



Operation: Chosen

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Description: Eric loved once, now he'd rather tame horses than see her ever again. He told Connor he wants nothing to do with the mission to face his regret. Not when his regret hurt him so deeply and not when it means a disruption to what the ranch does. Wayside is supposed help victims of trafficking, so why are they worried about their past regrets? Ali comes to Wayside under the guise of helping one of the men with a legal matter. As a military lawyer, she's used to handling intricate matters. What she's not used to is feeling unsure of herself, which is exactly what happens when Eric walks into any room she's in. Her courtroom talents have no place on a rural Wyoming ranch. Before she made the worst choice of her life, the choice to turn Eric's proposal down and marry a man who cheated on her, they were in love. Now, he's hesitant to even talk to her. When a plot to steal the Wayside Ranch horses almost gets both of them killed, will matters of the heart become clearer, or will they let past hurts stand in their way?

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Prologue

An argument with Lacy was coming. Connor knew it as innately as he knew the sun would come up in the east. Lacy believed in the Wayside Ranch mission. Possibly even more firmly than he did, and she would see his judgement as poor. But he'd had to make the call.

While Connor was giving his men—his friends—a chance to heal from their pasts, he couldn't risk the safety and mental health of the victims who looked to him for a place of refuge. Wayside couldn't offer that if strangers came to stay on the ranch as visitors. Connor had originally thought having the visitors around would actually help the human trafficking victims move closer to a normal life by interacting with people outside of those on the ranch. Unfortunately, having them around also introduced security issues.

Connor's phone rang—his landline which had been silent for a week after they'd found placements for their last two guests. "Hello," he said simply. He wasn't one for chatting, and the call felt like an interruption to his preparation for talking to Lacy.

"Connor, this is Micha Roberts with the California Board of Corrections. I heard about your situation from one of my associates. I know your ranch is currently empty, and I may have a way to keep your funding going while you're renovating. I've been given a grant and an opportunity to test a treatment method. Are you interested in helping me?"

"Renovation" had been the reason they'd given the government for Wayside's lack of space to house their usual guests. No one had wanted to invite the government onto

Wayside to help with security.

Lacy stopped in his doorway. Her gaze locked on to the phone in his hand, and she immediately headed for the seat on the opposite side of his desk. Talking on that phone usually meant a new guest would be coming, and his conscience pricked. He wanted her to be happy here. If she wasn't, she might leave. If she left, he'd lose a piece of himself. At least if she were at his side, helping him with the ranch, he could act like things were normal.

"I'm listening," he answered Micha.

"Good. I have three boys here who were all recently arrested for gang activity. These were non-violent crimes. We know that gang activity usually escalates. We hope to test if taking them out of this environment, getting them somewhere far away, completely different from what and who they know, will help them move in another direction before it's too late. I know you normally deal with victims, not criminals. In a way though, these boys are both."

Connor stared across his desk, thankful for the opportunity to give Lacy something that she could pour herself into. She was a vessel, needing someone to heal. She would've made an amazing mother if he hadn't lost his mind and his heart and pushed her away. After all he'd been through, he didn't want her light anywhere near his darkness. His wounds would smother her. Ten years ago, his father had had other ideas and convinced her to stay, even after their divorce. Connor was thankful now, but at the time he'd thought his father was choosing Lacy over him.

Which was why he couldn't take on the same challenge he'd given to his men.

He turned his focus back to the phone. While he wanted to give Lacy what she hoped for, there were red flags with a few things Micha had said. Even if the crimes were nonviolent, rarely did gang-related crime stay that way. These boys could be

dangerous.

“You’re hoping to send these boys here to see what life has to offer outside the city?” Connor replied. “What sort of protections do we have? Will their parents be aware of where they are? Do we have to increase some of our security to make sure parents can come in but no one else can? We have fences, but this isn’t a prison and was never meant to be.” These weren’t precautions they had to take under normal circumstances since Wayside rarely took children as clients.

“Yes, you’ll have to find a way to allow their parents, but you’ll need to be careful. We don’t know all the members of these gangs, and we certainly don’t know what kind of resources they have. At least one of these boys was a prime recruit. That makes things potentially dangerous for you.”

Connor didn’t know the first thing about gangs, but he knew about crime. Could gangs be similar in form to how trafficking syndicates operated? If so, by inviting these boys to stay, even for a short time, he could be putting everyone in a lot of danger.

“I have friends on the police force right now. At least we could have help quickly if we need it,” Connor said.

Silence from the other end ate at Connor’s gut. It dragged on a few seconds too long. “I’m really sorry. We have to cover our own butts,” Micha said. “This is an off-the-book exchange. If these boys act out in any dangerous way and you have to call in the police, the test would be done. They’d have to come back home and serve out the remainder of their sentences. Zero tolerance. This isn’t a vacation, it’s their last chance to see if they can choose to take advantage of the right offering.”

Connor glanced at Lacy. Though she couldn’t know what he was talking about nor whom he was talking to, she gave him a slight nod of encouragement. He had to

choose between either having an empty ranch until his men all had their month to heal their pasts...or he could help three boys in desperate need of their only chance.

“You’ve got my email. I’ll be interested in hearing all the details before I agree to anything,” Connor said. “When could they come if I approve this?”

Micha laughed. “I could have them there in three days. The bus is already ready.”

He finished the call with Micha, then waited for Lacy to speak. He loved her intuition and drive. She was made for a ranch like this, which was why his dad had insisted she stay. “I suppose you want to know what’s going on?”

She shrugged one slender shoulder, then smirked at him. “You’re going to tell me anyway. Might as well get it out of the way.”

True. She knew him.

“I know you were the only person who didn’t agree that we should stop taking guests while the guys are performing their second chance missions,” Connor said. After all, she didn’t understand how important this kind of thing was to the guys. She probably hadn’t ever had anyone who’d gotten away. She and Connor still had each other, even if they weren’t married anymore and she’d told him, plain as day, that she would never be romantic with him again.

Case closed.

“Wayside is a place for healing. I think there has to be a way to do what we’re called to do, safely. God doesn’t call us to do what’s easy.” She crossed her arms and waited for him to continue.

He held up his hands to let her know he wasn’t denying what she said. “I know

you're right, but I have to listen to my guys and my gut. We need to stay under the radar for a while. I still want to catch Viceroy and stop him and his cartel, but the safety of my ranch must come first. There's no safety net for us. Without breaking the law and shooting at people, we can't protect anyone from Viceroy."

Lacy glanced away, her jaw hard with determination. "I know you're right, but it feels like giving up. I don't give up."

Except when forced to. He'd forced her to give up on him. "What if we used this time to help three boys escape the grip of a gang?"

She raised one arched brow. "And how is that anything like helping victims?"

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He waited a moment before he answered, letting her think he wasn't invested yet. "According to the man I just spoke to, they are victims. Their families have been targets of violence for years. Sometimes for generations. We might be able to stop the cycle. What if we could help some families by showing three boys there are other ways?"

Lacy tilted her head and stared at him for a moment, her soft brown eyes drilling into him. "Those are nice words. Too bad they aren't yours. There's no heart behind them. You're doing this for some reason other than a heart motive, which means it's not led by God. I'm sorry, Connor. But this will fail, and I hope it doesn't lead to pain for you or your men."

ChapterOne

Eric glanced at his phone and breathed a sigh of relief. The text came from Connor, and, coming from him, that meant it was work. Not Ali. Connor had said she was coming soon. Too soon. Or maybe not soon enough. If Eric had looked her back up years ago and told her exactly how he felt, he wouldn't be in this situation now. If he had, he'd have no regrets and there would be no need for her to come.

With his gut in a knot, hoping she'd changed her mind and wasn't on her way out to Wayside, he looked at Connor's text again.

Eric didn't want to see Ali. Ever. After the way they'd parted, just setting eyes on her would tear his heart open. Even years later, he could still hear her voice in his head—that sweet, low voice she'd practiced to perfection.

She had cut him to shreds like she'd practiced ahead of time. You aren't what I'm looking for. You'll never be what I need. I need someone looking for rank, not a grunt looking to save the world...

And she'd hit the mark with deadly accuracy. His entire reason for joining the military had been to try to do something right. Help people. Be something. The main reason he loved working at Wayside was that he got to do exactly what he'd set out to do. Even if the one woman he'd ever loved would look down on him for it.

He wasn't a commander. He wasn't wealthy or in charge of anything but his own happiness. His truck wasn't even particularly new, but it didn't have to be. It was reliable and hauled horse trailers just fine.

He scanned the text for the third time and narrowed his eyes, unsure of what he'd read. "Threeboys...?" Did Connor mean men, or was this way outside of what they usually did?

"Hey, Eric?" Sam Elsner, the dog trainer, sauntered over and leaned against the railing of the horse training ring.

"Yeah?" Eric gave a low whistle, and Mable, one of the ranch horses, came trotting toward him like a dog looking for a treat.

"Did you just get a text from Connor about three boys?" Sam looked just as confused as Eric felt.

So, he had read it right. Maybe this meant Ali wasn't coming? Why give him work if his main objective was to fix his one regret and try for a second chance? Eric held in a laugh. That was never happening. "Looks like we got the same text. Wonder what it means."

Sam adjusted the brim of his hat. “Looks like Junior was included too, but I’m not sure. We all agreed to wait to bring in more guests until Connor gets word that Viceroy isn’t an issue. Think he got word? Maybe that’s why we’re getting guests?”

Eric snorted. “No. And even if he did, it would take a while to go through applications. Plus, the only time we’ve had more than one guest come at one time is when a young child is involved and Connor asks one of the parents to stay here. I don’t see anything about parents.” He took hold of Mable’s bridle and led her back toward her stall.

Junior came in from the back and waved. “You all get that text too?”

Eric nodded as he took off Mable’s bridle, then led her toward the back where Junior waited, holding the gate open. “This whole situation is strange. How many men are needed for three boys if this isn’t a normal situation? Are these boys like Pete, here to have a camp for the summer?”

Junior chuckled. “I don’t know. And just what does Connor mean by ‘boys’? Are these little kids like Pete, or older?”

Pete was off with his mother, Erica, and his father, Cole, but having young people around who were suffering might be hard on the boy if they were going to be here once Pete returned. “I don’t know. I got the same text as you, and it had almost no information. Should we go find out?” Eric asked.

Sam led the way, holding the barn door open for Eric and Junior. As was his routine, Eric scanned the front yard. Usually, there would’ve been guests sitting in the central fire pit area furnished with patio furniture. Today, all the chairs were neatly in a circle, empty. Someone had recently power washed them, and they looked lonely sitting in perfect order instead of scattered around the fire pit. Eric wanted to go move one just so the place looked lived-in.

Connor came out the front door of the main house leading three boys with droopy shoulders, scowling faces, and narrowed eyes. They all looked older than sixteen, but younger than adults. Although, judging the age of children had become harder the further Eric got from his twenties.

“Junior, Sam, Eric, I’d like you to meet our three guests. They just arrived this morning, and I finished their orientation a few minutes ago. I only learned they were coming just before they arrived. That’s why I didn’t send their files to you. I didn’t realize they’d be here this quickly.”

Delinquents. That could be the only reason they’d shown up without notice and looking like they wanted to run. Eric couldn’t help the thought that speared through his brain to his chest. These boys looked like trouble. What was he supposed to do for them? How could he possibly help them?

Connor continued, “This is Big E, Jayzon, and Terrell. They are here from California. All three were arrested after a theft from a gas station.”

Yup, delinquents. What in the world were they supposed to do to help these kids?

“I don’t want to assign any one guest to one wrangler. I’d like all of you to work together except when the boys are with Brendon. You can work all as one or take shifts. Their caseworker felt that counseling was a lost cause, but I told him that’s how we do things here.”

One of the boys rolled his eyes. He was the biggest of the three in both stature and girth. Eric didn’t want to assume anything, but if he had to guess, he’d assume that one was Big E.

“Can we get to our rooms already? Do you have Wi-Fi?” The biggest boy took the lead and turned slightly to look at Connor.

Connor gritted his teeth. He hated to be interrupted, and Eric took that as his cue to speak up and give Connor a break. “There’s only Wi-Fi when you finish chores. Let’s go find your bunkhouse.” He eyed Connor. “I’m assuming with their age that they are all bunking in the same cabin and one of the guys will have to be in there with them?”

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Connor gripped the railing of the porch, and Eric didn't miss his white knuckles. "Their caseworker didn't feel that was appropriate, not even for safety reasons. So, in the evening after they are done for the day, they have to wear the same monitoring ankle bracelets they had to wear in the yard back at the juvenile detention center, their door is to be locked, and no one is allowed in with them after curfew."

All three boys grumbled loudly and glanced back and forth at each other.

"Which cabin?" Eric hoped it wasn't too close to the one Erica had been staying in, since that was one of the few larger cottages they had. Suddenly the idea of having a cabin full of things to take and boys who liked to take things wouldn't leave him alone.

"Corner opposite Junior's, back row," Connor answered and tossed the key to Eric. He wasn't sure he agreed with Connor's choice to put the boys furthest from him and close to Erica, Cole's wife, and Gabby, Junior's wife.

"We all have to stay in the same cabin? What is this, church camp?" the biggest boy asked.

"Like you've ever been to church camp, Big E." The second boy laughed and elbowed him in the ribs. He turned to the third boy. "Come on, Terrell. You're holding us all up."

By process of elimination, that left Jayzon as the bridge between the largest boy, Big E, who seemed to be the leader, and Terrell, who didn't seem to fit the group at all. The hairs on Eric's arms rose the closer the boys came to him. Just like he'd keep an

eye on these same boys if he saw them on the street, he felt his defenses rise.

Junior stood back slightly, and Sam fell back to Junior's side. Eric turned and strode for the cabin all the way in the private back row, then unlocked it and opened the door. Lacy had to have been in there the moment the boys had arrived since there wasn't a hint of dust on the furniture. Everything was in order and all three bedroom doors were open and waiting, with beds made and windows open to freshen the room.

Eric cleared his throat. "These windows are open because there's no AC in any of the cabins. Don't make us lock them on you. You'll want to keep that privilege. There's literally nowhere you can go within fifteen miles and that's a long walk."

"I call dibs on the master." Big E strutted into the house and lounged on the couch.

"Whatever." Jayzon tossed his bag on the other sofa, then flopped down next to it. "What did you mean when you said 'chores?'" He narrowed his eyes at Eric. "I'm not doing any work around here."

Terrell held his bag close to his chest, a bag that couldn't have held more than two other changes of clothes, and waited by the hall. His eyes darted from the open doors to the boys sprawled on the couches.

"You will have chores to do every day. This isn't a vacation for you or anyone else who comes to stay here. We all work." Eric glanced at Terrell with what he hoped was a friendly look. The poor kid seemed completely unsure of himself. Maybe he wasn't as delinquent as Eric had first thought. "You can pick any room you want. If these two don't get up and choose, that's on them."

Big E held up his hand. "If you so much as step in the room that's the biggest, I'll beat you. See if I don't."

“That won’t be tolerated here.” Junior crossed his arms, but Eric noticed the slight tick in Junior’s fingers, which was the only sign of his battle with PTSD. This wasn’t a situation any of them had faced before. Their clients were all so glad to have a chance to be there that they often wanted to help out and learn new things. Chores usually came weeks into their stay, but this situation was different.

“Then don’t tolerate it. Still going to happen though.” Big E shrugged and cracked his knuckles. “Terrell can either follow the rules or not, but he’ll pay the consequences. You can’t watch me all the time.”

A look passed between Terrell and Jayzon, one Eric immediately recognized as controlling without words. Terrell shuffled down the hall, stopped in front of each door, then took the smallest room.

An uneasy knot tightened in Eric’s stomach. Maybe dealing with Ali would’ve been easier.

* * *

The farther Ali Wellthorpdrove after she went past Cheyenne, the more uncomfortable she felt. Vast stretches of highway spread ahead of her with little more than fences and the occasional billboard. Who lived like this? Was Eric so out of touch now that he had to live in no-man’s land?

She turned up the song on her playlist and nodded her head to the beat, trying to center herself before she reached Wayside Ranch. Connor, the owner, had contacted her a few weeks before about a military legal matter that needed her attention. Then, he’d dropped the bomb of a lifetime. Eric Moberg worked for him. The same Eric she’d loved in her teens and early twenties. Maybe she still did... The same Eric she’d turned down when he’d asked her to marry him and broke his heart.

Her hand stilled on the steering wheel where she'd been tapping the beat. She couldn't dwell on the past. She'd been young. Though she didn't regret her success, some of the choices she'd made to get there had been life-altering. Her wedding ring glinted in the sunlight refracting off the ceiling of the car. She'd worn it even after her divorce to ward off attention from men. Now, it seemed silly. She'd been divorced for years.

She spun the gold band on her finger, then slipped it off. With a flick, she sent it flying into the back seat. "I don't need you anymore, Frank. Not even your ring." Taking it off felt good. Freeing. Maybe after the next three weeks, she could finally get past that particular part of her life. Maybe Eric could forgive her, and she could finally feel the ultimate success.

The voice from her navigation system interrupted her thoughts. "You have passed the exit. Please drive for another sixteen miles and turn around." The mechanical voice sounded irritated with her.

"Missed my turn?" She glanced in the rearview mirror. There hadn't been an exit. "What in the world?"

Ali eased the car to the side of the road and turned on her emergency flashers, then dug the directions Connor had given her out of the stack of papers on the passenger seat. She read quickly down the list, then laughed. Apparently, the mapping system out there was just as lost as she was. Two more miles and she'd exit into a small town named Piper's Ridge, and from there it was all gravel roads.

She rolled her eyes and pressed the button to raise the convertible top on her car. She signaled to get back on the road, not that she'd seen any cars in the last twenty minutes. How was she ever going to survive out here in the sticks?

A half hour later, she pulled up the long driveway of Wayside Ranch following

Connor's directions. A huge metal gate blocked her entrance, and she pulled to a stop next to a post with a camera. She lowered the window and smiled. "Hello, I'm Ali Wellthorp, here to help Cole Bradley with a legal matter."

Someone on the other end spoke a quick welcome, and the gate slowly unlatched and swung open. She quickly raised the window to keep the dust out of her car and headed through the gate. When the ranch finally came into view, she couldn't deny the beauty. It sat in a shallow valley, with rolling hills and trees surrounding it. Fences spread as far as her eye could see, and horses grazed in the distance.

A tall man in a black cowboy hat sauntered out of the large house. Ali had been in the military so long and worked with so many people that she could immediately tell he was former military just by his walk. There was a confidence, a look on his face, a set to his shoulders that spoke of discipline and training. Some men never lost it.

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“Good afternoon,” she said as she stretched out of the driver’s seat. Recently, she’d started feeling stiff after driving long distances. When had age crept up on her? She went through her packing list in her head one more time, sure she remembered her anti-aging cream, multivitamins, and oils.

“Good afternoon. I’m Connor Kincade. Welcome to Wayside. Why don’t you come into my office first. We have a few things to discuss before you get started.” He held open the door for her.

Ali carefully walked across the large rocks in the gravel in her pointed heels. She never allowed herself to feel uncomfortable in her surroundings, preferring to always be the best dressed and most knowledgeable in a room, but something about being so far outside her comfort zone had her grasping mentally for her usual poise.

Connor led her to his office and indicated she could either sit in the chair in front of his desk or on the sofa along the wall. “Can I get you a water?” He glanced back at her.

“No, thank you. I’d like to get settled in before I get started, and it’s already later than I planned.” Somehow the drive had taken longer than she’d thought it would.

“About that...” Connor opened a file on his desk, then closed it. “Cole and his new bride just left two days ago on a three-week honeymoon. Her son went with them as a vacation before school.”

He couldn’t have surprised her more had the floor dropped out from under her. “Three weeks? I only took three weeks off, thinking that would be more than enough

time to file the paperwork to get Cole's name changed back and to work on getting his social security number reactivated. There's paperwork involved, but three weeks should've been more than plenty of time. Please tell me why you didn't let me know of this change before I arrived." She had cases back home that couldn't wait for any additional time away. They were already angry she was going to be gone that long.

"I figured you could spend the time working on the paperwork without Cole." Connor dismissed her worry with a slight raise of his brows.

Something wasn't right about this, and she suspected it had to do with Eric. Had he wanted her all to himself? Was it possible he missed her as much as she'd missed him? "I see."

"Do you? I don't think you do. This isn't going to be easy for you, and trying to do everything in three weeks... You may not get it done. You might want to contact your superior and ask for more time." He slid the folder toward her.

Ali grabbed it but left it closed. "Even if that were possible, which it's not, why would I need more time?"

"Eric is not willing to talk to you." Connor tilted his head slightly. "I wasn't originally even going to tell him you were coming, but now I'm glad I did. He's had a few days to process the idea."

He had to process the idea of her coming to see him? "Why don't you show me to my room?" This was not how she'd planned for this to go. She'd expected Eric to be hesitant, but she was a litigation attorney so changing people's minds was her job. She could say just the right thing in just the right way, and then all would be fine. That was her gift. Eric might take some time to come around, but she could do it.

"I can do that. Right this way." Connor stood and headed back out to her car.

Ali popped the trunk and let him help her gather the large bags, but he again surprised her when he headed for the second row of four strings of cabins. Rustic cabins.

“Where are you going?” The alarm in her voice was far too evident, and she cleared her throat to hide it and calm herself.

He glanced over his shoulder and tipped his head toward the cabins. “This is our housing.”

But the huge ranch house looked a lot nicer and more accommodating. “You want me to stay out here?” Ali stopped in her tracks and waited for him to answer. Did the cabins have running water? Bathroom facilities? How rustic was this ranch?

“I do. This is the only housing we have, and I promise you it’s nicer than the one motel in town.”

She wasn’t going to erupt. Yes, the little houses were a lot like the lake cabin she’d had to endure as a child. Probably very similar inside. But she could manage. That had been a little more than twenty years ago. She was now a grown woman in control of her emotions.

He opened the door, and a scream lodged in her throat as she saw the familiar red indoor/outdoor carpet. “I can’t...”

“Of course she can’t. It’s not nice enough for her.” Eric appeared from a path along the side of the cabins. “She probably assumed you had a hotel room for her.”

Seeing Eric for the first time after so many years took her heart a few moments to catch up to her thoughts. He’d filled out in the shoulders. Age creased the skin beside his eyes. The very same lines she fought so hard against looked good on him.

As pleasant as he was to look at, he wasn't exactly happy to see her. She refused to feel contrite about wanting a nice place to relax. She'd worked her whole life to be comfortable. Why should she expect less now?

"The room is just fine." Ali took her bags from Connor's hands and headed inside, then closed the door so they couldn't see what she knew would be a weak moment. Everyone else could have them, but not her.

She let the bags fall from her hands the moment no one could see her and gripped her stomach. Why did all little cabins, whether by a serene lake or nestled away on a ranch, all have the same smell? Why did they all feel the same, look the same?

Control your breathing. Control your inner self. Control your mind.

There was no giving up. Not now. Not ever. She could overcome this. She always did.

ChapterTwo

Eric refused to hang around and witness the fallout from his comments. Connor was bound to say something, and Eric had no time or interest in hearing what Connor had to say. Eric had regrets when it came to Ali, but unlike any of the other guys at Wayside, his regret was that he'd ever met Ali at all. In all the other cases, they'd made choices to leave their women behind. Whether the choice was forced or personal, it was still a choice.

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Ali had made that decision for him. Publicly. He'd been so sure she would say yes to his marriage proposal. They'd been perfect for each other in every way. Though looking back now, he'd noticed the seeds of what would become her selfish side. The side that ultimately took over and pushed her away from him.

She'd wanted success, security, a high rank, and a good-paying job. She'd wanted a big house with all the comforts. Even when they'd dated, she'd negotiated her contract on an apartment she never should've been able to afford with military pay. Before she'd finished her degree to become a lawyer, she'd been able to convince the devil to put on a sweater in July.

He'd been so proud of her then. Now all he saw was a selfish political climber.

Eric made his way to the horse barn. That's where he could find peace, no matter what. The distant green metal roof glinted in the afternoon sun. They'd just painted the siding a fresh coat of bright red last summer. The center of the barn was taller, with a shorter section on each side for the stalls. The center aisle was usually where they would hitch the horses if they had that kind of rig.

Terrell stood in the center, his head slowly swiveling left to right as he took in the enormous barn. When Eric had first arrived, he'd been used to the large red brick stables at the Fort Leavenworth Equestrian Stables. He'd never seen active duty, glad to simply finish his basic training, then work with civilians training horses. So the Wayside stables seemed small to him. But to someone who'd never seen a horse barn, it was probably impressively large.

The boy whipped around, arms wide. "I didn't do nothing."

Eric held up his hand to stop any further explanation. “Until you do something to prove otherwise, you’re welcome to roam where you were told you could. We aren’t a prison.” Well, for most people they weren’t. His thoughts traveled back to the ankle bracelets the boys would have to wear.

Terrell narrowed his eyes and sniffed. “And you’re sure I’ll prove that soon enough. That’s why you said it that way. Everyone believes I will. The older they are, the faster they believe it.” He turned back around, and one of the horses ahead stomped its back hoof twice and flicked its tail.

“I don’t think it’s fair to assume that everyone of a certain age will feel a certain way about you.” Eric hung back, giving the boy space to think on his own and feel no pressure to move.

“You haven’t lived my life, old man.” Terrell tossed the words over his shoulder. “I won’t touch anything in your precious stable.”

Eric took a deep breath. This was his job. He had to make this boy feel accepted and welcome, even if inside he worried about the exact things Terrell thought he did. That was the first step in building trust. “You’re welcome to look or touch whatever. All we ask is that you not use anything until you get some training first. The horses are here for you to ride, once you know how.”

A short snort was Terrell’s only reply.

Eric came alongside him and glanced at what had caught Terrell’s attention. She was a pretty roan. What Terrell couldn’t see was the star on her forehead or her testy disposition. “That one is probably for more advanced riders, unless you like finding yourself in the dirt.”

“And would you like that? Would you like to see me put in my place? You wouldn’t

be alone. Lots of people do.”

Time to change tactics. This was getting nowhere, and Eric’s patience was too thin after seeing Ali. “What are your goals, Terrell? What do you want to accomplish in your life?”

The boy turned and leaned against a stall, then tilted his head and looked to the rafters. “I want what everyone else wants. I want to be rich and have friends.”

Eric held in his scoff, barely. He certainly didn’t want wealth. Friends, yes, but he’d never been one to seek money. That was Ali’s desire. Money and security. He schooled his features to keep his anger from showing. This boy wasn’t at fault for wanting the same things as the woman who’d gutted him with her desires. “Might surprise you to know that not everyone desires those things,” he replied.

“Well, I do. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Maybe you’re just too old to understand.”

Terrell may have meant the statement as more of a joke than anything, but Eric wasn’t certain and wasn’t going to ask for clarification and give the boy a weapon to use against him. Against his will, memories of his younger years flowed. He remembered Ali when they were both eighteen, both trying to find their way in the military. Both just kids. But she’d known exactly what she’d wanted then, even more than he had.

And he’d fallen by the wayside when her goals came into the equation.

“I’ll trust you to behave in here and not touch anything you shouldn’t.” Eric strode toward the opposite end of the barn, past Terrell. He didn’t miss the almost imperceptible widening of the boy’s eyes or the slight slackening of his jaw.

“You’re just going to leave me in here? You’re not going to assign someone to watch me or turn on a camera or something?” Terrell scuffed his tennis shoe against the concrete floor of the barn.

“No cameras. No one set to watch you. But if you do anything that makes us take that trust away, it will be difficult to earn it back.” He got to the other end of the barn and resisted the urge to turn and look Terrell in the eyes. He had to give the boy a little slack, just like a spooked horse, or he’d get stepped on. He’d been stepped on enough that day.

* * *

Ali hungup one of her suits in the tiny closet and flinched as it rubbed against her other suits. Why couldn’t they have invested a few more square feet into the closet? She still had four more suits to hang. At least she could have them all dry cleaned and pressed when she returned home.

The sudden, immediate need for her own space clawed at her senses. Her nose craved the cranberry scent of the candle she burned, her hands needed the feel of her plush throw on her sofa, and even her ears needed the sounds of the city around her very urban apartment. How had she ever thought she could manage staying in the country for three weeks? And now it could be more?

How had Eric managed this long? She gripped the door of the closet and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror hanging on the inside door. With good skincare—okay, expensive skincare—few people could guess her real age. At forty-two, that was saying something. Money hadn’t ever let her down. She’d pushed and sacrificed in her life to have the security that money could provide, and she wouldn’t go back down the road ofnot enough.

Except, chasing after money had cost her Eric. But look where she would’ve been if

she had stayed with him! He needed her now. This ranch was a mess, and he needed her to lift him out of it. Then all her work over the years wouldn't go to waste, because if she could convince him to forgive her and start over, she could save him from a boring life. All that work would actually be a double benefit, and maybe someday Eric would look back on what she'd done as a good thing.

