The tech leaned closer, using a mirror to examine the device from multiple angles. “There’s no explosive material. Just a timer, battery pack, and what looks like a cellular transmitter.”

“A decoy?” Hunter moved closer, studying the setup.

“Or a signal,” I said, ice forming in my gut. “They wanted to know exactly when we arrived.”

“Device is safe,” the EOD tech announced. “No explosive components at all. Just a notification system.”

The implications hit like a punch. They’d known we were coming. Known it well enough to set up an early warning system.

“Clear the rest of the warehouse,” I ordered, but my voice carried the weight of growing certainty. “Full sweep, but watch for more trip wires.”

We moved slower now, caution replacing urgency. The office complex, empty except for an overturned desk and years of dust. A hidden room behind a false wall that Coop discovered—nothing inside but concrete and disappointment. Even the catwalks above, accessed by a rusted ladder that groaned under Aiden’s weight, deserted.

“Loading bay’s been used recently,” Beckett reported. “But it’s clean. I mean clean—someone took industrial-grade solvent to this whole area.”

I joined him at the bay, crouching to run my fingers over the concrete. The chemical smell lingered, sharp and antiseptic. They hadn’t just moved their operation—they’d erased it.

“All teams, stand down,” I said, the words tasting like ash. “Target is cold. Repeat, target is cold.”

The radio erupted with variations of disbelief and frustration. Four agencies, dozens of operators, hundreds of hours of planning—for nothing.

They’d known we were coming. Again.

I walked outside, needing air that didn’t taste like failure. The other team leaders converged near the command vehicle, a mobile unit the DEA had brought in for the operation. Dawn was breaking, painting the sky the color of a bruise.

“What the fuck happened?” Kowalski demanded, yanking off his tactical helmet. His face was flushed, whether from exertion or anger, I couldn’t tell. “This was supposed to be the score. My bosses are expecting arrests, seizures?—”

“Your bosses can get in line,” Lieutenant Morrison interrupted. “We have more man hours in this operation than you do.”

“Someone leaked,” Hunter said quietly, but his words cut through the brewing argument. “This is the fourth time. They’re getting intel from somewhere.”

Kowalski rounded on me. “Your department has a mole, Sheriff. There’s no other explanation.”

“I kept this operation compartmentalized,” I shot back. “Only two of my deputies even knew we were moving tonight.”

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“Then maybe it’s your civilian contractors,” Morrison suggested, glancing at Hunter and Beckett. “No offense, but?—”

“Finish that sentence,” Beckett said softly, “and we’ll have a problem.”

The threat in his voice was unmistakable. Morrison, who’d probably never faced anything more dangerous than a drunk driver, took an involuntary step back.

“Enough,” I said. “Fighting among ourselves won’t solve this. Someone’s feeding them information, yes. But pointing fingers without proof helps no one.”

“Proof?” Kowalski laughed bitterly. “The proof is that empty warehouse. The proof is that they had time to sanitize the place, probably moved everything days ago while we were congratulating ourselves on what a big win this would be.”

He wasn’t wrong. The humiliation burned hot in my chest. I’d vouched for this operation, convinced multiple agencies to commit resources based on intel that had seemed rock solid.

“I want a full debrief,” Morrison said. “Every person who had any knowledge of this operation, no matter how peripheral. We’re going to find your leak, Calloway, even if we have to polygraph your entire department.”

“Do what you need to do,” I said, keeping my voice level despite the anger boiling inside me. “But right now, we need to process this scene properly. If they made any mistakes?—”

“They didn’t,” Coop interrupted, emerging from the warehouse. “I’ve done a preliminary sweep. No prints, no DNA-worthy material, no electronic signatures. They even pulled the security camera feeds from every building in a three-block radius. These aren’t amateurs.”

The gathered leaders dispersed to manage their teams, leaving me standing in the cold Montana morning with my failure. Beckett appeared at my shoulder, his expression grim.

“This isn’t on you,” he said.

“Isn’t it? I’m the sheriff. The buck stops with me.”

“Someone’s playing a long game here, Lachlan. This level of intelligence, this kind of operational security—we’re not dealing with typical drug dealers.”

I wanted to argue, but he was right. Every failed operation had been surgical in its precision. They knew exactly when we’d move, exactly what we were looking for, exactly how to leave us with nothing.

“We need to regroup,” I said, watching as the crime scene techs began their futile documentation of an empty warehouse. “Full debrief at Warrior Security as soon as I get done with this paperwork shitstorm. Bring Travis in person if you have to drag him out of that compound.”

“He won’t like that.”

“I don’t care what he likes. We’re missing something, and I need his eyes on this.” I scrubbed a hand over my face, exhaustion hitting like a sledgehammer now that the adrenaline was fading. “Four operations, Beck. Four times we’ve come up empty. That’s not bad luck—that’s enemy action.”

Beckett nodded. “I’ll talk to Hunter about increasing security protocols. Maybe we’ve got a digital leak we haven’t found yet.”

“Maybe.” I looked back at the warehouse, its broken windows reflecting the sunrise like accusing eyes. “Or maybe we’re looking in the wrong place entirely.”

The gathered teams were already beginning to pack up, the energy of anticipated victory replaced by the bitter taste of another loss. I’d have to write reports, attend meetings, justify the resources we’d wasted on another empty building.

But worse than the professional humiliation was the knowledge that somewhere out there, traffickers were still moving weapons and drugs through my county. Kids were still dying. Families were still being destroyed.

And I wasn’t anywhere close to stopping them because I couldn’t get my fucking house in order.

Beckett slapped me on the shoulder. “Hang in there. See you soon.”

The drive back to Garnet Bend stretched before me, forty minutes of empty highway and bitter recriminations. I need coffee and to pull my wits about me and reset.

Because that’s what you did when you wore the badge. You got knocked down, you got back up, and you kept fighting.

Even when the enemy knew your every move before you made it.

Chapter 23

Piper

The afternoon feedbuckets clanged against each other as I carried them through the barn, my movements automatic after weeks of the same routine. My hands shook slightly, making the metal handles rattle. Lachlan hadn't come home last night or this morning. His side of the bed had stayed cold and empty, the sheets still tucked neat from when I'd made it yesterday morning.

I'd lain awake until four, straining to hear his truck in the driveway, the familiar sound of his boots on the stairs. Nothing. I knew he was out doing something for work, but I didn't know what. I'd been out of the loop since I'd given him that watch, the ultimate betrayal. Ray could hear every word Lachlan said wherever he wore it.

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And he hadn't taken it off except to shower since I'd given it to him.

My stomach churned, acid rising in my throat. What had he said while wearing it? What plans had Ray heard? What ambush might Lachlan be walking into right now because of me?

Caleb had picked up on my anxiety, fussing through the night until I'd finally given up on sleep altogether. He was asleep now, and I set his carrier over in the corner Lark had set up for him.

The horses nickered as I passed their stalls, expecting breakfast. I forced myself to focus on measurements, on routine. Two scoops for Maverick, one and a half for the ponies. Don't think about where Lachlan might be. Don't think about what operation he might be running. Don't think about whether Ray had used the information from that watch to?—

"Piper!" Lark's voice cut through my spiral. She practically bounced toward me down the barn aisle, her face lit up with excitement. "You're here! I have the most amazing surprise!"

I set down the buckets, trying to match her energy. My cheeks ached from forcing a smile. "What's going on?"

"Duchess! She went into labor last night." She grabbed my arm, already pulling me toward the far end of the barn. "Everything went perfectly. She started labor around midnight, and by three this morning..."

My stomach clenched. “Is she okay? No complications?”

“Better than okay. Wait until you see.” Lark’s grip on my arm tightened with excitement as we reached Duchess’s stall. Her joy was infectious—or would have been if I could feel anything beyond the nauseating dread that had taken up permanent residence in my chest. “Are you ready for this?”

She slid open the stall door, and I stepped inside. Duchess stood in the corner. She turned to look at us, protective but calm, and that’s when I saw them.

Them.

Two foals. Not one. Two.

My knees locked. The stall suddenly felt too small, the walls pressing in. Two tiny bodies, still wobbly on their too-long legs. One bay like the mother, one black with a white star on its forehead. Side by side. Together. Safe.

The air in my lungs turned solid.

“Twins!” Lark whispered beside me, her voice reverent. “Can you believe it? The odds are something like one in ten thousand. And for both to survive, to be healthy... It’s almost unheard of.”

The hospital room had been too bright, fluorescent lights harsh against my exhausted eyes. Thirty-six hours of labor, but they were here. Both of them. Caleb had come first, screaming his arrival. Then Sadie, smaller but just as fierce, her cries joining her brother’s.

“Beautiful twins,” the nurse had said, placing them both on my chest. “You did so good, mama.”

The weight of them, one on each side of my chest. Caleb's face scrunched and red, Sadie's surprisingly peaceful. I'd sobbed then, hormones and exhaustion and pure joy overwhelming me. Two babies. Mine. Both of them mine.

I gripped the stall door, wood rough under my palms. Splinters bit into my skin, but I held tighter, needing the pain to anchor me. The foals were nursing now, both of them finding their way to their mother's milk. Side by side. Together. The way nature intended.

"Piper?" Lark's voice sounded distant, muffled like she was speaking through water. "Are you okay?"

Two months. I'd had two months of paradise. Two babies in the secondhand crib I'd bought, sleeping wrapped around each other like they had in the womb. Caleb's dark hair already showing, Sadie still bald as an egg but perfect. So perfect.

I'd learned their different cries. Caleb's demanding wail when he was hungry. Sadie's softer whimper when she needed changing. The way they settled when I held them both, one in each arm, walking the cramped trailer at three a.m. and singing lullabies I barely remembered from my own childhood.

The trailer front door exploding inward, the cheap material of it splintering. The chain snapping like thread. Ray's face twisted with rage. "You think you can hide from me after everything I've done for you? You think you can just run off and leave?"

The mare shifted, protective of her babies. I stared at her for a long moment, Ray's voice echoing in my memory as I tried to push it away, knowing what came next.

Twins. Duchess got to keep both of hers. The unfairness of it stung like broken glass in my throat.

“You’ve been gone for a year. You know I depend on you, you ungrateful bitch. And here you are with two little bastards. You think you’re better than me? You think your little bastard shits are better than me?”

Ray couldn’t even be happy to meet his own grandchildren. I’d known that. That was why I hadn’t gone back. Had never gone back. “How did you find me?”

“I have people who know people. Even trailer trash keeps records of tenants.”

“Please,” I’d begged, trying to shield the kids with my body. But Ray was stronger, always stronger. The first blow had knocked me into the wall. My head cracked against the cheap plaster, vision sparking white. The second hit my ribs, driving all air from my lungs.

“A cop’s babies,” he’d snarled, standing over me. “You let a fucking cop knock you up?”

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I'd tried to crawl to the crib, ribs screaming, blood in my mouth from the punch to my face. Caleb and Sadie were crying, both of them, from the noise. Ray walked toward my babies, and I raised my arm in his direction.

"Don't hurt them. Please, Ray. Dad." I hadn't called him that in years, but I would now if it meant he wouldn't hurt my children. "Don't hurt them. They're your grandkids."

"Oh, I'm not going to hurt them. You're the one who needs to pay for your sins."

I tried to protect myself from his fists, but I couldn't. Blow after blow, until darkness took me.

"You don't need to worry. The vet said they're both perfectly healthy," Lark continued, oblivious to my internal collapse. She moved closer to the foals, her voice soft with wonder. "Usually with twins, one doesn't make it or they're too small to thrive. But these two... Look at them. They're perfect."

My chest constricted, lungs refusing to expand properly. Each breath came shorter than the last, like breathing through a straw. A plastic straw that someone kept pinching tighter and tighter.

I'd woken to Caleb's cries hours later. Just Caleb's. The portable crib held only one baby, Sadie's side empty. Like someone had carved out part of the crib, part of the world, part of me.

She was gone.

Ray sat in the chair by the window, smoking despite the baby in the room. Despite everything.

“Where is she?” My voice had been broken, barely recognizable. Blood had dried on my lips, copper pennies on my tongue. “Where’s Sadie?”

“Here’s how this is going to work,” he’d said, not even looking at me. Ash fell from his cigarette onto the stained carpet. “You’re going to go to that sheriff of yours. You’re going to get close. You’re going to tell me everything—every operation, every plan, every thought in his pretty little head.”

“Where’s my daughter!” I’d tried to sit up, but the room spun. Concussion, probably. Broken ribs, definitely. None of it mattered. “What did you do with her?”

“She’s safe. For now.” He’d finally looked at me then, and his smile had made my blood freeze. The same smile from my childhood, the one that meant someone was about to bleed. Usually me. “She stays safe as long as you do exactly what I tell you. Cross me, try to run, breathe a word of this to anyone—especially your cop—and you’ll never see your little girl again.”

The barn spun around me, hay dust dancing in the morning light like snow. It had been more than two months since I’d held my daughter. Sixty-eight days. One thousand six hundred and thirty-two hours. I knew because I counted every one.

“They’re nursing so well already,” Lark said, kneeling beside the foals now. “Sometimes twins have trouble competing for milk, but Duchess seems to have plenty. Mother Nature is amazing, isn’t she? The way she provides for both babies, makes sure they both get what they need.”

Mother Nature. As if nature had anything to do with a mother having her baby ripped away. As if nature would ever be that cruel. My throat closed completely, like hands

wrapping around my neck. Ray's hands. Always Ray's hands.

"Lachlan will never take me back."

"You'll find a way to make him take you back, or I'll kill her." Ray shook his head calmly as if he wasn't talking about murdering his own flesh and blood. "Make it look like SIDS. Tragic story—young mother, overwhelmed. Asked us to help out."

"You wouldn't." But even as I said it, I knew he would. He would do it to control me.

"Try me," he'd said. "Do what you're told, use your boy there to get back in Sheriff Calloway's life, and feed me details so I can run my drug and weapons network right under his nose. You'll make sure I never get caught, and everyone will be fine. Your mother will take care of the brat."

I let out a sob. My mother could barely take care of herself, much less a newborn.

Ray stood and walked to the door. "I'll be in touch."

"Please, Ray." I didn't know why I was begging for mercy when he didn't have any.

He reached over and yanked my head back by my hair. "Fight me, and I'll mail you pieces of her, Piper. Starting with those tiny little fingers."

I'd vomited all over the floor.

The foals made soft sounds, content and safe. Together. My vision started to tunnel, darkness creeping in from the edges. The taste of copper filled my mouth—had I bitten my tongue again? Or was that just the phantom taste of that night, forever burned into my memory?

“Piper?” Lark’s hand touched my shoulder. Her fingers felt like brands through my shirt. “Hey, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

I tried to answer, tried to form words, but my chest had locked up. No air in. No air out. Just the image of those two perfect foals, side by side, the way my babies should have been. The way they’d been before it all went to hell.

Every video call, every proof of life photo that deleted itself after thirty seconds. Technology I didn’t understand, apps Ray had someone install on burner phones.

Sadie getting bigger, changing, growing without me. Her first smile—I’d missed it.

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Missed the first time she rolled over. First time she held her head up on her own. Slept through the night.

All the things Caleb had done, I'd wondered if Sadie had done too.

"She'll be sitting up," Ray had told me last week, casual as discussing the weather. "Determined little thing. Must get that from you. Though hopefully not your stupid streak."

I'd missed it all. Would miss all the other milestones too.

Black spots danced at the edges of my vision. My knees buckled, hands slipping from the stall door. The splinters tore free, taking skin with them. I heard Lark calling my name, heard the horses shifting nervously, but it all seemed very far away.

Underwater. I was drowning in barn air, drowning in the scent of hay and horses and milk that should have been feeding two human babies instead of two foals.

"Please," I'd begged Ray just last week. "Just let me see her. Just once. I'll do anything."