Ali turned around and stopped short. There was a plaque hanging on the wall identical to one in Connor's office. She hadn't taken the time to look closely at it then, but now there was little else to do. After all, her room was so small she barely had the space to turn around compared to her massive closet back home.

There was no preface, nothing to indicate what the numbered items were, but the first one made her want to go after Connor with all her legal might.

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1. Faith. How dare he try to make people who came to stay here have faith? She'd looked up the ranch with the resources she'd had back in her office. While she couldn't tell exactly what they did, they had guests that were paid for by the government, and church and government money had no business being together.

She strode to the plaque, took it down, and tossed it in the back of the closet. No one was going to force their faith on her. No one was going to get her to believe there was one God or anything else out there that supposedly cared. Not when children could be treated like she had been. No God who cared would allow that.

If she dwelled on her past too long, she wouldn't be able to focus on the real reason she was here, which was helping Cole decide if he wanted to keep his new name and have it legally changed and connected to his old information, or if he wanted to go back to his given name. She dug in her briefcase and tugged out a pink legal pad and blue pen, then settled into one of the overstuffed chairs in the living room area.

As much as she wanted to focus on Cole, he wasn't there, and there was little she could do without knowing his plans. This left her thinking about the secondary reason she had come to Wayside: Eric. The moment Connor had mentioned Eric was there, she had been on board with coming. She hadn't even cared about the location. Now she wished she had.

Nothing she'd brought had really been appropriate for a ranch. There was no way she could dress as she normally did out here. If she did, she'd stick out. The only time she liked to be a spectacle was in the courtroom, and only in the most positive way. She wore her uniform dress when it was required but had always pushed the envelope, making herself the star in the courtroom. She'd won many cases just by being the

more memorable of the two lawyers.

She wasn't fighting a team of litigators now, though. Only Eric and his memories. She just had to reframe the whole situation for him. He had to believe that they went through those times for a purpose, and there was no reason they couldn't start over. Just seeing him had made her lose her cool, and every word had flown from her head, which was a pretty amazing feat because she was never speechless.

"This shouldn't be that hard," she told herself. But as she stared down at the pristine pink page, waiting for ideas to come, she realized it might not be that easy. More than twenty years separated this moment from the one that had divided them. A lot could happen in that time. How was she going to convince him they were even the same people as they were so long ago? Because she certainly wasn't.

Someone knocked on her door, and Ali pushed herself from the plush chair and answered it. A blonde-haired woman who had to be close to her age waited outside. She gave an easy smile that was genuine and thrust her hand toward Ali.

"Welcome! I'm Lacy Kincade. I can help you get started with Cole Bradley's information whenever you want to get started. He left a few things for me so your time wouldn't be totally wasted."

"Oh..." Ali wasn't sure what to say. She'd already pushed aside that task. "I'd just gotten out my notebook to write down some notes. You have impeccable timing." She motioned for Lacy to come in.

Lacy sat in the other stuffed chair and laid a folder on the table between them. "Are you settling in? Do you need anything?"

Ali laughed. "Do you have any of these cabins that are about three times this size?"

Lacy's eyes widened, and she snorted. "We do, but we didn't figure you'd want to be in the cabin right next to the three boys who just came. The only other large cabins we have are Gabby and Junior's and Cole and Erica's."

She hadn't realized Cole wasn't the only married man at Wayside. "Oh, do you have families staying here?" She was pretty sure that wasn't mentioned on the government paperwork she'd read.

"Just those two for now, but I think both will be moving in the spring. Connor just acquired the ranch next door. It needs a lot of work first, but that will be the perfect place for families to live. The men can be within riding distance, but the wives won't need to be right here. Things aren't always pretty, or safe, when dealing with what we do."

"And what is that?" Ali hated when people weren't up front with her. She wanted truth, plain and simple.

"Wayside is a place for healing. We don't have our usual guests staying here now, which is why those three boys are here, but I hope we return to our mission soon."

Ali's gut twisted. Connor was taking vulnerable people who needed healing and encouragement, and shoving fake promises of faith down their throats. When she returned to her office, she would have to do a write-up of Wayside.

Lacy glanced at the wall at the open spot over Ali's shoulder where the plaque had been. Mentally, Ali dared Lacy to ask her why it was gone. Lacy stood and brushed her hands down the front of her jeans, suddenly looking a lot less welcoming. "Well, that paperwork doesn't answer everything, but it should give you a start. Let me know if you need anything." Lacy headed for the door.

Ali didn't bother to walk her to the door. Lacy could think what she liked. She

returned her focus to the folder for a moment, running over all the facts she knew. What had Eric gotten himself into, and how could she report what she knew without destroying him again?

Chapter Three

Eric took the stiff brush used for cleaning hooves to his speckled silver mare, Skyfall. He'd been focusing on training their newest acquisition and hadn't done the job in a while. Her hooves were caked with what amounted to cement, though she seemed to know she would be more comfortable when the task was done, because she didn't move except to lean against him for the first two.

Connor made his way toward Eric, adjusting his hat as he strode through the darkened barn. "Morning."

Eric chuckled as he glanced at his watch. "Yup, barely." He'd already checked on the boys that morning and found them all lying around in their beds watching television. None of them had any interest in riding. The only chore they'd completed was wiping out the sink, though he couldn't tell if they'd done it or just hadn't used it. He'd left feeling like this was a waste of his time. Yes, the boys had freedom, but if being here wasn't going to help them in the long run, then it wasn't what they needed.

"I wanted to come talk to you before lunch." Connor spaced his feet wider apart and planted his hands at his waist. His right shoulder still didn't rest evenly with his left after getting shot a few months ago.

"I've got all the time in the world." Eric kept his sarcasm to a minimum. Connor wouldn't understand just how angry Eric was that he'd invited Ali. He should've been given a choice. Just because she was there didn't mean he had any intention of giving her his time. He had better things to do than relive a bad past.

“Any sign of those boys this morning?” Connor asked.

Eric snorted. “I went in there. Want me to hire someone to play reveille? That might get them out of their rooms.”

“I expect the noon hour will get them moving. They didn’t even bother to show up for breakfast. Odd, for boys. Don’t you think?”

Eric thought it was strange that they hadn’t asked for trays of food while he was there. No one liked to deliver trays to the cabins, preferring for the guests to come and get a small amount of socialization that mimicked a restaurant as far as noise, people, and what was happening. But they would’ve provided food if the boys had asked.

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“Did they say anything to you?”

“Not a word,” Eric said. “I barely got a grunt out of two of them. Terrell narrowed his eyes at me, then pretended like I didn’t exist until I left. Not sure if they are just putting up a few defenses because they’ve never been in a situation like this, or if they really don’t realize this is the last stop on the end of the line before they go to real prison.”

Something smacked against a nearby building with a loudcrack, and dog barking erupted loudly from outside. Eric let Skyfall’s hoof loose and followed Connor through the barn toward the kennels. All three boys stood outside, two of them holding large rocks ready to launch.

“Hey! Stop!” Connor yelled.

The boys ignored Connor and hurled the rocks toward the kennel. Luckily, both stones hit the wood siding, doing no damage except nicking some paint, but the dogs were obviously bothered and kept yowling. Connor rushed closer.

“I said, stop. Now.” He caught Big E by the arm as he raised another stone.

“Who do you think you are? You can’t do anything to me.” The boy raised his foot to stomp on Connor’s, and Eric came from behind, gripped him around the waist, and backed him off. Not easy to do to a very solid seventeen-year-old boy.

“Big E, you can’t throw rocks at the dogs.” Eric tried a little common sense.

“I didn’t hit any of them. We were just bored.”

Jayzon chucked his rock toward Terrell. The boy ducked out of the way but said nothing. “Why did you even come out here? You just stood there,” Jayzon taunted.

“Let’s go inside. Looks like we need to have a little conversation before chow time,” Connor said, thumbing toward the main house and his office.

Big E planted his feet and crossed his arms. “I’m not a dog. I don’t eat chow. I don’t want to be here. I want to be back with my friends. Do you think this is better than what we came from? It’s not. In juvie, we had cable. Most of my friends were there. I was going to get out in a month anyway. This is such a waste of time.”

Both boys took up similar stances, and it became obvious that Big E was more than just the bully of the group, he was the leader. Since they were all in jail because of gang activity, Eric wondered how much Big E had done that the police didn’t know about and if he was the prime recruit Connor had mentioned.

Connor gave him a conspiratorial look. “Release? I hadn’t heard that. I was told that if you do anything that makes waves out here, you’re going back and serving the rest of your time.” He shrugged as if the choice were theirs to believe him or not.

The adults had to establish who was in charge, and that was only going to happen by taking something the boys expected as a reward and holding it, so Connor’s words made sense. Eric wondered if Connor was stretching the truth to gain a little power, but he’d never seen Connor break any of the ten rules, and truth was number nine.

The boys followed, though they obviously weren’t excited about what would happen once they got there. They’d only gone a few steps when Sam came around the kennel with a dog at each of his sides. “What’s going on?”

“The boys riled up your dogs. We’re taking them inside to talk about how a clean slate works and that they really should look at it as a blessing.” Connor kept walking.

Clean slate, that was rule two. There was no way Connor could break a rule, then mention those very rules a moment later. So, these boys weren’t going home at the end of the month. He almost felt bad. Each boy had made their choice to live like they had, but what about their families? Didn’t they matter?

Eric followed the group, making sure the boys kept following Connor. He was more than happy to let his boss take the lead on this one. After never having children, he didn’t see how to talk to them without losing his cool, something he never allowed.

Except where Ali was involved.

He wondered how long she would stick around. Wayside was nothing like the big city, where she was probably used to having whatever she wanted as close as a taxi ride away. Not only was nothing close here, but there were also no taxis to get her there. He stopped his train of thought right there. Thinking about her wasn’t going to put him in the right frame of mind to deal with the boys. They were his job right now, not her.

Ali was going to have to wait.

* * *

What was making the dogs bark like that? Ali glanced out of her small kitchen window above the sink but couldn’t see anything. Every once in a while, the dogs barked but they usually stopped quickly. This had been going on for about five minutes. She slipped on her heels and rushed to investigate. The thick, soft grass didn’t handle her choice of shoes very well, and she barely kept herself from twisting her ankle as she made her way to the commotion.

Eric, Connor, and—she tried to remember the other cowboy’s name—maybe Sam, were about thirty yards away from the huge dog kennel building, heading for the house along with the three boys she’d seen the night before. By the look of the boys, they’d done something they shouldn’t have. This was her chance to prove to Eric that she was more than he remembered. If they’d done something wrong, feeling a little guilt would get them to turn around. That’s how the criminal justice system worked.

The boys saw her first. She always knew when men saw her. Their reactions gave them away. The moment the boys stopped to stare, the men turned and noticed her approach. At least, Sam spotted her. Connor seemed annoyed, and Eric looked like he’d swallowed bad fish or something.

“What happened?” Though it was a question, she put enough power behind the words to let all of them know they weren’t going anywhere until she got an answer.

Eric looked away. The rejection stung, but she’d only just arrived. The process of gaining his trust again would take time. Sam glanced at Connor, who finally answered her. “The boys were chucking rocks at the dogs. We were headed to my office to have a little discussion about what’s expected while they’re here. It’s not for you to worry about. I’m sorry the noise bothered you.”

“Throwing rocks at the dogs? Were any of them injured?” Ali tried to keep her shock in check.

Sam shook his head. “I spotted all of them in the run when I came around. None of them seem hurt.”

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The boys were completely unaffected by Sam's statement, even though throwing rocks could've hurt the dogs tremendously. "Don't you have any sense of decency or what causes pain?" She crossed her arms, angry that no one seemed to be taking the matter all that seriously. The boys were going to get a talking-to? That meant nothing and wouldn't get through to them. "Well?"

"Mrs. Wellthorp, I have this under control." Connor stepped forward, putting himself between her and the boys.

She stared at him and raised her brows to challenge his definition of "under control". "What if they'd broken a window and a dog had been hit? What if one of them had died?" The windows in the kennel were small and narrow, probably difficult to hit, but she had to assume that was their intent. Why else would they aim stones at a building?

One of the boys looked away. "We didn't mean to hurt any of them."

"Shut up, Terrell. You're useless." The biggest boy said.

Her heart stuttered for a mere second as memories of her childhood washed over her. You're useless. How often had she heard that? Too many times to count. Her mother had been an addict and everyone she'd met as a child had assumed she was from the same stock.

Her aunt and uncle hadn't wanted her and had let her know that in what they'd said and how they'd treated her. She'd vowed to make herself so wealthy, so stable, that they would someday beg her for help. That had never happened before they died, but

at least she never had to worry about being useless anymore.

“If you all don’t accept the help you’re offered here, you’ll end up in a situation so bad you’ll never get out. You’ll suffocate from it,” Ali intentionally added emotion to get their attention.

Eric strode toward her and turned her with a firm but gentle hand to her back. He guided her behind the barn, then dropped his hand from her like he never wanted to touch her again. She hadn’t realized how much she’d craved his touch until he took it away.

“You need to leave the boys to Connor and the rest of us. This isn’t for you. This isn’t a case you can win by twisting what you think you know. These boys are in our care, not yours.”

Her need to argue and defend herself outweighed what he’d said. “I don’t see an issue with anything I said. Obviously you don’t have control over them, or they would’ve been busy doing something productive instead of trying to kill dogs.” Maybe that was a stretch, but it could’ve happened.

He took a step closer to her, and his warm brown eyes ignited a fire inside her. She wanted to close the gap between them and tell him to let her prove herself. They had a chance if they could just leave the past behind.

“Ali, these boys have been told lies their entire lives. You just told them that we are no different from anyone else. We’re here to prove that people don’t have to act the way these boys expect us to. What you did just made our jobs much harder. We’re trying to reach them. Connor had already established that if they don’t put forth some effort here, they aren’t going home where they thought they were going. They’ll go back to jail, and it won’t be better or good for them.”

Her way would work if he'd listen, to everything. "I don't want to argue with you. I just want to talk to you. Give me a chance."

Eric backed away a few steps, and the heat in his eyes died as he hid his emotions from her. "I don't want to talk to you. We talked when we were twenty-one, not much older than those boys there. And just like those boys will change completely in the next ten years with the right instruction, you and I both changed from who we were. The past is the past. Leave it be." He turned slightly.

Ali gripped his arm, a shock jolting her with the touch, and he stopped. She drew her hand back and found him staring at his arm, just as she wanted to at her hand, but that would've given away her feelings. She could never do that, but what had that been? Loving him had been exciting when she was young, but she didn't remember feeling anything so instinctual.

"Eric, please. This isn't easy for me either. I'm here to work, and I want to help you. I can't leave this be. I'm here. Don't you think that's a sign or something?" She'd never believed in signs from God or whomever, but Eric had even back then. He'd tried to bring her into the fold, but she'd resisted. Why would a God who cared allow the only parent who cared about her die and let the other give her away to a relative who didn't want her? If He existed, He wouldn't. But Eric believed, and she'd use that to bring him back to her if she had to.

"A sign?" Eric quirked his brow. "A sign of what? That I'm supposed to listen to how good we were together until you found someone who would help your career more? Or maybe I should listen to grand stories of how you climbed the ranks with his help?" Eric's voice held steady, but she caught the faintest hint of anger. He was good at controlling it. She could read those things from a mile away after years of court litigation.

"I never asked you to dredge up our past. I never look back. I want to look forward.

Don't you want that? Doesn't your neck hurt from looking back and holding on to the past?"

He raised a hand, palm flat and facing forward, like a crossing guard telling her to wait. "There's very little I hold on to. I don't have a family anymore, and my friends are all here. In this case, looking back is my safety net. I did nothing to you but care, and you rejected me. Publicly. I'm not volunteering to go through that again." He strode away with rigid shoulders and a stiff walk.

Failure? It wasn't even in her vocabulary. She looked down at her hand, still tingling from touching him. She'd remind him how good they'd been together. If that didn't work, then she'd just show him how good he'd have it with her now. Letting him look back had been a bad idea anyway. She never looked back, and she wouldn't let him either.

ChapterFour

Coffee wasn't going to cut through the fatigue that morning. Eric bowed his head and tried to release the anger that clung to him like a second skin. How could Ali just show up and expect him to forget what she'd done? He didn't see any remorse from her, probably because she didn't feel any.

Looking back, he wondered if any of her feeling had been genuine. She'd loved hard, then had shut her heart off like a faucet. Could anyone do that if they really felt anything? Maybe she was as good an actress with him as he'd heard she'd become in the courtroom.

"Can I sit with you, or is this spot taken?" Edwyn Brookings, the foreman, pointed to the chair across from him at the table.

The cafeteria had plenty of other open tables, but Eric wasn't going to spread his foul

mood to everyone else. “You can sit where you’d like.”

Edwyn tugged out the chair with one hand and lowered his tray with the other. It was piled high with pancakes, sausages, hashbrowns, and even a muffin balanced on top like a baked castle. Though the guy was solid, he had very little fat on him. “You eaten yet?” He raised a brow and eyed Eric’s coffee.

“Nope. Didn’t have the stomach for it this morning.” Eric lifted his cup but found he no longer had the stomach for that either.

“Word got around quickly that Ali is here for you.” Edwyn grabbed the plastic handle of the glass jar of maple syrup from the center of the table and poured a liberal portion over his pancakes and muffin.

Eric flinched at all the sugar, but Edwyn worked hard. He’d need the calories. Eric would have to eat more for lunch or be exhausted by the end of the day after skipping breakfast. “She’s here to help Cole. Nothing more.”

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Edwyn froze in place. “That’s not how this works, man. We all agreed to talk to our one regret and try to make it right. You have to at least try or you’ll live in regret forever. You might have been in the military the shortest of all of us, but a mission is a mission.”

Eric snorted. He’d never fully agreed to this, but it was his own fault for keeping silent like usual. He was a man who got work done without fuss. What good would arguing do? He loved his job and wanted to keep it, so why risk losing his position by disagreeing with the boss? Connor’s heart was in the right place, but in Eric’s case, the situation was flipped. His regret couldn’t be made right because he couldn’t go back in time.

“I don’t see how I can fix the situation. I wish I’d never met Ali in the first place. That’s a pretty tough thing to work out. Especially face-to-face.”

Edwyn speared so much pancake it barely stayed on the fork. “Why, because you’re afraid of offending her or because you actually care how she feels?” Edwyn shoveled the fork into his mouth then jabbed it into another portion without waiting for Eric to reply.

Love thine enemy...But was Ali really an enemy? “I don’t like hurting people any more than the next guy. I just want to train horses and live out my days quietly. Ali is anything but quiet. I wish Connor had just waited. I could’ve gone last or not at all, but he went behind my back and invited her here.” Which felt like a betrayal though he didn’t want to dig that deeply into his feelings.

Edwyn grinned. “Except Connor couldn’t have contacted her unless you gave him her

name.” He poked the fork in Eric’s direction. “So, on some level, you want to see this finished. Why are you really so angry? That’s not like you.”

It wasn’t, and being angry left his stomach in knots. His father had displayed bouts of anger, and Eric had fought his whole life to control all negative emotions. Part of why he hadn’t wanted to face Ali was because after she’d publicly rejected him, he’d gone out and brawled that night. He’d had no other way of releasing that negative emotion, and he didn’t want that much anger to get inside him again. If anything, the brawling after the fact was a regret he could actually manage.

“Part of me wants this finished. Another, probably stronger, part wants to stay as far away from her as possible because she brings out a side of me that I’d rather not look at. No one wants to look at it.”

“What? Are you Jekyll and Hyde or something? You know that Brendon is there if you need to talk to him. He could help you manage whatever you need to manage.”

Ali set her tray down to Eric’s right at the four-person table and tugged out the chair. She was still wearing professional slacks and heels. Her blouse was the brightest white thing in the room, drawing attention to her pearly smile. “Good morning,” she said looking only at him.

Edwyn stood. “Why don’t you take my seat. I see Connor waving for me.”

Connor wasn’t, and that fact didn’t escape Eric’s notice. Edwyn grabbed his tray and rushed across the dining room.

“Huh, I guess we get a table to ourselves.” Ali took her seat then perfectly aligned her fork and knife beside her plate on her tray. She hadn’t taken the chair across from him. If she had, at least she wouldn’t be close enough to touch him again. That innocent touch the day before had left his brain swirling.

“I guess we do.” Eric clutched his coffee in both hands and considered going up to get a tray, just to put off talking to her. He would not lose his cool again. Not because of her or anyone else. He would not succumb to the anger that seemed to consistently boil inside him no matter what he did.

“I thought about what you said yesterday, and I’ve concluded that looking at the past is a bad idea. At first, I’d thought I would remind you of how good we had it, but that’s thinking of the past, which doesn’t help now. I should’ve known better.” She grabbed her fork and poked a single orange slice and slowly put it in her mouth.

Eric swallowed hard. He wouldn’t look at her lips, and he wouldn’t remember how he’d lost himself in the sweetness of that sassy lawyer mouth. “Of all the things I said to you yesterday, that’s what stuck with you? I really should get to work.” He gripped the table to push his chair back.

“You can sit with me for a few minutes. There’s no way your shift starts at forty-two past the hour.” The side of Ali’s mouth quirked in a knowing half-smile as she made a show of looking at her watch.

“It doesn’t. But I like to have things ready, and frankly, this is a ranch, so my hours start when I do.”

“You could at least finish your coffee.”

Eric closed his eyes and prayed for a calm spirit. Only God would help him manage what he couldn’t. “Until we deal with the past, there is no future. You can’t just walk in here after what you did and pretend like it didn’t happen. You don’t get to act like nothing is wrong. I don’t know why you came here, but you’re not going to get out of it what you want.” There, he’d come closer to telling her how he felt than he’d planned. Now he’d done his duty to Connor, and Ali could go back where she’d come from. Wherever that was.

She stiffened slightly, and he fought the urge to whoop in success. Maybe she actually felt something. He wasn't so sure. She'd acted so cold and calculated since she'd arrived that he wasn't sure if she was real or not.

She laid down her fork and gave him her full attention. "I always get what I want. I will not talk about the past. It's done. I can't change it, and most of it I don't want to. The past made me who I am, and I like who I am now. I went through too many years of being ignored to ever settle for less."

He knew she was setting a trap for him, but he couldn't stop himself from speaking. The moment he acted interested in what she was hinting at was the instant she used his curiosity against him. She was a lawyer, and that was how lawyers operated. Though maybe she was still human. "That's what you hope to get out of me, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you mean. I'm hoping to restart an old friendship." She tried to smile at him, but he could feel how forced it was.

"Just like you manipulated those boys yesterday, you want to come in here to bend me. You want me to feel how you want me to feel. Well, you won't. I'm not some jury you can convince."

"Eric, you and I were good together. We made each other better. I've had twenty-one years to improve my life, and I am where I am because I fought. I want you to be there too. Maybe I went through everything I did so you and I could enjoy what I built. Together. You can share in all the things that I've done. You can live a great life with me. You don't have to work at this little ranch out of the way anymore. Come with me." She reached for him.

He stood and picked up his coffee mug, tossed back the little bit he had left, and offered her a forced cheers and a fake smile. "I think you've said your piece. I will never leave Wayside Ranch." He turned and walked away.

* * *

Drat him. Ali watched Eric walk away. It seemed like she was always watching him walk away from her. As much as she loved the view, she hated the deed. She pushed around the few orange wedges left on her plate. Eric had resided in her dreams all night, just as he had for years, but last night he'd had his back to her the whole time. She'd woken to her alarm feeling more alone than she had in years. Even more than after her nasty divorce.

Nope. Thinking about her ex was the past. No backward thinking. Success came with looking ahead. Planning. She poked a blueberry. Maybe that wouldn't be so acidic to her stomach. The little marble of goodness dodged the fork and flew across the table. A hand stopped it, drawing Ali's attention up. Lacy waited there with a smile.

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“Morning. I saw Eric leave and didn’t want you over here alone.” Lacy sat across the table and set the blueberry in the middle with a grin.

“Yeah, I get the feeling he would like me to walk away. I just can’t. I did that once before, and while I’m so glad I am where I am, I wish I’d handled the situation with him differently.”

“Oh? Well, you’re here now to fix that.”

Ali closed her eyes, wishing for a little time alone. “I will try that but after the way we parted, I don’t think he’s willing.”

“What happened?” Lacy set a bowl of oatmeal in front of her and slowly stirred it as steam wafted across the table.

“Eric and I went to high school together. We went to prom together. Both of us wanted a military career, so we enlisted together. He joined to make a difference in the world. I joined to make a difference for me. My life was hard, and my aunt and uncle weren’t going to pay for an education. The military would.”

“So, you joined for the GI bill?” Lacy finally spooned a bite into her mouth.

“Yes. I refused to waste an opportunity, and I’m not ashamed of using what is offered. Eric wanted to stick to a few years, become a man, then move on and find a civilian career. I had no intention to quit. I had eight years of school ahead of me, and I knew there was no other way to get it.” Though the GI Bill had only been half of her plan. The other half had involved her husband ranking high enough to help with the

rest. Eric hadn't wanted that.

Lacy tilted her head in that questioning way that left Ali's mind racing. Why couldn't people just mind their own business? There was no need to explore why she hadn't been able to afford to go to school.

"I take it you and Eric parted ways after you discovered his plans didn't jibe with yours?"

Ali let her breath out and finally gave up on the pretense of eating. "There was a little more to it than that." Which was why Eric had stormed off from the table and kept running away from her. "He proposed. He thought if we married, he could make me happy and I wouldn't have to keep working so hard to fulfill my dreams. He didn't understand that I wanted to keep working, keep achieving. I needed to prove myself."

"To who?" Lacy laid down her spoon and looked Ali directly in the eyes. "How did you tell him all that?"

"That's not really important." And while it was important to him, it was a million years ago. If she wasn't going to talk about it with him, she wasn't going to talk about it with anyone else.

"I think it is. All the guys at Wayside are good guys, the kind women look for. The only one I ever was angry with was Cole, and that was because he couldn't stand who he'd become. He used to treat everyone like garbage. He's better now. But Eric, he's the most respectful, quiet guy here. He's unassuming, loves the land, and would love his mama if she was still here. So, let's try this again. How did you turn him down?"

Ali had thought she had an ally in Lacy, but perhaps that wasn't the case. "He proposed in front of everyone." She pushed her plate away and crossed her arms on the table. Why couldn't he have waited for her to tell him in private that they had no

future if he didn't want to be part of the military?

The public nature of his proposal alone had made Ali want to run and hide. She'd felt like he was trying to force her hand since he knew she hated to be embarrassed.

"It was a bright summer day, and we were all hanging out on the beach after working a long day. I could tell something was up with him because he'd acted strangely in the mess hall."

Ali's mind whirled in every direction, trying to avoid saying anything that would make the situation seem even worse than it had been, but there was no way to spin it positively. She'd tried. "He dropped to one knee right there in the sand of the volleyball court and asked me to marry him."

Lacy didn't move. Ali wasn't even sure she was breathing. "And?"

"And...I told him I couldn't marry him."

"Again, I know I didn't know Eric back then and people change, but it seems like his aversion to talking to you is disproportionate to what you're saying happened. He's acting like you dragged him on stage and announced to the world that he wasn't fit to marry." Lacy laughed.

Ali hadn't been that brash, but close, and she couldn't quite force a chuckle at Lacy's joke.

Lacy's laughter died, and her mouth dropped open. When she regained herself, she asked, "Are you kidding? You did that? Seriously? Why does he want a second chance if you blasted him in front of everyone?"

"No." Ali waved her hands back and forth. "It wasn't that bad. It's just... He

proposed so publicly, and I couldn't say yes. I cared about him a lot, but love can only go so far. I needed stability. Reassurance. I needed someone driven and successful. If Eric had stepped up, he could've been so great. He would've gone through the ranks and could've eventually been a general. I just know it. But that's not what he wanted."

Lacy slowly shook her head. "You had his whole life planned out for him. What about what he wanted? Didn't that matter? Why didn't you chase your own success and let him chase his?"

Of course Lacy wouldn't understand. Ali gestured to the room around them. "Success? You call this success? Some out-of-the-way ranch in Wyoming where you can't even get decent Chinese takeout and your Wi-Fi is more won't-fithan anything?" Ali stood and pointed at Lacy. "If Eric would've given just a little bit of effort, we could've been great together. He didn't want that."

Lacy sighed and glanced around the room. Only then did Ali realize they had an audience. All the men of Wayside that she'd met, minus Eric, sat at a long table staring at her. If she'd hoped to have Connor in her corner, she'd probably just lost him.

"I think I see the big picture now. I think I understand exactly why Eric isn't tripping over himself to talk to you. It's interesting that Connor planned second chances for his men to help them, but in this case, it's you who needed the second chance. I don't know if this mission will work. You're going to have to dig pretty deeply into who you are, because until you understand what it is Eric does here, you'll never see him as worthy. Until you see him as he is now, you'll never appreciate him for the great guy he is. He's not just a guy for your arm, he's a guy for your heart." Lacy picked up her tray and headed for the group of men.