"You're already doing everything," he'd said. "Don't get greedy, Piper. Greedy mothers lose everything."

But I'd already lost everything. Lost Sadie. Lost myself. Now I was losing Lachlan too, one betrayal at a time. That watch on his wrist, counting down our destruction with every tick.

The barn floor rushed up to meet me. Hay scattered under my hands as I tried to catch myself, but my arms had no strength. Pine shavings pressed into my palms, sharp and real. The smell of horses and grain and morning filled my nostrils as everything inside me went haywire.

“Piper! Oh God, someone help!” Lark’s voice, high and frightened. Her hands on my shoulders, trying to ease my fall. “Stay with me. Just breathe. Just?—”

But I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think past the image burned into my brain. Two foals. Two babies. One mother who got to keep them both.

The unfairness of it broke something inside me that I’d been holding together with desperation and stubborn hope. I felt it snap, actually felt it, like a physical thing breaking in my chest. A rib, maybe, or maybe just my heart finally giving up.

Voices now. More than just Lark. Someone talking about calling 911. Someone else saying my name. But they were far away, so far away, and I was falling into darkness that tasted like copper and felt like losing everything.

“Sadie.” Her name escaped on what might have been my last breath. The first time I’d said it aloud since I’d been in Garnet Bend. It burned coming out, like acid on my tongue. “Please... Sadie.”

Gray mist flooded over me. In the mist, I couldn’t see what I’d lost. Couldn’t count the days since I’d held my daughter. Couldn’t feel the watch on Lachlan’s wrist counting down to the moment he’d learn exactly what kind of monster had been sharing his bed.

In the mist, maybe I could pretend that somewhere, somehow, there was still a way to save them all. That Lachlan would forgive me. That Ray would let Sadie go. That I could have both my babies in my arms again.

Then the mist turned to darkness, merciful and complete.

And there was nothing.

## Chapter 24

Lachlan

The phone had been glued to my ear for three hours straight, and every call made me want to throw it through my office window. My voice was hoarse from explaining, defending, apologizing. The abandoned warehouse raid had turned into a jurisdictional nightmare, with every agency involved looking for someone to blame.

“I take full responsibility,” I said for what felt like the hundredth time, this time to the regional DEA director. My jaw ached from clenching it. “The intelligence seemed solid. We followed proper protocols?—”

“Proper protocols don’t result in empty warehouses and wasted resources, Sheriff.” The director’s voice could have frozen hell. “Agent Kowalski’s report suggests your department has a significant security breach.”

I bit back the response I wanted to give. “We’re investigating all possibilities.”

“See that you do. And, Sheriff? Next time you want DEA support, you better have more than rumors and ghost stories.”

The line went dead. I set the phone down carefully, fighting the urge to slam it. Through my office window, Main Street looked deceptively peaceful. Tourists browsed the antique shops. Mrs. Yang arranged flowers in her shop window. Normal people living normal lives, unaware that somewhere in their community, someone was selling death in pill form.

My phone buzzed with a text from Beckett.

Change of plans. Meeting at Travis's place instead of the office. He insisted.

Of course he did. Travis Hale hadn't left his compound in the two years since he'd moved to Garnet Bend. Whatever had driven him out of the CIA had left him functional but reclusive, turning his property into a high-tech fortress.

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I grabbed my keys, my movements sharp with frustration. Another dead end. Another failure. And still no closer to finding our leak.

The drive to Travis's place took me through the outskirts of town, past the last subdivision and into the emptiness that Travis preferred. His driveway appeared suddenly—unmarked, easy to miss if you didn't know to look for it. The security began immediately: cameras tracking my truck, the gate that looked decorative but could probably stop a tank.

From the outside, Travis's house looked almost normal. A sprawling ranch-style home with native stone and large windows, nestled against a hillside. You'd never guess that most of it extended underground, that those windows were bullet-resistant, or that the pleasant landscaping concealed enough surveillance equipment to run a small military operation.

I parked beside Beckett's SUV and Hunter's truck. The front door opened before I could knock—Travis had been watching, of course. He always watched.

"Sheriff." He stepped aside to let me enter, his greeting as minimal as always. Travis looked like he'd slept in his clothes—black cargo pants and a faded band T-shirt that had seen better days. His dark hair hung past his collar; the man wasn't going to go out to get a haircut. I wasn't sure how he ever got one.

The entryway looked normal enough—hardwood floors, neutral walls, a table for keys. But I knew the scanner built into the doorframe had already checked me for weapons and God knew what else. Travis's paranoia was legendary, but given what he'd done for the government, probably justified.

“Conference room,” Travis said, already walking away. His bare feet made no sound on the floor.

I followed him through halls that looked residential but felt like a bunker. The temperature dropped as we descended—Travis had built down into the hillside, creating multiple levels that didn’t show from outside. We passed the gym where he maintained the physical conditioning the CIA had drilled into him, the pool he swam laps in at two a.m. when the memories got too loud.

The conference room belonged in a Fortune 500 company, not a recluse’s basement. A massive table dominated the space, surrounded by leather chairs and walls of monitors currently showing financial data, satellite feeds, and scrolling code I couldn’t begin to understand.

Beckett, Hunter, Coop, and Aiden were already there, coffee cups and tablets scattered across the table. They looked up as I entered, and I saw my own frustration mirrored in their faces.

“Gentlemen,” I said, taking a seat. “Let’s figure out what the hell went wrong.”

“Everything,” Coop said flatly. “Every damn thing that could go wrong did.”

“The intel was solid,” Hunter insisted, pulling up files on his tablet. “Multiple sources confirmed activity at that warehouse. The DEA’s informant saw trucks there as recently as three days ago.”

“Three days is a lifetime in trafficking,” Aiden pointed out. “Plenty of time to move an entire operation if they knew we were coming.”

“Which they obviously did,” I said. “The question is how.”

Travis paced behind our chairs, holding out some sort of stick—unusual for him. The stick thing wasn't as weird as him being away from his bank of computers, where he was almost always found. But today, he circled the table like a caged predator, his agitation palpable.

“Let's go through it piece by piece,” I said. “Who knew about the target?”

“In Warrior Security? Just us,” Hunter said. “No support staff, no external contractors.”

“My department, only Martinez and Torres. I didn't even put it in writing—told them face-to-face yesterday morning.”

“DEA knew as of Monday,” Beckett added. “State police found out Tuesday afternoon. But the specific warehouse wasn't identified until yesterday's briefing.”

“The briefing that was held in the Warrior Security office,” I said slowly. “No chance of surveillance. Right, Travis?”

Travis continued pacing, that magic wand thing still in his hand.

“What the fuck are you doing, Travis?” Beckett's question cut through my words. Travis had stopped directly behind my chair, close enough that I could hear his breathing. “Are you about to cast some spell on us or something?”

Instead of answering, Travis held up one finger in a clear signal for silence. Then, moving with the fluid grace that spoke of his CIA training, he reached for my left wrist.

“What—” I started, but his sharp headshake cut me off.

His fingers were surprisingly gentle as he unfastened my watch—the silver one with the leather strap that Piper had given me. The one I’d worn every day since that night at Resting Warrior Ranch. Travis cradled it in his palm like it might explode, then moved swiftly to a metal container on a side table.

The moment the watch disappeared inside and he sealed the lid, Travis finally spoke. “It’s transmitting.”

The words hit like ice water. “What?”

“That’s why I wanted everyone here instead of the Warrior Security office.” Travis moved to his wall of equipment, fingers flying over a keyboard. Data populated on the screens—wavelengths, frequencies, technical readouts that made my stomach drop. “I swept the Warrior Security office this morning, thinking maybe someone had planted something. But it was clean. Which meant...”

“Someone was wearing the bug,” Hunter finished, his voice dangerous.

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“The signal’s blocked now by the Faraday cage.” Travis pointed to the metal container. “But you can see the transmission attempts. It’s sophisticated—burst transmissions at irregular intervals to avoid detection. Professional-grade.”

My mind raced backward, memory crystallizing with sickening clarity. Piper on the porch at Resting Warrior, tears on her face as she handed me the box. I wanted to thank you. For everything.

“When did you get the watch?” Beckett asked quietly.

“Friday night.” My voice sounded distant to my own ears. “At the family dinner.”

“Four days ago,” Coop calculated. “Right before we finalized the warehouse raid.”

The pieces clicked into place with brutal precision. Every meeting I’d attended. Every phone call I’d taken. Every plan I’d discussed while wearing that watch.

“Who gave it to you?” Hunter asked, though his expression suggested he already knew.

“Piper.” The name tasted like dust.

Silence descended on the room, broken only by the hum of Travis’s equipment. I stared at the metal container holding the watch—holding the evidence of a betrayal I should have seen coming.

“There’s more,” Travis said, his fingers never stopping on the keyboard. “I’ve been

digging since I isolated the signal. The watch? It's not some consumer-grade device. This is specialized equipment, the kind career criminals use."

"Career criminals like Ray Matthews," I said, the final piece sliding into place.

Travis pulled up a file on the main screen. Ray Matthews's booking photos through the years, arrest records, known associates. "He's evolved since leaving Garnet Bend nine years ago. Graduated from small-town cons to the big leagues. Gunrunning, drug trafficking. He's connected to operations across three states."

More memories flooded back. Finding Piper in my office that night, supposedly looking for Caleb's pacifier. The way she'd been on her hands and knees by my desk—where I kept sensitive files. How I'd given her my computer password without a second thought because she'd needed a recipe.

"Jesus Christ." I pushed back from the table, needing space, needing air. "Piper has been playing me from the beginning."

"The Highway 37 checkpoint," Beckett said slowly. "You mentioned it at home?"

I nodded, remembering dinner conversations, casual mentions of work while she cooked. While she listened. While she reported back to her father.

"The Murphy farm raid. The warehouse last night. She knew about all of them." Each word felt like glass in my throat.

"It explains the surgical precision," Hunter said. "They knew exactly when we'd move, exactly what we were looking for. Professional intelligence gathering."

Travis pulled up more data. "I'm tracking her communications now. I also found another signal and pinged it for location. It's coming from your house, and matches

up with calls made to numbers connected to Ray Matthews's operation. It's all here."

I stared at the evidence scrolling across the screens. Phone records. Timeline correlations between information I'd shared and blown operations. Digital proof of what my heart was still trying to deny.

She'd used me. Used our son. Used my pathetic need to protect her, to believe she could be more than her father's daughter.

My phone buzzed with a message from Lark.

911 - Need you at Pawsitive NOW. It's Piper.

I stood, chair scraping against the floor. "I have to go."

"Lachlan—" Beckett started.

"Piper's at Pawsitive. Lark says I need to get there now." Which was good because I would've been heading there anyway. I was already moving toward the door. "Continue working this. Find out how deep it goes. I want to know every contact Piper has made, every piece of information she's passed along."

"And then?" Hunter's question stopped me at the doorway.

"Then we use it. Turn their own intel against them. But first—" I looked back at the metal container holding the watch. The symbol of my blind trust. My stupidity. "First, I deal with Piper."

Because if she was at Pawsitive, I'd face her knowing the truth. Look into those lying eyes and see her for what she really was—not a victim needing protection, but a predator who'd used my compassion against me.

The woman I'd held in the dark, who'd cried in my arms, who'd made me believe she was building a life with me—she was just another Matthews. Another con artist who'd found the perfect mark.

And I'd fallen for it completely.

The anger crystallized into something colder as I headed for the door. More useful than rage. Because when I saw her—when I looked at the woman who'd shared my bed while betraying everything I stood for—I'd need that coldness.

No more fool. No more mark.

Just a sheriff who'd finally learned the truth about Piper Matthews.

### Chapter 25

Lachlan

The gravel sprayed under my tires as I skidded into Pawsitive Connections' parking lot. The rage that had been building during the drive erupted as I slammed the truck door hard enough to make the windows rattle.

The main barn loomed ahead, its familiar red paint looking garish in the afternoon sun. I'd kissed Piper goodbye in this same spot yesterday morning, tasting coffee on her lips while she'd smiled up at me. All lies. Every smile, every touch, every whispered word in the dark—all of it calculated manipulation.

"Lachlan!" Lark appeared in the barn entrance, her auburn hair escaping from its messy bun. "Thank God you're here. Something's wrong with Piper?—"

I pushed past her into the barn. The familiar scents of hay and horses barely

registered as I stalked down the aisle, boots striking the concrete with sharp cracks that made several horses shift nervously in their stalls.

“Where is she?”

“Lachlan, wait—” Lark grabbed my arm, her grip surprisingly strong. “What the hell is wrong with you? You need to calm down. She’s not well.”

“Not well?” I barked out a laugh that held no humor. “That’s one way to describe being a lying, manipulative?”

“Stop.” Lark stepped directly into my path, forcing me to halt or bowl her over. Despite being half a foot shorter, she held her ground with the same stubborn determination she used with difficult horses. “Whatever’s going on, she’s in no state to handle you storming in here like a bull in a china shop.”

“You don’t understand what she’s done.”

“Then explain it to me. But first, take a breath.” Her green eyes held mine, unflinching. “I’ve never seen you like this. Not even during that hostage situation last year.”

The hostage situation where I’d kept my cool while negotiating for three hours. Where I’d talked a desperate man into surrendering without anyone getting hurt. But that had been a stranger threatening innocent people, not the woman I’d taken into my home, into my bed, who’d used our son as a weapon against me.

“She’s been feeding information to her father, Ray Matthews, a known criminal,” I said, each word precise and cold. “She’s allowed a weapons and drug trafficking enterprise to flourish. Every operation we’ve planned against it, every raid that could’ve stopped them? That’s gone sideways because of her. She planted a

recording device on me.”

Lark’s expression shifted, but not to the outrage I’d expected. Instead, something like understanding flickered across her face. “And you know this for certain?”

“Travis found the bug. In the watch she gave me.” I held up my bare wrist. “The one she said was a thank-you gift. Every meeting, every phone call, every plan I discussed while wearing it—her father heard it all.”

“Okay.” Lark nodded slowly. “That’s bad. Really bad. But?—”

“But nothing. She played me. Used me. Made me think—” I cut myself off before I could voice exactly what I’d thought. That she cared. That we were building something real.

That we were building forever.

“There are always two sides to every story,” Lark said quietly. “Maybe there’s something you don’t understand.”

“It’s not terribly difficult to understand betrayal.” The words came out harsh enough to make her flinch. “Now, where is she?”

Lark studied me for a long moment, then sighed. “Back corner, near Duchess’s stall. But Lachlan—she had some kind of episode. Started hyperventilating, collapsed. She kept saying a name—Sadie. Over and over.”

“Sadie? Who’s Sadie?” The name meant nothing to me. Another lie, probably. Another con.

“I don’t know. But the way she said it...” Lark shook her head. “Like her heart was

breaking.”

I pushed past her, though her words followed me down the aisle. Heart breaking. As if Piper Matthews had a heart to break.

I found her exactly where Lark had said, propped against the wall outside Duchess’s stall. A damp washcloth pressed to her forehead, her skin pale as a ghost except for the red splotches where tears had tracked down her cheeks. She looked small, broken, nothing like the woman who’d systematically destroyed everything I’d worked for.

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Her eyes opened as my shadow fell across her, and I watched the sequence of emotions play out—relief at seeing me, then confusion at my expression, then naked fear as understanding dawned.

“Lachlan.” My name came out as barely a whisper.

“Get up.”

She struggled to stand, using the wall for support. The washcloth fell forgotten to the ground. Up close, I could see she was shaking—fine tremors that ran through her whole body.

“I can explain?—”

“Can you? Can you explain how you’ve been reporting every word I say to your father? How you’ve been helping him sell drugs that have gotten people killed?” My voice rose with each question. “How many weapons are on the street because you warned your father and his cronies about our raids?”

She flinched at each accusation, arms wrapping around herself like armor. Behind us, I heard Lark approaching again.

“Lachlan, you need to calm down,” Lark said firmly. “Whatever’s going on?—”

“She betrayed us all.” I didn’t take my eyes off Piper. “Every single person trying to protect this town, trying to keep drugs away from kids, trying to stop weapons trafficking—she sold us out. Everything Pawsitive Connections stands against, she

was trying to help.”

“There’s something you don’t know,” Piper said, her voice stronger now but still thread-thin. “Please, if you’d just listen?—”

“Listen? Like I listened when you cried in my arms about being scared? Like I listened when you said you were trying to build a better life for our son?” The word tasted bitter now. “Every word out of your mouth has been a lie.”

“Not everything.” Tears streamed down her face, but she held my gaze. “Not how I feel about?—”

“Don’t.” The word cracked like a whip. “Don’t you dare stand there and pretend anything between us was real.”

Piper wisely didn’t try to dispute me.

I turned to Lark. “I’m taking her home. We need to talk. I won’t hurt her. But this ends today.”

She looked between us, clearly torn. Finally, she nodded. “Piper, do you feel safe going with him?”

The question sent fresh rage through me. As if I was the threat here. As if I was the one who’d lied and manipulated and?—

“Yes,” Piper whispered. “It’s okay.”

I grabbed Caleb in his car carrier, and we walked to my truck in tense silence. I held the passenger door open, not out of courtesy but because I didn’t trust her not to run. She climbed in slowly, movements careful like everything hurt.

I started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot, gravel crunching under the tires.

“Want to see what I’m not wearing?” I held up my bare wrist, then tossed the printed pages into her lap. “Travis found out it was a transmitter. Didn’t take long for me to put the pieces together from there.”

Fresh tears tracked down her cheeks as she stared down at her hands, but she didn’t speak.

I didn’t speak either. Didn’t trust myself to. The rage was too close to the surface, mixed with a betrayal so deep it felt like drowning. Every instinct screamed at me to pull over, to demand answers, to make her explain how she could have done this to me. To us. To our son.

But I kept driving.

Ten minutes stretched like hours. Piper’s breathing grew more ragged, hitching on suppressed sobs. Her hands clutched the papers like a lifeline, knuckles white with tension.

When we finally pulled into my driveway, I cut the engine and sat there for a moment. Home. The place where she’d cooked dinner every night, where we’d bathed Caleb together, where we’d made love in the shower just this morning. All of it tainted now.

“Inside,” I said, the first word I’d spoken since leaving Pawsitive.

She grabbed Caleb’s carrier, and I took it from her and carried him inside. The familiar scent of home—coffee and baby powder and something that was uniquely Piper—hit me like a slap.

I took him out of the carrier and laid him carefully in his crib, shutting the door behind me as I left. I found Piper in the living room. She stood in the middle of the space, looking lost, like she didn't belong here anymore.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” My voice came out rough, barely controlled. “Or was the plan to just keep bleeding intelligence until we were all compromised? Until someone got killed?”

“I tried to minimize?—”

“Minimize? You think that makes it better?” I slammed my palm against the wall. “You sat at my table, slept in my bed, smiled at my friends, all while stabbing us in the back.”

“I didn’t have a choice!”

“Everyone has a choice. You could have trusted me. Could have told me the truth from the beginning.”

“You don’t understand?—”

“Then help me understand! Explain how you could do this. Make me understand how the woman I—” I bit off the words. “How you could betray everything I stand for.”

Part of me couldn’t wait for the elaborate lies that I knew would come out of her mouth. Something complicated and difficult to understand at first—some long story where the details were vague at best.

“Ray has our daughter!” The words exploded out of her, raw and desperate.

That was definitely not what I expected. “What?”

“Sadie. Our daughter. Your daughter.” Her voice cracked, body starting to shake violently. “Ray has her, and the only way I get to keep her alive is to do exactly what he says.”

“What?” I parroted, completely incapable of putting these pieces together.

“Twins.” The word came out as a wail. “I had twins. Caleb and then...Sadie.”

She dropped to her knees, as if standing was beyond her capacity. Her hands went to her hair, fingers tangling in the blonde strands, pulling hard enough that I winced.

“You’re lying.” She had to be lying.

But even as I said it, pieces clicked into place. Her panic attack at the barn. The name Sadie. The way she’d been so protective of Caleb, so terrified of leaving him with anyone.

And something I’d never told her; she probably had no idea. Twins ran in my family. My father had a twin sister.

“I have—I have a picture,” she gasped between hyperventilating breaths. Her whole body rocked back and forth, hands still twisted in her hair. “Just one. Just one picture of her.”

She fumbled for her phone with shaking hands, nearly dropping it twice. When she finally got it unlocked, she held it out to me, her arm trembling so badly I had to kneel and take it from her.

The photo showed a baby girl. Dark hair like Caleb’s, delicate features, clutching a stuffed elephant. My daughter. Another child I’d never known existed.

“What happened?” My voice came out strangled.

She was pulling at her hair again, hard enough that strands came loose in her fingers. “They were two months old, and he found me. Beat me unconscious. When I woke

up, she was gone. He left me Caleb but said if I ever wanted to see my daughter again, I had to do exactly what he said.”

The last words came out as sobs. She wrapped her arms around her middle like she was trying to keep herself from flying apart.

I still couldn’t even wrap my head around all this.

“Every week,” she gasped, the words barely intelligible. “Every week, I gave Ray information. If it was good enough intel, he’d send a photo on an app that erased the pictures. Thirty seconds. Thirty seconds to see my baby before it vanished. Thirty seconds to memorize how much she’d grown without me.”

I stood frozen, her phone still in my hand, watching her fall apart completely.

“You should have told me.” The words came out broken. “The moment you showed up with Caleb, you should have told me everything.”

“He said he’d kill her!” She was on her feet now, pacing frantically, pulling at her hair again. “He said if I breathed one word to you, if I tried to be clever, she’d disappear forever. And I believed him. I still believe him.”

“Piper—”

“Three months!” She screamed the words. “Three months since I’ve held her. Since I’ve smelled her hair or felt her weight in my arms. Do you know what that’s like? Do you?”

Her breathing was coming in short, sharp gasps, chest heaving like she couldn’t get enough air.

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“All those nights you held me while I cried,” she said, voice rising with hysteria. “I wasn’t crying about being tired or overwhelmed. I was crying because half of me was missing. Because somewhere, my baby girl was growing up without me, and I couldn’t even say her name out loud!”

She pressed her palms against her temples, squeezing like she could force the pain out. “Every time Caleb smiled, I wondered if she was smiling. Every time he reached a milestone, I knew I’d missed hers. And the worst part? The worst part is that I was grateful. Grateful that at least I got to keep one of them.”

Her legs gave out again. She slid down the wall, knees pulled to her chest, rocking back and forth. The keening sound coming from her throat was barely human.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. She’d been wrong, she’d made horrible decisions, but she’d done it because she’d felt she’d had no other choice.

This woman had been alone her whole life. Had been abused by the people who should have taken care of her. Had been threatened in the worst possible way by the man who should’ve been helping her the most.

I slid down beside her and stopped her as she reached to pull her hair again. “Piper. We’re going to get her back.”

There was so much more to this than just getting Sadie back, but that was the most important thing. To Piper and to me.

I had a daughter.

“I’ve lost everything.” She clutched the phone in her hand, staring at Sadie’s picture. “I’ve lost you, I’ll lose Caleb, and I’ll never get her back. He’ll disappear with her, and I’ll never?—”

She broke off, pressing her fist to her mouth as another sob tore through her. Her whole body shook with the force of it, like she was coming apart at the seams.

I wanted to comfort her. The instinct was still there, despite everything. Confusion and pain and heartbreak swirled inside me. But how could I hold the woman who’d betrayed me? How could I not hold the mother of my children—both of them—as she shattered in front of me?

I rubbed my hand down the back of her head, getting her to calm. I said the same thing over and over: “We’re going to get her back.”

“How?” Piper finally asked, voice small and broken.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I promise you, we’re going to get Sadie back.”

She nodded, wrapping her arms around herself, still rocking slightly. We sat there in the wreckage of our relationship, both crying for different reasons. For the daughter we’d lost. For the family that never had a chance. For the love that had been condemned from the start.

Sadie. Her name was Sadie and she was five months old and she was out there somewhere with a monster.

And I had no idea what to do about any of it.

Chapter 26

Lachlan

The conference room at Warrior Security felt like a cage. It had been two hours since I'd confronted Piper. Two hours since she'd been sobbing on my living room floor. I could still hear that inhuman keening sound she'd made. Could still see her pulling at her hair hard enough to rip strands from her scalp.

Could still feel the moment my world had tilted sideways with two words: Our daughter.

My hands shook as I gripped the edge of the table. Beckett, Hunter, Coop, and Aiden were already seated. Travis's face filled the main screen, his compound visible behind him. They'd reconvened, without any details, when I'd texted to let them know we needed to meet. They all watched me with careful eyes, like I might explode.

Maybe I would.

"Where's Piper now?" Beckett asked.

"At my house with Jenny." The words came out rough. I'd called my secretary, asked her to come sit with Piper while I figured out what the hell to do next.

"Jenny? Not one of your deputies?" Beckett crossed his arms over his chest.

"I wasn't afraid Piper was going to run. I was afraid she might hurt herself. She's... Christ, I don't even know how to describe it." I scrubbed a hand down my face.

"You said there was more," Hunter prompted. "Something that changes everything."

My phone felt like lead as I pulled it from my pocket. The photo Piper had shown

me—the only one she had of our daughter. My hands trembled as I set it on the table.

“This is Sadie.” Her name caught in my throat. “My daughter. Caleb’s twin sister.”

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The silence stretched until I thought I might suffocate in it.

“Twins?” Beckett picked up the phone with reverent care. “What? How? Where is she?”

“Ray has her.” The words burst out of me, along with everything else. Everything that Piper had told me over the past few hours.

How Ray had shown up and beaten her when the twins were two months old. Her waking up and finding Sadie gone. Ray’s ultimatum—spy or never see her daughter again. How he’d demanded information and she’d provided it then gave me the watch a few days ago so Ray could hear everything.

“Three months. That bastard has had my daughter for three months. Using her as leverage to make Piper—” I slammed my fist on the table hard enough to make everyone jump. “Fuck!”

“Lachlan—” Beckett started.

“She should have told me!” The rage erupted, impossible to contain. “The second she showed up with Caleb, she should have trusted me. Instead, she let me believe...let me fall...” I couldn’t finish. Couldn’t admit out loud how completely I’d fallen for the woman who’d been betraying me since day one.

“Would you have believed her?” Hunter asked quietly.

I whirled on him. “What?”

“Three weeks ago, I was the one saying not to trust her. Warning you she might be playing you.” Hunter leaned forward, his gaze steady. “If she’d shown up that first day claiming Ray had kidnapped her daughter, would you have believed her? Or would you have thought it was another con?”

The question hit like cold water. I wanted to say yes, of course I would have believed her. But would I? After she’d stolen from me, disappeared for a year, shown up shoplifting baby formula?

“That’s not the point?—”

“That’s exactly the point,” Hunter interrupted. “She was terrified, traumatized, and completely under Ray’s control. She made the only choice she thought she had.”

“People died because of the intel she gave him!” My voice bounced off the walls. “Kids overdosed on drugs that made it through because our operations were compromised!”

“And if she hadn’t cooperated, your daughter may be dead,” Aiden said bluntly. “It wasn’t a chance she was willing to take. That’s a mother’s love for you: willing to do anything, risk anything, for her child.”

I pressed my palms against my eyes, seeing stars. The photo of Sadie burned behind my eyelids—dark hair, rosebud mouth, my father’s nose. A little girl I’d never held, never even known existed.

“Every time Piper cried...” My voice came out strangled. “All those nights I held her while she sobbed, I thought it was postpartum depression. Exhaustion. But she was crying for our daughter. And I just... I didn’t know. How did I not know?”

“Because she couldn’t tell you,” Travis said through the speakers. “I’ve been

analyzing her communications since you left. The level of surveillance Ray maintained... He would have known immediately if she'd tried to get help."

"She still should have trusted me." But even as I said it, my conviction wavered. What would I have done in her place? If someone had Caleb, if the price of his life was betraying everything I believed in?

I'd have sold my soul without hesitation. I still would.

"We need to get Sadie back," I said, the words coming from somewhere deep and primal. "I don't care what it takes. Stopping the drugs and weapons are important, but not as important as getting my daughter home safely."

"Agreed," Hunter said immediately. "And I owe you an apology."

I looked up, surprised.

"I was wrong about Piper," he continued. "I saw Ray Matthews's daughter and assumed the worst. But she's been fighting a war none of us knew about, trying to protect your children the only way she could."

"She lied to me." The betrayal still burned, even understanding why. "Every kiss, every night in my bed, all of it was built on lies."

"No," Beckett said firmly. "The situation was built on lies. But what's between you two? I think that's real, man. I've seen how she looks at you."

"You mean how she looked at me while reporting my every word to her father?" But the venom had drained from the words. I kept seeing her on the floor, broken, screaming about missing three months of her daughter's life.

“A mother does whatever she has to do,” Hunter murmured. “I’m not saying that makes everything okay between you two, I’m just saying that she’s not necessarily the bad guy here. It’s not that black or white. You guys gave Jada a chance when it wasn’t so simple, and I, for one, am willing to give Piper the same chance.”

If anyone knew that choices weren’t always black or white, it was Hunter and his fiancée Jada. But everyone else around the table was nodding too.

And while I appreciated my friends’ support, figuring out all this stuff with Piper had to wait. Right now, we had bigger issues at hand. “Thank you. But let’s focus on getting my daughter home where I can meet her and getting Ray Matthews placed behind bars.”

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There was a curious mix of hallelujahs and fuck-yeahs, but everyone was in agreement.

“I say we use the watch against him,” Travis said. “It hasn’t been transmitting since I put it in the Faraday box, but Ray doesn’t know what’s happening. As far as he’s concerned, it could just be malfunctioning.”

“You want to feed him false intel,” Hunter said.

“Yep. Make him feel safe. Make him think law enforcement is looking the wrong direction.” Travis pulled up signal data. “I can modify the transmitter, make it seem active while we control what it sends.”

Coop stood up and started pacing. “We could make him think you’re focusing your attention on the east side of town closer to Billings. After last night’s failure, he’s going to be feeling cocky, thinking everything is going according to plan.”

“I think it will work.” Hunter leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Our team will focus on finding out where he really is, while you focus on feeding him false info over the next forty-eight hours.”

It could work. It was a great plan. I thought about Piper’s face when she’d talked about those thirty-second photos. The desperate way she’d memorized every detail of our daughter before the images vanished. I wasn’t letting her go through that again.

“We’ve got to find where he’s keeping Sadie first,” Beckett said quietly.

“It’ll all have to be timed perfectly.” I rubbed my eyes. God, I needed a cup of coffee. “We have to know Sadie is safe before any sort of raid, but the raid has to be ready because once he finds out we have Sadie, he’ll be in the wind.”

Hunter looked at the screen. “Travis?”

“Already working on it. The burner phone Piper used, Ray’s communications—patterns emerge. Give me time, I’ll find him. We’ll get her to call him a couple times, and I’ll be able to triangulate his location.”

“How much time?” My patience felt threadbare. Every minute that passed was another minute my daughter spent with that monster.

“Not long. I’ll build some programs to make it quicker. Forty hours, tops. By the time we know where his operation is hiding, I’ll know where he’s been calling Piper from.”

Travis cleared his throat. “I’ll get the watch to you when I’m done with it. I’m playing with it now so it will only transmit when you specifically want it to. Otherwise, it will just run some basic chatter sounding like the department, at home, et cetera.”