Ali watched her leave and decided she'd had enough of the cafeteria. She brought her

tray up to the counter. Teddy, Connor's father, reached for it. She'd met so many men the day before that remembering them all was difficult, but Teddy was memorable. He was older, and even though his gait was a little stiff and his shoulders a little stooped, he was still a strong and healthy man.

"You didn't eat much. Is there something wrong with the fruit?" Teddy glanced at her plate.

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“No, I just lost my appetite before I could get started.” Maybe being here was a bad idea. She should admit this was too much, go back home and do the name change through the mail when Cole returned from his honeymoon. Eric wasn’t interested in talking, much less rekindling an old flame or attempting a second chance. Connor had gotten her hopes up for nothing.

“Want me to put it in a bag for you for to eat later? You’ll get hungry. The air around here does that.” He chuckled, waiting for her reply.

“Sure, why not. I might need something.”

His gaze traveled down to the bracelets on her wrist, then back to her eyes. “Lacy can take you to Cheyenne if you need some clothes that are more comfortable to live out here. There are a few shops in Piper’s Ridge that have a small selection, but nothing you’d probably be interested in. You’ll be uncomfortable if you wear that all the time.” He kept his gaze trained on her eyes.

Ali snorted. “I don’t think she’s interested in taking me anywhere. I can drive if I need anything. Thank you.” She grabbed the bag of fruit from the counter and headed for the door.

She made it to the front porch before her heel caught in the wooden slats and broke clean off, leaving her hobbling down the steps. A German shepherd trotted toward her with its tongue lolling to one side. Ali had feared the shepherds and Malinois at the base. They were dangerous dogs so this one brought her up short. “You just stay back.”

Sam came out the door behind her and whistled softly. The dog stopped and sat at attention. Ali wasn't sure if she should move or just stand there—especially with a broken shoe since she couldn't run without taking it off. Back home, she never felt out of place. Nothing was beyond her control. Why was everything out here so difficult?

“Need some help? I don't wear women's shoes, but I imagine that's even more uncomfortable than when it happens with boots.” Sam came to her side and offered his arm.

She could take his offer or hobble back to her cabin on her own and probably humiliate herself along the way. At least she was in the middle of nowhere, and no one would see her. Last time she'd let someone help her, it hadn't turned out well, but what could be the harm in a cowboy assisting her back to her room? “Sure, thank you.”

Sam glanced down at the rocky path, then at her feet. “Might be best if we do this the old-fashioned way.” He scooped her up and headed toward the cabins.

Ali stiffened, sure she was going to die of embarrassment. She wasn't certain if she should hang on to his neck or what she could do to help him so he could put her down quickly. Sam stopped abruptly, and Ali turned her head as all her breath swooshed from her lungs.

“Sam, what are you doing?” Eric stood by her front door with his hands on his hips.

ChapterFive

Seeing Ali in the arms of another man shouldn't bother Eric. He'd found out she'd been married for years, and only learned she was divorced right before she came to Wayside, so why did seeing her draped over Sam's arms make his blood boil?

He'd planned to apologize for leaving her so abruptly at the breakfast table. End of story. He hadn't made it all the way out to the barn before his conscience pricked him. Then, he'd witness Sam carrying her across the lawn like some knight and his insides had turned to magma.

He stomped into the barn past the other horses all the way to Skyfall, his trusty gray mare. She twitched and stomped, feeding off his energy.

"Whoa, girl. I'll calm down if you will." He ran a hand down her smooth neck. "I don't need any other girl but you." She turned as far as she could toward him and nuzzled his hand.

If only human girls were as easy to sweet-talk. He mentally shook the thought from his head. Who needed girls? He slipped Skyfall's halter over her head and secured it, then clipped the reins in place. Without prompting, she backed from her stall and moved toward the area where he usually saddled horses.

"Not today, girl. We're going to the circle." Because he needed the mental focus of watching her gait, looking for weakness or injury, and spending time with his horse. Horses didn't reject him, at least, not for long. He'd seen some troubled horses in his time at Wayside and before that when he'd worked for a livestock auction. Now, he had the blessing of watching the years of abuse fade as he coaxed them back to health.

Skyfall bobbed her head as she stayed a few paces ahead of him. That was her way. If he told her where they were going, she wanted to get there faster. As soon as her dappled head hit the sun, her mane almost sparkled in the light. She was healthy and shiny, so much better than how she'd been when she'd arrived. If Skyfall of the past could stand next to Skyfall now, they wouldn't look like the same horse.

He got in position at the center of the circle and slowly released the long rope as she

trotted in a circle around him. She chose the pace, and soon she was running in wide circles. Other trainers might never do this for a horse who was already trained, but for him it was time spent bonding with his horse.

A movement out of the corner of his eye distracted him momentarily, not that it affected Skyfall. Terrell peeked from the wide door of the barn, his dark head almost blending in with the shadows. Eric wondered briefly if Terrell intended to be stealthy, like when he'd helped with the convenience store theft, or if he was merely trying to hide that he was watching.

"You can come on out. Are your friends with you?" Eric asked, keeping his tone level to prevent spooking Skyfall.

Terrell shuffled from the security of the shadows into the sun and stuffed his hands into his large pockets. He stared at the ground until he made it to the corral fence, then finally looked up. "I don't have friends."

"Enemies, then?" Eric focused on the horse until Skyfall was near enough to the boy that he could glance at Terrell unnoticed.

"They aren't my enemies either, old man."

Eric chuckled and felt a flimsy bond form between them. Terrell must have come in search of companionship. Eric tried not to let it go to his head that he'd found it with the one person who'd talked to him. He'd grown sensitive to those bonds as he worked with horses and knew the moment another person decided Eric was worth a time investment. "Then, what would you call them?" he asked, hoping to keep the conversation going.

"Right now? My competition. There's only one spot open. I didn't want it, but now I've got no choice but to try. I know too much. A year from now, only one of us will

be alive.” He glanced away. “I can’t let it be anyone but me.”

One open spot on the gang. Terrell hadn’t said it, but that’s what he meant. From what Connor had said, the gang knew who the prime recruit was but the boys didn’t. Terrell had to feel like he was fighting blind.

Eric couldn’t favor one boy over the others, but Terrell’s need to talk almost sounded like a cry for help. Some men just went about asking for what they needed that way, stating the problem out loud. The trouble was, some men were looking for assistance, others just wanted to hear the problem out loud to talk it out. Eric wasn’t sure which Terrell wanted since he didn’t know the boy well yet.

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“Want to help me?” Eric slowed Skyfall with a sharp whistle, and soon she was back to a steady trot.

“You want me to stand there and spin in circles? Naw, that looks like a good job for an old man.” Terrell gave the barest hint of a smile.

“There are other options for you, if you take them.” Eric gave the rope a soft tug, and Skyfall slowed as she circled him one last time, then strode to his side. “Putting ‘I survived a gang’ on a resume won’t get you far in life unless you plan to be a motivational speaker. If you start reaching for things to achieve here at the ranch, you might start finding that good things come your way.”

Terrell’s face shuttered, and he looked away. “I think your ears must be failing you, old man. It won’t matter how hard I try. They will come and find me. I’ve seen faces. I know names. Not just street names, real names. Clayton, Big E’s brother, has been in for years. They tell us on purpose so if we don’t cut it, the members won’t feel remorse when they kill us. It’s for safety. If I’m gone, it protects them.”

Wayside Ranch had lowered the security after all the trafficking victims had left to allow Gabby to go to work more easily in the morning. Eric would have to talk to Connor about setting it back up to the level they’d had it before. They’d assumed the gang would never leave California, but maybe that assumption was misplaced.

“What do you have to do in order to make the cut?”

Terrell looked him in the eye, and his young jaw hardened. “I can’t tell you that.”

Eric hadn't seen hardness like that in anyone's eyes since his time in the military. Terrell might be the smallest of the three boys, but he had determination and a will to survive. By inviting these boys to the ranch, they may have set themselves up for more trouble than they ever could've imagined.

* * *

Ali's closet held few comfortable options outside of her running shoes, and they were supposed to be exclusively for running. Other than her workout clothes, the wearing of which hadn't bothered her in the slightest on base running the track, she had nothing other than business slacks or skirts and blouses.

When she returned home after a long day, she often simply put on her pajamas to relax. Why have clothes sitting around that she didn't want? If she went to the store on the weekend, she usually chose to wear the clothes that helped her feel in control. Jeans and tees were for kids. She was an adult.

Then again, Lacy and Eric—and all the Wayside men for that matter—didn't look like teens in jeans. Maybe her big-city thinking was getting in the way. After losing a three-hundred-dollar pair of shoes that morning, she wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. There had to be another option.

She tugged on her least revealing workout outfit, a pair of yoga pants she wore when the weather was too cool for her capri leggings, then topped it with her usual sports bra. To make the outfit slightly less workout and more everyday, she took out a breezy, thin peasant top that she normally wore over a cami and tugged it on over her head.

Ali frowned at her reflection. Nothing coordinated. She didn't look ready for a run with the top, nor did she look ready for life with the pants. At least she looked like people she'd seen at the grocery store, so she'd deal with feeling uncomfortable for a

little while and at least fit in. Her discomfort only had to last until she could get something more appropriate for the remainder of the three weeks she'd have to live at Wayside. Or until Eric convinced Connor to tell her to leave, whichever came first.

She grabbed her purse, then halted. The purse definitely didn't go with the vibe of the outfit she'd put together, but she didn't have anything else that would work. After a quick rummage through the few items inside, she tucked her driver's license and debit card in her bra strap, then headed out.

Since she'd only been there a little over one day, she hadn't made time to work out yet, and wearing the runners on the gravel made walking a lot easier. A pair of boots like everyone else wore around the ranch might be even more comfortable. Everyone else wore them, with the exception of the boys who'd arrived the same day she had. They probably felt just as out of sorts as she did.

Ali strode along the cabins, keeping as quiet as possible. Eric had looked so angry about her lapse in judgement, allowing Sam to help her, that she didn't want to face him. There was no way his anger was jealousy. He'd made himself perfectly clear that he wasn't attracted to her anymore. He had to have been angry that she was there only because of him and that his friend had been forced to rescue her. The cowboy code had worked against her.

How she hated that. Her cheeks burned, and she increased her pace like she could run away from the very idea of being embarrassed. At the end of the line of cabins, she heard voices and stopped. She had no desire to meet up with anyone but Lacy, especially dressed in this ridiculous outfit.

Peering around the corner, the three boys stood in a small clutch, heads down, mumbling to each other. Her lawyer curiosity kicked in, and she inched closer so she could hear what they were talking about. Eric had warned her against doing things to manipulate the boys, but she didn't trust anyone until they proved to her that they

could be trusted, and these boys looked like they were up to something. Voices low. Hiding out of sight. All things criminals would do.

“You think Bones will come all the way out here? It’s in the middle of nowhere,” the boy leaning against the cabin said.

“Shut up, Jayzon. How dare you use any of their names? What if someone heard you?” The second boy quickly glanced around.

Ali ducked behind a cabin and waited until she heard voices again, then slowly inched her way closer. If she could get to the cabin closest to where they were, she could hide just around the corner and they’d never see her as long as she guessed correctly which way they would go when they left...

Most likely, they wouldn’t go to the back, they’d go inside or head to the lodge to eat. Boys were always eating, and she hadn’t seen them in the cafeteria once since she’d arrived. They had to be starving by now.

Avoiding windows and glad she’d worn her runners now, she was able to think about where she wanted to be, not where she had to place her feet to stay upright. Once she was close enough, she could hear the boys again.

“I think Bones will come, and both of you will get it,” a low voice said.

“You think you have this in the bag because you’re the biggest and meanest of the three of us, but I’ve got both of you beat,” another boy said. “I know for a fact they will come because Clayton already tried to take a hit out on me in juvie, but I escaped. If you don’t make it, you don’t make it.” The boy made a snickering sound.

“My brother didn’t try to kill you or you’d be dead. You don’t know anything,” the boy with the low voice said. “I’ve got plans for this place. I’m going to make sure

everyone knows that I can follow orders. Can you say the same?"

"Big E, when is Bones coming?" Jayzon asked, with a nervous laugh.

The boy with the deep voice answered, "Clayton will be here, with some others, in a week or less. They'll drive here because they won't risk flying for us."

"How many?" Jayzon continued.

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Ali held her breath. Eric would want to know all of this, but not from her. He might accuse her of lying to get to talk to him. Who could she tell who would get the word to Eric? The only possibility was Lacy. She got the feeling the woman didn't like her, but Ali had little choice.

“Not sure, but at least two besides Clayton. They'll want to make sure they can get the one of us out of here who made it and make sure no one else who saw their faces can ever tell anyone.” Big E's young voice trembled.

When Ali looked at them, she couldn't sense a hint of fear. Anyone looking on would have assumed they were talking about the weather or the latest baseball score. But as soon as she backed fully around the corner and could only hear them, the fear came out. Their voices gave their true feelings away.

“Terrell, if you say a word, even one word, to that cowboy you've been talking to, I will personally drown you in the toilet,” Jayzon whispered.

The third boy answered quickly. “We don't talk. I make fun of how old he is. I won't say a word. I know you both have counted me out, but I'm in. I won't end up in some ditch.”

Big E snorted. “That's pretty Hollywood. They won't even bother moving you. Once you're gone, you're not worth thinking about. I would bet they've already decided which of us gets in. It's only a matter of time. Might mean I'm in if Bones is the one who comes.”

Ali took a few steps back slowly to keep her feet from making any noise. She

couldn't happen to walk by them now or they might realize she'd been standing there longer than she should. If they thought about the fact that they'd only heard a few steps, they'd know she'd been listening. If they were so callously talking about their own deaths, they could quickly dispatch her without a second thought to keep their secrets safe.

Moving slowly, she heard them shuffling at the other end of the house. She turned and bolted around the corner, flattening herself against the wall. The boys tromped onto the small porch in front of the house, the other way around. Ali took a deep breath, but her escape wasn't over. She was pinned there because they could still see her walking away. All of their window blinds were open, probably so they could see anyone coming for them. Even running the way she'd come would give her position away.

Everything around seemed far too wide-open now. In the city, she could've made a run for the nearest building and dashed around a corner and out of sight. Out here, there was at least thirty yards between the cabins and the nearest barn. Why couldn't anything be closer together? Did all these cowboys like to walk far to get anywhere?

Ali pressed her palms to the siding of the little cabin, hoping to feel the slight vibration of footsteps within. If she could guess how far away they were based on how hard the vibrations were, she might be able to make a run for safety, but first she'd have to crawl under their windows so they didn't see her.

She glanced down at the rocky path and held in a groan. Her knees would be a scraped-up mess by the time she was clear of the windows. Eyeing the porch, she had an idea. If she could get on the roof, she could slowly walk across and climb down silently.

Basic training was many years behind her, but she'd remained in good physical health. Shimmying up the porch support shouldn't be a big problem. She stuck her

foot between the rails of the porch surround and climbed up on the railing. From there, she slowly stood, trying to avoid any line of sight from the front windows or making the wood creak under her.

Her foot caught between the rails and she held her breath as she wiggled free. Finally able to stand, she glanced up at the remaining distance. From the railing, the roof came to about her chest. She'd done lifts before, but usually with a bar, not scratchy shingles. However, if her male counterparts could do it, so could she.

She braced her palms to absorb the pressure, pushed off with her toes and caught her weight with her elbows, then slowly straightened them to bring the roofline to her waist. Once steady, she flung her knee over the edge and slowly crawled onto the roof.

Now that she was up, she only had to get across slowly and quietly enough that she could avoid detection from the boys inside. Even if they didn't try to kill her themselves, the men who were coming for them would want to get rid of her. She knew one of their names now, both real and nickname.

After a painstakingly slow crawl across the roof, Ali climbed down the other side and held close to the house to catch her breath. If the boys saw her on this side, where they'd been talking, they might assume she'd come from the other direction. But that was exactly the direction she needed to go to talk to Lacy.

Her mind kicked in, thinking of every option and every escape. She recalled that Lacy had an office down in one of these cabins, but which one? The door to the next cabin opened up and Lacy came out, balancing a cardboard storage box on her arm.

"Hey, let me help you with that." The perfect excuse to be in the area. Hopefully Lacy hadn't seen her crawl across her neighbor's roof. At least she'd been out of sight while listening to the boys talk. "You look like you're off to go somewhere, but

I wanted a minute to talk with you.” She hoped she got the urgency across in her voice.

“Oh, sure. What I had to do can wait. Come on inside.” She opened the door back up and held it for Ali. “What’s the matter?”

Ali set the heavy box on a small sofa and brushed the asphalt from the shingles off her hands. “I think we need to talk about those boys. I just heard something that might change how welcome they are here.”

ChapterSix

Ali took a deep breath and let it out as she pulled her car to a stop by the front lodge in the Wayside lot. Piper’s Ridge had little shops just like Teddy had mentioned, but no clothing had looked suitable. She was not a flannel or tee kind of girl. She’d worn enough tees when she’d done her time in the army and she’d hated wearing them then.

At the end of her tolerance, she’d finally chosen a couple flowy peasant tops and a pair of linen palazzo pants to replace her yoga pants from a low-quality big box store. If they didn’t last, that was fine. She only needed them for a short time. She’d discovered halfway through her trip into Piper’s Ridge that her poor yoga pants had sustained injuries to the knees. Now she’d only have her capri leggings for working out.

Lacy and Connor left the lodge, obviously in conversation with one another. She’d told Lacy all about what the boys had said, and Lacy had promised to tell Connor about what she’d heard. Connor would then talk to Edwyn and make a plan to tell everyone else. Notifying Lacy had felt right, but letting it go didn’t. She still wanted to make sure Eric knew about the threat since he was working with the boys. What if Eric was with them when these gang members arrived?

Ali's chest ached, just as it had for so many years when she thought about Eric. He was all that was missing from her life. Her husband had cared about her success—though not about her—right up until the point when she'd started to age. Then, just like everyone else she'd needed to care for her, he'd changed. He'd no longer appreciated her success or her career. He'd wanted a newer, younger model.

Connor opened the gate to the corral for Lacy, and her laughter caught on the breeze at something he'd said. She and Eric had been like that at one point. Ali grabbed her small bag of clothes from the store she usually avoided and headed for her cabin. As much as she hated the tiny house, at least she could be alone with her thoughts there.

More laughter reached her, and Ali picked up the pace, trying to keep her sights on the path to her front door, not the divorced couple ahead of her that were obviously closer than most separated spouses. Absolutely closer than she was to hers. She wondered what made them so close, but her own history was painful enough that she would never ask people about theirs. Why force people to share pain if they didn't want to?

Her memory was far too clear for her own good, and a date long ago with Eric came to mind. He'd come over to pick her up in his old truck. Since she'd never wanted him to really know her aunt and uncle, she'd always run out of the house to meet him. She hadn't thought about it, but now she wondered if he'd gone to talk to her uncle before he'd proposed. If he had, he might know just how bad her life had been for so long.

Then again, Uncle Cliff was a completely different person in front of strangers.

She'd climbed into Eric's truck and had buckled herself in. Eric had handed her a bottle of raspberry iced tea—her favorite—and given her that smile he reserved just for her. "How's my girl?" he asked.

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She rubbed the bruise on her hip, contemplating telling him about Cliff and how he didn't appreciate that, with age, she didn't listen to him like she used to. He'd pushed her into a counter and called her ungrateful, along with a few other choice names.

"What's wrong?" Eric's demeanor changed immediately.

"Nothing. I just had to think through my answer. You know me." She laughed, deflecting his concern. She always covered for Cliff. Where else could she go if the law got involved? She was far too close to eighteen for foster care.

"You sure?" He reached for the bottle, opened it for her, and handed it back.

"I am." She had always felt safe with Eric—safe from her uncle and safe from herself and her need for perfection from herself.

Reality came back when Ali realized she was standing in front of her own cabin door, unmoving and distracted. Who knew how long she'd actually been standing there staring at the numbers before her eyes.

Safety and love had no place in her life now. They didn't really help in the long run. Money did. Money had bought her freedom from Uncle Cliff when she'd gotten a scholarship to go along with her GI Bill and was able to move away to college.

By then she'd already refused Eric, and he'd transferred as soon as he'd finished basic training. She'd convinced herself that they would've followed separate paths. They never would've stayed together. She would've been unhappy with his choices.

As she pushed open her front door, she knew there was no way she could've been happy if this was where Eric would've eventually ended up anyway. But he'd never had all of the comforts she'd had. He'd only had what the army provided and then what he'd earned wherever he'd been between then and now.

Since he showed no signs of wealth or appreciating the finer things, she could only assume he'd never had them. That might be the key to turning his eye toward her. Frank had said she didn't have what it took at her age to keep his attention. Maybe the same could be said of Eric. Her face wasn't what it had been before, when she was twenty-one.

She rushed to the bathroom and screwed off the top of her expensive skin cream. Twice a day. Three times if she worked out really hard and needed to refresh her skin from an extra hot shower. The expense and effort were worth it. All of it was worth it. Wrinkles were within her control if she just kept on top of the routine.

Back in the kitchen, she tugged her laptop from its leather case and opened it. She quickly linked to the spotty Wi-Fi and searched for her favorite wine. The bottle would cost almost four hundred dollars with shipping, but the cost would be worth it to show Eric a little taste of the finer things. Start small, then slowly show him what he could have with her. Maybeshewasn't enough to catch his eye, but her lifestyle had to be.

After putting in her payment information, she closed her laptop and set it aside. Sitting here wishing and daydreaming wasn't going to get her results. If she wanted the man of her dreams, she'd have to go out and get him just like she did with everything else in her life. One bullet point at a time.

* * *

The few windowseats in the dining room weren't Eric's usual first choice for eating

supper. He generally sat with the rest of the guys along with Lacy and Gabby at a hugely long table set right in front of the fireplace. He hadn't stopped to think how having all of them at one table might detract Ali and the three boys from coming to the dining room, but now that he was apart and alone, he understood why the boys hadn't come and why Ali might be missing. Sitting alone wasn't much fun.

Where was she? He hadn't seen her since the previous morning when Sam had carried her back to her cabin. Sam had found him later to tell him the particulars and didn't seem all that convinced Eric didn't care if other guys wanted to hold Ali. Sam didn't realize it wouldn't be any different for Eric than the last twenty-one years. Someone else had held the woman he'd loved.

Eric pushed his food around his plate, keeping watch out the window for any sign of Ali. He didn't really want to talk to her, but he wanted to make sure she was fine. Connor had mentioned some situation she'd found herself in that could've been dangerous, and Eric had been worried. Just seeing she wasn't hurt was enough.

After eating the longest meal he'd had in the history of forever, he brought his tray over to Victoria at the counter.

"Eric, what's going on? Are you having a disagreement with the guys?" She glanced at the table full of the other Wayside men, then back at him.

"No argument. I just wanted to make sure Ali was all right and thought I'd see her coming if I sat by the window." He saw no reason to be less than honest about his intentions. Other than the disaster that was his relationship with Ali, honesty had always been the best policy for him.

Victoria smiled. "Good, I'm glad to hear y'all are getting along better than I first thought. I'll happily be wrong in this case."

Victoria cared about everyone there and often joked with the men, especially Teddy since he worked with her in the kitchen when he wasn't working security. Her concern wasn't warranted though, and he didn't want her having any. "It's not like that. I just heard she'd gotten into a sticky situation. That's all." He held up his hand to show his feelings were at a full stop. There was no room for discussion.

Victoria's gaze danced to his right for a bare second before she grinned at him. "Well, you don't have to look anymore because she's right behind you."

His stomach dropped. Had Ali heard him? He slowly turned and took her in from head to toe. She had on a shirt that was feminine and soft, making her look more approachable and even relaxed. Instead of her usual trousers and heels, she wore a pair of running shoes and wide-legged linen pants that gave her a look of being on vacation. But what got to him the most was the sudden vulnerability in her eyes. That hadn't been there since she'd arrived at Wayside and reminded him of the woman he'd known so long ago, the one who'd turned him down for her career.

"Eric, I know you don't want to have much to do with me, but I was wondering if we could just walk and talk? No expectations. Just talking. Please?" She glanced up at him with her beautiful brown eyes.

Ali was five foot eight without her heels, but he hadn't seen her without them in so long he'd forgotten she wasn't his height. That contributed to her sudden vulnerability that made him want to accommodate her request. He glanced around the room, suddenly feeling less than sure of himself. Turning Ali away was easy when she was being snooty or chilly. This soft and feminine Ali was a lot harder to send on her way.

"Sure. I know the perfect place." It was out in the open where they belonged, but quiet so no one would hear their conversation. The less people knew about what had happened between them, the better.

She smiled and stepped to the side, letting him lead the way.

“Thank you, Victoria.” He took a moment to make sure she knew he appreciated her hard work.

Victoria laughed pleasantly and waved him on his way. He headed for the door, keeping an eye out for the three boys. They still hadn’t come to a single meal. He was pretty sure Connor had caved and allowed Lacy or someone to bring them meals in their cabin. He wanted to encourage them to follow the rules but more than that, he wanted them to get out of their cabin. While there was no part of the ten rules that said eating in the cafeteria was a must, trust was one of the rules, and they couldn’t build trust if the boys were hiding all the time.

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He glanced toward the boys' cabin, but none of them were outside. He hadn't seen two of the three of them in the barns or doing anything besides tossing rocks at the dog kennel. He shortened his stride to match Ali's as they walked between the cabins and the barn to a small fire pit area with seating. A pergola covered a few tables and created some shade from the heat.

"This is perfect," Ali said. "I've looked at this spot every day, but it doesn't look like such a nice spot to sit if you're alone." She took one of the seats on the opposite side of the fire pit. He wanted to keep his distance, but didn't want her to yell and have everyone hear them, so he chose the chair to her right.

"It's been here since I started. Our guests use it more than we do. The fire pit for the workers is about a mile down one of our trails, and usually you'd only get there by horse."

Ali scrunched her nose. "I've never ridden."

He could hardly recall the last day he hadn't ridden. "Maybe we'll have to take you for a ride sometime." But that wasn't why she'd asked him out here. There was something else. Would she tell him, or would he have to poke around and hope he guessed correctly? "What did you want to talk about?"

"Us." She drummed her fingers on the arm of the Adirondack chair. "I think we need to talk about why I'm here and what we can do over the next two-and-a-half weeks until I go back."

He appreciated that she wanted to talk and get things out in the open, but there was

nous. He wasn't ready to be in a friendship with her, much less a relationship that went deeper. "I think we need to discuss what happened between us before we move forward. Maybe you don't need the explanation, but I do. Call me a wimp, but you destroyed me."

Her lips flattened to a thin line. "It was over twenty years ago, Eric. What good is it going to do either of us to rehash and reopen old wounds? I'm not the same person I was then, and like you said, you aren't either."

Her stiff spine gave her away. He was treading where she was uncomfortable, which was good. He'd been uncomfortable with the way things had shaken out for over two decades. He'd had reasonable closure until she walked right back into his life like nothing had happened.

"I'm not looking back. I'm just not," she continued. "There are a lot of good things about both of us, and I think if we simply talked about ways to reconnect, we could get past this discomfort."

"Do I make you uncomfortable?" He wanted to stand, to feel like he had some control over the situation, but the whole mess seemed about ready to blow at any moment. His own anger was simmering, but so far completely under his control.

"I don't need to answer that." She turned her face from him.

Her profile was still just as beautiful as the day she'd walked away. She barely had any laugh lines by her eyes or near her mouth like so many women their age had. He wasn't sure how she managed to look ten years younger than her age, but that wasn't a question he was ever going to ask her. "I need to hear why you said no. I gave you everything I had, and it wasn't enough for you. I'm not sure why you've suddenly decided that you want some type of relationship with me when you ended it the first time." He wouldn't go any further than that or he'd risk getting angry again.

“I don’t see why it should matter. Stop looking back. Like you said, we’re different now. Looking back does no good. I’m not the same person I was when you proposed. Not even a little. I’m ready to bury the hatchet. Aren’t you?”

Any other woman he knew would’ve crossed her arms and given a little pout at the direction of the conversation, but Ali didn’t. She looked him right in the eye and made it clear she was going to control this conversation, and his refusal to see her point almost seemed to energize her.

“I’m not ready,” he answered. “I can’t look at you and not see you laughing at me as I shoved my ring back in my pocket. You humiliated me, and I need to know why.”

Ali sighed and leaned forward, touching the tips of her fingers together. “Eric, I see you talking to all the men around this ranch, and I’ve seen you with those boys who came the same day I did. I’m certain that all of them have hurt you at some point. The boys threw rocks at your dogs, yet you forgave them. You talk to them. You always wanted me to be a believer and to trust in God, you wanted me to espouse all those virtues like forgiveness. Why do all of them get your forgiveness, but not me? Why do I have to jump through hoops to earn it when no one else does?”

He doubted she was a believer. She’d been vehemently against anything having to do with faith when they were together, and he doubted she would’ve started living for the Lord between then and now. But that didn’t mean he shouldn’t think about her accusation. Was he being less forgiving with her than others?

“The past has nothing to do with who we are now.” She stood from the chair and waited for his reply.

“I would argue the past has everything to do with who we are. Every situation we’ve been through has shaped us.” And he’d remained single because he couldn’t trust himself to fall for another woman who would hand his heart back to him on a platter

with a knife in it. Some changes were irreversible.

“The past shapes us, directs us, but we choose how we deal with it,” she said. “You choose to keep your eyes trained on that day so long ago, when there are plenty of other days ahead.”

Maybe he needed to forgive, but she had to admit some blame in all of this. He wasn’t going to again be the only one to give in any relationship. “What about you?”

She thrust her chin forward. “What about me?”

His phone pinged, and he drew the device from his pocket. Connor had sent him an urgent text, telling him to come to the barn. “I have to go. I guess we’ll finish our talk later. Maybe then you’ll be ready to explain what or who was more important than me.”

He turned before she could reply and raced for the barn.

ChapterSeven

Eric ran to get Skyfall, wishing he knew what he was rushing into. Was something going on with the boys? Had one of the horses been injured? If so, he’d have to call up Dr. John Willis. Eric couldn’t offer much help for an injured horse. The door to the horse barn hung open like usual, and Eric headed inside.

Connor stood at the other end, holding a rope tied to one of their newest rescues in one hand and a gun in the other. Eric drew his weapon and headed over to join Connor. “What’s going on?”

“I was able to ride in and get him because he refused to go anywhere near that trailer.” He pointed to a stock trailer in the distance that Eric hadn’t noticed. Someone

had broken through a portion of the fence, trying to steal horses.

“Did they get any?” Eric asked, searching for people within the riled-up knot of horses.

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“None that I can tell. I don’t see anyone, but when I first rode out there, someone took a shot at me. I couldn’t lead this horse back and grab any others. They’re just too scared.”

Eric nodded, knowing he was going to have to put himself in a little danger to get the animals somewhere safe. “Call Deputy Blake. He’ll come right out. I’ll try to get these horses back in the barn where we can get a count.” He took the lead rope from Connor and led the horse back into the barn.

They didn’t have enough stalls for all the horses owned by Wayside. Since most of them pastured the majority of the time, it wasn’t necessary to keep a place for each and every one. Now he wished they had more space. He got the gelding tied securely, then headed over for Skyfall, glad that he’d had his horse in the barn.

“You ready for a little racing?” He rubbed her soft cheek as he clipped the reins to her bridle.

She twitched in expectation, and he backed her from the stall, then quickly saddled her. Connor returned with one other. “On foot I just can’t reach them. This one raced by, and by God’s mercy I was able to grab her. Watch yourself out there. You’re more important than any of our horses.”

Eric didn’t answer that. These horses got him through his days. They were like family since he had none left of his own, and by the state of his love life, it didn’t appear he was ever going to have one.

The horses seemed to be weaving together in a cluster but moving farther from the

barn. There had to be something or someone directing them. The barn was a safe place for them if they were frightened and they'd head back to it if they could. Their movements made no sense, meaning someone or something was driving them.

Eric said a prayer that they wouldn't turn into a stampede of horses running away from him. Alone, he couldn't handle that. If whoever had cut down that section of fence had done that in other areas, they could funnel all the horses right out of Wayside. Even if he only thought about the cost, they could never replace all those horses. But he had never been able to think of them as just horseflesh.

He gave Skyfall a sharp whistle, and she raced toward the others. Three riders galloped from behind the stock trailer, whipping their mounts with the reins. He couldn't see any of their faces, only the color of each horse. None of them looked familiar.

One of the men drew his pistol and shot three times into the air, setting the Wayside horses running just like Eric had feared. "Come on, girl. We need to catch up with them."

With three of them and only one of him, he wasn't about to make himself an obvious target by shooting at one of the riders. If he missed, he'd have three men after him, and their skill at shooting from the back of a running horse might be better than his own.

For once, he wished he'd spent more time in the military than he had. He'd only served for two years before discharging. Staying hadn't been an option when he knew he could run into Ali at any time. She really had changed the entire course of his life.

He tugged out the whistle he wore under his shirt to call in the dogs. Two of them would be out on security detail and would come as soon as they heard the whistle. He gave two short blasts, then focused on the riders. If he didn't stop them, they'd drive

the horses through the fence, but the horses could be injured before that.

Eric said a prayer of thanks that the two dogs he hoped were on duty came running. Cody, a large smooth-coated sheltie, was the best at herding. He could work security too, but his strength was in his ability to turn animals and get them going the way he wanted. Zeus, the huge rehabilitated German shepherd, joined Cody.

Eric blew the special command on the whistle, and the dogs went to work, heads down, racing into the fray. One of the three riders took aim at the dogs. Eric drew his pistol and shot, drawing attention away from the dogs. He couldn't let the dogs become targets.

All three riders slowed, then turned toward him. Soon they were racing for him. A shot sounded from behind him, and he ducked, risking a glance over his shoulder. Edwyn rode toward him on his roan gelding. He'd shot, but none of the riders dropped or even slowed.

Eric circled back, but the riders would be on them in a few seconds. "Plan?"

"Keep the horses." Edwyn gave a sharp heel to his mount and drove right for the thieves.

Eric followed, keeping an eye on what the dogs were doing so he could give direction if they needed it. At least the odds were a little more even now. One of the riders raised his pistol and shot toward Edwyn. The shot went wide, and the Wayside foreman raced on.

After a few nips and barks, the dogs got the entire herd of horses rounded and headed back for the barn. Eric refused to give up their edge, and broke off from Edwyn to put himself between the riders and the horses. Drawing attention to the horses made the riders slow, and they finally drew to a skidding stop, turned their mounts around, and

rushed for the stock trailer. Until they shot again, Edwyn and Eric couldn't shoot at them or they risked being arrested for shooting people who were fleeing.

Edwyn kept chase, and Eric followed. There was no way the thieves could dismount, load those horses, and get away without injuring themselves. Since Eric and Edwyn had fresher mounts, this was their chance to catch the would-be rustlers.

He hadn't gotten a good look at the trailer until he had that to focus on and not the riders. It was huge, like the ones he'd seen when he'd worked for the auctions that could carry twenty or more horses in them. The back gate was down and ready for loading, but he could see no other horses inside. At least they'd been unsuccessful in stealing the Wayside horses.

All three riders ducked low close to their horses' necks as they raced into the back of the trailer. The back gate lifted while the semi started rolling away, and one of the riders leaned out, closing the two back doors one at a time. As soon as the trailer was secure, the truck sped up traveling toward town.

Eric and Edwyn slowed, then finally stopped. Eric rubbed Skyfall's neck. He'd need to get her into the barn soon and let her rest while he gave her a rubdown and took care of her. "They didn't get any, but I wonder if they'll be back," Eric said. "Either way, we've got some repairs to do on that fence. Who in the world even knows we have horses? And why steal ours when they're all rescues? Any other ranch in the area would offer younger, more sure options."

Edwyn's brows rose. "That reminds me, the rescue knows," he pointed out. "They are the only ones, other than former guests, who know we have so many horses. I can't imagine why anyone who has stayed with us in the past would team up with people to steal our horses. We let them come back to ride anytime they want."

Eric hated to think that his old employer would have anything to do with thievery, but

Edwyn was right, they were some of the only people who knew how many horses Wayside had other than the vet and he had no reason to take them. “I didn’t see any marking on the side of the tractor trailer or the stock trailer,” he said. They commonly rented transportation for the animals.

“I was too busy wondering how they were going to get away to look closely like I should’ve. Maybe Teddy caught something on the security cameras we can use to figure out who this is.”

If someone had come in shooting anywhere but in the pasture, he’d have thought it was Viceroy trying to remind them he was still a threat. But this wasn’t like any other time the head of the trafficking ring had attacked them. This wasn’t focused on people, but animals.

Edwyn turned his horse around and let him walk back. Skyfall fell into pace next to him. Eric tapped the tips of the reins against the saddle. “We’re assuming that because the fence was broken down and because they were chasing the horses that these men were out to steal them. Seems to me, if they wanted to steal a horse, they could’ve done it in much easier ways and at a time when we wouldn’t see them.”

Edwyn blasted his whistle with a long note, then two quick ones. Both dogs backed off, letting the horses go their own ways. “I want you to check them over, make sure none of them were injured. I’m going to go up to the house and talk with Connor and Teddy, see if we can find anything on the cameras. They had to have been there awhile if that section of the fence was down.”

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Eric had thought the same thing. How had they silently pulled up in that big truck and managed to cut down a large opening in the fence without anyone noticing? Then again, they hadn't been out riding the trails as much since they didn't have guests who would ride them. The three boys had shown no interest in horses or horse riding.

"You don't think this has anything to do with the boys, do you?" Eric had to ask. They'd had no trouble between the last guest leaving and the arrival of the boys. Now they'd had two incidents in as many days. The dogs were still barking more than usual after having rocks thrown at the kennel.

"I don't think any of them want horses, but they do like to make trouble. How would they hire a trailer and riders though? I doubt any one of them has any idea trailers like that exist, much less the money to hire one."

Eric nodded his head, but couldn't shake the feeling that there was some—even flimsy—connection. "True, but things were pretty quiet around here until they arrived."

"Ali arrived the same day, don't forget." Edwyn stopped his horse as soon as they reached the barn, then he swung down. "And I could be wrong, but doesn't she have an ex-husband?"

Eric locked his jaw and answered with a nod. He hadn't considered that Ali could be the reason. How would anyone connected to her even know where she was, much less that Wayside had horses? And why would they take out their anger with Wayside when there was no connection between Ali and the ranch?

“I don’t see that as being a connection. I’m assuming Connor would’ve told her that our location is a secret. She’s JAG, so keeping things private is the norm for her.”

Edwyn shrugged as he led his horse into the barn. “I’m not arguing with you. I’m just saying that they are both possibilities. We should talk to the boys and Ali and see if any of them have a connection to people who have horses.”

Eric remembered how Ali had scrunched her nose at the idea of riding. “I agree that we need to figure this out, but neither of them seem particularly likely. Maybe Connor or Brendon will have an idea we missed.” Eric led Skyfall back to her stall and drew her a bucket of water to limit her. He didn’t want her to get too much and make her sick from consuming it quickly after a hard run.

Edwyn quickly finished taking care of his own horse, but while he worked he and Connor talked in low tones. Eric couldn’t help but hear Ali’s name come up a few times. Having her as a suspect shouldn’t bother him. If she were guilty, even by association, of aiding horse thieves, he’d be happy to see her go. But he was sure she wasn’t, and so it bothered him.

Ali’s accusation from earlier played through his thoughts. He hadn’t forgiven her. He’d done his best to bend any way he needed to for the ranch and the people who stayed here, but he hadn’t even tried to forgive her and move on. What would his life look like if he let that anger and resentment go?

He headed for the door as Ali appeared bathed in light just outside. He’d never seen a woman their age look that good. And now that she’d given up wearing the stuffy city clothes, she looked relaxed instead of ready to pounce.

“I didn’t mean to bother you or be nosy, but I heard gunshots. I was worried.” She crossed her arms and looked away.

Her open honesty reminded him of times gone by, times he shouldn't allow himself to remember. She wasn't looking back, so why was he allowing himself to? "We had some people show up who thought they could take some of our horses."

Her mouth dropped open slightly, and his gaze was drawn directly to her full lower lip. He shook the thought away. She was not appealing. Not in the slightest. He wouldn't let himself be drawn in again.

"Is horse thieving a big thing around here?" Her brow rose slightly.

"We've never had it happen in all the time that I've been here. I wasn't one of the first, but I came along early on. Connor was at a livestock auction and saw me working with one of the abused horses that was going up for sale. He started talking to me and found out I'd been in the military. The two combined—the fact that I'm a veteran and that I train horses—made me an easy hire. I didn't even have to fill out paperwork."

She glanced around at the buildings surrounding the barn and sighed. "And you're happy here? Really?"

He wanted to be angry that she would even question his happiness—it should have been evident—but he hadn't acted happy since she'd arrived. "I am. This is where I plan to live out the rest of my days if Connor will keep me on until then."

She flinched. "I don't think I could stand to stay here longer than I have to." She turned slightly, looking at the rows of cabins behind her. "Walk with me? We keep getting interrupted."

He didn't want to, but Connor and Edwyn didn't need him to do their jobs, and he would get right to checking the horses for injury as soon as he was done. Connor and Edwyn would let him know if he needed to take extra security steps or take a shift on

watch. Until then, he could walk with Ali. In a few weeks, she would disappear again and his life could go back to normal.

Assuming he could forget about Ali again.

* * *

With a slow pace, Ali walked alongside Eric. He smelled of hay and Irish Spring soap. In some ways, the man hadn't changed. He used the same soap he had back then. He walked the same and talked the same. His large hand brushed against hers as they walked, and thatzapof pleasure she'd felt before zinged up her arm.

She didn't want to fight with him, but every time she opened her mouth he became defensive with her. They weren't dealing with their past because she refused to, but what if she dealt with the main issue, the one that stood in her way the most, at least from where she stood? Maybe later she could bring up the day she'd turned him down, but not yet.

"Did you ever meet my uncle?" The question sounded so innocent to her ears, and it would to anyone else who might be listening in on them, but it was anything but.

"I did. Briefly." Eric tugged a bandana from his back pocket and wiped off his hands. "Why?"

She swallowed hard, knowing this was going to be the hardest convincing she'd ever have to do in her career. Parts of her story would never come to light, but her story was the reason she was who she was. Her story made her want success above everything else. Without success, she had nothing.

"My uncle and my aunt were my guardians for many years, but they never wanted the job. Part of me wished Mom would've just given me up for adoption or even put me

in foster care. My uncle never did because he felt like he was asked to take me in by his sister, so he had to keep me. But that didn't make my life any easier."

Eric slowed his pace even more, then directed her over to a small stack of hay bales at the end of the barn. She lowered onto the prickly bales and took a moment to catch her breath. She'd promised to leave Uncle Cliff as far in the past as possible. When he'd died at the fairly young age of sixty-seven, she hadn't mourned him. Even though her mother had come out of the woodwork to try to guilt her into helping with the funeral, she'd washed her hands of both of them.

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“I only met him briefly right near the end of our relationship.”

At least he'd said it kindly. He could've easily pointed out again that she'd been the one to end things between them. Their separation was her fault entirely. “Did you ask his permission to marry me?”

He stiffened at her side, but his face remained the same. “What can I say? I'm an old-fashioned guy.”

An old-fashioned guy who had treated her so well until she'd given him a very good reason not to. Even then he'd kept to himself after they'd parted. She'd never gotten a hint of any anger or resentment until she'd arrived at Wayside.

“He's the reason. He's the reason I turned you down. There were things that went on in my life that no one knows about, but they were things that drove me to work, drove me to perfection, drove me to success.”

Eric slowly shook his head, then his shoulders fell as he looked down at his feet. “They drove you away from me. And since you seem very much the same as the woman who stood on that beach and loudly told everyone my shortcomings, I have to believe they still would. Your uncle may have done some awful things, and I'm sorry for that. I truly am. But you have to be you. At some point, you need to decide if he's to blame for the person you are, or if he's just a good excuse.”

Eric took a deep breath, then continued. “We help people here at Wayside. People whose pasts are probably worse than yours. We teach them to take days slowly, to be careful with how long you allow yourself to feel like a victim. It's okay to feel that

way if you are, but you can't live there. At some point, you need a new identity, one that is yours and yours alone, not the sum of what someone else has done."

Ali brushed a stray hair out of her eye and raked it behind her ear. Never in her life would she have thought of herself that way, but he was right. She was living under the cloud of her uncle even if she'd never thought of it that way.

And worse, she was pretty sure Eric was living under her cloud. Would she want to face her uncle again if he'd asked for a second chance? She flinched and turned away from Eric. How could she have become what she hated the most?

ChapterEight

Eric had to be out of his mind. Why would he want to talk to Ali? He strode up the steps of the porch to the ranch house, sure that he had to have lost all common sense. In the span of less than a week, he'd gone from vowing he would have nothing to do with Ali to having a genuine conversation with her. Some might even have called their discussion meaningful.

He paused near the front door of the huge lodge house and heard angry shouting coming from inside. Even when Brendon was with a guest and having a deeply emotional session, yelling in the lodge was rare. He opened the door and listened to see where the arguing was coming from.

Down the hall where Brendon and Connor had their offices, he heard the sounds of scuffling with grunts and shouts. Connor's office was closer, and the door hung open. The sound couldn't be coming from there or it would have been louder. He rushed to the end of the hall. Brendon was fully capable of taking care of himself, even from his wheelchair, but that didn't mean Eric was going to just stand by and let him deal with a brawl alone.

He shoved open the door and took a moment to assess the situation. Brendon's chairs were upended, his desk askew, and he and Connor were doing their best to keep Big E and Jayzon from pummeling Terrell. Eric grabbed hold of Terrell and yanked him away from the reach of swinging punches.

"What's going on?" Eric glanced from Brendon to Connor, then at the boys.

"Terrell was telling Brendon about the gang. I heard him from the hallway. They will kill you for that," Big E said, lunging at Terrell. "If you thought you were going to live, you're wrong. They'll know. They always know. You're as good as dead."

Terrell pushed forward and stood nose to nose with Big E. "Yeah, they'll know because you're a snitch."

Big E swung hard, and Terrell dodged the blow, pushing Eric out of the way. Jayzon struggled against Brendon's grip. "This isn't cool. Get your hands off me," Jayzon said, yanking against Brendon's hold.

"I think we'd better get them separated for a while. I'll take Terrell." Eric spun the boy around toward the door. Terrell might not want to, but he was leaving.

Terrell jerked his arm free of Eric's grasp, but he strode ahead until they reached the entryway. "I don't want to go anywhere with you. I don't want to talk to you. I just want to get out of here."

"Right now, you have no choice." Eric glanced at the boy's clothing. While it wasn't suited to riding, it would work. At least he wasn't wearing shorts. Eric kept him moving until they reached the barns.

Eric had struggled with anger management as a very young man but had learned to control it the same way he'd learned to train horses: at his father's side. His dad had

taught him about life, about finding peace—even though Dad could be an even bigger hothead—and about learning to read horses from the age of twelve. Terrell was older than that, but he could start now.

“Follow me.” Eric allowed no argument.

Terrell stayed two paces behind him until they reached the tack room. Eric selected a saddle, took it off the sawhorse, and handed it to Terrell.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Terrell gripped each end of it, and his eyes widened in surprise as he tested the heft.

“You’re going to saddle a horse with it in just a few minutes. Then you’re going to climb onto it and plant your backside. Then, you’re going to ride a horse.” He figured stating the obvious would ground the boy in reality.

Terrell looked momentarily nervous. “I don’t know how.”

Eric strode down the line of available horses in the barn. There weren’t many readily on hand, since most were outside. Finally, he came to a sweet ten-year-old gelding. He was very responsive to verbal commands, making him great for use when the rider knew nothing about horses.

Eric led, Ted out of the stall and to Terrell, then loosely tied the reins around a hook. “First, you’ll need to brush him off so he doesn’t get irritated by dirt under the saddle.” He showed Terrell how to take a stiff brush to the horse’s back and under him where the cinch strap would go. Finally, he showed Terrell the saddle, naming each part for him.

After he got the saddle pad placed, he turned his full attention back to Terrell. “Okay, flip the stirrup over the saddle so it isn’t in your way, then lift the saddle onto the

horse's back. You're tall enough to do it. This pommel should be next to his neck, almost like it's too high." Eric pointed to remind him which part of the saddle was the pommel.

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Terrell gave him a questioning look but offered no retort. He followed directions, even adjusting the saddle closer to the horse's neck when it didn't sit quite right. "What now?"

Eric explained how to buckle the saddle in place, finishing with the latigo knot. When Terrell completed the task Eric checked it for safety, then went to get Skyfall. Any guest's first ride was always a time for him to worry. Would Terrell be all right once he was on the horse? Would Ted take to him like he had to every other rider? How would he get to the heart of what Terrell needed through the experience?

He showed the boy how to place his foot, leverage his weight, and swing easily onto the horse. Once Terrell was up there, apprehension filled his eyes. "I'm not sure about this. I've never seen no one like me on a horse."

"There are lots of people like you who ride." Eric laughed, trying to dispel the boy's worry. "I read about a man once. I think he was in Chicago. He would ride his horse through dangerous neighborhoods, introducing boys who had only known hood life to his horse and showing them it was okay to be different. What started out as something to help his own mental health has made a big difference for a lot of boys just like you."

Terrell snorted. "I don't think it's okay to be that different." He looked at the horse skeptically.

"No one is here to see you but me, and I'm not telling anyone."

Eric's conscience picked at him. Would he be this appeasing with Ali? Would he

keep trying to draw her out and heal if she was nervous, like he was doing with Terrell? He almost laughed. Ali didn't get nervous about anything. The fact remained, she had to have been through something terrible where her husband was concerned or she wouldn't be divorced.

Terrell adjusted his high-top tennis shoe into the stirrup and followed Eric's instructions for how to get on Ted, then settled into the saddle. Eric told him to relax into the motion of the horse's stride because if he didn't work with the horse, he'd work against him and Terrell would hurt the next day.

After a few minutes, Terrell started to ride at a walking pace. Eric led him out on the trail, and they went down the first one since it was the easiest. Terrell loosened up a little after a few minutes and almost looked comfortable in the saddle. He even looked up from the horse's neck a few times to enjoy the scenery.

Eric showed him some native plants and the river that meandered through the property. He took him at a relaxing pace along the path, allowing Terrell to forget for a little while about why he was there at the ranch if he chose to.

But Eric also wanted to make sure Terrell understood the gravity of his situation. Terrell might be worried about gang members showing up, but going back to the juvenile detention center could be just as dangerous. "I don't know if you're aware of this, but this is your last chance. Connor is hesitant to call in the police for anything you guys do, but once he does, we've been instructed to send you back."

Terrell's excitement visibly dulled. "I'm not surprised. Anytime things get tough, people give up." He flicked the reins a little. "I just wish there was another way, but there isn't for me. This is my way. Whether I like it or not. Sometimes your life is chosen for you."

Eric reached out and laid his hand on the pommel of Terrell's saddle. "When you

think life gets chosen for you, that's the time you step back and evaluate if you're giving up or if you're ready to fight for what you want. If that's not the life you thought you'd have, then it's time to try to make a change."

Terrell gave his head a single shake with an exasperated sigh. "You don't understand. The boys, they don't have choices. We live where we live. We go to school where we were born. There's only one way out, and it isn't following the rules."

Eric took a deep breath and prayed he was saying the right words. "Out here, the rules are different than they are back home. Here, the rules don't depend on Big E or Jayzon. They are in almost every room in this place, and I can promise you, they won't lead you back to juvie."

Terrell tugged up on the reins, stopping his horse, and Eric halted alongside him. "Are you saying that if something happens, you won't blame me right along with them? Because I can already feel this us vs. them thing going on. You and Connor lump all of us three as one, and that isn't the way it is. I'll listen to you, but you've got to trust me too."

Eric swallowed his reservations and the realization that Terrell was asking for the exact same thing as Ali. Maybe he needed to give Ali a little grace along with Terrell.

Because if he could do it for the kid he'd labeled a delinquent just a week before and who could physically hurt him, he could do it for someone who could only hurt his heart.

"You got it. I'm here for you."

* * *

Why was Eric so invested in looking back at the past? Ali brushed aside her curtain

over the tiny sink in her micro kitchen. Everything was too small, too cramped. She needed space to think. A space like her apartment back home. That wasn't happening though. The drive out to the ranch had been enough small space until she had to be back in there. Her car was even smaller than the cabin.

She headed outside into the sun. At least the outdoors was wide open and she could breathe. Even sleeping in the cabin felt like being trapped. Lacy was down by the corral, watching Sam working with the dogs. The same German shepherd who'd greeted Ali by the lodge was out working with him. A small dog zipped around Sam's feet, oblivious to whistles or calls.

Ali made her way closer and stopped at Lacy's side. "That dog doesn't look like he's going to amount to much of a herder or security helper." Ali rested her arms on the fence next to Lacy to watch.

"That's Bubbles. He came just before Zeus, the other dog. The difference is that Sam realized Zeus had either a very natural knack for training, or he'd been trained before. Bubbles, on the other hand, was just straight-up neglected. Cole found him in a parking lot and rescued him."

Ali watched the interaction between Sam and the dogs. Zeus seemed to almost sigh at Bubbles' antics. "Bubbles seems happy to have a place to run," she said. She could relate. Neglect and abuse were an infection that wasn't easy to get over.

"He is. He hates the kennel, and I think—against Connor's wishes—Sam takes him home at night to his cabin. That dog is becoming a pet. But that's okay because there's a little boy that will come here daily after Cole and his wife get home, and that little boy loves that dog like he's a blood brother." Lacy laughed.

Tears burned the sides of Ali's eyes, and she blinked them away. Crying over a dog and a boy? That was silly. Her own childhood was years ago, bare of dogs or

attention. Giving attention and love wouldn't provide for her, wouldn't keep her feeling secure. And a dog would've been another thing to protect from her uncle. Those past things, things she couldn't control now, didn't matter. They were like a feather in the wind.

"You rescue everything around here?" Ali knew she sounded skeptical, but what kind of place was this?

Lacy laughed. "Yes. Completely. From the owner to the smallest dog, everything and everyone has been rescued from something." Her smile faltered slightly. "Some more than others."

Ali didn't want to get too personal with Lacy yet. She usually avoided personal relationships completely. The more people knew her, the more they could judge her life, and she didn't need that negativity. "Helping like a latte? I would think having a place nearby that sold a decent latte would help just about everyone." Ali tried to laugh but the emotion felt flat.

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Lacy snorted. “A good latte is only about an hour away. There are a lot more important things here than coffee. Plus, Victoria makes a pretty amazing mug of coffee if you ask her.”

Ali sighed and backed away a step. “I guess coffee was a metaphor for so many things I’m missing while I’m here. I’m used to having life at my fingertips, and out here everything is far away.”

Lacy silently watched the dogs for a moment before answering. “Yes, and we like it that way. If you want something, just plan ahead to get all the things you want in one trip. Then you can come back out here and enjoy the things that really matter.”

“And what is that?” Maybe she just wouldn’t get along with Lacy. They seemed far too different anyway.

“Like the sky, fresh air, quiet, and good friends. You’re a lawyer, right?” Lacy glanced over at Ali.

“Yes, which makes me a pretty rare gem out here.” Ali tried again to laugh, but it ended up sounding like she was choking.

Lacy turned her attention back to the dogs and Sam. “You’re not so different from us. You have a job where you help people who sometimes end up in situations they don’t want to be in, or didn’t choose to be in. In your case, they may be wrongly accused. That’s not the case with our usual guests. We promote healing, both in our guests and with the boys who are here now.”

Ali closed her eyes and thought back to the last few clients she'd had. "I don't heal anyone. I recoup damages, or I help people find justice, or I help people who are guilty avoid punishment. I don't see how that's anything like my limited understanding of what you do."

Lacy shrugged. "You won't yet. You will before you leave here." She gripped the fence and leaned back a little bit. "You know, the Lord doesn't bring anyone here who doesn't need to be here, and I mean that in a broad sense. I'm not talking about delivery people or the occasional trouble we have around here. I mean the people who live here, even for a few weeks. They all have needed to be here. I have no doubt that you have some healing to do too."

"Me?" Ali's defenses rose immediately, not just at the idea that she was broken, but that God had led her there to do that healing. How dare Lacy even suggest that she might need help from anyone? She'd lived on her own and provided for herself even when she was married. Her husband was a cheater and hid his gambling and drinking from everyone, especially since his commission to general. As a JAG, Judge Advocate General Corps, she was mainly serving fellow military families facing issues with the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which was why she was there helping Cole, but she wasn't there because she needed help herself.

Lacy's look turned serious. "Yes, you. I've never met a person who didn't need to heal from something, but most people never take the time they need to do it. You probably work a lot of hours every week. When will you ever again get three weeks to work on you and any issues you might have?"

Issues? Who was she to assume Ali had issues? "I've already worked out everything I might need to. That's what working my butt off to get through my Juris Doctor and then admitted to JAG finally did. I got over everything in my past that was holding me back. Now I can live. Healthy. I don't answer to anyone. My life is my own."

Sam turned to look at them for a moment and gave a brief wave. Lacy waved back but didn't smile. "Your life is your own, but you're wrapped up in physical things. Clothes. Lattes. Bigger places to live. Those are the things that matter to you." She turned to face Ali. "But are you happy?"

What did happiness have to do with life? Happiness was what people got after they retired. Happiness was for people who'd worked long and hard and could enjoy the fruits of their labor. "I don't need happiness yet. That will come later."

"What if I told you that you can have happiness at any point in your life? You can have it right now. You can have peace too."