I looked around the table at these men who’d become brothers. Who’d drop everything to help me save a niece they’d never met.

“I need to be clear,” I said. “Getting Sadie back is all that matters to me. The drugs, the weapons, even Ray—everything else comes second.”

“Agreed,” Beckett said immediately.

Aiden had been quiet this whole time, as he tended to be. The man was not a talker.

“We’ll bring her home,” he added. “You have our word.”

I had no doubt.

“Let’s get Sadie back,” I said. “Then we’ll figure out the rest.”

I stood, exhaustion hitting like a physical weight. But tired didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except the little girl in that photo.

“I should get back. Need to…” What? Comfort the woman who’d betrayed me? Plan with the mother of my children? I didn’t know what Piper was to me anymore.

“Lachlan,” Hunter called as I reached the door. “I agree with Beck. I think Piper loves you. Real love, not manipulation. That’s why this has been killing her.”

I nodded but couldn’t respond. Couldn’t process love when everything was tangled with lies and desperation and a missing child.

The drive home stretched endlessly. Every mile, I thought about Sadie. She wasn’t old enough to be scared, but I wished she knew we were coming for her.

I thought about Piper too. The woman I’d fallen for despite every warning. Who’d carried this impossible weight alone, crying for our daughter while I held her, unable to share the burden.

Part of me still raged that she hadn’t trusted me from the beginning. But the father in me—the part that would burn the world to protect Caleb—understood with brutal clarity what she’d done.

She’d done what she had to do to keep our daughter alive.

Now, it was my turn.

Ray Matthews had made a crucial mistake. He'd threatened my family. He'd taken my daughter. He'd turned the mother of my children into a weapon against me.

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He thought he held all the cards. He was about to learn that a father's wrath, backed by brothers willing to wage war, was a force he couldn't contain.

I'd get Sadie back. Whatever it took, whoever I had to go through, whatever lines I had to cross.

My daughter was coming home.

### Chapter 27

Piper

The house felt different with Lachlan gone. Not just empty—condemned. Like the walls themselves knew what I'd done and were waiting to crush me for it.

I sat on the living room floor with Caleb in my lap, his tiny fingers wrapped around mine. The rug was rough against my legs, little indentations from furniture feet pressing into my skin. My throat still burned from screaming, and my scalp ached where I'd torn at my hair. Every muscle in my body felt wrung out, like I'd been put through one of those old-fashioned washing machine wringers in old movies.

Caleb babbled happily, unaware that his mother had just destroyed everything. That his father would never look at us the same way again. His dark eyes—Lachlan's eyes—studied my face with that serious baby concentration, like he was trying to memorize me.

Jenny had left twenty minutes ago after making sure I'd eaten something and wasn't

about to do anything drastic. She'd been kind, careful, treating me like I might shatter. Maybe I would. Maybe I already had.

"Mama made such a mess," I told Caleb, who responded by grabbing for my nose. "Such a terrible, terrible mess." I stood to pace the room.

The relief of Lachlan finally knowing the truth warred with grief so sharp it stole my breath. No more lies between us—but no more use either. I'd seen it in his eyes when he'd left. The betrayal. The disgust. The way he'd looked at me like I was a stranger wearing the face of someone he'd loved.

Because he had loved me. I'd seen it in quiet moments—when he'd watch me feed Caleb, when he'd pull me close in the middle of the night, when he'd trace patterns on my skin like he was trying to memorize me by touch. All those tender moments, every whispered promise in the dark—I'd contaminated all of it.

I was probably going to prison.

I'd aided a drug and weapons trafficking operation. People had died because of information I'd passed along. Kids had overdosed. Families had been destroyed. There wouldn't be any mercy for that, not even with my reason.

My legs gave out, and I sank onto the couch. The cushions still held the impression of where Lachlan and I had sat watching movies just a few nights ago, sharing popcorn and laughing at some comedy I couldn't even remember the name of now. He'd pulled me against his side, his arm warm around my shoulders, and I'd felt safe. Home.

I'd never feel that again.

My phone buzzed. The burner phone.

My whole body went rigid. With trembling fingers, I pulled it from my pocket.

Where the hell have you been? Watch stopped transmitting hours ago. EXPLAIN. NOW.

The words blurred as my hands shook. Ray knew something was wrong. Of course he did—he'd been listening to every word Lachlan said for days, and now, there was only silence.

What could I say? That Lachlan had discovered everything? That even now, he was probably planning how to hunt Ray down?

I set Caleb in his bouncer, my movements mechanical. He fussed at the transition, little face scrunching up in displeasure.

"I know, baby. I'm sorry. Mama just needs to think."

Think. How? My brain felt like cotton, stuffed full of exhaustion and grief and terror. I paced the room again, phone clutched in my sweaty palm. The weight of it felt enormous, like holding a live grenade.

How long before Ray figured out something was wrong? How long before he disappeared with Sadie...or worse?

The image of her face from that last photo burned behind my eyelids. Was someone holding her when she cried? Did they sing to her like I used to? Did they know she liked to sleep with her tiny fist pressed against her cheek?

My knees hit the floor hard enough to bruise. The phone skittered across the hardwood, Ray's message still glowing accusingly on the screen.

“Please,” I whispered to no one. To God, maybe, if He still listened to people like me.  
“Please don’t let him hurt her. Please.”

The front door opened.

I scrambled for the phone, shoving it into my pocket as Lachlan walked in. He looked haggard, older than when he’d left just hours ago. His uniform was still crisp, but his face belonged to someone who’d aged years in minutes. The strong line of his jaw was set hard, his whole body radiating controlled fury.

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“Ray texted,” I said, the words tumbling out. “He knows the watch stopped working. I don’t know what to tell him. I don’t know?—”

Lachlan crossed to me in three strides. No hesitation, just purpose. He pulled the phone from my pocket and read the message, his expression growing even harder.

“We need to call him.”

“What?” The word came out strangled.

“Travis is set up to trace the call. We need Ray talking long enough to help triangulate part of his location.” His voice was all business, cold efficiency replacing the warmth I’d grown accustomed to. “I’ll coach you through it.”

“Lachlan—”

“This is about Sadie. Nothing else matters right now.”

The words were hard, cutting, carving out what was left of my heart. But I couldn’t argue. He was right. Our daughter came first. Whatever was left of us—if anything—would have to wait.

He pulled out his phone, pressing a number to dial. “Travis? We’re ready.” A pause followed while Lachlan listened. “Good. We’ll call in two minutes.”

Two minutes. My chest tightened, lungs forgetting how to expand properly.

Lachlan turned back to me, his expression clinical. Like I was a witness he needed to prep, not the woman who'd shared his bed last night. "When he asks about the watch, tell him I got it wet doing dishes and we're letting it dry out. Meanwhile, you'll call more often with updates. Got it?"

I nodded, throat too tight for words.

"Be convincing. He needs to believe everything is fine, that you're still his good little spy." The bitterness in his voice made me flinch. "Can you do that?"

"Yes." The word came out as barely a whisper.

"Tell him that we're in a tizzy after last night's debacle and that I mentioned focusing all our efforts east of town. That we're positive they're working out of Billings and want to focus our efforts in that direction."

"Okay."

"Good. Sit down. You need to sound normal, not like you're about to panic."

I sank onto the couch, legs unsteady. The cushions felt wrong now, like they belonged to someone else's life.

Lachlan sat on the coffee table facing me, close enough that our knees almost touched. Close enough that I could see the pain he was trying to hide behind determination.

"Breathe," he ordered. "In through your nose, out through your mouth. That's it."

My hands wouldn't stop shaking. Violent tremors that started in my fingers and worked their way up my arms. He noticed—of course he noticed, he noticed

everything—and covered them with his own. The touch wasn't gentle, wasn't comforting. Just steady. Practical. His hands were warm and solid, callused from work, familiar in a way that made my chest ache.

“You can do this,” he said, his voice softer now. “For Sadie.”

For Sadie. I could do anything for her. Walk through fire. Sell my soul. Pretend my heart wasn't shattered beyond repair.

“Okay, it's time.”

I dialed Ray's number with fumbling fingers, nearly dropping the phone twice. Speaker on. The dial tone seemed impossibly loud in the quiet room. One ring. Two. My heart hammered against my ribs hard enough to hurt.

“About fucking time,” Ray snarled before I could speak. The sound of his voice made bile rise in my throat. “What the hell is going on? I haven't gotten any info from the watch in hours.”

“The watch stopped working.” I forced my voice steady, apologetic but not panicked. I'd learned long ago that showing fear to Ray was like bleeding in shark-infested waters. “Lachlan was doing dishes and forgot to take it off. Got it completely soaked.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? That was expensive equipment!”

“I know, I'm sorry.” My voice cracked slightly, and Lachlan squeezed my hands. A reminder. Stay strong. “He feels terrible about it. We're letting it dry out. Hopefully then it will be fine.”

Lachlan nodded encouragement, his dark eyes never leaving my face. Even now,

even hating me, he was my anchor.

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“Hopefully,” Ray repeated, skepticism dripping from the word like poison. “It’s like you don’t ever want to see your daughter again, do you?”

“No, I do. You know I do. I’ll call more often until it’s working again. I can get you information the old-fashioned way. Like before.”

“You better. I’m running a business here, not a charity. That watch was how I stayed ahead of your boyfriend’s operations.”

Boyfriend. The word made me want to laugh hysterically. Lachlan wasn’t my boyfriend. He was the love of my life whom I’d betrayed in the worst possible way. He was the father of my children who’d never trust me again. He was everything I’d ever wanted and could never have.

“I know,” I managed. “I promise, I’ll make it up to you. Actually, I was going to call today anyway. Lachlan mentioned something about focusing efforts on the east side of town, closer to Billings. They’re sure that’s where the base of operations is.”

Ray chuckled. “East side. Law enforcement has always been, and will always be, dumb as dirt. What else?”

At least he seemed to be buying it.

“That’s all I have so far, but there’s supposed to be a meeting tomorrow. I’ll find out more then.”

“You better. Because if I think for one second that you’re trying to play me, Piper,

there will be consequences. You know what's at stake here."

My whole body went cold. Beside me, Lachlan's jaw clenched so hard I could hear his teeth grind.

"I know," I whispered. "Please, Ray. Can I see her? Just a photo? It's been so long?—"

"No." The word was flat, cruel, designed to hurt. "You get photos when you earn them. And lately, you haven't been earning shit."

"Please—" My voice broke completely. "She's my baby. I just need to know she's okay. Need to see her face?—"

"Stop begging. It's pathetic." I could hear the smile in his voice, that particular tone that meant he was enjoying this. "You'll get what you deserve when you prove you're still useful. Fix this watch situation, get me real intel, and maybe I'll consider it."

Tears burned down my cheeks. Lachlan's face had gone dangerously still, the kind of stillness that preceded violence. His whole body was coiled tight, ready to explode.

"Yes, Ray."

"Call me tomorrow night. And, Piper? Don't disappoint me again. You know I don't give third chances."

The threat hung in the air like smoke. Then the line went dead.

I dropped the phone like it had burned me, wrapping my arms around myself. My whole body shook now, violent tremors I couldn't control. The taste of blood filled

my mouth—I'd bitten my tongue again.

Lachlan immediately called Travis, his movements sharp and efficient.

“Did you get it?”

Travis's voice came through the speaker, triumphant. “Got him. He's using a tower near Whitehall. It's a start.”

Whitehall. The name hit like a physical blow. Less than two hours away. My daughter had been less than two hours away this entire time. While I'd been sleeping in Lachlan's bed, while I'd been cooking dinner and taking walks and pretending to build a life, she'd been right there. Close enough to reach but completely out of my grasp.

“How many more calls?” Lachlan asked.

“Two should do it. Each call helps me narrow down the area. With two more, I can pinpoint him within a few houses.”

“Good. We'll make that happen.”

“I'll be ready. Also, I've modified the watch. Should have it to you within the hour.”

Lachlan ended the call and stood abruptly, putting distance between us.

“Two more calls,” I said, the reality of it crushing. “Two more times when I have to keep pretending everything's fine while Sadie?—”

“While Sadie stays alive,” Lachlan finished harshly. “She's alive. That's the most important thing. We can't move until we know exactly where she is. If we spook Ray,

he'll take off and take her with him. Or worse."

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Worse. The word conjured images I couldn't let myself see. Ray was capable of anything when cornered. I'd seen what he'd done to people who'd crossed him over the years.

No. I couldn't think about that or I'd never be able to function.

"I'll do whatever it takes," I said, my voice stronger now. "Whatever you need me to do. However many calls, however many lies. I'll do it all."

Lachlan studied me for a long moment. In the lamplight, I could see the exhaustion written in every line of his face. When had he last slept?

"Next time, you'll call him with more false intel about our operations focusing on the east side. We'll make sure it's believable. Talk about increased patrols, maybe mention a tip we got about a warehouse out that way."

"I can do that."

"Travis will have the modified watch here soon. I'll wear it whenever I'm home so Ray thinks it's working again when it gets 'fixed.' The transmission will be controlled—he'll only hear what we want him to hear."

The planning helped, gave me something to focus on besides the ache in my chest. Besides the way Lachlan looked through me instead of at me. Besides the memory of how he'd looked at me this morning, like I was his whole world.

"What happens after we find her?" I asked, even though I already knew. "After we

get Sadie back?”

His expression shuttered completely, those warm brown eyes going cold as winter ground. “That’s a conversation for later.”

Prison. He meant prison. I’d confessed to aiding trafficking operations. There would be consequences. A trial. Sentencing. Orange jumpsuits and concrete cells and visiting hours where my children—if I was lucky—might come see me through thick glass.

But as long as they were safe, as long as they were together and away from Ray, I could handle whatever came next. I’d handle it the way I’d handled everything else—one day at a time, one breath at a time, holding on to the memory of their faces.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, the words completely inadequate. “I’m so sorry for all of it.”

“Don’t.” The word cracked like lightning. “We’re not doing this now. Right now, you’re the mother of my children and the key to getting Sadie back. That’s all.”

That’s all. Two words that shattered what was left of my heart.

Caleb started fussing in his bouncer, little whimpers escalating toward real cries. I moved to get him, but Lachlan was already there, lifting him and cradling him to his chest.

The contrast hurt—his infinite gentleness with Caleb, his arctic coldness with me.

“I’ll watch him,” Lachlan said, settling Caleb against his shoulder. “You should get some rest. You look ready to collapse.”

I probably did. I could feel the exhaustion in my bones, the kind that went deeper than physical tiredness. Soul exhaustion. Heart exhaustion. The kind that came from carrying impossible weight for too long.

“I can’t sleep. Not when she’s?—”

“Then shower. Eat something. Do whatever you need to do to be functional when we need you to talk to Ray again.” He swayed slightly, the automatic motion of a parent soothing a fussy baby. Caleb settled immediately, tiny fist clutching Lachlan’s collar. “We both need to be clearheaded for this.”

I stood on unsteady legs, pausing at the stairs. “Thank you. For not giving up on her. For helping even though you hate me now.”

Something flickered across his face—pain, maybe, or regret. “I don’t hate you, Piper.”

“You should.” I hated myself.

“Maybe. But what I should feel and what I do feel are two different things.” He turned away, focusing on Caleb, but not before I caught the raw emotion in his eyes. “Go rest. Be ready to get our daughter back.”

Our daughter. Even now, even after everything, he claimed her. Claimed both of them. Claimed the family I’d destroyed before it had a chance to truly begin.

I’d do anything to get Sadie back. Play any role, tell any lie, sacrifice whatever was left of my soul. She was out there—close enough to reach but still impossibly far away.

Lachlan and the Warrior Security team would find her. Would bring her home where

she belonged. And whatever happened to me after that—prison, losing custody, Lachlan's eternal hatred—would be worth it to hold her one more time.

To tell her I loved her. That I'd never stopped fighting for her. That every betrayal, every lie, every piece of my soul I'd sold had been for her.

To tell her goodbye.

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Because that's what this would be. Even if we got her back—when we got her back—I'd lose her again. Lose both of them. But this time, at least they'd be together. This time, they'd be safe.

This time, they'd have their father to protect them in all the ways I'd failed.

### Chapter 28

Lachlan

The watch felt heavier on my wrist than it had before. Not physically—Travis had done something to the internals that actually made it lighter—but the weight of deception pressed down with every tick of the second hand.

I sat at my desk, Deputy Martinez across from me going through routine paperwork while I carefully planted seeds for Ray Matthews to harvest. Martinez was in on this, knew to ask just enough questions to make it feel as realistic as possible.

“This Billings situation is going to be a nightmare,” I said, letting exhaustion color my voice. “DEA wants us to provide six deputies for their operation tomorrow night. Six. That's half my department.”

Martinez looked up from his reports. “Six? Sheriff, that'll leave us stretched pretty thin here.”

“I know.” I shuffled papers, making sure the watch faced the right direction—Travis had been specific about optimal transmission angles. “But after last night's

clusterfuck, we need to show federal support. Make nice with the big boys.”

“What about regular patrols?”

“We’ll have to cut them back. Focus on the town center, leave the outskirts to state police if they can spare anyone.” The lie tasted bitter, but I sold it with a frustrated sigh. “Which they probably can’t since they’re also supporting this Billings thing. Somebody’s boss wants some answers.”

Martinez shook his head. “Understandable.”

“I fucked up everything last night, but hopefully this gets me out of hot water.” I let my voice drop like I was sharing classified information. Which I was, in a way. Just not real classified information. “Evidently, this intel is solid. And honestly, it makes more sense that these traffickers would be moving closer to Billings. Want some of that big-city action.”

That was the opposite of true with Ray and his crew. He was actually smart enough to stay out of the cities. Hopefully we were feeding his ego.

“Yeah, good point.”

“And evidently, our ‘local knowledge’ is invaluable to the feds.” I made air quotes, playing the part of frustrated small-town sheriff being pushed around by federal agencies. Not hard, considering how often it actually happened. “Meeting’s at four to coordinate. I’ll probably be there until late.”

Travis had crafted this narrative carefully. Plausible enough to be believed, specific enough to be actionable. Ray would hear about a major operation pulling resources east toward Billings, leaving Garnet Bend’s edges vulnerable. Like dangling meat in front of a hungry wolf.

Martinez gathered his papers. “Well, if you need me to pull a double shift?—”

“No.” I gave him a thumbs-up. “Save your energy. If this goes sideways like last night, we’ll all be pulling doubles for a week, dealing with the fallout.”

“Okay. I’ll catch you later.”

After he left, I walked to the break room, continuing the performance. Jenny sat at the small table, eating a lunch salad while scrolling through her phone. She was also in on this.

“Any word from the mayor about overtime budgets?” I asked, pouring coffee that had probably been sitting since morning. The bitterness matched my mood.

“He’s not happy about the Billings operation,” Jenny said without looking up. “Wants to know why federal agencies can’t use their own people.”

“Because they need bodies, and we’re convenient.” I took a sip, grimaced at the burned taste. “Tell him I’ll have a full report after tomorrow night. Assuming I’m not in Billings until dawn, dealing with their mess.”

Jenny finally looked up, concern creasing her features. “You look exhausted, Lachlan. When’s the last time you got a full night’s sleep?”

She was going off script. I knew she was actually concerned.

I hadn’t slept since I’d learned I had a daughter being held hostage. But I just shrugged. “Comes with the territory. Just keep the coffee coming, and I’ll survive.”

I headed back to my office, each conversation carefully crafted to paint a specific picture. Big operation. Resources stretched thin. Local law enforcement distracted

and overwhelmed. By the time I locked my door and slumped in my chair, I felt like I'd run a marathon.

My personal phone buzzed with a text from Travis.

Signal strong. He's listening.

Good.

Let him listen. Let him think he had us figured out.

The drive home took forever, each mile feeling like ten. I'd maintained the charade all day—meetings about the fake Billings operation, calls to state police “coordinating” resources, even a staged argument with the DEA liaison about jurisdiction. All performed for an audience of one.

The house felt different when I walked in. Tenser. Piper sat at the kitchen table with papers spread in front of her, Caleb in his bouncer beside her. She looked up when I entered, and the mix of hope and fear in her eyes felt like a punch to the gut.

“Hey,” I said, setting my keys on the counter with deliberate casualness. I pointed to my watch.

“Hey.” Her voice stayed steady, but I caught the tremor in her hands as she shuffled papers. “Dinner’s in the oven. Should be ready in twenty minutes.”

Normal. We were playing normal while my watch transmitted every word. While Ray Matthews listened to his daughter pretend everything was fine.

“Sounds good. I’m going to change real quick.”

In the bedroom, I pulled off my uniform shirt, movements deliberately normal. No rushing. No tension. Just a tired sheriff coming home after a long day.

When I came back downstairs, Piper had moved to the stove, stirring something that smelled like the chicken she'd made our first week together. Back when I'd thought we were building something real.

Maybe we had been. Maybe we still were. Just with more complications than either of us had imagined.

"Find anything interesting in those papers?" I asked, nodding toward the mess on the table.

She turned, wooden spoon in hand. "Actually, yes." Her voice carried just the right amount of forced casual interest. We'd rehearsed this part. "I was organizing your home office—hope that's okay—and found some logistics reports in that bottom drawer."

"Logistics reports?" I moved closer, playing my part. "Those should be at the station."

"That's what I thought. But they were mixed in with those old training manuals." She bit her lip, a gesture that looked nervous but I knew was calculated. We'd planned every beat of this conversation. "I didn't read them thoroughly, just noticed they had delivery schedules for evidence transport. Thought you should know in case they're important."

"Show me."

She led me to the table, pointing out documents Travis had crafted with surgical precision. Real forms, real protocols, but with crucial alterations. Schedules that showed evidence transport moving through specific routes at specific times. Routes that left other areas unmonitored.

“These are from last month,” I said, frowning at the papers. “Must have grabbed them by mistake when I was bringing work home.” I shuffled through them, making sure the watch caught every angle. “Good thing you found them. These show our evidence transport schedule for the next quarter. Can’t have these floating around.”

“The routes look pretty set,” Piper observed, finger tracing paths on the map. “Every Tuesday and Thursday, same times.”

“Budget cuts,” I muttered. “Can’t vary routes when we can barely afford gas. Though, with half the department in Billings tomorrow night, even these routes will be skeleton crews.”

There. The final piece. Ray would hear about the Billings operation, the evidence transport schedules, the skeleton crews. A perfect storm of opportunity for someone looking to move illegal goods through our territory.

“Would you mind taking Caleb out for a little walk while I’m finishing dinner? I’ve been cooped up inside today, and I like for him to get a little fresh air.”

“Take my buddy for a walk?” I grinned down at Caleb in the bouncing chair. “Of course.”

I talked out loud for a couple minutes like I was getting everything ready for the walk, then switched the button Travis had added on the watch so it wouldn’t transmit. I nodded to her. Nothing was going out to Ray to the watch now.

She grabbed the burner phone, and I moved to lean against the counter where I could see her face. We’d decided I should be present but not hovering—let Ray think Piper had some privacy while still allowing me to hear both sides.

The phone rang three times before Ray’s voice filled our kitchen through the speaker.

“About time you called.” No greeting. No warmth. Just immediate irritation.

“Sorry. It’s been busy here.” Piper’s free hand gripped the edge of the table, knuckles white. “I don’t have much time. Lachlan is out for a walk with Caleb. Is the watch working okay?”

“Yes.” I could hear the smile in his voice. The satisfaction. “Very productive. We’ve got a lot of information.”

“Good.” Her voice stayed steady, but her other hand trembled. “It looks like there’s some sort of big movement out toward Billings.”

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Ray chuckled, the sound making my skin crawl. “Well, that’s what happens when the feds stick their noses in. Local cops dance to their tune, leave their own territory unprotected.”

“Speaking of which,” Piper said, glancing at the papers spread across our table. “I found something today you might want to know about.”

“Oh?”

She described the logistics reports, voice carefully neutral. I watched her face as she fed information to the man holding our daughter hostage, saw the pain she was hiding, the desperate hope that this performance would bring Sadie home.

“Evidence transport schedules,” Ray mused. “Interesting. And it sounded like tomorrow night half the department will be gone?”

“That’s what Lachlan said. Six deputies plus him, all outside of Billings.”

“Leaving just a skeleton crew for the whole county.” His satisfaction was palpable even through the phone. “You did good, sweetheart. Real good.”

“Dad?” Piper’s voice cracked slightly. “Can I...can I see her? It’s been days since the last photo.”

Silence stretched, broken only by our breathing and the buzz of the connection.

“Please,” she whispered. “Just for a few seconds. I just need to know she’s okay.”

“She’s fine. Growing like a weed. Starting to babble more.”

“She is?” Tears rolled down Piper’s cheeks.

“Baby nonsense. Though, she’s got opinions, I’ll give her that. Yells when she doesn’t get her bottle fast enough.”

Piper laughed through her tears, the sound breaking my heart.

“Listen, I’ve got business to handle. Big shipment moving tomorrow night while your sheriff’s playing soldier in Billings.”

My pulse quickened. This was what we’d been waiting for.

“Shipment?” Piper kept her voice carefully neutral.

“Nothing you need to worry about. Just some inventory redistribution. That warehouse on Elm, east side of town. The old Brackenridge building. Perfect location now that the cops will be busy elsewhere.”

The Brackenridge warehouse. I knew it—abandoned for three years, isolated, multiple exit routes. Perfect for moving illegal goods. And now we knew when and where.

“Be careful,” Piper said softly. “I can’t afford to have you get caught.”

“Glad you’re finally starting to see how it really is. You keep doing your part, maybe I’ll bring Sadie by for a visit soon. Let you see her in person.”

Piper’s whole body went rigid. “Really?”

“Maybe. Depends on how tomorrow night goes. Keep your phone on.”

The line went dead. Piper stared at the phone in her hand, setting it down with shaking fingers. She moved to the sink, gripping the edge hard enough to turn her knuckles white.

“We know where he’ll be,” I said quietly. “We know when.”

She nodded but didn’t turn around. Couldn’t face me yet. The performance had cost her.

My phone buzzed. Travis.

“It’s Travis,” I told her, answering immediately. “Tell me you got something.”

“I got something.” His voice carried rare excitement. “That call gave me the final triangulation I needed. Cross-referencing with signal patterns from the past week, I’ve narrowed Ray’s location to a three-block radius in Whitehall.”

“What sort of area is it?”

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“Neighborhood. Smaller, older houses, lower rent, but not very close together. Sort of place where people mind their own business. Which I’m sure would be just what Ray was looking for.”

“That’s where she is,” Piper said, still facing the sink. “That’s where he’s keeping Sadie.”

“Most likely,” Travis agreed. “By tomorrow night, I’ll have an exact house.”

“Good.” This was all coming together. “We locate Sadie, extract her while Ray’s at the warehouse, then hit the warehouse before anyone can warn him. Clean sweep.”

It sounded simple when I said it like that. But nothing about this was simple. Too many variables, too many things that could go wrong.

“I’ll coordinate with Hunter,” I said. “Get the teams ready for tomorrow night. We’ll have to divide and conquer.”

“Lachlan.” Travis’s voice carried unusual emotion. “We only get one shot at this. If Ray suspects anything?—”

“He won’t,” I said firmly. “We’re going to get my daughter back. And then we’re going to put that bastard away forever.”

After Travis hung up, I watched Piper mechanically remove dinner from the oven. Her movements were precise, controlled, but I could see the tremor in her hands.

“I’m scared,” she said without looking at me.

“Me too.”

She nodded, portioning out the meal with careful precision. We sat across from each other at the table, Caleb between us in his bouncer, and ate in silence. The plan was in motion. Tomorrow night, everything would change. Either we’d have both our children safe, or...

I couldn’t think about the alternative.

## Chapter 29

Piper

The green glow from Caleb’s night-light cast strange shadows across the walls. I stood over his crib, my hands gripping the rail hard enough to leave indentations in my palms. It was 3:17 a.m. I’d been standing here for twenty minutes, maybe thirty, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest.

Twenty-four hours. That’s all that separated me from either getting Sadie back or losing her forever.

My legs trembled from exhaustion, but I couldn’t make myself move. Couldn’t risk missing a single breath, a single twitch of his tiny fingers. What if this was the last night I got to watch him sleep? What if tomorrow everything went wrong and I never?—

“Can’t sleep either?”

Lachlan’s voice came from the doorway, soft enough not to wake Caleb. I didn’t turn

around. Didn't trust my face not to betray the spiral of terror that had been building since dinner.

"I keep thinking about all the ways this could go wrong." The words came out raw, scraped from a throat tight with suppressed tears. "What if Ray figures it out? What if he runs with her before your team can stop him? What if?—"

"Hey." His hand settled on my shoulder, warm and solid. "Look at me."

I shook my head. If I looked at him, if I saw the determination in his eyes, I might actually believe this could work. And hope was dangerous. Hope was what got you killed in my world.

"Piper." His other hand found my waist, gently turning me to face him. "We've gone over the plan a dozen times. Travis has Ray's location narrowed down. Hunter's team is ready. We know where Ray will be tomorrow night, and we know Sadie won't be with him."

"You don't know him like I do." My voice cracked. "He's paranoid. Smart. He's survived this long because he always has a backup plan. What if he takes her with him to the warehouse? What if he has someone watching her who'll hurt her if he doesn't check in?"

The possibilities had been eating at me all day, each scenario worse than the last. Ray with a gun to Sadie's head. Ray's car careening off a mountain road rather than be taken alive. Ray disappearing into the night with my daughter, and me never knowing if she was alive or dead or?—

"Stop." Lachlan cupped my face, thumbs brushing away tears I hadn't realized were falling. "You're torturing yourself with what-ifs."

“I can’t help it. She’s so little, Lachlan. She won’t understand what’s happening. She’ll be scared and crying and—” A sob tore from my chest, loud enough that we both froze, watching Caleb for signs of stirring.

He slept on, one tiny fist pressed against his cheek.

Lachlan moved to the crib, lifting our son with practiced ease. Caleb made a soft sound of protest before settling against his father’s chest, still deeply asleep. Then Lachlan took my hand, leading me to the rocking chair in the corner.

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“Hold him for a second,” he said quietly.

Lachlan carefully transferred Caleb to my arms, then before I knew what he had planned, scooped both of us into his own arms and sat the three of us into the rocking chair. He pulled me against his chest, creating a nest of warmth with Caleb secure between us.

“Better?” His breath stirred my hair.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. Caleb’s weight, his baby-powder scent, the solid presence of Lachlan behind me—it grounded me in a way nothing else could.

“I need to tell you something,” Lachlan said after a long moment. “I understand now. Why you did what you did.”

My whole body went rigid. “Lachlan?”

“No, let me finish.” His arms tightened around us. “When I first found out about the watch, about you feeding information to Ray, I was so angry. Felt betrayed in a way I couldn’t even articulate. But since I’ve found out Sadie is out there...” He paused, and I felt him swallow hard. “If someone had Caleb, if the price of his safety was betraying everyone and everything, I’d do it. Without hesitation. Without apology.”

“Even if people died because of it?” The question slipped out before I could stop it—the guilt that had been eating me alive given voice.

“I’d hate myself for it. It would destroy something in me. But yes.” His honesty was

brutal, unflinching. “That’s what parents do. We protect our children, even when the cost is our souls.”