Ali felt the push as strongly as if Lacy had actually shoved her. Lacy may have been subtle, but for someone who'd avoided talk of faith her entire life, Ali felt it coming. "I think I know where you're going, and I don't need that. I'll be happy when I retire. When I can lay down my pen and my voice for people who need me, then I'll be happy knowing I bent over backward to help everyone who came to me. Until then, you keep your happiness." She pushed away from the fence.

Why did Wyoming feel so lonely? At least she'd been able to talk to Eric. That was progress. But she didn't need happiness. She needed work to keep her going. She needed the rush of helping someone escape a life like she'd had. That gave her a jolt of pleasure that made her want to keep going. Maybe it wasn't happiness, but it was close.

What did happiness really look like, anyway? She may have had it when her father was still alive, but she could barely remember him now. Her mother had been a drug addict and hadn't wanted her once Dad died, so Mom had sent Ali to live with her mother's brother, the uncle who hadn't been a part of her life at all until he was her guardian.

A bird hopped along in the grass, looking around, heading away from Ali's path. The bird didn't seem concerned that she was there, nor did it fly away as she walked. Other than pigeons, birds were pretty rare in town. At least, she'd never noticed them. She watched the little bird for a moment until it found whatever it was hunting for and flew off.

Lacy's words came back, flowing through her mind as conversations usually did, when they'd talked about all the things Wayside offered. Brendon was the counselor there. If she needed healing, he would be the one to talk to. Or he'd tell her she was right and perfectly fine and didn't need any help at all. That was the most likely option, so why bother him when he was busy. She was fine, and life would only get better from here.

ChapterNine

Eric shuffled the boys toward the fire pit area where Sam and Junior were already waiting. He'd hoped to engage Jayzon and Big E like he'd talked with Terrell, though Terrell hadn't spoke with him since they'd gone riding two days before. Usually when people went riding, they got the itch to do it again quickly.

Big E shuffled his feet. "I don't see why we have to come out and do anything. You can't make us do anything around here."

The men of Wayside held very little power where the boys were concerned, especially since their normal operations included government funding. They weren't a prison, nor could they compel the boys to do anything. When it came to protecting themselves, they weren't allowed to defend their lives or property in the same way as a person in their home could. If Viceroy came around again, they couldn't draw their weapons until they were under direct deadly threat. These boys weren't threatening, and they had to rely on the boys' desire to do things to get work done.

Eric motioned for them to take seats around the fire pit. It was hot in the summer sun, so the pit was empty, but the pergola gave them a private place to talk. He took the remaining seat and waited a moment to catch his thoughts.

“You’ve been here a little over a week now. It was understood that we would try to help you learn some life skills outside of criminal activity as a way to give you a second chance. This ranch is all about second chances. While you’re right, I can’t force you to do anything, we can start limiting the few freedoms you have to encourage you to try the things you should.”

Junior took over. “Like meals. From now on, you’ll eat in the dining room with everyone else. Victoria works hard enough. She shouldn’t have to put together extra trays for you just because you don’t want to walk to the dining room. You are fully capable young men and walking a few yards isn’t a problem for you if you want to eat.”

“Maybe we just don’t want to eat with all of you,” Big E said, then snorted. “Not like you’d want to eat near us any other time.”

Junior stopped him there. “That’s not true. We don’t know you. How could we say that we don’t want to sit with people we don’t know? The point is, we’ll see you at supper tonight.” Junior glanced to Sam.

Sam took a deep breath. “I’ve got room for one of you to help me with dog training. It’s difficult. It requires a lot of patience, and you have to actually like dogs.” He glanced around the circle, waiting for a reply. “And no more rocks.”

Big E slowly shook his head. “Not me.”

Jayzon took Big E’s lead. “Not interested.”

Terrell glanced from Eric to Sam, his eyes darting nervously. He said nothing, but Eric was sure he was interested. If only he could save Terrell. The other two didn’t seem to care about their own lives and where they would end up in the future. They’d already made their decision. Terrell still showed signs of hope.

“Perhaps Terrell would like that job. For the rest, I’d be happy to take you riding, as would Junior.” Eric made the offer and left it at that. This was all up to the boys. If they didn’t take what was offered to them, then they would lose the chance.

“I don’t care about horses.” Big E frowned. “Except maybe selling them and seeing what I could buy with the money. That’s all the good they are. Not like selling them would get me a Bugatti or nothing.”

Eric glanced at Junior, hoping he had read too much into what the boy had said. Could Big E have coordinated the attempted horse theft? That seemed like a big job for a kid of seventeen, but maybe he wasn’t giving the boys enough credit. All three of them were facing a life of crime in a gang. Stealing a few horses was probably a game to them.

“I heard shooting going on a few days ago. Maybe you could teach us something worthwhile, like shooting practice.” Jayzon’s eyes gleamed, and he glanced at Big E. Both nodded slowly, excitement rising.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen. We’ve never offered our guests access to guns, and we only keep them to provide safety for the people who stay here and the animals we care for.” Junior rattled off the answer that Connor had given them long before the boys had ever come.

While teaching people who had been trafficked how to shoot seemed like a good idea, it also put most of them in a terrible place mentally. They weren’t ready for it when they came to Wayside. So, Wayside didn’t offer that service.

“Then what good is staying here? That’s the only life skill we’ll need that we could learn out here.” Big E stood.

A black car pulled up the drive and parked in front of the lodge, immediately drawing Eric, Junior, and Sam’s attention. All three boys stood quickly and headed for the car like they knew the people inside. Eric moved toward the car, his apprehension rising. Who could this be? They didn’t get random guests at Wayside. Four young men a little older than the boys got out of the car and looked around. The driver finally turned his focus on Eric and lifted his chin slightly in greeting.

“We’re here to see Big E.” The boy didn’t look Eric in the eyes.

“Did you make an appointment?” Eric had heard from Connor that the boys had been talking about members of the gang they hoped to join coming to Wayside. Who else could this be?

“I don’t need an appointment. We’re family. Family doesn’t need to.”

“Bones, I’m right here.” Big E stepped away from Sam and headed for the man who’d spoken for the group.

Eric hated to push the issue, but this didn’t seem like a family visit. “That’s news to

me. I've worked here for years, and we've always required an appointment to see our guests." He stood his ground and crossed his arms, putting himself between the car and the boys.

"Well, we drove all the way from California. I would think you could make an exception." The boy thrust out his hand to Big E, then yanked him into a back slapping hug. "Big E, how's it going?"

Big E backed off a step, puffed his chest and held his head high. "Ready to get out of here as soon as I can."

Sam and Junior joined Eric. Sam lowered his voice and said, "I don't like this. I feel like a powder keg is about to go off. We're supposed to be protecting these boys, but how can we if no one pulls a weapon and the boys walk right over to the enemy?"

"I don't know," Eric said. "But I'm staying right here, and they are not going back to the cabins. That's for security. If they hadn't come here, they would still be in juvenile detention, meaning they wouldn't have the freedom to do as they pleased. So, they can't here either."

Junior nodded his agreement. He wasn't one to develop a plan, but he was always good with following one. "Then let's stay right here and keep an eye on the situation."

Eric tipped his head toward the ranch house. "Sam, why don't you go let Connor know what's going on. Teddy will want to know too. I know they turned down the gate security coming in, but after an attempted horse theft and now this, I think we need to turn it back up."

"It was," Junior mumbled. "I heard Teddy talking about it last night. He said that he wasn't losing a single horse, so the perimeter fence is turned on and so is the gate. I

don't know how these guys got through."

"Unless they tricked whoever is running gate security today?" Eric wasn't sure how that worked. He wasn't asked to do it. Teddy was the head of security and worked with Connor and Edwyn most often. The wranglers took turns when extra security was needed, but that wasn't usually the case. No one manned the cameras after dark because anyone trying to enter wouldn't be allowed in.

One of the new arrivals shoved Jayzon over a chair, breaking the back off and sending Jayzon sprawling. Big E laughed, and Jayzon leapt to his feet, landing a punch to Big E's stomach. One of the newcomers pulled a gun from the back waistband of his pants and all three of the others followed suit.

"Hit the ground! He's armed!" Junior yelled and ran to protect the boys.

Terrell jumped behind one of the wooden chairs, and Eric's heart lurched to a sudden stop as a gun went off. He searched for anyone injured even as he raced in to join Junior. Sam took off to get help from the lodge.

Eric drew his gun and leveled it at the boy aiming his pistol at Jayzon. Terrell, wide-eyed and frantic, jumped from his hiding place and tackled the nearest kid with a gun. The boy raised his arm and slammed the gun over Terrell's head. Terrell fell like a puppet to the ground.

Ali came out the front door of her cabin just a few yards off and glanced around. One of the boys aimed his gun at her. "Get back in your cabin right now." The boy made a show of racking the slide on his pistol.

Eric stopped, conflicted. He had to help the boys and Ali. In the next instant, Connor, Sam, and Teddy rushed from the nearby lodge. Eric didn't want to lose what was left of the time he could have with Terrell over this, and that's what calling the police

would do. Terrell would, just like he'd predicted, be lumped together with Big E and Jayzon and have to go back.

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Eric swung his gun between the armed boys. “Stop. All of you.”

Connor and the others joined him, both surrounding the boys and staying out of the line of anyone else’s fire. “It’s time for you to get back in your car and leave. You will not be allowed back in.” Connor took over.

“That gate won’t stop us if we want to. This was just a test to see if we could and we can. You three better watch yourselves. Not one of you made the cut.” The boy shoved the pistol back into his waistband.

Two of the other three did the same, but one of them eyed Ali. He made a low growling sound and pulled up quickly and closed one eye as he took aim. “This is what you get for not listening.”

Eric pounced, tackling the kid before he could pull the trigger and yanking the gun from his hand. “Just get out of here. If you ever come back, we’ll see you off to jail.”

Letting them go didn’t sit well, but that was the only option if they wanted to keep trying to help Terrell and the other boys. Even if the other two didn’t want help, creating a life for Terrell would be worth the danger and effort. Terrell was looking at a life without the gang where he could live free, but only if the men of Wayside could keep him alive to experience it.

* * *

Trembling took over Ali’s body, and she raced back into her house. She’d heard the shots and hoped she could be of some assistance. Even as a JAG, she had to maintain

the health standards she'd had to in the army, but she hadn't ever been in a combat situation.

She pressed her palm to the door, hoping to catch her breath, when someone pounded on the other side to get in. "Go away!" she yelled, looking for anything she could use as a weapon. Nothing would help against a bullet, not even her door honestly.

"Ali, it's me, Eric."

Adrenaline drained from her body, and she lost all strength in her knees. She lowered to the floor and let the emotion take over for a moment. "I'm fine. Just let me be." She needed to get over this, needed to be in control. She could handle herself if Eric would give her time to deal with what had happened.

"Let me in. I need to make sure you're all right."

She tried to get up but couldn't make her knees work. If he was going to come in, he was going to see her weak. He'd have power over her.

"Ali. I need to know you're okay."

She gritted her teeth. "Fine, come in." She crawled away from the door to let him through.

He opened the door and glanced all around, finally seeing her on the floor. His eyes widened slightly, and he lowered to the floor but didn't come near her. At least now she had his attention, sad as that was.

"I'm fine. I just got an adrenaline overload. I'm not used to facing down kids with guns." She rubbed the back of her neck. Her whole body felt overwhelmed and twitchy.

Eric slowly crawled toward her. She had to hand it to him, her husband never would've done that. He'd have considered putting himself in that position demeaning.

"What happened?" Eric asked.

Ali swallowed the bile stuck in her throat. "It was just too much." She rubbed her wrist, even though it didn't hurt. All the feelings reminded her of the time her drunk husband had hurled her across the room. That was the day he'd finally told her he wanted a divorce. That was also the day she'd decided to gladly give it to him since he'd treated her like her uncle had. All those years she'd lived knowing he was cheating on her, so the news had come as no surprise.

"I guess I haven't been that scared in a long time, and it's making me remember things I don't want to."

"I know. Looking back like you never do and all that." Eric leaned against her sofa a few feet away and tilted his head back. He was so handsome with his lean body, toned arms, and crinkles beside his eyes. In the looks department, he had her ex beat soundly. He did in the behavior department too.

He gave her a frank look. "Want to talk about it?" He kept his voice soft, like he was used to dealing with women gripped by fear.

She didn't. Absolutely didn't want to talk about her past. Talking about her ex was almost as bad as talking about her uncle. Maybe she was drawn to men who would use her, abuse her, and abandon her? "It's just history."

"Sometimes talking about your history can help you go through it. I'm not saying you shouldn't have been scared out there, but you might as well use this experience for any good you possibly can."

“Are the boys all right?” she deflected.

“Yes. All three of them are with Brendon and Gabby right now. Brendon and Gabby are working through the stress and finding out as much as they can. The boys in the car lied to Teddy and told him they were Jayzon’s brothers. They pretended to care and seemed worried, unlike they did once they got up here.”

“So, he’s locking the gate.” Great, she’d be locked behind even more doors. How could the great wide open be so closed?

“Now do you want to talk about it?” Eric pressed.

Her stomach knotted. “Fine, my husband was a jerk. The worst kind of jerk. He cheated on me as soon as we got home from our honeymoon. I never said anything because he knew that I married him for his money so I could keep going to college and so I could qualify for JAG. He married me for my looks and to improve his name. It took me ten years, but I did what I set out to do.”

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Eric listened and to his credit, didn't say I told you so. "I'm sorry he cheated on you."

Ali snorted. "I'm not. It kept him away from me. What frightened me was when he finally decided he wanted me out of the way so he could be with someone else. He was a drunk and really good with a gun, but not at the same time. He came home angry because I was there, in the house we shared. He threatened me, waved the gun around, then decided to toss me around and beat me up with it."

The story sounded to her own ears like she was talking about anyone but herself. She could almost believe it was someone other than her if she didn't delve into her own feelings too deeply. "From that moment on I learned how military men stick together. No one believed me. They all sided with him. Some of them went so far as to make my life miserable enough that I transferred. I was the outcast and eventually had to move to escape the verbal abuse I faced every single day after he announced he was leaving me."

Eric lowered his voice even more. "Memories can be hard."

She knew Eric had always been a man of few words, and there was more to the words than what he'd said. His statement seemed so small compared to what was actually going on in her mind and heart. "You can say it. Serves me right. I chose him over you because he could get me where I wanted to be. I deserved what I got."

She waited for a moment, but he said nothing and only looked confused by her words. She had to fill the silence. "I ended up in the hospital. Just like when I was a kid, no one believed what I said happened. I'd been a lawyer for a few years by then and assumed people would believe me. I was wrong."

Eric frowned and closed his eyes as he leaned against the sofa. “I had always wondered who he was and what he offered that I couldn’t.” He raised his knees and rested his arms on them. “I always knew you were more driven than I was, but I never figured it would drive you away from me. I was always in your corner. You could always count on me.”

“Not always. When I asked you to put a little effort into your military career, you said no. You said that wasn’t your calling and you had other plans. I needed a steady plan, something I could be sure of. There is no other career out there that is as sure as the military. Do your job, and you keep it.”

He snorted. “I did my job, and then I left. I’m okay with that. I trained horses for a while in Kentucky, but I wanted out. I wanted to make a difference, so I started working with a horse rescue that had auctions. We saved a lot of animals.”

“I saved people.” Not that she wanted him to feel less for what he’d done, but she’d gone through all that school and all that effort to be able to help people.

“That came later for me. Connor saw that I could train horses, and he had the plan for this ranch. It was originally a place for wounded veterans to come and work. Finding employment can be difficult for men who have been in the military for a long time. They don’t bend the way a lot of civilian work environments need them to bend. But after a while, he shifted focus and the men who came to heal began to help others do the same.”

That was more than she’d heard him say at one time, ever. Telling him about her past hadn’t made her self-combust, nor did she sound like the self-centered brat that she’d been worried she’d sound like. There was still embarrassment, but she’d managed. Maybe at some point she could even broach the real reason she’d publicly turned him down instead of doing it in private like he probably wished. Or maybe she’d stick to her mantra and keep the past in the past.

“Feel better?” he asked as he slowly stood. Watching him straighten to his feet and seeing his muscles bulge and flex did strange things to her belly and left her mouth dry.

“A little. I’m worried about those boys. That kid pulled a gun on me for no reason at all and aimed it at me. They mean business. We need to protect the boys.” She wasn’t sure what she could do, but she wasn’t going to let Big E, Jayzon, and Terrell be bullied or forced to live any way they didn’t want to or shouldn’t. She’d stop every kid from having to make choices like that if she could.

“Agreed. Now that we know they’re trying to get in, we won’t let them get past the gate again.”

“Any new information on the attempted horse thieves?” Ali was happy to change the subject to anything other than her past.

“No. Teddy looked at the security cameras, but none of them show faces, and the trailer didn’t have a license plate. It was a dead end.”

Somehow the situation with the horses and boys felt attached, but she couldn’t say how. “There’s never a true dead end. Maybe we just need to look at the clues differently.” That would give her something to do until Cole returned. That and getting Eric to continue to talk to her. She could do all that in two weeks, no trouble at all. The trouble for her would come when it was time to leave.

ChapterTen

After making sure Ali was all right, Eric headed for Connor’s office. That’s where the boys would be. As one of the men who was supposed to be leading them, Eric had to be there to hear what they had to say. He arrived at Connor’s office, knocked, and let himself in when he was told to.

Connor sat behind his desk, Brendon waited off to his right, and Teddy sat on the sofa along the wall with Junior and Sam. The boys sat in three chairs facing Connor. Eric leaned against the wall near the door since there were no seats left and he didn't want to interrupt anyone to make them move. The room felt stuffy and heavy.

"Eric, thanks for coming. We were just getting around to talking about who those guys were in the car." Connor looked at each of the boys. "This won't happen again. I don't know what kind of life you had growing up, but this isn't acceptable behavior. You don't drive up to someone's house and start shooting."

Brendon nodded. "We've always allowed families to come and check in with our guests as long as families call ahead and arrange times to do so. While we are secret, we're not keeping secrets from your families unless they were part of the abuse cycle." He gripped the arms of his wheelchair and shifted slightly. "So, we won't be allowing anyone here who is not a member of your immediate family."

Big E and Jayzon both snorted, but Big E was the only one to speak. "We both have brothers who were in that car. My brother might not want me dead, but he'll do whatever he's told to, just like I would."

"And how does your mother feel about that?" Sam asked.

Jayzon scoffed. "She thinks gangs are savage and that they amount to nothing, but she doesn't know Damion is part of it."

Big E backhanded Jayzon in the chest. "Keep your mouth shut, or you'll be the one to get it."

Terrell shook his head slowly. "I don't think any of you understand. None of us are getting out of this. The leaders sent both of your brothers as a test to see if they would follow through on taking out a blood relative. Didn't you hear them say none of us

are getting in?”

Connor leaned forward on his desk, interrupting what could turn into an argument. “I call all the men of Wayside my brothers, but that doesn’t mean we are related. We will not allow anyone not related by blood on this property to see you and those boys especially.”

Jayzon leaned forward, almost in Connor’s face. “And I’m telling you they are our blood brothers. Mine is two years older than me. The moment he got in, he told me about how they support everyone. There’s a structure, with leaders and followers. No one is left behind. Except now.” He looked away. “I can’t believe Damion would do me dirty like that.”

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Eric shifted his weight. After being on the floor in Ali's cabin, his back wasn't happy about standing so long, making him a little cranky. "Sounds like they will happily leave all of you behind. Don't you see that there is nothing good about that? You're looking to voluntarily join the kind of relationship we usually help people get out of. It's mentally abusive. It's basically slavery."

Big E shot to his feet. "Don't you talk to me about slavery. You know nothing. Your white privilege is showing."

Brendon held out his hands and lowered them for Big E to take his seat. "We're listening, but we are also here to provide safety and a place for you three to experience things other boys in your situation don't. This is your privilege. Use it. Take it. You want it, enjoy it. We are giving it to you. Think about all the young men back in California who were with you in the detention center. Think about the differences between there and here."

Terrell glanced back at Eric, then quickly away. Eric could feel the pull on Terrell's spirit to take what was offered, but there was fear there too. What if the other two saw him as different and they attacked him? What if the gang members who had come made it back to the ranch and he was killed just for wanting more than they could offer?

"I know that stepping out of your comfort zone and learning some of these life skills will seem difficult, but I think all of you are capable. In fact, I know you are." Eric spoke to Terrell, but the message was for all of the boys if they chose to take it.

Jayzon bent his head and stared at his feet for a moment. "Mom doesn't want me in.

If she knew I was in, it would break her heart. My oldest brother was killed by a rival about three years ago. I need to avenge him.” His voice filled with emotion as he spoke. “My brother Damion started it, but he can’t finish alone. I won’t leave him to clean up the mess. Mom won’t bury two sons.”

Connor’s mouth flattened, and he sighed. “No, she might have to bury three if you don’t start the change. Be what she needs you to be. She needs you to go against the tide, to fight your circumstances. She needs you to be the strength against the neighborhood that expects this from their men.”

Big E slowly shook his head. “You don’t understand, man. You just can’t. You grew up thinking about what college you were going to go to or what job you might want to have. We start out that way, and school teachers try to convince us that if we just work hard enough we can have whatever we want. But the truth is, we can’t. All three of us have applied for jobs and been turned away. Jayzon applied for a job at the same gas station we robbed. It was one of the reasons we chose it.”

Jayzon scowled. “I was told they’d hired someone else who was more qualified. To work in a gas station.” He rolled his eyes. “They probably just thought I was going to steal stuff.”

“But you proved them right,” Sam pointed out. “When you didn’t get the job, you stole from them.”

Jayzon glared at him. “I was getting back at them.”

“And what is your excuse?” Sam looked directly at Big E. “Why were you there?”

“Jayzon is like a brother. I won’t let him down.”

Terrell hung his head. “I didn’t realize what was going to happen. I was just hanging

out with Jayzon. We were all going to the gas station to grab some sodas. I was ready to pay for mine when Big E shoved it into my coat. If I would've taken it back out, the clerk would've seen me do it. It wasn't until after that Jayzon told me it was a small part of a gang initiation and I passed. I didn't want this, but I'm in too deep now."

Connor laid his hand flat on top of his desk and looked straight at Terrell. "You're not. It isn't too late. This is why you're here. The men in charge of the detention center you were in decided there was still hope for all three of you. Let's stop working against each other and start working together. None of you has to die. None of you has to join a gang. Help us to help you."

Big E stood, and Eric realized the boy was very near his own height. He would be a tall man if he made it to adulthood.

"I'm not in. This is the only way to see success in my world. If I want money and women and fame, then this is my path. You decide you don't want that anymore, it's your funeral." He strode past Eric and out of the room.

Jayzon watched his friend leave and glanced at Terrell. If Eric had to guess, Jayzon wasn't as close to Terrell as he was to Big E and staying in that seat was taking every ounce of willpower the boy had.

"We have the ability to protect you," Eric said.

"Until they decide we can't stay here anymore," Jayzon finished. "Then what? Are you going to just let us stay here the rest of our lives? I know better. There's a mark on our heads. If I don't fight back, I'll be just like my brother. Terrell might think they sent the people they did to take all of us out, but I think they wanted confirmation that we weren't selling out. At least, some of us." He stood and gave Terrell a glare. "Some of us will die quicker than others." He followed Big E out of

the room.

Terrell's shoulders looked heavy, his face drawn and even a little pale. "I don't want to go down that path anymore. Now I don't even want go back to my room."

"We'll move you," Eric said without hesitation. If Connor disagreed, they could discuss it later. "You can stay with me, and if you want to lock your bedroom door, then you can. Your safety is promised."

Terrell turned to look Eric in the eye. "I'll hold you to that."

* * *

Gabby sat in the dining room right where Ali had hoped she'd find her. Gabby was fairly elusive on the ranch since she worked in Piper's Ridge every weekday as a counselor. Today she sat at a table alone, drinking a cup of coffee.

"May I join you?" Ali hoped she wasn't interrupting her work, but she wanted to talk to someone who might know Eric a little better—someone who wasn't Lacy, since she didn't seem to connect well with Lacy.

"Of course. If you want a cup of coffee, Victoria would be happy to make one for you." Gabby smiled as she tipped her head toward the open kitchen.

"I'm good for now, thanks." Ali pulled out the chair across from Gabby and sat down.

"I was hoping to come talk to you later today, so I'm glad you found me. Are you settling in well?"

Ali always fought the urge to tell the truth when asked questions like that. People

didn't really want to know that she was struggling to sleep in the cabin that felt too closed in. They didn't want to know that she went for walks in the middle of the night to clear her head.

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“I’m doing fine, thanks.” She drummed her fingers on the table, unsure how to turn the conversation to what she wanted to know. The day before, after the car full of boys had come onto the ranch and she’d almost gotten shot, Eric had piqued her curiosity when they’d talked. He’d told her about the people who came to Wayside to heal. Lacy too had mentioned healing, but hadn’t told her who these people were.

Ali had assumed the ranch was more of a dude ranch, where guests could come and vacation. Or maybe with all the rules that were similar to the Ten Commandments she remembered Eric talking about when they were younger, Wayside acted as a church camp. “I’m curious, and maybe you can cure my curiosity.”

Gabby smiled. “You want to know what the ranch is all about. I can see it on your face. I was lucky in that I was originally invited here to work with one of the guests, so I knew up front the service Wayside provides. I’m sure if you don’t know, being here is confusing for you.”

“Well, yeah. There’s this ranch full of horses and dogs, a couple kids, and a bunch of grown men who don’t seem to do anything other than the ranch. How can this work? Then there was Lacy who said everyone comes here to heal. So, that confused me too.”

Gabby laughed. “I can see how that would be confusing. Wayside is a place for victims of human trafficking to come and find rest. They can stay as long as they need to and heal. I’m still new here. I came about five months ago to help Junior, who I knew many years ago. We were able to work through a past mess, and now we’re married.”

“Connor mentioned that a few of his men were able to get second chances with women they regretted leaving behind. I was hoping for that with Eric, but I don’t think he will ever open up for me. He’s too grounded in the past.” At least they’d had one good conversation, even if neither of them got real closure from it.

“That’s secondary, but it is a big deal to all the men right now. Some are happy for the chance to try again. Others, like Eric and Brendon, are not. I’ve tried talking to Brendon about it, since I know him better than Eric, but he’s very closed lipped about what happened between him and Dee. He’s a mystery.”

Ali was good at opening books that didn’t want to be opened, but she wasn’t about to offer to help in that case. She already felt like the men there were against her after her first day when she tried helping them with the boys.

“So, Eric helps these victims return to normalcy through...horse training?” That seemed like a pretty big leap.

“Sort of. Mostly through riding and listening. That’s what all the guys do here. Many of the people who come here are women. They’ve been sex trafficked and seeing strong men can be a trigger for them. Having all the Wayside men gently show them that they are safe and can be trusted in a slow and sensitive way helps them to acclimate to a world they never thought they’d see again.

“The guys have to be very careful about how they treat and react to situations. I looked up the training all of them had before they started this venture, and it was pretty intense. I’m delighted to be here, and I’ve been able to help in some ways because Brendon never had anyone he could turn to. Now he does.”

The expensive bottle of wine on its way there came to mind, and Ali flinched inwardly. Even at the cost of that wine, it wouldn’t be nearly as fulfilling as what Eric did with his life every day. “I had hoped with this second chance mission, as Connor

put it, that I could convince Eric to look at my life, at what I have and what I've accomplished, and join me. I was convinced that nothing he did in this out-of-the-way ranch could be as fulfilling as what I do."

"And now?" Gabby's brows rose, and she waited for Ali to answer.

"I don't know what to do now. I want to see him. I want to rekindle what we had, what I shoved away. But I'm dealing with the fact that in some ways I'm not sorry. I was able to do a lot that I couldn't have done if I'd stayed with Eric. But part of me wishes I could go back and see what that would've been like." Even thinking like that sent acid churning in her stomach. Thank goodness she'd turned down the coffee. What if Eric had left her just like everyone else? Would she have been as strong and capable if she hadn't been through college and physical training?

"It's okay to have thinking that isn't one hundred percent one way or another. There is no safety net when it comes to relationships. That is especially true when there is a painful past involved. I can tell you with complete assurance that Eric is not going to leave here without a good reason to."

Ali couldn't force him to choose, nor would she tell him what to do. But then, why stay? There was no place for her as a member of JAG out in rural Wyoming. They didn't even need an attorney like her in Piper's Ridge. While Gabby had obviously moved here and settled in with her career, that wasn't an option for Ali. She wasn't so sure she would ever see Eric devoted to her enough to leave Wayside.

If it would make him unhappy, she didn't want him to.

Which meant there was no future for them. She'd already lived through a relationship with no future and wasn't about to put herself in that situation that again. Eric might not get drunk or violent, but living in a loveless relationship caused by pressuring him would be torture enough. Nearing retirement, she wanted someone who would

understand her and love her, not leave her when it was convenient like everyone else in her life.