Fresh tears spilled down my cheeks, landing on Caleb’s sleeper. “I tried to minimize the damage. Tried to give Ray just enough to keep him satisfied without... But people still got hurt. Kids overdosed because I couldn’t stop the drugs from getting through.”

“That’s on Ray, not you.” His voice held conviction I couldn’t feel. “You were an unwilling participant, forced into an impossible situation. The guilt belongs to the man who threatened a baby to get compliance.”

I wanted to believe him. Wanted to accept the absolution he was offering. But I’d lived with Ray’s evilness too long to think in such clear lines of victim and perpetrator.

“What happens after?” The question I’d been afraid to ask tumbled out. “After we get Sadie back, after Ray’s arrested—what happens to me?”

He was quiet long enough that I knew he’d been thinking about it too. “I’ll talk to the district attorney. Explain the situation. The duress you were under. The circumstances are extreme. Kidnapping, threat of violence against an infant, sustained psychological torture—any decent defense attorney can make a strong case.”

I hugged Caleb tighter.

“That’s a bridge we’ll cross when we get there.” He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “Right now, focus on tomorrow. On getting Sadie back.”

“Will you—” My voice broke. “If I have to go away, will you keep them together? Promise me they’ll grow up together.”

“Piper—”

“Promise me.” I twisted to look at him, needing to see his face. “Whatever happens to me, promise they’ll have each other. And you. Promise they’ll be okay.”

His jaw worked, emotion flickering across his features in the dim light. “I promise. But we’re going to fight like hell to keep you with them too.”

I wanted to argue, to make him understand that my freedom was the least important part of this equation. But exhaustion was pulling at me, made worse by the warmth of his body and Caleb’s comforting weight.

“Emma and Evelyn are going to watch Caleb tomorrow,” he said, returning to practicalities. “He’ll be at the ranch, completely safe. Lucas will have security there too, just in case.”

In case Ray demanded to speak to me. In case he got suspicious. In case everything went sideways and they needed me to try talking him down. I nodded, trying to swallow past the lump in my throat.

“It’s just a precaution. The plan is solid.”

The plan. I’d memorized every detail. While Ray was at the warehouse supervising his shipment, one team—Beckett and Lucas—would extract Sadie from wherever Ray was keeping her. Once she was safe—only once she was confirmed safe—the second team would move on the warehouse. Clean. Precise. No room for error.

“What if she doesn’t remember me?” The fear slipped out, small and painful. “It’s been three months. That’s forever in baby time.”

“Then you’ll remind her.” His hand found mine where it rested on Caleb’s back.

“Every day, every minute, until she knows again that you’re her mama and you love her more than life itself.”

The rocking chair creaked softly as he set us in motion, the familiar rhythm soothing. Outside, the world was still dark, but I could feel the approaching dawn like a countdown timer in my chest.

“Try to sleep,” he murmured. “Tomorrow’s going to be long.”

“I can’t. My brain won’t stop.”

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“Then just rest. Just be here with us.”

So I did. Closed my eyes and focused on the immediate—Caleb’s breathing, Lachlan’s heartbeat against my back, the gentle sway of the chair. Tomorrow would come with all its dangers and possibilities. But right now, in this moment, I had one of my children safe in my arms and their father holding us both.

It wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t be enough until Sadie was here too. But it was something to hold on to throughout the terrifying hours ahead.

The room lightened incrementally, black fading to gray fading to the pale gold of dawn. Neither of us moved. Neither of us spoke. We just held our son and each other while the last night became the day that would change everything.

“It’s time,” Lachlan finally said as full sunlight painted the nursery walls.

I nodded, pressing one last kiss to Caleb’s head. Time to hand him over to Emma’s and Evelyn’s care. Time to feed false information to Ray one last time. Time to pretend everything was normal while teams of highly trained men prepared to steal back what Ray had taken from me. From us.

Lachlan stood, helping me to my feet while I kept Caleb cradled against my chest. My legs had gone numb from sitting so long, pins and needles shooting through my feet. But I welcomed the pain. It meant I could still feel something besides the paralyzing terror that threatened to consume me.

“Whatever happens,” I said, meeting his eyes in the morning light, “thank you. For

believing me. For helping me get her back.”

He touched my cheek, the gesture achingly gentle. “We’re going to bring her home, Piper. Both of our children are going to sleep under this roof tomorrow night. I promise you that.”

I wanted to believe him. Wanted it with every fiber of my being. But I’d learned long ago that promises were just words, and words couldn’t stop bullets or change a desperate man’s actions.

Still, I nodded. Because what else could I do? Everything was in motion now. All the lies, all the betrayal, all the impossible choices—they’d all led to this day.

I prayed it would be enough.

## Chapter 30

Lachlan

The Brackenridge warehousesquatted against the darkness like a cancer on my county. Through my night vision, I watched shadows move behind grimy windows—real shadows this time, not the emptiness of my other failure. My knees ached from crouching behind the concrete barrier for the past forty minutes, but I barely noticed. Everything that mattered was happening two hours away in Whitehall.

“Visual confirmation on weapons movement,” Aiden reported through my earpiece. “Southeast corner, they’re loading crates. Long guns, military profile.”

I forced myself to focus on his words, on the operation in front of me. But my mind kept drifting to that house on Cedar Lane where my daughter was being held a couple hours from here. Beckett and Lucas would be in position by now, Jude and Daniel

with them—four of the most capable operators I knew. Former Navy SEALs who'd extracted assets from places that made suburban Whitehall look like Disneyland.

They were experienced. I trusted them. But trusting them and being there myself were tearing me in different directions.

“Confirmed eight heat signatures inside,” Martinez added. “Two on the ground floor, six up top. Possibly more in the basement.”

Eight armed traffickers, minimum. We had the numbers—barely. But half my trusted people were in Whitehall right now, moving on my daughter.

“All teams in position,” Hunter's voice cut through my spiral. “Ready on your signal.”

I pulled out my phone, angling it so the light wouldn't give away our position. Nothing from Beckett. It had been seventeen minutes since his last check-in:

In position. Surveillance active. Hold for my update.

Seventeen minutes of not knowing if my daughter was safe.

The grocery delivery confirmation had come through that afternoon. Travis had been monitoring multiple different areas of intel for final confirmation of which house Ray was keeping Sadie in, and when a grocery order was delivered to 847 Cedar Lane, we'd known. Formula, diapers, baby wipes—someone was caring for an infant at that address.

But confirming the location and successfully extracting a baby were vastly different operations. What if there were more guards than expected? What if they had orders to hurt her if law enforcement showed up? What if?—

“Movement at the loading dock,” Coop reported. “They’re picking up the pace.”

Through my scope, I watched two men carry a heavy crate from a panel truck into the warehouse. The way they moved—careful but urgent—screamed weapons. Another man followed with smaller packages, wrapped tight in plastic. The kind of packaging I’d seen too many times in drug busts. They were moving everything tonight—guns and drugs, just like Ray had told Piper they would.

“Looks like they’re moving both hardware and product,” I said into my comms. “Confirms our intel about dual trafficking.”

“Copy that,” Hunter responded. “Makes sense. Same routes, same protection, double the profit.”

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“What’s the holdup?” The question came through the comms from someone I didn’t recognize. Had to be DEA.

Agent Kowalski had materialized at our staging area three hours ago with his merry band of federal agents in tow. Somehow he’d gotten wind of our operation—or had enough suspicions that something was going on to make his presence known. He’d threatened to shut everything down, call in federal oversight, make my life hell unless his team got a piece of the action.

I’d agreed because I needed bodies. We were stretched dangerously thin between the warehouse assault and the Whitehall extraction. But I hadn’t told him about Sadie. That wasn’t information he needed, and I didn’t trust him with my daughter’s life.

“We wait for my signal,” I said into the comms, keeping my voice level despite the acid burning in my gut.

Any other night, stopping this shipment would’ve been my only priority. Tonight, it was a distant second.

I checked my phone again. Nothing.

“This is taking too long,” another DEA voice muttered. “They could be destroying evidence. Protocol says?—”

“Protocol says the ranking local officer calls the breach,” I cut him off. “That’s me. We hold.”

Sweat trickled down my back despite the cool night air. Every instinct screamed at me to move, to do something, to be in two places at once. But all I could do was wait and trust the men I'd sent to save my daughter.

Movement to my left made me turn. Kowalski approached in a tactical crouch, his movements precise despite his obvious frustration. He dropped beside me and deliberately switched off his comms.

"We need to talk off official channels," he said, voice low but carrying an edge. "My team's been in position for twenty-three minutes. We have a clear visual of criminal activity. Active trafficking in progress. What exactly are we waiting for?"

"Final confirmation before we move."

"Confirmation of what?" He shifted closer, and I could smell coffee on his breath. "Intel verification? Because I can see weapons with my own eyes. Are you waiting for them to finish loading so we get a bigger bust? Because that's risky as hell."

I kept my eyes on the warehouse, watching shadows move. "Just following protocol."

"Bullshit." The word came out sharp. "I've run dozens of operations. This isn't protocol—this is hesitation. If you've lost your nerve after last week's failure?"

"I haven't lost anything." The words came out harder than intended.

"Then give the damn order." His hand moved toward his radio. "Look, Calloway, I respect what you're trying to do here. Small-town sheriff, big federal case. I get it. But if you can't make the call, step aside. No shame in admitting you're in over your head."

The condescension in his voice made my jaw clench. This federal prick had no idea

what was at stake.

“I’ll make the call when it’s time,” I said.

“Time was ten minutes ago.” He pulled out his radio. “This is exactly why federal oversight exists. When locals freeze up?—”

“Put the radio down, Kowalski.”

How far was I willing to take this? Knock the other man unconscious? Pull my weapon on him?

Both.

All I knew was that we could not breach this building until we had word Sadie was safe. If we went in before that, one call from Ray could cost my daughter her life.

“Listen very carefully,” I said, keeping my voice low enough that our comms wouldn’t pick it up. “I’ve got operational command here. Me. Not you. Not your bosses. Me. We move when I say move, not one second before. You want to write me up after, fine.”

He reached for his radio, and I shook my head, menace in my eyes. “If you have anyone move before I give the signal, I will arrest you for interfering with a criminal investigation.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me. All my men will say you attempted to override local command during a joint operation.” I had no doubt every single one of my team would back me up on that. “Your bosses might eventually sort it out, but by then, you’ll have spent a night

in my jail explaining why you blew a major trafficking bust.”

His face went from red to purple. “You have no idea who you’re fucking with.”

“Neither do you.” I picked up his radio, holding it out handle-first. Not surrendering—establishing dominance. “We can do this together, following proper command structure. Or I can have Deputy Martinez escort you to an observation point where you can watch but not interfere. Choose.”

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Around us, I could sense the tension. If Kowalski went for his radio, I wasn't sure I could stop him before he called for the breach.

My phone buzzed.

The soft vibration hit like an electric shock. Everything else—Kowalski, the warehouse, the operation—faded to background noise. I pulled it out with hands that suddenly felt clumsy.

Beckett:

Package secured. She's safe.

My heart shuddered in my chest. I had to read it twice before the words sank in. Safe. Sadie was safe.

A photo loaded below the text. My daughter—my daughter—in Beckett's arms. Dark hair sticking up in tiny tufts. Eyes wide with confusion but unharmed.

My knees almost buckled. She was real. She was safe. She was ours.

"What is it?" Kowalski asked, anger momentarily replaced by curiosity.

I slipped the phone back into my pocket, squaring my shoulders. Everything I'd been holding back—fear, rage, desperate hope—crystallized into purpose. "You're about to get your wish. Let's do this."

“All units,” I said into my comms, voice steady and sure. “This is Calloway. We are green light. I repeat, we are green light. Breach on my mark.”

The change was instant. Weapons came up. Bodies coiled for action. Whatever questions Kowalski had were swept away by the immediacy of the moment.

“Remember your sectors,” I continued. “We need arrests, not bodies. But protect yourselves and each other. These people won’t hesitate to kill cops.”

I looked at Kowalski, offering my hand. After a long beat, he shook it.

“Ready to do some good?” I asked.

He nodded, professionalism sliding back into place. “DEA teams ready on your signal.”

“Hunter, you’re leading Alpha team through the north. Coop, Bravo takes the loading dock. I’m Charlie team through the south entrance. Kowalski, your teams provide overwatch and cut off escape routes.”

“Copy.”

“Copy.”

“Roger that.”

I raised my hand, watching the warehouse through night vision. In Whitehall, my daughter was safe in Beckett’s arms. Here, justice was about to rain down.

“All units—execute, execute, execute!”

The night exploded. Flash-bangs detonated with chest-thumping percussion. Doors splintered under breaching charges. Teams flowed into the warehouse like water through a broken dam.

“Contact front!” Gunfire erupted—the sharp crack of hostile weapons followed by the controlled response of our teams.

I moved with Charlie team through the south entrance. The warehouse interior was a maze of stacked crates and industrial equipment. Muzzle flashes strobed in the darkness. The acrid smell of gunpowder mixed with motor oil and rust.

“Moving left!” Martinez called out, his weapon tracking shadows.

A figure popped up from behind a forklift, rifle swinging toward us. Training took over. Front sight, center mass, squeeze. Two rounds. He folded, weapon clattering across concrete.

“Clear left!”

“Clear right!”

“Charlie advancing!”

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We pushed forward in practiced formation. The traffickers weren't expecting us. They'd assumed, like the other times, that they'd be given a warning if law enforcement was anywhere near.

Instead, they got overwhelming force from multiple directions. Their resistance was fierce but chaotic.

"Taking fire from the catwalk!" someone shouted.

I tracked up, caught movement against the ceiling. Suppressing fire sparked off metal railings while Martinez flanked left. The shooter focused on me, giving Martinez the angle. Single shot. The shooter tumbled from the catwalk, hitting crates on the way down.

"Hunter's hit!" Coop's voice cut through the chaos. "Southwest corner, second floor! Need medical!"

My chest tightened. Hunter down. Every instinct screamed at me to go to him, but that wasn't my job. Trust the team. Everyone had a role.

"Alpha copies, medical en route," someone confirmed.

We kept pushing. The ground floor was nearly clear, but automatic weapons fire from the second floor had multiple teams pinned.

"Heavy resistance upstairs," Kowalski reported. "Fortified positions. They want a fight. Let's give it to them."

Through the smoke and chaos, I could see the stairs. Getting up there would be brutal—narrow approach, no cover, defenders with height advantage.

“This is Martinez. Movement in the basement. Looks like they’re burning documents.”

Shit. Evidence destruction. “Take two men, secure that basement.”

“Copy.”

The firefight intensified. Muzzle flashes from the second floor looked like deadly strobe lights. We were taking cover behind anything solid—crates, equipment, concrete pillars.

“Can’t advance,” someone reported. “They’ve got the stairs zeroed.”

I found Kowalski behind a pillar, his team spread out around him. “Ideas?”

“Smoke and flank,” he said immediately. “My team can take the exterior fire escape, hit them from behind while you push the main stairs.”

Federal ego aside, the man knew tactics. “Do it.”

“All units, smoke out in thirty seconds. Masks on.” I pulled my gas mask into place, the world narrowing to the view through scratched lenses. “We push hard and end this.”

Smoke canisters flew. Gray clouds billowed through the warehouse, turning clear sight lines into blind fog. But through thermal imaging, human shapes glowed like ghosts.

“DEA moving exterior,” Kowalski reported.

“Charlie pushing stairs,” I confirmed.

We moved fast through the concealment. A defender fired blindly into smoke. I tracked his muzzle flash, put him down with controlled shots. Another tried to retreat. Martinez got him.

The smoke was chaos—shouting, running feet, blind gunfire. But chaos we controlled. We had communication, thermal imaging, discipline. They had panic.