Ali reached into her bag and gripped the scented lotion from within, then squirted a liberal amount on her hands and carefully rubbed it in, making sure all the places where lines might form were good and moisturized. Maybe she still had a chance to find love if she kept fighting against the clock.

Gabby reached across the table and rested a gentle hand on her arm. “You’ve only been here a little more than a week. Give Eric some time. His hesitance is his safety net. There are three sides to every story: his side, your side, and then what really happened that only an unbiased observer could recount. You both brought something to the situation that broke you apart. Let him work through his truth, and maybe you can get to the other side together.”

Ali stood and gripped the chair tightly like an anchor. “Even if we do, I’m not so sure anymore that it would benefit either of us. I’m not cut out for life out here, and he would be unhappy anywhere else. His job is just as important as mine, but his lifestyle is a world away from what I need. I don’t see how either of us can make that work.”

Gabby tilted her head and the side of her mouth raised in a smile. “Then let God handle the details, and you just concentrate on listening to what you should do.”

Ali didn’t have the heart to tell Gabby—the only person so far who’d really treated her openly like a friend—that she had no faith, no little angel on her shoulder to direct her. Nothing. Maybe other people could hear direction, but Ali wanted to make her own way and claim it as her own. Unfortunately, the path she was supposed to take currently resembled a mud pit, and there was no way she was escaping a mess.

ChapterEleven

Eric gathered the few things Terrell had brought with him while the other boys looked on in disgust. Neither of them asked why Eric was there or why he was touching Terrell's stuff. Terrell was truly an outsider in the group. The feeling added credence to Terrell's statement that he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time when the theft had happened.

Eric took the duffel from the room and left the cabin feeling heavy in his chest. Big E and Jayzon were still welcome to choose otherwise, but he knew they wouldn't. They'd both decided to follow their brothers down a path that would lead to destruction. Very few people retired from a gang.

He stopped in front of his own cabin and pushed the door open. Terrell waited just where he'd told him to, in the living room area. He was pacing and stopped as soon as Eric closed the door.

"Did they say anything?" Terrell glanced at the door, then at Eric.

"No. Did you expect them to?"

Terrell seemed to deflate a little. "I guess I hoped they would. I've been with Jayzon for years. I thought we were friends. I guess not."

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Eric motioned for him to have a seat. “Do you regret choosing yourself and living over going back with them?”

“I couldn’t have gone back. There was no choice. I’ve never had a choice in my life. You heard what they said. Jayzon applied to work at a gas station, but I can tell you I applied any place I thought might take me. Businesses with bars on the windows wouldn’t even give me a second look. The only place I was ever hired was making fast-food. There is no way I could provide for myself, much less anyone else, on what I made microwaving burgers.” He ducked his head. “You don’t know what it’s like to be judged by how you dress, by what you say or how you say it, by who your family is. I’d bet you’ve never walked into a store and had them follow you around because they were sure you were going to steal something. They don’t even hide it.”

He couldn’t share in what Terrell had been through, but he could relate. It wasn’t the same, but when people attempted to relate to the pain of others, it was a way to build connections.

“Maybe I don’t deal with that like you do. I don’t meet with those situations every day. But I have had people cross the street to get away from me when I was in uniform. I’ve had people assume I was stupid because I chose to be in the military. They assumed I couldn’t get a career on my own, so fighting was all that was left for me. I’ve had people treat me like I was dirt because I come from the country, not the city.”

The memory of Ali came flowing back like it had happened yesterday.

You will never be successful enough to support me. You will never be what I need.

You don't make the cut. He felt the cold of the ring as she shoved it back into his hand. Even more than twenty years later, he couldn't forget that feeling and the pity and discomfort on the faces of the men around him. Men who he'd trained with and admired.

"I get it. You have a tiny speck of understanding. Try living through that all the time and knowing that you don't have what it takes to ever get out. There is no hope. Everyone on the outside thinks we could get out with a little motivation. If we tried a little harder, our lives would be better. That's not how it works. Do you know how hard it is to get out of the system? Like food support. Mom has been on government food support for as long as I can remember. Every time she has a job that makes enough for her to get off, she gets a call and they pressure her to stay on. They tell her that things could turn bad any moment and she might need it again. They tell her it's better if she keeps it, because then when something happens, she'll have it available. When, Eric, not it. They manipulate and pressure us into staying where they want us. See, as long as they are giving you something, then they can call whenever they want."

Eric nodded his understanding. After getting help from the government to fund what Wayside did, he'd found trusting any government body even harder. "Because the more they know, the more they can use."

Terrell nodded. "And then they offer you more, like housing assistance, just in case you might need it. Well, as soon as you have that, things get a little easier for you and pretty soon you can't imagine how you lived without it. Then you're stuck. After that, there's no way to make enough to ever feel comfortable letting go of the help. You're trapped."

"So, what you want from life is to get away from assistance, to be independent."

Terrell nodded once. "Yes. But it's impossible. I'd have to make four times what I

made at the fast-food place, and that wouldn't even make life better. That would pay for what Mom is already getting from the government. I lose, no matter what. What are my options?"

Eric sat in the other chair and laid Terrell's worn duffel on the floor. "I don't know. I'm not someone who can come up with ideas out of thin air." But he wanted to help, at least that was a start.

There were options at Wayside, but he couldn't just offer Terrell a job. Not when the boy had to leave in a few weeks. "What we do here might seem unimportant. We work with animals in a barn, that's what you see. What you don't see, because other than you, they aren't here right now, are the people we help. I think if we just start the same way I would with any regular guest, you might find something you like and maybe we can find a way to make something happen for you."

Terrell turned his back and paced to the opposite end of the room. "I'm not going into the military. No offense to you, old man, but that's not my thing."

Eric chuckled. "It wasn't my thing either, though I'm glad I did it. It made me a better man." It made him capable of doing things he hadn't thought he could do before that and he'd been head over heels in love with Ali. Where Ali had wanted to go, he'd followed.

Terrell's problem was so similar to Ali's from the past. Money and success. Both of them wanted to do something with themselves but felt like life had dealt them a poor hand, so they chose what they had to in order to make life work. So, why did he give so much grace to Terrell when he couldn't to Ali? Did the past blind him so completely that he couldn't forgive her, but he could with Terrell because they didn't have that past?

Ali was right. He wasn't forgiving her, and he was acting as a poor Christian by

refusing to move on. She'd hurt him. This was true. But if she asked for him to move on, didn't he owe it to her to try? Or would God's Word suggest he guard his heart from hurt again? He wasn't sure, and neither seemed exactly right.

"It's been a long day. Let me show you to your room, then you can come with me to the dining room for supper."

Terrell groaned. "They'll be there."

"Yup, or they'll be hungry. Connor wasn't kidding about coming to eat where we eat. Would you rather they go hungry than to see them?"

Terrell hefted his bag over his shoulder and trudged after Eric. "I suppose I should say that I'll get over seeing them so they don't go hungry."

Eric laughed. "I think you're getting the hang of this grown-up thing already."

"Don't fool yourself, old man, I didn't say I actually wanted that."

He held the door for Terrell and waited until he set his bag down. The room was almost identical to the one he'd had over with the other boys, since all the cabins came furnished for guests, only this room was slightly larger since Eric only had two bedrooms in his cabin. At least Terrell wouldn't have to learn where everything was in Eric's cabin.

"Thanks for taking me in." He moved his bag in front of the dresser and pulled out the top drawer. "I don't know when those guys will come back, but I know they will."

Eric felt the tension in the room rise like a thermostat set on the highest setting. "I know you've been outside more than the others, so you've seen the terrain here. If

you can ride, you can get away faster than most cars. That will help you if you need it to.” And as long as Terrell could get to a horse, he could get away from anyone who broke into Wayside.

“That’s great and all, but a horse can’t outrun a bullet.” He bent down and unzipped the bag. “And I’d feel bad if they shot my horse.”

“Then, we’ll do our best to make sure no one gets through that gate again.” And just to prove it, he’d go talk to Teddy about security right after supper. Terrell made Eric think about things he’d never considered, like what it would have been like to have a child. If he and Ali had married as he’d hoped, they could easily have a child Terrell’s age. In fact, a child Terrell’s age could’ve been their youngest.

How had Ali been married for so many years, but didn’t have children? She’d said her husband had caroused around, but had she avoided him for over twenty years? A chill washed over his skin. Had she missed Eric as much as he’d missed her?

* * *

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Eric locked the door behind him and headed in for the evening meeting in Connor's office. They would have a lot to discuss after the conference with the boys earlier that day. At least supper hadn't been as stressful as Terrell had thought. The other two boys had sat at a table looking sullen and unapproachable, and he'd invited Terrell to eat with him and the guys.

When Terrell had declined the offer but looked worried about where to sit, he'd suggested a place with just two seats, one for each of them. The meal had taken longer than he'd planned. Now that evening was here, the day had seemed to drag out way too long and he wanted to get back to his room and rest.

The moment the thought entered his head, so did Ali. He'd been thinking about her all day and how he could broach the subject of forgiveness without scaring her. She'd never been a Christian, which was also an issue, but he'd cover that later. With prayer and God's plan, anything was possible. He'd just keep praying for her.

He stopped for a moment to look around at all the horses, barns, corrals, and buildings near the house. He'd never felt more at home than here at Wayside. He'd loved his home growing up, but his father had trained him from early on that their home was not his home. He would someday move on and have a place of his own. He shouldn't get too comfortable with them because a man had to do manly things and take care of his own life.

He couldn't help but feel like they'd died disappointed in him. His one love had turned him down, and he'd given up seeking anyone after that. He hadn't dated or tried to find anyone else. Then he'd moved far away on a ranch full of men who would become his closest friends. Not an available woman in sight. Until Ali, the one

who ran away, came back.

He was still in love with her if he were honest with himself, but it didn't take the questioning skills of a lawyer to know she wasn't happy at Wayside Ranch. She wanted closed-in streets with huge houses and a town full of shops, while he wanted wide open spaces.

He shoved those thoughts far away as he entered Connor's office. Junior wasn't there yet, so he left the door open. "Evening," he said in greeting.

Connor nodded. "Is Terrell settled in?"

"He is. He also knows he can keep the front door locked since I have the key to get in and the only other person who has that key is you." That way he wouldn't have to worry about his former roommates coming after him. Even if they'd only planned pranks, Eric wasn't in the mood for that. "He was very concerned about retaliation."

Connor shook his head. "If those boys do anything else, I have to call in the police. I can try to talk to Micha, their caseworker, but he made it clear that if the boys messed up, they were all to be returned."

"I don't need to say that isn't fair, but we all know how this works." Eric settled into his usual seat.

"We do," Teddy replied from his seat along the wall. "While we wait for Junior, let me show you what I have from the cameras this morning." He picked up a remote on Connor's desk and flipped a picture up on the large screen behind the desk.

A blurry image of the black car appeared, with one boy visible. The others stayed completely hidden from the camera's view as if they'd done this before. "We know that the boy in the picture is Big E's brother, Clayton, a.k.a. Bones. Big E's real name

is Indie, his brother's last known address was Oakland, California. We don't know if he's still there or not. We suspect that's his mother's address."

"Then, we know where Big E lives," Edwyn said.

"Yes, but that doesn't help, since Big E is not going home. Especially if he doesn't take advantage of this time here at Wayside." Teddy flipped the image to another. The camera on the front of the house came up, and the car was in the parking area. Four of the boys had gotten out. Teddy zoomed in to see the faces more clearly.

"As you can see, they stayed too far away for me to get a good image of the other three. We don't know who they are. There are no security cameras near the fire pit, so we didn't catch any of them over there."

"We know one of the four is Jayzon's brother, Damion, but not which one. How do we get past the fact that two of the boys in the car were direct relatives of two of the boys staying with us? We've never had to keep out family," Brendon said.

Connor frowned. "Except with Scarlet. Her aunt wouldn't have been allowed in. We have precedent. Let's lock out anyone from entering."

Junior walked in and closed the door behind him. "Sorry I'm late. Gabby needed some help with her car. It's been acting up after work the last few days. I don't know what to make of it. I'm no car expert, but everything looks fine. It's like her battery gets drained while she's working, but as soon as she gets a jump from one of the other people in town, her car is fine."

"Could someone be targeting her car?" Connor asked.

"Has to be. But who and why? It feels pretty petty." Junior scratched his chin.

Eric swallowed hard. Viceroy was familiar with Gabby. “Could this be someone with Viceroy, trying to see if she can find help in this kind of situation or seeing when she’s more vulnerable?”

Junior scowled. “Don’t even say that. I struggle with her being at work, knowing there’s nothing I can do if anything goes wrong. I had to work through letting her be herself because she’s good at what she does and I need to be here. If she’s in danger, I don’t know how I’ll handle that.”

“It might not be. We also had those would-be horse thieves come up. I haven’t seen any other issue here, so maybe they are trying another tactic. It’s crazy though. Draining Gabby’s battery isn’t going to make the horses any easier to steal,” Connor said, glancing to each man around the room. “So, we’ve got the boys who mostly refuse to work with us. We’ve got the car full of gang members who want to get in here for the boys staying here. There’s someone pulling what is hopefully a harmless prank on Gabby daily. Lastly, there’s a group who tried to break in and take horses.”

Edwyn spoke up. “Teddy, Sam, and I got that fence patched up. Looks like they found two of our cameras and destroyed them.”

Connor nodded. “We’ll have to go back to watching like we did when we had regular guests. I know we all thought watching three boys would be easier, but that just isn’t the case. I never dreamed gang members from California would drive all the way here for three young teens. You’d think they’d have easier pickings right where they were.” He scowled out the window. “Any idea who our thieves could be? Do we know who might want to target our horses? The police have no leads.”

Two barks came from outside. All the men froze for a split second before Connor raced for the window and flung it open. More of the dogs started barking. “The kennel...” Sam ran for the door.

Eric followed close behind him. While he wasn't as good with the dogs as Sam, he knew animals and could help better than some of the others. Sam slowed near the edge of the cabins and peered around the corner. He motioned for Eric to follow.

Before Eric raced through the open, he glanced all around. A figure in dark clothing dashed toward the barn. Eric held up two fingers and pointed where he was headed. Sam nodded that he understood, drew his pistol and continued toward the dogs. Eric drew his pistol from the holster on his waistband and headed for the barn. While there was a gate on the driveway into Wayside, someone alone on foot could easily scale the wall, and that's what they must have done.

Junior stopped in the position Eric had just left. Eric motioned his intent to Junior, who responded by pointing to the cabins. Junior would take care of watching the boys and Ali while Eric went after whoever was in the barn.

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Eric stopped just outside the door, said a prayer for protection, then ducked into the dark interior. A shot pierced the air, and Eric dropped to the ground as pounding hooves raced over him and out the door.

ChapterTwelve

Blaring sirens brought Ali's attention away from her notes on how she could handle Cole's case. She felt slight guilt for neglecting her email for the first week, focusing instead on Eric and getting comfortable at Wayside. She shoved her notebook away in a drawer for a smidgeon of privacy. Even though no one else would go in her cabin, she couldn't leave notes sitting out.

She rushed outside to see what was going on as two police cruisers pulled into the parking area in front of the main house. Behind them was an ambulance that came to a stop closer to the barn. Just down the row of cabins, Terrell hung by the door, watching the scene.

He might not know what was going on, but why was he in this row? She'd thought the boys were staying in a cabin far from hers. She jogged over and stopped at the base of the steps up to the small porch. "What's going on?"

Terrell crossed his arms and leaned against the door. "I don't know. Junior came and told me to stay put behind a locked door about a half hour ago. I heard a shot and heard a horse ride away, then nothing. I've been waiting for Eric to come back, but he hasn't."

Was Eric the reason for the ambulance? "I'll go find out. Where are the others?"

He raised his chin. “Still in the other cabin.”

She felt blocked in a way, like there were things going on around her that were important, but she wasn't being made aware of them. They didn't have to tell her everything about the ranch or why the boys were there, but knowing if she were in danger would be good.

Two police officers stood next to one of the squad cars talking to Sam, and she headed over to find out what had happened. She hoped to see Eric talking to another officer, but he wasn't anywhere that she could see. Sam finished up and turned to her.

“Oh, Ali, you're probably looking for Eric. He's in the ambulance, but he won't let them take him in. I think they would rather, but...” Sam laughed humorlessly with a shrug.

Ali swallowed the sudden bile in her throat. How could he be so flippant about Eric's well-being? “Is he all right?”

“Trampled. Probably a busted arm. Teddy and Edwyn went after the rider, but it looks like he got away. He took Eric's horse, Skyfall. He should've known better though because that horse is well-known within at least fifty miles. If he stops anywhere, people will see that horse. We gave pictures to the officers, but that's all we can do right now.”

“How did he get on the property, and how did he get off?” She'd seen the fence when she'd arrived. It was too tall to jump, wasn't it?

Sam's mouth went flat. “He jumped over the area that was just repaired. Teddy had put up more cameras, but Eric said he was wearing a mask over his face.”

Eric's horse probably meant a lot to him as a trainer. She could imagine how

frustrated he was. “Can I go talk to him?”

“I don’t see why not.” Sam shrugged. “The back of the ambulance door is open. He wouldn’t even let them shut him in.”

Ali hadn’t wanted that door to shut either the night they’d taken her in after Frank had drunkenly beaten her up. He’d said her face was too old to attract anyone, but he’d seemed to want to make sure of that fact. She still carefully avoided the lighter-colored scars on her face when she put on makeup. Too much coverage made them stand out even more.

Peering in the back of the ambulance, she caught sight of Eric. Tubes ran over and down his body with oxygen and an IV. He sure looked like they wanted to transport him. He glanced up and saw her, then looked away. Her chest clenched, knowing he didn’t want to see her.

“What happened?” She stepped forward. Now that he’d noticed her, there was no reason to stay hidden.

His voice sounded tinny and small through the oxygen mask. “Intruder on the property. I went to check it out, got shot at, then he rode over me.” Eric flinched as he lifted his arm and rubbed the IV site.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you again not to do that.” The EMT gave him a look Ali was very familiar with. It was how her team would look at witnesses who were giving too much information on the stand.

“Do you need to go into the hospital? I imagine a broken arm needs some attention.” Maybe he needed to see that she still cared about him. Maybe just asking to start over wasn’t good enough as proof.

“I’m not going in. Can you just wrap me up and we can get this over with?” He glanced at the EMT.

“You need a cast. Just wrapping it is not going to be enough,” the EMT argued. “I can’t do a cast in here.”

“I’ll take him in.” Maybe he was worried about the cost of the ambulance ride? If that were the case, then they could avoid it if she took him.

Eric’s brow furrowed. “I don’t need...”

“You do,” the EMT and Ali said in unison.

“Fine.” Eric tugged the IV out and the oxygen off. “I’ll take you up on that, but I’m not staying at the hospital.” He gripped his arm and held it close to his body. “Before we go, I have to talk to Terrell.”

“Can’t someone else talk to him?” Terrell had been worried, but surely he was old enough to understand Eric needed to see a doctor right away. “I think you’re in shock or something.”

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He chuckled. “You worried about me?”

Heat flooded her cheeks. She hadn’t felt that particular emotion in a long time. “So? What if I am?”

Eric didn’t answer and headed quickly over to his cabin. Terrell visibly relaxed the moment he saw Eric round the front of the emergency vehicles.

“Man, I was so worried about you. Did they shoot you?” Terrell tried hard to play it cool, but his worry was evident.

“I’m okay. Look. I don’t know how long I’ll be away. I have to go to the hospital, and I’ll probably have to get a cast. This doesn’t mean I won’t teach you how to ride, but it means I’ll need your help even more when I get back. You up for a challenge?”

Terrell came the closest to smiling she’d seen since she’d met him. “I am.”

“Good. I want you to go and stay with Junior until I get back even though that puts you closer to the others. I don’t want you sitting here alone. It’s not safe with all that’s gone on. He’s right out here. Need anything first?”

Terrell shook his head and trudged down the steps. “Not if you’ll be home by the time I need to shackle up and go to sleep. And if not, it won’t be the first time I’ve slept in my clothes.”

Ali wanted to put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze it. She’d been there. She’d slept in her clothes to be able to leave her uncle’s house within minutes of waking every

morning. Leaving before he could get up had always been her goal. If only there were a way to offer Terrell the same chance at success that she'd had.

Junior waved Terrell over, and Ali led Eric to her car. It was small and he was going to have to practically fold in half to fit in the passenger seat, but at least he wouldn't have to drive himself. She pressed the button to unlock all the doors.

He opened the passenger side and eyed her. "You drive this? Do you even know what kind of speeds this car can achieve?" His mouth was crooked in a half-smile.

"I am aware. If you don't tell anyone, I can admit that I may have tested it once or twice."

"I'd never say a word." He lowered into the car like he was practically sitting on the ground, then pulled his knees in. When he managed folding himself in half, he moved the seat back as far as it would go. "Tight fit."

He wasn't even super tall, but he made the car seem even tinier. "Take your hat off, cowboy." She laughed. "It won't seem so small if you don't scrunch your neck."

"A man without his hat is no man at all," Eric teased as he took off his cowboy hat and balanced it on his knee. He angled his body to reach for the seatbelt with his right hand to avoid using his injured arm then paused.

He grunted softly as he reached toward the floor with his good arm and picked up a small, shiny object off the floor. Ali gasped at the sight of her wedding ring grasped in his fingers. When she'd tossed it in the back, she'd never thought about it bouncing its way to the front of the car as she drove.

"Pretty ring." He set it in a recess in the center console with no emotion on his face.

She picked up the ring, opened the glove box and tossed it inside. “Pretty doesn’t mean important.”

He made a soft harrumph noise in his throat. “How long has that been in here?”

Heat rushed up her neck. That was a question she hadn’t thought about answering. “About a week. I wore it for years just to make people think I was taken. No one knows me well enough to know better.” She pushed the ignition button and the engine growled to life.

Although he was sweaty and dirty from a long day and getting trampled, he still made her heart quiver and feel like she was twenty again. Seeing that ring put her life in perspective. If only he’d wanted to be successful. If only he’d wanted to work with her and be the best they could both be, together.

As soon as she had the thought, she shoved it from her mind. How selfish. He had made his own way and his own success. Now she just needed to figure out how she was going to manage for the next few weeks before she had to go back to her life. Before she had to slip that old ring back on for security. “You’ll have to give me directions. I have no idea where I’m going,” she said.

“Bold of you to assume I’d give the right directions when I didn’t want to go to the hospital in the first place.”

She pulled her phone to her mouth, pressed the home button, and asked her phone to bring up directions to the nearest hospital. The phone calculated the route and announced the first turn.

“Party pooper.” He chuckled.

“I just like taking you for a ride.” She accelerated out of the parking lot and headed

up the driveway. “Settle in. It looks like this will take about an hour.”

“I don’t think I’m going anywhere that far away. They are going to have to peel me out of this seat if I have to sit in here that long. My knees aren’t going to move.”

She snorted at the thought. Eric shot forward in his seat and pointed at something in the distance. “Floor it! That’s Skyfall!”

* * *

Eric wished he were behind the wheel of the compact sports car. Ali didn’t know the roads, and she obviously hadn’t driven on gravel very often. Skyfall was getting farther and farther away, despite being a horse against a car.

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He made a fist and pounded his knee. If that man hurt his horse, he'd have to fight the urge to beat him. Skyfall had been very abused when she'd come to Wayside, and Eric had slowly worked her back into vitality. He would not see her hurt again.

"You should call the police." Ali's eyes focused on the road ahead as she gripped the steering wheel. Her knuckles were bright white against the black of the interior.

His arm was useless, and his phone was in the wrong pocket to reach easily. He slid forward as far as possible, then tried to stretch around and grip his phone in his opposite pocket. Pain shot through his shoulder, and he had to stop before he hurt himself further.

"You can look up the directions again once we get this guy." Eric grabbed her phone and pressed the emergency button.

"Piper's Ridge Police, do you have an emergency?"

"Yes, the man who stole my horse is getting away." Eric relayed the nearest address and where they were headed.

"The closest unit is at least ten minutes away."

They were busy at Wayside, and Eric didn't have ten minutes to wait. If this was one of the thieves from before, the rider might be able to get Skyfall to run right up into a trailer ramp just like their horses had. Then she'd be gone. Skyfall didn't like trailers most of the time, but if she were tired after a run, she might do it just to be somewhere that looked like she could rest.

“Come on, Ali. Hurry.”

“I’m going as fast as I can. I don’t want to go in the ditch.” Her little car fishtailed slightly, and Ali overcorrected. The car spun twice, then came to a stop in the middle of the road. He had to give her credit for not screaming.

She shifted the car back into first and raced down the road. His horse was little more than a speck in the distance now. Why his horse? There were so many mounts that weren’t attached to anyone, but they’d taken his personal horse.

Ali slammed the wheel to the right and took them down a side road. He wasn’t sure how she knew that road would cut back around and might get them ahead of the rider, but he was thankful she’d decided to take it.

She pushed the little car faster, kicking up a huge dust cloud behind them.

“Remind me that I owe you supper for this,” Eric said, gripping the dashboard with his good hand.

She snorted. “I’m sure Victoria will love that. Better not promise too much.”

He took a split second to look at Ali. He hadn’t meant food in the dining room. He’d wanted to actually thank her. “I’ll find a way that doesn’t involve making anyone else work for me.”

She met back up with the road and slid to a stop as the dust cloud behind them flew over the car, blocking his view. Since the main road curved around, they were now close to Skyfall again. The rider’s black clothes stuck out against the mare’s gray coat. “Another minute and we’ll have her.” He pointed where Ali should go.

Eric wasn’t sure what he would do once he caught up with the rider. The man in

black glanced over his shoulder and pulled his pistol.

“Oh no!” Ali let off the gas.

“No! Keep driving.” Eric reached for his gun and only then realized he had to have lost it when he dove to the floor of the barn.

“But...” Ali bit her lip.

The rider turned in the saddle and took a shot at them. Ali screamed. As she ducked, the car careened off the road.

“Sir, are you still there?” the dispatcher asked. “Sir?”

Ali slammed into the steering wheel as the car came to a skidding stop. Her airbag deployed with a loudcrack. Every muscle in Eric’s body protested as he shoved the door open and scrambled from the car. He clutched his arm close to his body as he ran around the hood. He hadn’t seen the sharp-tailed grouse fly in front of the car, but that had to be what had made the airbag deploy.

He tugged open Ali’s door, but she was slumped back, pushed into her seat by the force of the airbag that now lay limp in her lap. “Hey, Ali?” He brushed away a trickle of blood from her nose with his thumb. “Ali?”

His heart clenched in his chest. How was he going to help her when his arm was all busted up? If he hadn’t been so stubborn about the ambulance, he wouldn’t have known his horse was there. If she hadn’t been driving, she wouldn’t be hurt.

Skyfall disappeared behind a distant rise as the sound of sirens came on the wind. But would they see the rider, or would he veer off the road due to the potential of getting caught?

Although help would be there momentarily, Eric had to make sure Ali wasn't hurt worse than she appeared. He reached for her wrist and felt for a pulse, thankful he found a strong one right away. "That's it. The police will be here shortly."

He reached over Ali and grabbed her phone from where he'd dropped it in the center console before he got out of the car. "This is Eric Moberg. I'm still here. I hear the sirens. They're almost here." He couldn't think of anything more intelligent to say.

"Is everyone all right?" the dispatcher asked.

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“No, the driver, Ali Wellthorp, hit her head on the wheel.”

Ali groaned softly, and her eyes fluttered open. She flinched and cradled her head in her hands. “I’m sorry, Eric. I tried.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. You drove as best you could, and we almost caught up to him.” But he had no idea where his horse would end up now.

A police car rolled to a stop behind them, and two officers got out. Within a few minutes, they’d assessed Ali, who refused treatment just like he had. Eric cornered Officer Blake. “Blake, I need your help.”

Officer Blake snorted. “Before or after I call a wrecker for the little sports car? I’ve never seen a car like this out here.”

And once Ali left, the officer probably wouldn’t again. The car, the attitude, the need for shops and designer things...he couldn’t give her any of that. Even if he could get over what she’d done, he couldn’t make Piper’s Ridge a place Ali would ever enjoy living, and he wasn’t going to leave Wayside.

“After. I need you to take me to see Doc Willis.”

Officer Blake stared at him for a moment. “You’re not serious.”

“I am. He can wrap me up as well as anyone else, and then I don’t need to go all the way to Cheyenne. Have the other unit take Ali back home if she doesn’t want to go to the doctor so I know she’s safe. Then you can take me to the vet.”

“You are a veteran. You shouldn’t have to visit a vet for care.” Officer Blake’s tone was more acidic than battery acid.

“It’s not that I have to. I’m asking to.” Plus, Eric knew Willis better than anyone else and he wanted to talk to him about the missing horse. If anything happened to Skyfall, the thieves might take her to a veterinarian. Dr. Willis could let nearby vets know about the missing horse.

“Fine. I just need to push this car all the way off the road so it isn’t a hazard. Go sit in my car. I’ll be there in a minute.” He went to talk to the officer driving the other squad car. Within minutes, Officer Blake’s partner got in the other car along with Ali and headed back to Wayside.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” Officer Blake pulled a U-turn and headed toward town.

“My horse was stolen, I was trampled, I was shot at, and in a minor fender bender today. Knowing what I’m doing is the easy part.” His arm throbbed, and he wished he’d waited a little longer to state his decision to walk away from the care the EMTs had given. If he’d waited a few more minutes, they may have offered him some pain medication. But then he’d have missed Skyfall.

“Did any of your team go after the horse?” Eric asked.

“Unit three was coming up the opposite way. Hopefully they saw the rider. Your horse is pretty recognizable.”

She was, but only if they knew where to look.

ChapterThirteen

Officer Blake pulled to a stop in front of the small veterinary office in Piper's Ridge. Dr. John Willis's sign was set to closed for the evening, but Eric had called the man after hours enough that he knew the doc would be in.

The pain that had been near unmanageable an hour before was so intense Eric had trouble keeping his stomach under control. "Thanks for the ride. Better than any ambulance."

"You're a stubborn old cuss." Deputy Blake laughed as he helped Eric out of the car.

Eric headed for the door, and Dr. Willis met him before he could even knock. The doctor unlocked it and held it open for him. "What have you gotten yourself into, and how does the horse look?" The doctor laughed as he glanced to the now-empty parking lot. "Did you walk?"

"No, I got a ride. I need you to bandage up this arm. Probably needs to be set first."

John looked at him and gripped his shoulder. "You know I can't legally medicate you."

Eric nodded. "I know. I've got enough to tell you to keep my mind occupied while you do what you need to."

"I can promise you, there isn't anything on this earth distracting enough to let me set a broken arm without you noticing. I might need my assistant for this." He headed for his phone and pressed a few numbers. "Hey, Amy? Sorry to bug you during supper. I need you to come help me with a patient." He glanced over at Eric. "Looks like an HBC. Yup. Thanks." He hung up the phone.

"Hairy Big Cowboy?" Eric tried to make the man laugh.

“Hit By Car.” Dr. Willis corrected him as he led him back to the first exam room. “I’ll need an x-ray. Take anything metal you’re wearing off and leave it in this tray.” He pointed at a little mesh crate on the counter. “You need help stripping down to your undershirt?”

Eric hated to admit that he did. His arm was swollen and fairly useless for anything but causing pain. “Yeah, I’ll need that.”

“Good, all those fancy snaps will make a mess of my imaging.” Dr. Willis made quick work of getting the shirt off, leaving Eric in his jeans and tank top. “I’ll get you a lead drape so you don’t have to take your jeans off.”

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Amy came in the front door with a loud “It’s just me!”

“We’re back here,” Dr. Willis called.

She rounded the corner and stopped short. “That’s not a dog.” She glanced at the doctor. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’ve known Eric for years. If he needs my help, I’ll help him.” Dr. Willis shrugged. “I assume there’s a good reason you didn’t go to a hospital?”

There was, but Eric didn’t want to discuss it. Others might not think it was a good enough excuse, but the last time he’d been in an ambulance was with his mother. Where Dad had been tough and almost unyielding, Mom had loved him. Seeing her hurting like she’d been had torn him up inside. Just being in that box with all the devices made him remember that day.

“I just need to get back to work.”

“All right. Amy, why don’t you head into the other room. I just need to take a few snapshots of this arm so I know what I’m resetting.” He gave her a quick glance, and she left.

Amy seemed just as efficient as the doctor, and despite the oddity of going there, Eric felt like he was in good hands. After a few clicks of the machine, Dr. Willis came back in and collected the hard-sided sheet that he had to process in the darkroom. A few minutes later, he emerged with the x-ray.

“This is crazy. You look like you were hit by a car.”

“Horse or car, not much difference.” Eric was losing his sense of humor the longer he was in pain.

“I don’t have a table long enough for you to lie down.” Dr. Willis directed Eric back to the waiting room and a long wooden bench built into the wall. “Lie here. I’ll get ready.” He headed back to his office while Amy helped him get situated on the hardwood slab.

“Not the most comfortable place.” Eric shifted his weight until he was sure there was no possible way to make this position comfortable.

Dr. Willis came back with surgical gloves on. “I’m going to say it again, this is not my specialty. You’d better not sue me over this.”

“Just get it done.” He was too old to fight over incidentals. At his age, pain was an almost constant companion, and there were few days he didn’t take a pain reliever with his coffee in the morning.

“Well, start talking.” Dr. Willis motioned for Amy to restrain him.

Amy took no time and anchored the top half of his body to the table while the doctor gripped his arm and gave it hard yank.

Eric couldn’t help screaming. Not only was the amount of pain unexpected, his reaction was the only thing in the situation he could control. While the doctor prodded up and down his arm to see if he needed to do more adjusting, Eric told him about his horse in broken gasps.

“By the grace of God, I think it popped back into place. I was worried I’d have to pull

some more.”

Amy slowly raised off of Eric and headed for the doctor’s office. When she returned, she had the materials needed to cast his arm.

“A hard cast?” He’d hoped for just a wrap and sling.

“Yup. If you don’t, you might not heal properly. You still might not. I have no way of knowing if there are little bone fragments in there...” He shook his head and wiped his brow with the back of his arm. “You’re going to make me lose my license.”

“If anyone asks me, I won’t mention your name. But can you keep a lookout for Skyfall?”

“I’m not the police. I can’t put out an APB on a horse. But I can tell all the doctors within a fifty-mile radius about her and that we want her back.”

“Thank you.”

Amy and the doctor made quick work of shaving his arm and getting it plastered up, then wrapped. They had to wait for it to dry, then he was ready to go.

“I suppose you need a ride back out to Wayside?” Dr. Willis glanced at his watch. “I’ll get you there, but you need to promise me you’ll take it easy for a few days. I can’t even believe you’re still awake. Most people would’ve passed out.”

He had a pretty high pain tolerance, but that was being put to the test. “I’ll be good.” He gave a brief salute with the arm that would be locked in a bent position for weeks.

“Anything else I can do for you before I take you home?”

Eric closed his eyes. “Unless you know a good way to get beyond a past that’s haunting you, I don’t think so.”

John helped him sit in one of the more comfortable seats, then offered him a few over-the-counter pain meds. “I have an ear to listen, but I can’t change the past any more than you can.”

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He probed the skin just under the edge of the cast, trying to scratch. “The girl who refused my marriage proposal about twenty years ago is in town. She wants to, or seems to want to, rekindle what we had. Every time I ask her why she did what she did, she shuts me out. She finally admitted that her uncle was probably abusive, and that had to do with it, along with wanting more from her career and needing someone who could support her. But with the things she said... I have to believe there’s more to it than that.” He pressed harder under the edge of the cast.

“Don’t do that.” Dr. Willis tugged his hand away. “You know, I have this theory about looking back. If God has delivered you from it, don’t tell Him his handling of the situation wasn’t good enough by looking back. Don’t do what Lot’s wife did. Even Jesus told us to remember Lot’s wife. She was all but delivered of her fear and trials. She was so close to peace, she could see it. But against the will of God, she looked back at what He’d already saved her from. She disobeyed God by desiring even a glimpse of what she’d left.”

He hadn’t been happy about Ali or the way she’d left him, but if she hadn’t, he wouldn’t have the career he had now. It had been his desire to get away from everything military and to hide away in a small town that finally brought him to Wayside. “But how do I just forget?”

“You ask for help to forget, and you move on in the assurance that He will give you all things that help glorify Him. Forgiveness always glorifies God. And if she hurts you, you’ve offered the other cheek. You’ve done what you’re supposed to do.”

“Don’t look back,” he muttered. Maybe he could force himself to let go. He’d held on to that anger for so long it was almost a part of who he was.

Dr. Willis nodded, then led him out to his big beat-up white truck and opened the door for him. “See what I mean, you won’t be able to do much of anything for a few days. Tomorrow you’ll be hit with fatigue like you’ve never had before. That’s your body trying to fix you. Don’t fight it. Hear me?”

Even though the doctor was at least five years younger than he was, he chuckled and gave a deadpan, “Yes, sir.”

Halfway through the ride home, Eric drifted off to the country sounds on John’s radio and woke to the crunching of the truck on the gravel driveway. He’d forgotten to ask Amy to grab the phone from his pocket so he could text Terrell and Ali. Now it was late, and both of them would hopefully be in bed.

Eric waited for the truck to come to a complete stop, then he waited for the ground to stop spinning when he opened the door of the truck. John came around and gave him a hand to get his feet on solid ground. A door opened somewhere close by.

“Eric?” Ali’s voice was music to his ears. She was all right.

“Yeah, I’m back.”

A moment later she was there with her arms wrapped around him. Her head tucked under his chin, just like she used to do when she’d just wanted to be held. He hadn’t seen her that vulnerable since she’d come to Wayside.

“You okay?” He stroked her soft hair with his good hand.

“I was worried. When the deputy said he was taking you to an animal doctor, I tried to persuade Connor to take me to town and convince you to go to a doctor. He laughed.”

Eric couldn't deny that holding her felt right, like twenty-one years hadn't passed. "I'm just fine." And hopefully, he still would be in the morning.

* * *

Ali refused to listen to the little voice inside that said she needed to watch herself. Everyone she'd ever needed had deserted her, beaten her, used her. Eric wasn't like that. She could chant that over and over, but her mind still refused to believe it. She had hurt him in the worst way. Why wouldn't he retaliate and walk away from her? Why wouldn't he let her feel something, then do to her exactly what she'd done to him?

And she wasn't strong enough to take it. She opened her mouth to tell him she was sorry, she never should've said the things she had. She hadn't meant them. She'd only been trying to sever the relationship, and she didn't want him sitting somewhere loving her. Better that he hate her and find someone else.

But he hadn't, and really, neither had she. She'd been married, but it was basically a marriage of convenience. Frank had used her when he needed a military bride on his arm. All other times, he was married to his booze and various mistresses, the bottle being his most longstanding relationship.

"I need to sit. Have you seen Terrell?"

His worry for the boy stung slightly. Wasn't he concerned about her? She'd been in a car accident while driving him at breakneck speed down a low maintenance road. She started to pull away from him, but he held her close as he turned for his cabin.

"Come with me."

She walked alongside him, feeling his strength as he made his way to his front door.

Terrell opened it and peered out when they were only a few feet away.

“Why is that door unlocked?” Eric’s voice was gruff and hard-edged.

“Because I was watching for you and saw you coming. I just got back from Junior’s. He’s inside. We were waiting for you.” Terrell held the door for him.

Ali noted that Eric was trying not to lean on her, but every so often he would. She stiffened her shoulder to offer more strength and helped him get inside. She’d already started the rotation of ice and heat that the EMT had suggested to help her neck, but Eric hadn’t been able to do anything for his pain.

“They got away?” Terrell asked.

“They did. Skyfall is missing.”

Junior whistled from across the room. “I’m sorry, man. I know how much that horse meant to you.”

“Means to me. We’ll get her back,” Eric said.

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Ali helped him sit on his narrow sofa by lowering herself next to him. He cradled his cast close to his body, and he squinted his eyes with pain. He needed rest. “Eric, what do you need? We should help you, then leave and let you rest.”

“I just needed to know that you and Terrell were all right. The whole time we were gone, I kept thinking this seemed like a perfect diversion. Junior, thank you for stepping in and helping.”

Junior pointed to his temple in the same motion of gratitude men did when they were wearing their cowboy hats. “Not a problem. I’m going to go and make sure my wife isn’t worried since I’ve been gone all evening.” He grabbed his hat where he’d left it hanging by the door and left.

Ali suddenly felt out of place in the house shared by Eric and Terrell. She didn’t belong. “I should go. I’m glad you’re back and that you’re almost okay.”

“It’ll be fine. You’ll see. Terrell will help me. We’ll get all the work done, and he’ll learn a lot. Dr. Willis is watching for Skyfall and so is Deputy Blake. Someone will see her.” He sounded so tired that she slid forward to stand in order to leave, and he gently held her shoulder.

“I promised you a supper.”

“Not now. Not when you’re hurt. We can worry about supper another time.” Who was she kidding? He wouldn’t heal enough in the next two weeks to be strong enough to drive her anywhere to eat, and then she’d have to go. Her attempt to rekindle what they’d had was too little, too late. She hadn’t just burned the bridge between them,

she'd bombed it and made sure there wasn't even a river to cross anymore.

"I want to take you to supper. Tomorrow. Don't argue."

"I'm really good at arguing."

"I'm sure you are." Eric tried to smile, but it looked more like a harsh grimace. "But I'm asking you not to. I can handle this. I just need you to trust me. I can take care of everything."

She'd wanted to hear those words from him when she was twenty. She'd wanted to hear that he would do everything in his power to make sure she was taken care of and that she could make her dreams a reality. That she could rely on him. How could she fight what she'd waited so long to hear? "Okay, but at least let me drive your truck."

He laughed. "No way. We won't need it anyway. You'll see."

Terrell gave her a sneaky grin. "I promised to help him with whatever he needs. Don't you worry one bit. We've got this covered."

Seeing Terrell act like most other sixteen-year-olds she'd known made her heart happy. Maybe there was still hope for him. He could take the broken pieces of his life and make a beautiful picture from them. Hopefully, his picture would look even better than hers. Her life still had a huge piece missing, and she was pretty sure it was in the shape of Eric.

ChapterFourteen

For the tenth time that hour, Ali glanced at her watch. She wanted to go over and check up on Eric. But he would hate that. Or would he? Young Eric had hated to be coddled. His parents hadn't done it, and the idea was foreign to him. She'd wanted

someone to fuss over her, but that wasn't the way he'd expressed love back then.

But now her needs had changed. She wanted to help people get out of situations beyond their control. She'd made a few sizable donations to shelters and children's hospitals since she had been too busy to physically help. The distant nature of her donations felt cold now.

With Eric having been injured, would he need her help or was Terrell enough? Would this test Terrell in a way that was good for him? How could she know the answer to that without checking up on him? She squeezed her eyes closed, trying to justify her overwhelming need to see Eric.

Someone knocked on her door, and she rushed to answer because it would give her something else to think about. The moment she got to the door, she held in her disappointment. Instead of Eric, Terrell waited for her.

"Eric asked me to come and get you. I'm supposed to say, 'Mrs. Wellthorp, would you join us for supper?'"

"Us?" She hadn't expected Terrell to join them, but maybe Eric would need his help all evening. He was in a cast that kept one arm almost completely immobile.

"Oh, not us. You. And Eric. Not me." He held up his hands. "I won't be there." He chuckled as he held out his elbow, and she realized Eric had probably coached him on what to say and do.

A smile she couldn't contain swept over her. "Thank you." She thought they would head for the parking lot, but he turned her toward Eric's cabin. The scent of grilling meat tickled her senses. She hadn't had anything cooked on a grill in years. Her husband just hadn't done that sort of thing. Even going to five-star restaurants didn't offer that same smoky tang of meat tossed on an outdoor grill.

Terrell brought her to Eric's front door, then opened it and held it for her, motioning her inside. "I'll be heading over to Junior's. Eric wants me to eat in the dining room, but I don't like sitting by myself. I suppose that makes me a wuss."

Ali gripped his shoulder to stop him from ducking his head. "No. It doesn't. Even people who don't like people at all often have trouble eating alone. I know. I'm one of them. I've eaten pretty much by myself for years, and I can tell you, it's not fun. I'm glad Eric is thinking of you."

He gave a brief grin. "It's weird having someone worry about my every move, who isn't doing it because they think I'll screw up. I know why he's doing it. I'll make myself scarce. You don't need me hanging around here." He gave her a wave, grabbed a new baseball hat she'd never seen before, and dashed out the door.

"Eric?" She'd only been in his house one time and never past the living room. She slowly made her way toward the kitchen. "Eric?" Panic hit for a moment. Had he hurt himself while Terrell was out getting her?

The back door opened and Eric came in, his hat shielding his face momentarily while he watched his step. His arm was now in a cast with a sling, so he didn't have to use his other hand to hold it where it pained him the least.

She suddenly felt nervousness skitter down her back. How could she go into court and face all sorts of issues—even if the issues she usually faced were on paper—and never feel anything but excitement, but this man had her nerves jangling? "Good to see you."

His head snapped up, and he grinned. "Good to see you, too. Took some work, but I've got everything."

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“Here?” She refused to feel disappointment. Hadn’t she just been excited about grilled meat? But she’d also been eager to get Eric alone, away from the pull of Wayside Ranch and his ever-present phone. Connor always needed him, which didn’t leave much for her.

“Yeah, I never had a chance to make anything for you back in the day, and I don’t feel like paying to have someone else make food that I can make better is a proper thank-you.”

The sentiment was so sweet and brought back memories from years before. “You forgot?” She grinned, remembering the time he’d tried to bake her a cake for her eighteenth birthday.

“Forgot what?” He tilted his head to the side, showing off his dimple.

Ali threaded her hands together to keep from grabbing his cheeks and kissing his sweet face. “My birthday cake.”

He suddenly let out a guffaw that had her bursting with laughter. “I had totally forgotten. What a mess that was. Mom never thought I would need to learn anything like baking. I tried. If that was the only yardstick you had for my cooking, it’s no wonder why you look so disappointed.”

Ali closed her eyes and focused herself. How could she have let her disappointment show? This man had the use of one arm, and he’d wanted to cook for her. Had her husband ever done anything like that? The closest had been writing out the checks to pay for the remainder of her education, what the GI Bill hadn’t covered. But he’d

known she'd married him for his money, so that didn't really compare.

"I'm not disappointed. I'm sorry my face made you feel that way."

He brushed off the comment. "It's not a problem. You haven't tried my cooking yet, so maybe you're justified. I hate to ask, but can you grab the plates and silverware?" He nodded toward the cupboard and drawer.

"I didn't know you would have any of this stuff here. Don't you usually eat in the cafeteria?" She got right to helping him.

"I do. But sometimes I give Victoria a break and I invite everyone over here to grill. I'll bring the meat, and all the others bring something to share. It's fun. It's relaxing. Victoria loves cooking, but even people who love things need a break from them."

She nodded and turned back to face him. "Where would you like these?"

He pointed to the dining table. "I think it's a little windy to eat outside tonight. Getting the grill started took a while. I'll bring in the steaks."

Her mouth watered as she set the table. She'd had her share of fillets at restaurants, but this meal smelled amazing. Her heart fluttered as she listened to him hum a song through the open door, gathering the food from the grill.

The situation felt so...right. She didn't even have to try hard to imagine this every evening. She glanced around the room, confused for a moment about how her cabin, which was exactly like Eric's, could feel so claustrophobic, but his didn't. Was the issue not the walls at all, but her?

She waited to take her seat until he came inside since she wanted to avoid accidentally taking his usual spot. He came in holding a plate heaped with two huge

steaks and kicked the door closed with his foot. After he set the plate down on the table, he went to the refrigerator and brought out an Italian noodle salad and a fresh romaine salad.

He forked one steak and put it on a plate, then indicated she could sit at that spot. He forked the other onto the other plate, then sat down and stared at it. "I didn't think this through, apparently." He laughed. "I'm either going to have to go barbarian or ask for your help."

She took the fork and spoon stuck in the lettuce and gathered a portion for herself, then got some for Eric. "Hmm, barbarian mode, huh? I might like to see that," she teased as she dragged his plate over and cut up his steak for him. While he probably could've eventually learned to do it one-handed, she didn't want him to deal with that the day after his injury and not on their only date.

"Thanks." He looked a little sheepish. "It's been hard asking for help. I'm usually a pretty self-sufficient guy."

"I'm the same. Being alone for so long will do that to you."

She saw the questions in his eyes, but he didn't give in and ask them. Even married, she'd been on her own in a lot of ways, but he didn't know that. She served up the noodle salad and then waited for the inevitable. Eric would want to pray over the meal. He always had in the past, and he'd become even more religious since then.

He reached across the table with his right hand, and she slipped her fingers in his, enjoying the sweet, skittery feelings inside her as he prayed. The moment he released her, she jumped at the change.

"Thanks for coming over tonight. I know you were hesitant. I've come to the realization that it won't hurt anyone if I stop looking at the past and just keep

focusing on this minute, right now.”

Just like she’d done. But had that really worked for her? Lacy had asked her if she was happy. That question had bounced around in her head ever since. Was there value in looking back? Was there another way? Or could she stay in the moment and find happiness? Maybe even...joy?

“Then let’s agree not to look back. Let’s start from this minute and move on from here. Brand new. What do you think of that?” she asked.

He stuck his fork into a section of steak and lifted it to his mouth, then took a bite, avoiding her question for a minute as he slowly chewed. She poked a few noodles and a black olive, letting him think through his response. Half of being a good attorney was allowing the other person to think—or in the courtroom, overthink—how they were going to reply to a question.

“I like that, but not so sure how it will work in practice. I remember our very first date. We were only fifteen. Too young to be smart. I remember how that first date ended too, with a kiss behind the tree in your front yard.” He chuckled, and the low rumble made her giddy.

“I remember that better than I should. Like it was yesterday.” Even at fifteen, he’d been a good kisser. She’d been terrified her uncle would see them, but at the time had wanted to keep that part of her life a secret. She’d never told Eric about her fears or how her uncle treated her.

“So do I.” He slowly stuck his fork into another portion of steak and brought it to his mouth.

Ali swallowed, her throat feeling too thick to allow food to pass. Emotion had always been easy to shove away, to push down until she couldn’t feel it, until now. With Eric

right next to her, just a foot away, she could easily reach over and touch him, and she couldn't think straight.

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“Is something wrong with your meal?” His brows shot up.

“Nothing at all. I just find myself distracted.”

He slid his chair back. “I’m struggling with the same issue, and that’s a shame. Cooking was twice as hard as usual today.”

“Maybe we could get the distraction out of the way and then enjoy our supper?” She’d never been afraid to say what was on her mind, but being so open took more fortitude than usual.

Eric stood and held out his hand. She joined him, and his nose was just a few inches above hers. She could smell his aftershave lotion clinging to his skin. The laugh lines she’d fought the last ten years looked appealing on him. She wanted to kiss him and trace the ones next to his mouth with her thumbs.

He slid his right hand behind her neck and drew her forward. When his lips met hers, for a moment she couldn’t even remember her name. His kiss was like the rush of a roller coaster, and suddenly she was a kid again, wanting to ride over and over. All too quickly he ended it and leaned his forehead against hers. “I don’t think that’s going to help my distraction at all.”

* * *

With one kiss, the floodgate of memory opened wide. All the things Eric had been trying to forget came back in one powerful, clarifying instant. Good and bad. Ali was composed of both, but he’d loved every part of her. She was both the overachiever

and the scared teen looking for a safe place to land.

He'd wanted to give her that place. He'd sensed without knowing the particulars that her home life wasn't great. She'd never talked about it and had always hated going home in the evening. She'd stayed out as late as possible every night, holding on for seconds past when she should've been rushing in the door.

At first, he'd fooled himself into thinking she just wanted to spend those minutes with him. She had, but that wasn't the root of what had been going on. She wouldn't talk, and he'd never pushed. Caregiving was never a natural tendency for him, and she'd made it clear that the home part of her life was off-limits. Now she'd mentioned her uncle and how awful he'd been. If only he'd known that then. He might have tried harder to be the support she'd needed, even though that concept would've been very new to him.

For her, he'd have learned. But they had both been too young to ever think that far ahead.

They both settled in close to each other and ate, talking through the past even though they'd agreed not to look back. By stating that he didn't hold it against her, it opened her up. And him, to be honest. He'd have to thank Dr. Willis next time he went into the clinic.

They finished, and Ali gathered the plates off the table and headed for his sink. He'd joked that it was about the size of a gallon of ice cream. Washing anything larger than an eight-ounce cup was a trial. "Don't worry about that. I'll manage," he said.

She glanced over her shoulder and raised a brow. "And how are you going to do that without getting your cast wet? It's like ten dishes. I can manage." She rolled up her sleeves and went to work.

He sat on the sofa and let his head fall back against it. Today had been a test for him in more ways than just the dishes. Asking Terrell to take on so much when he wasn't used to being asked to do any of it had been stressful on both of them. But, true to his promise, Terrell had come through in every way. He'd even learned how to muck out a stall or ten—and claimed he didn't even mind it. If he'd been lying, Eric didn't want to know.

Eric heard the dishes clinking together and then the sound of metal pans being washed. Ali would be done shortly, and then he wasn't sure what to do. Kissing was supposed to come at the end of a date, but they'd never done anything according to order or a proper plan. But how did he finish the evening when the fireworks had come at the start?

He closed his eyes and dared to imagine what life would look like if she were here all the time, then shook the thought from his head. This should be a good day. He wasn't going to ruin it with his own negative thinking. Ali was meant for the city, she'd said as much. She was a city girl through and through. She might be able to find work in Cheyenne, but even then she'd be an hour away. Cheyenne also wasn't nearly as "city" as Ali was used to.

"What's got you so pensive?" She lowered gently onto the sofa next to him.

"Things for future me to worry about. This-moment me is really glad you agreed to come over." He tried to smile and get back enjoying his time with her. There might never be another like it.

"I'm glad I did too. I am sorry about your horse though. If I had only seen that bird a little quicker..."

He resisted touching her for mere seconds, then thought better of it and rested his hand on her leg. Her muscles tightened under his touch. "You did your best. I

certainly couldn't have been behind the wheel. Without you, I wouldn't have known where to look for Skyfall. We don't have much information, but it's something." And he tried not to think about how long the day had been without any word from the police or Dr. Willis.

"I should get back to my place and let you rest. Would it help if I went over to Junior's and got Terrell?"

Eric didn't want to bother the boy when he was probably comfortable at Juniors, plus Gabby loved to mother the boy. Eric could do everything he needed to with a little extra work. For some things, he would never ask for help. Getting dressed and using the bathroom with jeans had been a challenge, but he would overcome. He was too stubborn not to.

A text came through on his phone from Dr. Willis asking if he had survived.

He laughed as he quickly typed out that he might be sprouting a tail, but other than that he was fine. John sent a laughing emoji, then his phone went silent. "I think I'd be a very bad host if I didn't walk you home. Especially with all the trouble we've been having lately. I know you can take care of yourself and you probably don't need an injured cowboy traipsing after you, but would you allow me?"

She laughed as she stood. "I'd like that. But I didn't see any trees between here and my place. I guess you'll have to kiss me goodnight out in the open." She headed for the door, unaware of what her words did to him.

His heart stuttered along, then raced like Secretariat. He hadn't thought about women since she'd left. Finding a relationship was the last thing on a never-ending list of things to do, meaning it was never really there at all. What if he got the whole mess wrong again?

But what if he got it right?

He headed for the door and held it open for her. They both went out into the breezy night. The moon was full, and wispy clouds slid across the sky. He offered his good arm, and Ali took it. They walked side by side for a few feet, then she stopped and took a deep breath.

“Eric, tonight has been what I hoped for when I came to Wayside. All joking aside, thank you.”

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He slipped his hand around her slender waist and tugged her close. Saying “you’re welcome” seemed so silly compared to what he really felt inside. He was bending to show her how he felt instead, when he heard a car revved in the distance.

She gripped his arm and looked all around. “What’s that?”

Sound traveled far and could be disorienting down in the little valley where Wayside was situated, but this felt very close. “I don’t know.” He reached for his phone as an urgent text came through. “Connor says the gang members are back. I guess they must have thought they could get through if the guy working security couldn’t see their faces.”

An engine gunned, then metal crunched. “Are they trying to break through the gate?” She gripped his arm harder.

“I don’t know. I want you to go to Junior’s house. Stay there with Gabby and Terrell. Do not leave until I come get you. I’ve got to get the other boys into hiding.”

Ali stopped him with a whirlwind of a kiss, then raced off toward Junior’s house. He turned to get his bearings as he heard the car crash against the gate again, then it roared as the engine got louder.

They’d made it through the security gate, and Eric had seconds to warn Big E and Jayzon to take cover.

ChapterFifteen

Ali banged on Junior's door once before it swung open. His wife Gabby stood there, her face pale. "Junior already headed up to the main house."

"Can I come in?" She hoped Gabby would understand that after having a gun pointed at her by these same people, she didn't want to be alone in her house. Especially since they knew which house was hers and they seemed to want to get on the property badly.

"Of course." Gabby tugged her inside and closed the door.

Ali hadn't realized when they'd sat together at the dining room table that Gabby was about a foot shorter than she was. She had rounded cheeks and narrow eyes that were even narrower when she was worried. "I don't know what to do. I feel helpless," Gabby said. She shoved aside the curtain in the front window, but all that showed was the row of cabins in front of them.

"Eric is going to check it out." Ali slowly lowered into a chair and fought the roiling in her stomach. Eric, the one with only one good arm right now. Eric, the one she'd kissed just minutes before.

"I hope Connor gets everyone." Gabby sat in the nearest chair with an exasperated huff. "I hate not knowing what's going on."

"Where's Terrell?" Ali hadn't seen him since she'd arrived, and he didn't usually hide from her.