I reached the second floor as Kowalski’s team breached from the fire escape. Caught between us, the remaining defenders crumbled. Some threw down weapons. Others made last stands that ended predictably.

“Clear!”

“Clear!”

“Second floor clear!”

As smoke dissipated, I saw what we’d fought for. Tables loaded with military weapons. M4 rifles. Squad automatic weapons. Cases of ammunition. And between the weapons—packages wrapped in plastic, scales, cutting agents. A full drug packaging operation alongside the weapons cache.

“Jesus Christ,” Kowalski breathed beside me. “This is everything. Guns and drugs in one location.”

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“Basement secured,” Martinez’s voice came through the comms, breathless but triumphant. “They only burned about half the documents. Rest is intact—shipping records for weapons, client lists for drug distribution, the whole network laid out. Sheriff, they were supplying half the state with fentanyl.”

The magnitude of it hit me. This wasn’t just moving product—this was a major distribution hub. The weapons would’ve armed gangs and militias. The fentanyl would’ve killed more teenagers like the college kid who’d overdosed.

“Hunter’s status?” I demanded.

“Stable and complaining,” Coop reported. “Vest caught one, thigh caught another. He’s more pissed about missing the fight than the holes.”

Relief flooded through me. Wounded but alive. We’d all go home tonight.

“Eight suspects in custody,” someone tallied. “Two deceased. No friendly casualties beyond Hunter.”

I stood among the captured weapons and drugs, watching suspects get cuffed and led away. I wasn’t sure where Ray Matthews was in all of this, but I’d find out. I wanted to talk to him myself. Wanted to see his face when he realized his leverage was gone.

But first, despite it going against protocol, I was going to text Piper. She deserved to know.

It’s done. Sadie is safe. Raid complete. Everyone’s coming home.

Then I forwarded Beckett's photo—our daughter with her “favorite uncle.”

Three dots appeared immediately. Piper was awake, waiting. Then:

Thank you

Two words that contained multitudes. Relief. Joy. Gratitude. Love. Everything we couldn't say yet but would, when both our children were safe under our roof.

“Hell of an operation, Sheriff,” Kowalski said, appearing at my elbow. His expression held genuine respect. “Sorry about before. Whatever you were waiting for—I'm going to trust it was important.”

“It was. A hostage situation off-site.”

Kowalski nodded. “Hostage safe?”

I nodded.

“Good. This bust is going to make careers,” he continued, gesturing at the weapons and drug tables. “Biggest trafficking bust in the region this year. The amount of fentanyl alone—we probably saved dozens of lives tonight. Kids who won't overdose because this poison won't hit the streets.”

He was right. Every package of fentanyl we'd seized was a potential overdose prevented. Every weapon was a shooting that wouldn't happen. But all I could think about was the photo on my phone—my daughter safe—and the woman waiting at home to hold her.

Outside, red and blue lights turned the warehouse into a discotheque of justice. Suspects were loaded into vehicles. Evidence teams arrived to catalog our haul. But I

only had one thought.

“Somebody take me to Ray Matthews. I want to talk to him.”

I wanted to look that bastard in the eye when I made sure he understood he would never threaten my family again.

## Chapter 31

Piper

The text message blurred through my tears. I read it again, then once more, my brain refusing to process what my eyes were seeing.

It's done. Sadie is safe. Raid complete. Everyone's coming home.

My knees gave out. The kitchen floor rushed up to meet me, cold tile shocking against my palms as I caught myself. The phone clutched to my chest, I curled into a ball and let the sobs tear through me.

Three months. Three months of phantom cries in the night, of reaching for a baby who wasn't there. Three months of my heart being ripped out fresh every single day.

A photo loaded below Lachlan's text. My hands shook so badly I nearly dropped the phone trying to open it.

Sadie.

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Dark hair sticking up in little clumps. Those wide, confused eyes—not scared, just bewildered by all the sudden activity. Beckett’s strong arms holding her like the precious cargo she was. Safe. Alive. Real.

The keening sound that escaped me didn’t sound human. Every bit of agony I’d been holding back, every tear I’d swallowed, every scream I’d suppressed—it all came pouring out on Lachlan’s kitchen floor.

My baby. My baby girl was coming home.

The phone rang, startling me. Evelyn’s name on the screen.

“Piper? Honey, we heard the operation went well.” Her voice was warm, careful. “Are you okay?”

“She’s safe.” The words came out broken, waterlogged. “Sadie’s safe.”

“Oh, honey. I’m so glad.” I could hear the smile in her voice, the genuine joy. “And before you ask, Caleb’s been perfect. Just went right back down to sleep after his bottle. Little man didn’t want to finish it—kept looking around like he was waiting for someone.”

Fresh tears spilled over. My son, waiting for his sister without even knowing it.

“I’ll be there soon,” I managed. “I need... I need to hold both of them tonight. I’m not sure when Beckett will be bringing Sadie.”

“Of course. Take your time. We’ll be here.”

I ended the call and struggled to my feet, legs still shaky. But that didn’t matter. Both my babies were safe.

The diaper bag sat by the door where I’d left it this morning. A lifetime ago. I grabbed it, checking for supplies even though Emma would have everything Caleb needed. Old habits. I’d need two of everything now. Two sets of bottles. Two?—

The back door opened.

“Lachlan?” I turned quickly. I hadn’t expected him back this quickly. I thought he would have?—

Ray stood in the doorway, gun already drawn.

My body went cold, then hot, then numb. Time slowed to a crawl as my brain tried to process what I was seeing. He looked like hell—clothes rumpled and stained with sweat, hair wild, eyes glittering with the kind of rage I’d learned to fear before I could properly walk.

“You betrayed me.” His voice was deadly quiet, more terrifying than any shout. “They took everything.”

Every survival instinct I’d developed over twenty-seven years kicked in at once. Don’t run—it triggers the predator response. Don’t show fear—he feeds on it. Don’t argue—it escalates his rage.

Just breathe. Think. Survive.

“Ray.” I kept my voice level, hands visible and still. The diaper bag slipped from my

fingers. “I thought you’d be?—”

“At the warehouse?” His laugh was broken glass. “I knew something didn’t feel right. I got out as soon as they hit it. Didn’t wait to see if we could overpower them like everyone else.”

“They took her.” He advanced into the kitchen, gun steady despite the tremor in his hands. “They took what’s mine.”

“Sadie was never yours.” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

The backhanded slap came fast, snapping my head to the side. Familiar pain bloomed across my cheek. But this time, instead of cowering, I felt something else.

Rage.

“Where did you do it?” Ray demanded, shoving me toward the living room. “Where did you spy on me? Where did you betray your own father?”

His words didn’t even make sense. I hadn’t spied on him; I’d spied for him. But evidently, Ray was beyond comprehending that.

“Lachlan’s office.” I pointed down the hall, trying to steer him away from the kitchen. Too many knives in there. Too many weapons he could grab if his gun wasn’t enough.

He forced me ahead of him, the gun barrel occasionally touching my spine. In the office, he went wild. Papers flew as he swept them from the desk. The computer monitor shattered when he drove the gun butt through it. Frame after frame of photos—Lachlan’s family, commendations, certificates—destroyed with vicious efficiency.

“Years.” He was ranting now, the controlled facade cracking. “Years of building something. Creating an empire. And you destroyed it all for what? For him?”

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Ray wasn't going to let me out of this alive. I knew that for a fact. If he couldn't control me, manipulate me, he would make sure I didn't live to celebrate it.

"Ray, you're too smart for them." I played to his ego, the one thing that might get me out of this. How long before Lachlan came home? "You got away. They don't have you."

"They have everything else!" He whirled on me, gun swinging wildly. "My people are probably singing right now, giving up every detail to save their own asses."

My phone was still in my pocket. Moving slowly, naturally, I shifted my hand while he destroyed Lachlan's desk chair. My fingers found the phone, and I glanced down at it, pressing the speed dial for Lachlan then putting it on mute. I stuffed the phone back in my pocket. I didn't know if the call went through at all or if Lachlan would pick up even if it did.

"Show me where else." Ray grabbed my arm again, dragging me from the office now that he'd destroyed it. "Show me where you whored yourself to him."

The word hit like another slap, but I kept my face neutral. Let him think he was in control. Let him think I was the same scared girl who'd never fought back.

Up the stairs, his breathing getting labored. The bedroom door stood open—bed still unmade from this morning, Lachlan's uniform shirt draped over the chair. The domestic normalcy of it seemed to enrage Ray further.

"Here?" He shoved me toward the bed. "Here's where you spread your legs for a

cop? Just like your mother, always choosing weakness.”

I positioned myself near the bathroom door. Possible escape route if I could get there. Ray was checking windows now, jerking back curtains like SWAT might come crashing through any second.

“They’re coming,” he muttered. “I can hear the sirens.”

There were no sirens. His paranoia was eating him alive, showing the cracks in his control.

“Your mother never understood either.” He wasn’t even looking at me now, gun waving as he talked to ghosts. “Had to teach her lessons. Had to make her see. But she was weak. Always weak.”

The front door opened downstairs.

“Piper? I’m home.”

Lachlan’s voice, normal and casual. He didn’t know. How could he?

Unless... The phone in my pocket. Had the call connected?

Ray moved faster than I’d expected, arm around my throat, gun pressed to my temple. He dragged me to the hallway, positioning us at the top of the stairs.

“The hero returns.” Ray’s voice dripped venom. “Come to save your lying whore?”

I saw Lachlan at the bottom of the stairs, still in tactical gear. His face went carefully blank as he took in the scene. His hand moved slowly to his weapon.

“Don’t!” Ray pressed the gun harder against my head. “You pull that gun, and she’s dead.”

“Okay.” Lachlan raised his hands, showing empty palms. “Let’s talk about this, Ray.”

“Talk?” Ray’s laugh vibrated through his chest into my back. “Now, he wants to talk. After destroying everything I built.”

“Tell him.” The gun shifted to my jaw. “Tell him everything you did. Every lie. Every betrayal. Tell him what kind of woman he’s been fucking. See if he wants to be with you then.”

“She doesn’t have to do that, Ray. I know all of it.” Lachlan shook his head, calm. “That’s why we were able to catch you. Because of Piper’s help. Because of her sacrifice.”

Ray’s arm tightened on my throat. “Shut up.”

“Your men have turned on you.” Lachlan took a slight step closer. “The guys that you left tonight in order to save yourself are now doing the same thing to save their skin. You’re going to jail, Ray. For the rest of your life if I have anything to do with it.”

The gun wavered for just a second. Ray’s shock was palpable.

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Another step. “It’s over. You lost.”

I felt it—the slight loosening of Ray’s grip as the reality hit him. His kingdom hadn’t just crumbled. It had been ransacked, pillaged, sold off piece by piece by the very people he’d trusted.

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“You poisoned Piper against me!” The gun swung toward Lachlan now. “She was mine! My legacy! My?—”

Twenty-seven years of programmed obedience shattered.

“I was never yours!”

The words erupted from somewhere deep, somewhere I’d kept locked and buried and silent for so long. Ray jerked back, genuinely stunned. I’d never raised my voice to him. Never fought back. Never defied.

“You destroyed everything good!” The dam broke completely. “Every birthday, every Christmas, every moment that should have been happy—you defiled it all! You beat us, terrorized us, turned our lives into hell, and for what? For your ego? For your pathetic little crimes?”

“You ungrateful?—”

“I was a child!” I twisted in his grip, not caring about the gun anymore. “A child who just wanted her father to love her! But you’re just a small, pathetic man who hurts people because it makes you feel big. What’s even worse is that you were going to carry on that tradition of pain and terror with your own grandchildren! You are a useless piece of shit, and no matter what happens from here on out, my father is dead to me!”

His face went purple. The gun swung back toward me, but his shock had made him sloppy. His grip was wrong, his stance off-balance.

A baby's giggle flooded the room. Sadie. Making her little baby noises that I'd know anywhere. I didn't know where it was coming from, then I heard Beckett say, "Aw, come on, now. You're ridiculously cute."

What? Beckett wasn't here.

The baby's laugh came again, and I realized the sound was coming from Lachlan's phone. He'd made Sadie's laugh his ringtone.

Ray's head turned toward the sound, like mine did. But it took him longer to figure out what was going on.

I took advantage of his mistake, dropping like dead weight, straight down, while twisting my body. Ray's grip broke. His gun hand flew up as he tried to maintain control.

Lachlan knew what to do from there, as I knew he would. Two shots were deafening in the enclosed space, and Ray fell away from me, dropping back onto the floor.

Lachlan was up the stairs and on me, pulling me away from Ray and kicking his gun out of his reach.

Sirens wailed in the distance, growing closer.

"Are you okay?" He pulled me against his chest.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Now that he doesn't have a gun pointed at your head, I am." Red and blue lights were flashing outside. "I radioed for backup as soon as I got your call and realized Ray was here."

“Why didn’t you wait for them? You could’ve been killed!”

He cupped my face in his hands. “There was no way in hell I was leaving you in here alone with him. I could tell he was unstable, and I wasn’t taking a chance with your life.”

“Thank you.” That choice had probably saved me. As soon as Ray had heard sirens for real, he would’ve made sure I couldn’t testify against him.

“Thank you. Everything worked out just the way it should because of you.” He kissed my forehead. “Now let me go get things calmed down outside.”

Ray moaned on the floor at my feet. The man who’d haunted every corner of my life—reduced now to a trembling, broken shell. Pathetic. Small. Just an old man undone by his own overconfidence and paranoia.

Lachlan returned less than a minute later, two deputies flanking him. They pulled Ray upright, hauling him down the stairs and cuffing him as he wheezed for breath.

“You’ll never be more than what I made you,” he spat, blood staining his teeth.

The room went still.

I stepped closer, my voice steady, cold. “You’re right. Everything I am is because of you. Because you showed me exactly what I never want to be.”

Ray blinked, confused by the calm in my voice.

“I am a real parent. I am someone who protects their children instead of using them. I am someone who loves instead of destroys. So yeah...you get the credit. Because I became everything you weren’t.”

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They dragged him out, his venomous threats trailing behind him until they were drowned out by sirens.

Lachlan and I stood in the ruined hallway. Plaster dust clung to our hair. My throat throbbed where Ray's hands had been. Around us, the wreckage of his final tantrum. But he was gone. And I was still standing.

"Let me see." Lachlan's hands were gentle as he checked my throat, the developing bruises. "We should get you checked?—"

"No, I'm fine." And I knew I was. "By now, Beckett should be back at Resting Warrior with Sadie, right?"

"Yes, any minute."

This time, I cupped Lachlan's cheeks. "We need to go get our children."

We walked through the destroyed house, past the shattered picture frames and scattered papers. None of it mattered. It was just stuff. What mattered was waiting for us at Resting Warrior Ranch.

The drive passed in silence, our hands clasped over the console. His thumb traced circles on my palm—comfort and promise and partnership all in that small touch.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring. There would be consequences for my actions over the past few weeks.

But tonight?

Tonight, both my babies would sleep in our bed. Safe. Together. A family.

Tonight was for healing. For holding them. For believing that maybe, just maybe, broken things could be rebuilt into something stronger.

Lachlan squeezed my hand as we pulled into the ranch driveway. Through the lodge windows, I could see warm light. Safety. People who'd fought for us.

"Ready?" he asked.

To face whatever came next? To pick up the pieces and try to build something new?  
To believe I deserved the family waiting inside?

"Yes."

The lodge door opened before we could reach it. Emma stood there with Caleb in her arms, his little face lighting up when he saw us. Behind her, Beckett appeared with Sadie.

"Mama's here," Evelyn whispered to Caleb, passing him to me just as Beckett placed Sadie in Lachlan's arms.

Then we were both moving at once, coming together in the doorway. I shifted Caleb to one arm as Lachlan did the same with Sadie, and suddenly, both babies were between us, safe in the circle of our arms.

Sadie's tiny hand found Caleb's, their fingers tangling together like they'd never been apart. Fresh tears spilled down my cheeks—happy ones this time—as I pressed kisses to both their heads.

“We’re a family,” Lachlan whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “All four of us. Finally.”

I looked up at him through my tears, saw my own joy reflected in his eyes. “Finally.”

The babies cooed at each other, some secret twin language already reforming. And there in the doorway of Resting Warrior Ranch, surrounded by the family we’d chosen and the family we’d made, I knew that broken things really could be rebuilt.

Stronger. Better. Whole.

Epilogue

Piper

Six months later

The smell of pancakes filled the kitchen as I flipped another golden disk onto the growing stack. Behind me, Caleb’s delighted squeal mixed with Sadie’s answering giggle—the soundtrack to every morning now. Six months of mornings like this, and I still couldn’t quite believe they were real.

“No, no, no,” I said without turning around, recognizing the particular pitch that meant trouble. “Whatever you two are plotting over there, the answer is no.”

More giggles. Definitely plotting.

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I risked a glance over my shoulder to find both twins had somehow gotten hold of their sippy cups and were conducting what looked like a science experiment involving gravity and Cheerios. At eleven months, they were mobile enough to be dangerous but not quite coordinated enough to execute their grand plans. Thank God.

“How do they always know when I’m not looking?” I asked the pancakes.

“Twin telepathy.” Lachlan’s voice came from the doorway, rough with sleep but warm with amusement. “Pretty sure they’re planning world domination one Cheerio at a time.”

He crossed the kitchen in bare feet and pajama pants that hung low on his hips, mail tucked under one arm. My heart did that stupid flutter thing it always did when I saw him in the morning—hair sticking up at odd angles, that sleepy smile that was just for us.

“Coffee?” I asked, already reaching for his favorite mug.

“You’re an angel.” He dropped the mail on the counter and wrapped his arms around me from behind, pressing a kiss to the spot where my neck met my shoulder. “Mmm. You smell like syrup.”

“Charming.” But I leaned back into him anyway, letting myself have this moment. These small, perfect moments that I’d never thought I’d get to keep.

A crash from the breakfast nook made us both turn. Sadie had managed to knock her entire bowl of Cheerios onto the floor and was looking at the mess with scientific

interest. Caleb watched his sister with obvious admiration.

“I’ve got it,” Lachlan said, already moving. “You save the pancakes.”

This was our dance now. The rhythm we’d found in the chaos of raising twins while rebuilding our lives from the ground up. He handled breakfast cleanup while I plated food. I’d get them dressed while he packed the diaper bag. We’d switch off who wrestled them into car seats, depending on who had the most patience left.

It was messy and exhausting and absolutely nothing like the family I’d imagined when I was young and stupid enough to believe in fairy tales.

It was better.

“Hey,” Lachlan said suddenly, his voice different. Serious. “You need to see this.”

He held two envelopes, both looking official enough to make my stomach clench. That familiar spike of fear—would this be the thing that destroyed our carefully built peace?

“Which one first?” I managed, setting down the spatula with hands that wanted to shake.

“This one.” He handed me the thinner envelope, his eyes steady on mine. “It’s okay. Open it.”

The return address was the county courthouse. My fingers fumbled with the seal, tearing the paper more than necessary. Inside, a single sheet of official letterhead. I had to read it twice before the words sank in.

“It’s official. Probation.” The word came out choked. They’d told us at court this was

the sentencing, but seeing it here officially in my hand made it real. “Two years’ probation. No jail time.”

“The DA came through,” Lachlan said quietly. “The circumstances, the duress, your cooperation in taking down the trafficking ring—Judge Hernandez agreed minimum sentence was appropriate.”

Two years of checking in with a probation officer. Two years of staying out of trouble—which wouldn’t be hard since the most dangerous thing I did these days was try to bathe both twins at the same time. Two years was nothing compared to what I could have faced.

“Hey.” Lachlan’s hand cupped my cheek, thumb brushing away a tear I hadn’t realized had fallen. “This is good news.”

“I know. I just—” I looked over at the twins, who had moved on from Cheerio experiments to what appeared to be competitive babbling. “I was so scared they’d take me away from them.”

“Never.” The fierceness in his voice made me look back at him. “I would have fought anyone who tried. Beckett would have helped. Hell, half the town would have shown up at that courthouse. You’re not going anywhere.”

“What’s the other envelope?”

His smile turned soft, almost nervous. “Open it.”

This one was thicker, heavier paper. Legal documents that required multiple signatures and?—

“Adoption papers.” I had to sit down. Right there on the kitchen floor, legs suddenly

unable to hold me. “You’re—these are to legally adopt the kids.”

“Already signed by me.” He crouched in front of me, taking my hands. “Just need your signature and the judge’s approval. My lawyer says it’s basically a formality at this point, but I wanted it official. Both twins, legally mine. No questions, no loopholes. Mine.”

“Ours,” I corrected, but I was crying too hard to sound stern about it.

“Yeah.” He pulled me against his chest, and I realized he was shaking too. “Ours.”

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Sadie chose that moment to voice her displeasure at being ignored, her imperious baby demands echoing through the kitchen. Caleb immediately joined in, because heaven forbid his sister get all the attention.

“Our very loud children want pancakes,” I said against Lachlan’s chest.

“Then we better feed them before they stage a full revolt.”

By the time we got both twins settled with cut-up pancakes and fruit, the coffee was cold and we were both covered in syrup. Typical morning, really.

“I need to get them ready,” I said, checking the time. “Lark’s expecting us by nine.”

“About that.” Lachlan pulled out his phone. “Beckett asked if we could do dinner tonight. All of us, at Resting Warrior.”

“Sure. Everything okay with him?”

“More than okay, apparently.” Something in Lachlan’s voice made me look up. “He’s actually bringing her.”

“She’s good for him.” I thought about the woman who’d turned Beckett’s world upside down in ways none of us had expected. “Once you get past all the complications.”

“The complications almost got them both killed.”

“But they didn’t.” I reached over to squeeze his hand. “Sometimes the best things come from the most impossible situations.”

Lachlan lifted my hand to his lips. “Speaking from experience?”

“Maybe a little.”

Later, at Pawsitive Connections, I settled both twins into the double stroller while Lark updated me on the morning feeding schedule. The April air still held a leftover winter’s bite, but the sun was trying its best to warm things up.

“Duchess is being dramatic about her grain again,” Lark said, rolling her eyes. “I swear that horse holds grudges. She’s still mad I trimmed her mane last week.”

“I’ll sweet-talk her.” I adjusted Caleb’s blanket as he tried to grab his sister’s toy. “She never stays mad at me long.”

“Because you spoil her rotten with those carrots you sneak her.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The twins started fussing, ready to be free of the stroller and explore. Lark helped me transfer them to the soft play area she’d set up in the barn’s heated office. Safe, contained, and visible through the window while I worked.

“Go on,” she said. “Duchess is waiting for her morning worship session. I mean grooming. Definitely meant grooming.”

The barn smelled like hay and horses and possibility. Six months ago, I’d collapsed right here, breaking apart at the sight of Duchess’s twins. Now, I drew strength from this place, from the work that kept my hands busy and my heart steady.

Duchess whinnied when she saw me, already stretching her neck over the stall door for attention. Her twins—not so little anymore at six months—watched from the paddock, all long legs and attitude.

“Morning, beautiful,” I murmured, running my hand along her neck. “Hear you’re being difficult about breakfast.”

She nudged my pocket, checking for contraband carrots. Some things never changed.

As I groomed her, I found myself thinking about tonight’s dinner. About Beckett and his new woman. About how we’d all found our way through darkness to something better. Not perfect—perfect was for fairy tales. But real and solid and worth fighting for.

“Mama!”

I turned to see Lark holding Sadie up to the office window, my daughter’s face pressed against the glass in delight. Caleb was probably trying to climb something he shouldn’t.

My children. Both of them. Here and safe and loved.

The adoption papers were just a formality. These babies had been Lachlan’s from the moment he’d held them. Had been ours from that first night we’d sat in the rocking chair, planning how to bring Sadie home.

But having it legal, official, recognized by the same system that could have torn us apart—that meant something too.

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I waved at Sadie through the window, laughing when she smacked the glass in response. Duchess nudged me again, demanding attention.

“I know, I know. You’re the real baby here.”

Tonight, we’d gather with our chosen family, all of us survivors in our own ways. We’d eat too much and laugh too loud and celebrate whatever happiness Beckett had found. The twins would be passed around like the treasures they were, spoiled by too many aunts and uncles.

And tomorrow, we’d do it all again. Messy mornings and scattered Cheerios and work that filled my soul.

It wasn’t the life I’d imagined, but it was the life I’d fought for.

And it was perfect.

Bonus Epilogue

Lachlan

2.5 years later

The house was finally quiet. After three stories, two glasses of water, and one bathroom trip each, the twins were down for the night. I stood in their doorway, watching Caleb and Sadie sleep in their toddler beds, still amazed that these perfect little humans were mine.

“They asleep?” Piper’s voice came from behind me, soft and warm.

“Out cold.” I pulled their door mostly closed and turned to face my wife. “Happy anniversary.”

“Mmm.” She stepped into my arms, fitting against me like she’d been designed for this exact spot. “Two years. Can you believe it?”

“Best two years of my life.”

She tilted her head up, and I caught the look in her eyes—heat mixed with love mixed with something that made my pulse kick up. “The night’s still young, Sheriff. Got any ideas how we should celebrate?”

“A few.” I backed her against the hallway wall, caging her with my arms. “Starting with this.”

I kissed her the way I’d been wanting to all day—deep and slow and thorough. She made that little sound in the back of her throat that always drove me crazy, her fingers tangling in my hair.

“Bedroom,” she gasped when I moved to her neck. “Now.”

“Bossy.” But I was already walking her backward, my lips never leaving her skin.

We barely made it through our bedroom door before she was pulling at my shirt, her hands impatient. Two years of marriage hadn’t dimmed the heat between us—if anything, it made us burn hotter. We knew each other’s bodies now, knew exactly how to drive each other wild.

“Off,” she demanded, tugging at my belt.

“You first.” I caught her hands, spinning her to face the mirror on our closet door. “I want to unwrap my anniversary present properly.”

She leaned back against me, watching our reflection as I slowly unbuttoned her blouse. Each button revealed more skin, and I took my time, kissing every inch I exposed.

“Lachlan.” My name came out as a plea when I finally pushed the fabric off her shoulders.

“What’s the rush?” I unhooked her bra with practiced ease, watching her eyes flutter closed in the mirror as my hands covered her breasts. “We’ve got all night.”

“Do we, though?” She pressed back against me, and I bit back a groan at the friction.

“Because I seem to remember two little alarm clocks that go off around six a.m., regardless of how late their parents stayed up.”

Fair point. But I wasn’t ready to rush this. Not tonight.

I turned her to face me, walking her backward toward our bed. “Then we better make it count.”

Her knees hit the mattress and she sat, looking up at me with those eyes that still knocked me sideways. I stood between her legs, cupping her face.

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“I love you,” I said, needing her to hear it. “These two years, building our family, watching you create the Phoenix Program, seeing you heal and grow—you’ve made me the luckiest man alive.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. “Don’t make me cry when I’m trying to seduce you.”

“Who says you can’t do both?”

I kissed her again, softer this time, pouring everything I felt into it. Her hands went to my belt again, and this time, I let her, shucking my pants while she wiggled out of hers.

“God, you’re beautiful.” The words came out reverent as I looked at her—my wife, the mother of my children, my everything.

“Come here.” She pulled me down onto the bed, and we came together in a tangle of limbs and breathless laughter when my foot got caught in the sheets.

But the laughter died when skin met skin. When her legs wrapped around my waist and her nails scraped down my back. When she arched beneath me, calling my name.

“Wait.” I pulled back, reaching for the nightstand. “Condom.”

“No.” She caught my hand. “I want another baby. I want to try.”

I froze. “Piper...”

“I know we said we’d wait another year. But I’m ready. The program’s established, the twins are getting more independent, and I... I want our family to grow. If you do.”

Instead of answering with words, I kissed her until we were both gasping. The thought of her pregnant again, of creating another life together—it lit something primal in me.

“Is that a yes?” she managed between kisses.

“That’s a hell yes. And this time, I’m going to be there for the whole pregnancy.”

She laughed, the sound turning to a moan as I moved down her body, determined to worship every inch. Two years, and I still couldn’t get enough of her. The way she responded to my touch, the sounds she made, the way she said my name like a prayer.

“Lachlan, please.” She tangled her fingers in my hair, tugging. “I need you.”

“Soon.” I was enjoying this too much, the way she writhed beneath me, the way her breathing went ragged. “Very soon.”

“Now.” She pulled harder, and I gave in, moving back up her body.

I positioned myself at her entrance, teasing, making us both wait for it. Her hips lifted, seeking, and I had to grip the sheets to keep control.

“Please,” she whispered, and that single word destroyed my restraint.

I slid into her slowly, watching her face as I filled her inch by inch. Her mouth fell open, eyes fluttering closed, and the sight nearly ended me right there. Two years of this, and it still felt like the first time—that perfect grip, the way she opened for me,

how we fit together like we'd been made for exactly this.

"God, Piper." I had to still for a moment, forehead pressed to hers, just breathing her in.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, heels digging into my back, pulling me impossibly deeper. The movement made us both gasp, and she used the leverage to rock against me, taking control of the rhythm.

"You feel so good," she breathed against my ear. "So perfect. Always so perfect."

I started to move, slow and deep, wanting to make this last. But she was having none of it, raking her nails down my back, her hips meeting mine with increasing urgency.

"Look at me," she whispered.

I did, finding her eyes in the dim light from our bathroom. The love I saw there, mixed with desire and trust and forever—it nearly undid me.

We moved together, finding our rhythm, hands clasped above her head. Everything else fell away—the responsibilities, the past, the future. There was just this. Just us.

"I love you," she gasped, her body tightening around me. "So much."

"Show me." I released her hands to touch her where we were joined, and she shattered with a cry she muffled against my shoulder.

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I followed her over, her name on my lips like a benediction.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, her head on my chest, my fingers combing through her hair. The house was quiet except for our breathing gradually returning to normal.

“So,” she said eventually, tracing patterns on my chest. “Think that worked?”

“If not, I’m more than willing to keep trying.” I felt her smile against my skin. “Repeatedly. Enthusiastically. Multiple times a day if necessary.”

“My hero.” She yawned, curling closer. “Sacrificing for the cause.”

“Someone’s got to do it.”

She pinched my side, making me laugh. Then she grew serious, propping herself up to look at me.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“For the mind-blowing sex? You’re welcome.”

“Lachlan.” But she was smiling. “For this life. For believing in second chances. For seeing who I could be instead of who I was.”

I pulled her up for a kiss. “You were always her. You just needed space to become her.”

“And you gave me that.” She settled back against my chest. “You and the twins and this whole beautiful, messy life. Sometimes I can’t believe it’s real.”

“Believe it.” I pulled the covers over us, already feeling sleep tugging at me. “This is just the beginning.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

As she drifted off to sleep, I thought about everything we’d built from the ashes of our broken beginnings. A family. A home. A program that saved lives. A love that had survived betrayal and bloomed into something unshakable.

And maybe, if tonight had worked its magic, another little miracle to add to our chaos.

The alarms would go off too early. The twins would bounce into our room demanding pancakes. Life would continue in all its beautiful, exhausting glory.

But right now, holding my wife in our bed, in our home, surrounded by the life we’d built together—right now was perfect.

Happy anniversary to us.

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