"Terrell?" Gabby called over her shoulder, raising her voice only a little to be heard in the back of the cabin.

There was no answer. "Terrell?" she said a little louder.

Ali stood and headed down the hall. She may not have been invited to do so, but she felt like watching the boy was part of the job Eric had entrusted her to do when he'd told her to come to this cabin. She pushed open the first door which should be a smaller bedroom if this cabin were like all the others. The room was empty with just a made bed, a dresser, and a television. The window curtain billowed in the breeze.

“Oh no...”

* * *

Eric's arm jarred with each step, but he pressed on. After his Army training, he was a somewhat ambidextrous shot, but not nearly as accurate as with his left. Unfortunately, his left arm was out of commission. As he rushed past the parking lot, the rumble of the coming car ground to a halt.

Shots broke the night, and Eric flung himself to the ground. There was no cover near him other than the darkness. As the shooting continued, the sound of scraping against the ground came closer. Eric tried to glance over his shoulder, but all he could see were the distant lights of the main house, scattered lights from the cabins, and one large light above the main barn.

Had they broken in from multiple points? He froze, trying to hear everything around him.

“Eric? Is that you?” Terrell's muffled voice came from a few feet behind him.

“Terrell? What are you doing out here? They are coming for you!” How had he managed to get out of the cabin when Eric had told Ali to keep an eye on him?

“I escaped out the window. I heard them breaking through the gate and had to come help you.” He belly crawled until he came up alongside Eric. “So, what do we do

now?”

He wanted to grab Terrell’s arm and race him back to the safety of Junior’s cabin. “Avoid being seen,” Eric answered, then listened for any of the other Wayside men to come or send word about what they could see.

Lights from a nearby ATV flashed on, then the engine started. Eric scrambled to get off the road and get Terrell away before they were exposed by the light. He squinted, focusing on the driver to figure out who it was. From the body shape, tall and broad, he guessed the driver was Connor.

Terrell muttered, “I heard Junior talking to the other two while I was sneaking by. They are all still in their cabin. Not sure if Junior was going to stay with them or just trust them to stay put.”

Eric gripped Terrell’s arm to get his attention. “I doubt he would blindly trust them. Even those who are showing they can be trusted didn’t follow orders tonight.”

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The faint glow from the security lights shone off the perspiration on Terrell's forehead, or Eric wouldn't have seen him shaking it. "You showed me all day that you needed my help. Did you think I was going to let the only guy who ever saw anything in me get shot?"

He appreciated Terrell's worry but his lack of fear might get them both injured or worse. "I'm not going to get shot." Though he couldn't really say that for certain. Eric prayed none of the other men, horses, or dogs had been shot.

All of a sudden, the shooting came to a stop, and Connor's voice came from just over the next rise. "Freeze. I'm placing you under citizen's arrest for committing assault with a deadly weapon in my presence."

Eric strained to hear. With Terrell at his side, he couldn't rush in and help Connor as he normally would. He couldn't trust Terrell to stay back. He'd already proven he wouldn't. Another ATV roared to life behind Eric. He slowly pushed to his feet as Sam rode by toward Connor.

"We should go and make sure they have everything under control." Terrell started to stand to follow Sam.

Eric gripped his arm, stopping him. "You are not going anywhere near that car. They were just shooting. They've proven that they have the intent to kill you. Why would you want to just walk out in front of them?"

"I just wanted to help."

Offering assistance was a positive step, and Eric didn't want to crush that, but this wasn't a situation where he wanted Terrell to put himself out there. "I need you where I know you won't get shot tonight. I appreciate your help, but this isn't something I want you to deal with. This is what I was hoping to keep you from having to deal with."

Terrell shrugged as he threw one last glance toward the noise over the hill. "Either I do what's right all the time or none of the time. I hate playing it safe."

Sam came back over the rise on foot with both Big E and Jayzon. Eric stopped him when they got close enough so he didn't have to yell. "What's going on? I thought they were in their cabin."

Sam gripped each boy above the elbow. "Junior caught me as I was headed this way and told me he was headed back to his cabin to look for the boys because they were missing. He thought this might have been a diversion to get everyone busy so they could go after Terrell." Sam glanced over at Terrell. "Now I wonder if this wasn't planned in advance."

Terrell shook his head. "I didn't do anything. I was only out here to help Eric."

Eric held up a hand to stop him. "But can you see how this looks bad? You didn't follow orders and now—innocent or not—you look guilty even for trying to help because you're all out here when you shouldn't be."

Big E and Jayzon tugged against Sam. "We didn't do anything wrong. We just wanted to see our brothers."

Red and blue lights sliced through the night, and Big E tugged harder against Sam's hold. "We need to get back to our cabin, or they'll think we had something to do with this."

“Didn’t you?” Sam waited. “It seems awfully suspicious that you never leave your cabin, but as soon as someone breaks in, all of a sudden you were both out for a late-night walk.”

“You can’t prove anything,” Jayzon muttered. “We never even got close to the car.”

Doors slammed and voices rose in the distance.

Sam shuffled the boys toward their cabin, and Eric and Terrell followed. Eric let the others get far enough ahead that they couldn’t hear him, but still lowered his voice. “When the police talk to those boys, will their story match yours? If it comes out that you arranged for them to be here, Connor will consider that your last straw. He’s already keeping you here to try to get you to see the light when he was supposed to send you back at the first sign of trouble. You don’t believe it, but Connor is your ally. He wants to see you succeed. But if you don’t even try, there’s only so much he can do.”

Terrell sighed at Eric’s side, and he wondered what the boy was thinking. They’d worked together so well all day, but one day wasn’t enough to know Terrell well. He wanted to trust the boy and work with him, but sneaking out at the same time the other two boys had made him look guilty of trying to meet up with the gang members.

Eric and Sam followed Big E and Jayzon into their cabin. The rooms were messy, but Eric first noticed a sweet, almost chemical smell in the room more than the disorder. Lacy was adamant about using natural cleaners, so he wasn’t smelling anything used to clean the rooms. With the disorder, he couldn’t be smelling a cleaning agent.

He headed for the first bag on the floor and rifled through the disordered contents.

“Hey! You can’t just go through my stuff.” Big E reached for the bag.

Eric tugged free a homemade meth bowl. The room went silent as everyone stared at what Eric had found. “Where did you get it?” Because Big E couldn’t have had it when they’d left the juvenile detention center accompanied by one of the officers. They hadn’t left Wayside and hadn’t received any packages that Eric knew about. So, they had to have gotten it some other way.

“What about privacy?” Big E asked, his chin thrust out at a stubborn angle.

“You have no guarantee of privacy here any more than you had there. Coming to Wayside wasn’t a get-out-of-jail-free card. It was a chance to show the warden that you deserved a second chance.” Eric headed for the next bag. “Am I going to find more?”

All three boys were silent for a moment. Finally, Jayzon glared at Terrell. “Is he?”

Terrell backed away a step. “This isn’t my room anymore.”

“If our stuff gets checked, your stuff should too.”

Eric glanced at Terrell, and his gut twisted at the guilty look on the boy’s face.

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“I didn’t use it. But you’ll find one in my bag. I didn’t want to say no when Big E gave it to me. I wanted him to treat me like one of the guys.” He hung his head. “I should’ve thrown it away, but I was worried you’d find it and ask me about it, so I just left it in my bag.”

“Just a pipe, or meth too?” Sam asked.

Terrell crossed his arms and didn’t answer.

Eric could confirm that Terrell hadn’t done anything in the day it had been since he’d moved in with Eric. But he couldn’t swear that Terrell hadn’t before that. No one could. “We’ll examine what we find. This one has obviously been used.” He handed it to Sam, then reached for the other bag on the floor.

It didn’t take him long to find a similar device in Jayzon’s bag. “If you want to stay here, you’ll have to be honest with us. How did you get it?”

Connor texted the group, asking where everyone was and if they were all right. Eric let Sam continue questioning the boys while he answered that they were all in the boys’ cabin and what they were dealing with. Connor replied that he’d be there shortly.

Eric directed everyone out into the living room area and had them all take a seat. “Connor is going to be here in a few minutes, meaning the police are almost finished taking your friends into custody. This won’t be a secret for long.” Eric indicated the pipes laying on the counter. “This is your last chance to tell us honestly what happened.”

Eric hoped Terrell would come clean and tell the whole story. He wanted to believe that Terrell wanted to do what was right and would want to lessen the damage by coming forward with what had happened.

Terrell shifted in his seat and made a noise in his throat, then cleared it.

“Don’t you dare.” Jayzon stood. “My brother will hunt you down. I will hunt you down if he doesn’t.”

Terrell raised his chin slightly in a show of defiance. “I’m not living scared anymore. If I die tomorrow or not, I’m not going to live for what other people think of me anymore.” He swiped at his nose. “They were in Big E’s bag when we left. He had a pouch sewn in the side that was hidden. Jayzon made us all late that morning by being a jerk to the guy who was supposed to take us to the bus. Since we were so late, they didn’t check the bags carefully like they usually would’ve.”

“And what was the goal with them?” There was no one to sell drugs to around here, but they probably hadn’t known that when they’d left.

“Recreation is the word you’d probably use.” Terrell took a deep breath. “I know all this makes it look like I’ve done everything they have, that I’m still trying to be like them. I’m not.”

Someone knocked on the front door, then opened it. Connor came inside, his face a hard mask. “Those boys are off to jail. They won’t be coming around here anymore. I have Junior riding through the pasture with Edwyn to make sure none of the horses got shot.”

Terrell seemed to go slightly pale. “They shot at the horses?”

Connor gave a quick nod. “I don’t know what to do at this point. I feel like we’ve

given all of your chances to do what's right and none of you seem to want it."

"I do." Terrell looked at Connor, his eye steady.

Big E and Jayzon both shook their heads and made exasperated noises.

"We should get Brendon in on this conversation." Eric wanted to prevent a strictly emotional response. Emotions were great, but if he'd learned anything from the last week with Ali, it was that an emotional response wasn't always the best one.

Connor nodded. "Take those up to the house." He pointed at the bowls. "You two will be moving in with Sam in his spare room. I probably should've done that from the start whether Micha wanted it that way or not. If you give Sam so much as a hint of trouble, I'll further split you up. Understood?"

Both boys mumbled agreement.

"Good. Get what you need for the night. We are not coming back to this cabin or cleaning anything until one of us can be here and inspect what you're doing. But you will be cleaning it." He turned on his heel and headed for the door. "Don't make me regret giving you one more chance."

* * *

Brendon looked tired the next morning when everyone filed into his office. With the addition of the boys, they all barely fit, though the room was large. Eric had talked to Terrell the evening before and was fairly confident the boy was telling the truth. He still wanted Terrell to get the chance the others didn't seem to care about.

Anxious noise filled the room as Brendon tapped his pen on his huge desk calendar, then glanced over at Connor. A look passed between them that made Eric tense for a

moment. Something was wrong between Connor and Brendon, but Eric hadn't seen any other visible issues.

"This morning, I spoke to the warden at the juvenile detention center where the boys originally came from," Brendon began. He took a deep breath, then opened a file. Brendon always used paper files instead of computer ones. "All three of these boys would be considered at risk. There are no fathers in any of their homes. They have direct family ties to known criminals. They've struggled with school, both academically and with truancy."

Connor stood and strode to the window. "What are you getting at, Brendon?"

"That we aren't looking at this situation from their eyes. They may never have had the exact thought, but the gang offers them structure and hierarchy and rules, things young people hate but actually need and crave."

Connor tipped his head slightly, hiding his face. "So, we shouldn't call the police? I have never, ever, allowed drugs on the premises. I don't plan to start now." Connor's spine was stiff and unyielding. "I feel like we keep giving one more last chance and the last chances are being ignored."

Eric had heard Lacy had not wanted the boys to come to Wayside. She'd wanted to continue working as they always had, but increase their connection with the local police to help keep their guests safe. He wondered if Connor now agreed with her.

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“One more chance. No more options.” Brendon tapped the folder again. “I can see your pasts as a reason to give leeway, but at some point it’s your choice to continue acting as you have. From this moment on, when you have a session scheduled with me, you’ll attend. When you have a riding session, you’ll go. If you’re expected in the dining room, you’ll be there.”

Connor followed Brendon’s lead. “You’ll keep your cabin clean, and that will start now. I’ll be joining you this morning to make sure you do a good job.”

“What about him?” Big E pointed his thumb at Terrell. “He’s guilty too.”

“I looked through his belongings last night, and everything he shouldn’t have was given to Connor. All of it will be turned over to the police if we have to call them. Those charges will be added on to whatever sentence you already had,” Eric said.

Big E shook his head. “Just like jail.”

Terrell grinned. “Jail doesn’t have horses.” He got up and headed for the door. “This time, no one is tricking me into doing something I don’t want. If you two want to waste your life, go ahead. I’m going to have a future.”

Eric watched him leave and waited for the others, hoping they would see the light. Connor had given them more than enough chances. Big E crossed his arms. “I know how this works. If I give you information, then I get out early. What if I give the cops some information? Can we get out of here then?”

Eric wanted information, especially if they knew something about Skyfall, but he

suspected they were just fishing for a guarantee they could leave. Connor glanced over his shoulder the bright light against the side of his face making the other appear dark and shadowed. “This isn’t like anywhere you’ve ever been before, and you’ve exhausted my ability to trust you.”

Big E swung his gaze to Eric and smirked. “Too bad for you.”

ChapterSixteen

The laptop sitting on Ali’s bed was like a billboard drawing her eye. She hadn’t worked much since she’d arrived at Wayside other than meeting with Lacy about what Cole might want. Turned out, Cole, like so many other military men she knew, kept what he wanted close to the vest. No one seemed to know for sure if he planned to take back his old name or just register the new name change under his old identification information.

She headed for her computer to check in as her phone rang.Saved by the bell...She snorted. Not many people at this ranch would even get that reference, not only to the show, but that it was even a phrase before then. The realization made her feel old. What had she done with her life?I’ve served people. That means something...

“Hello?” she silenced her invasive thoughts by pressing the speaker phone icon so she didn’t have to hold her phone.

“Namaste,” Amelia, the only other JAG she spoke to outside of work, replied.

Ali bit her lip. Work calling? She was supposed to have had three weeks basically as a vacation, though she’d said she’d check her emails more than she had been. “Is something wrong?”

“Perhaps this would be better explained over a video chat. I’ve sent you a link. Check

your email.” Amelia’s curt reply then disconnect left Ali a little shaken. Was her position in jeopardy? She’d arranged to be away ahead of time, not that the office always knew when a big case would come in. Surely they wouldn’t fire her for taking a scheduled vacation.

She logged into her laptop and quickly opened her email. Splattered across the top were messages with red exclamation marks. There were a half-dozen important messages she’d missed because she’d needed the time off more than she’d realized. “Oh no...” She clenched down on her lip again.

Words like “please answer” and “urgent” jumped off the page from the last two days. She went to the top email from Amelia and opened it. The link for the video call was the only thing in it. She pressed the link, and the web application opened up, then started.

As soon as Ali connected, she jumped right in. “Amelia, I’m so sorry I didn’t check my messages. I was on vacation and assumed everything important was handled.”

Amelia slowly nodded, closing her eyes. “Most of what has come in was taken care of easily. However, a case came in about four days ago that needs your specific expertise. No one else could possibly do it. Worse, the client...”

Ali held her breath. Amelia was known for being meticulous and a little cold, and, as far as business was concerned, unflappable. So, why was she hesitating now? “What is it? I can take it.”

“Gene Forsyth.” Amelia’s dark eyes looked at her through the screen. “You see now why a video chat is easier?”

With a single name, Amelia had knocked the wind right out of Ali. Gene had been her husband’s best friend. He’d helped Frank cheat on her, had sat on the witness

stand against her during the divorce, and had made her life after the divorce almost as miserable as her childhood before marriage.

“I can’t do it. I can’t help him. No matter what the issue is. There’s too much past there. Someone else in the office can handle it. Hire someone else if you have to.” Especially because she wasn’t a criminal lawyer. She handled paperwork cases. They mattered. They helped families more than the military men themselves.

“Someone on base stole his identity and not only did a lot of damage to his credit, they somehow managed to get hold of his security clearance. There was a massive breach. This is huge. If this case gets out... Well, it would be very bad all around. This might go all the way up to the president.”

All the more reason for her to avoid it, though before now she would’ve fought to be assigned to a huge case that would get her name out there. “I’m not a criminal attorney. That’s what you need right now.” Anyone but her. “Why do you feel I would be good for this case when I don’t have the credentials to take this on?”

Amelia ignored her question like it wasn’t worth asking. “There are investigators trying to find the group that did this. We’re certain it was a group because of the scope of the damage. His credentials were used to gain access to information he never should’ve had. National security information. We need to prove he didn’t request the information, that he had no reason to want it.”

Knowing Gene and his willingness to bend the truth, she couldn’t be sure he didn’t. “Are you certain he’s innocent?”

“Does it matter?” Amelia tilted her head. “When have we ever asked if someone was guilty or not? That’s not for us to decide. I haven’t seen any paperwork come in for the case you are there to work on, and a simple name change isn’t as important as this. You know I don’t like to pull rank on you, and I know this isn’t just work, you

applied for leave. But... We need you to cut it short and come back. The whole office will be putting time in on this case.”

“I need time to decide.” Every case had been easy to justify in the past. Whether she thought her client had done anything wrong or not, she’d just imagined what she would do if it were her uncle who’d done whatever deed had landed those people in her office. In this case, Gene was too close to acting like her uncle for her to be able to defend him.

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“You’ve already had two days since I sent the first email. How much more time do you need? This is your job. What’s gotten into you? You’ve never left work undone before. You’ve never resisted taking on clients.” Amelia’s brow furrowed.

She was looking at things differently. She had to. All at once, the courtroom seemed just as foreign as Wayside Ranch had and Wayside seemed much more welcoming. “Because this is the man who made me move. My ex wasn’t even as derogatory and awful as Gene was.” And he’d turned so many men and their wives against her. All because he was trusted and she was just a lawyer. And a woman lawyer, at that.

“I know that’s hard. But you can’t refuse a case that’s been handed to you. You know what that means.”

Her nerves bristled. “Of course I can refuse. I have too much of a past with this man. I cannot defend him the way his case needs. Someone else will have to do it.”

Amelia slowly shook her head. “You know that we take cases we are assigned. It was already determined that, despite the connection to your past, you are the best person for the case. I can argue another week for you. That’s it. You’d better be back here in one week, or you may not have an office to return to. I’m not kidding when I say this is huge. You might not want to defend this guy, but he could unwittingly make a name for you like you never dreamed. Wouldn’t that be the icing on your cake, for the man who forced you to leave be the one who makes a name for you as the best and brightest of JAG?”

A week ago, that would’ve thrilled her. There wouldn’t have been a question. She’d have leaped in her car and rushed home. She would’ve jumped at the chance to make

her name bigger, making her rates rise and earning more money per hour billed. But now she had to choose between staying and seeing what could happen between her and Eric or keeping her career. One was the security blanket she'd always clung to; the other was the dream she'd wished for.

"I'll let you know before the week is up."

"I can see by the look on your face that you are actually considering not returning. What in the name of all that is good is making you hesitate? You can't like ranch life that much. Not you. So, what?"

Ranch life didn't appeal to her. At all. That was good to remember. Eric was a fixture of Wayside Ranch and would never leave, and she didn't necessarily want to stay. "I have to think about this. Not just for my future, but for my mental health. Notoriety does nothing for me if I'm too drained to do anything about it."

"Turn your feelings off. This job isn't about feelings, history, right or wrong. You know that. Snap out of this. You cannot afford to let any of those things distract you from the goal."

Ali's screen blurred as she focused on her thoughts more than Amelia. On the surface, her friend was right. That's how lawyers got the job done every day. They were experts at compartmentalizing, military lawyers even more than others. But this would test her.

"I can't just shut this off. Not without some mental preparation. So, I'll let you know as soon as I've made a decision."

"So be it." Amelia stopped the video call before Ali could say goodbye.

Ali stared at the black screen but saw nothing. Her mind swirled with a knot of

memories, both from growing up unwanted, then becoming unwanted through divorce. Being an advocate for others had always steadied her. She could draw on that when she got down. Life had been hard, but she'd made it and become successful.

Now all that success tasted like a bitter pill. If she didn't go back and pretend this case was just like any other, she'd probably lose her position. Even if she didn't lose it outright, she'd lose the trust the rest of the office had in her abilities. Next time, they'd find someone else to give the tough case.

If she didn't go back, she had nothing. Wayside was temporary. Staying here was a short respite to her busy life. It couldn't ever be more than that. Her lips tingled with the memory of Eric's kiss. They weren't close enough to start anything, but they'd opened a door. A door that she would close firmly if she went back early.

Life was never easy. Every stage of her existence had taught her. She'd had hardships she'd had to overcome with her own will and power. When could she just rest and be...happy? Lacy's question played through her head again. Was she happy? Could she sit alone and just be pleased with life?

Standing, she went to the window and held the lacy curtain out of the way. Green rolling hills spread out her front window beyond the parking area where her red car waited for her. The little sporty car looked downright silly in a parking lot full of sedans and dusty pickup trucks. She'd have to have it towed to a repair shop before she drove it again.

Letting the curtain fall, she closed her eyes. She wasn't foolish. Feeling that way made her angry. She liked to be the most knowledgeable and fashionable no matter where she was, but out here she didn't feel like she could be either. Even trying had shown how out-of-place she was. It hadn't been until she relaxed that she'd begun to feel at home here.

Her skillset was useless here. What did she know about human trafficking? Other than that it was a global issue of epidemic proportions...nothing. Would a lawyer even be able to offer anything to people who had suffered? Even if victims were called to testify against their traffickers, they wouldn't need a lawyer of their own. She might be able to counsel them on what would happen, but there was little else of value she could offer.

Her computer screen went to sleep, and the processor silenced, drawing her attention back to it. She'd lived more than a whole week without doing much with the thing. She had money saved, maybe even enough to move somewhere new. She hit the enter key, and the screen woke up.

With quick keystrokes, she looked at all the available houses online within an hour radius of Piper's Ridge. There were a handful of places. Two were small homes in town that appeared to have been built in the fifties, and all the others were ranches or rural properties. None of them interested her.

Cheyenne was an hour away, but even that looked more rural than what she would consider. Maybe Wyoming just wasn't the state for her. Her phone buzzed, interrupting her thoughts. She tugged it from her purse hanging on the back of her chair and flopped it on the table.

Amelia's text stared at her for a few seconds before disappearing.

I refuse to believe you're going to give up all you've worked for over Frank. He wins if you don't take this case. Prove to him you're stronger than this. You've got this.

She wanted to believe that. A week ago, that would've been all the pep talk needed. Actually, she wouldn't have even needed that. She wouldn't have let anything stand in her way. This was a job, and that made it the most important thing in her life.

Maybe...just maybe...it was time to make something else important.

* * *

Eric led allthree boys along the fence toward the horses, feeling like this was the biggest mistake he'd ever made at Wayside. The horses were his job, his to care for, his to keep safe. He'd already lost the one that meant the most to him, and there hadn't been a single report since the theft.

Terrell walked at his side, silent for a change. Eric wasn't complaining. Talking to the boys all morning about rider safety and what they would be doing had sapped his store of words for the day. Unfortunately for him, he'd have to train them again, and he knew it. There wasn't a rider who came to Wayside who didn't need to go over rules and safety more than once.

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Terrell headed for his horse, and the other two boys stood near the door waiting for Eric to tell them what to do. Eric stepped forward and picked out a horse for each of them, then showed them how to saddle each one. Since he couldn't do it for them, they had to learn from what he said.

Once the saddles were on securely, Terrell showed them both how to mount their horses. Since this was their first day and Terrell had only been out a few times, they'd decided to stay in the corral, keeping their ride to circles.

Eric wanted to be riding with them, but with his arm like it was and with his personal mount missing, he didn't want to risk greater injury. Lacy came from the house and stood at his side. "Afternoon."

He nodded, keeping an eye on the boys. "It is that."

"I didn't realize Connor would want them out here so quickly. It's good to see them making use of what we have to offer." She leaned on the rail next to him.

He shrugged a shoulder, hating that two of the three boys hadn't really been given a choice. With their regular clients, guests were given the chance to warm up to the horses slowly, then choose if they wanted to ride or not. If they didn't ever connect with the horses, they were given the chance to work with the dogs, but the dogs always came second since some former guests had been guarded by dogs. Sam had been forced to keep the dogs far away for the first few months those guests had lived at Wayside until they could slowly acclimate to the sight of them.

All of those things helped him feel every day that he was doing good in the world. He

could look back and think about the various people he'd helped. While none of that made him a better person, he had given his gifts to the Kingdom of God. He'd helped literal widows and orphans.

He couldn't think of a single place in the Bible that said to give criminals a second chance. The only place he could think that was close was in Luke where he was told to proclaim the Word to set the captives free. Somehow that verse didn't seem like it applied in this case.

God was all about second—and third and fourth—chances, but in every case, God saved those who wanted to be saved. While he wants people to follow, He isn't going to trick anyone. Eric glanced at the sky, hoping for insight. Just then, sunlight glinted off the printing on Terrell's shirt, momentarily blinding Eric.

He wanted to chuckle at God's head smack. He needed it. He silently thanked God for the opportunity to help one boy. Maybe the other two would never want to get out of the place they were stuck. Maybe he'd read about them in the paper someday, though he hoped not. But sacrifice was worth it, even if only one of the boys was saved.

"Ali and I got off on the wrong foot. I want to make it up to her. Any idea how?" Lacy said, breaking into his thoughts.

"You want to do something for Ali?" He hadn't thought about how alone she probably was out here while he was busy. "Honestly, I think Connor owes her more than you do. He's the one who asked her to stay out here for three weeks knowing Cole was going to be gone."

Lacy snorted. "Connor does what he thinks is right. I can't say that I always agree with him." She frowned as she stared at the three riders.

Eric lowered his voice. "I know you were against this from the start, but I'm glad they're here." Even though he'd been frustrated just a few minutes before. Stating what pleased him out loud helped him feel more in control. "We're making a difference for at least one and planting seeds for the others. No one has ever taken an interest in him before."

Lacy nodded slightly. "I hope he learns enough before the other two ruin it. Connor has to call the police if they do anything else. If he doesn't, I will. Wayside has a purpose, and this isn't it."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Shopping. She loves shopping at expensive places, boutiques and things. I wouldn't even know where to begin. Maybe you do."

Lacy glanced down at her frayed flannel over a tank top, jeans that had a few years on them, and scuffed boots. "Boutique isn't even in my vocabulary, but I think I can find a place or two. There's coffee and a couple places that might interest her in Cheyenne. At least, I hope they will. Spending two hours in the car with her might get interesting."

Eric leaned back, holding on to the rail with one hand. "She likes the things she likes because she grew up without anything. The comforts you and I turn our nose up at and call frivolous, she finds happiness in them. I was never able to reach her heart for Jesus, but I tried. She's filling that hole in her heart with things."

"I see." Lacy bowed her head, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hat brim. "That actually makes a lot of sense and helps me approach this differently." She touched her hat. "Pray for me."

He chuckled, knowing Lacy and Ali were as different as two women could be. "You know I will be."

He watched her head toward Ali's cabin and did just as he promised: he prayed for both women. As he turned back to the boys, he caught sight of Terrell grinning from ear to ear as he showed Big E how to use the reins to get the horse to follow commands.

With just a little encouragement, Terrell didn't look at Big E as a leader anymore. He'd stepped into the role himself and wasn't willing to let the bigger boy bully him. Big E was listening and trying to do what Terrell said, then all three boys would laugh as the horse did something completely different from what they'd wanted.

Laughter. That was something he hadn't thought he'd hear from this trio. "Thank you, Jesus." Eric let a grin slide over his face. Who couldn't use a little unexpected laughter?

ChapterSeventeen

Ali stuffed her computer back in her bag, determining that having it out was affecting her ability to decide what to do. Someone knocked on her cabin door, and she rushed to answer it, freezing as soon as she opened it.

Lacy hadn't liked her, which had made Ali avoid her. Ali had avoided almost everyone except Eric, since he was her main concern aside from Cole. "Lacy, hello." She tried not to sound too disappointed. Eric hadn't been around all day, but he had work to do with the boys. That was his job.

"Are you busy?" Lacy shifted her weight from one dusty-booted foot to the other.

Ali cringed at the idea of those dusty boots walking across the clean floors, but she opened her door to let Lacy in anyway. "I've got time. What's up?"

Lacy came in and looked around, then sighed. "It's always interesting to me how

every cabin is the same, but each feels differently after people have stayed in one for a few days. The colors are the same, fabrics the same, but I can tell this one is yours.”

“I didn’t change anything. I promise.” Why did everything out of Lacy’s mouth feel like an attack?

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“I know.” Lacy smiled. “Cute top, by the way.” She made an offhand gesture at Ali’s cotton designer tee.

“Thanks.” Ali hoped her face didn’t show her confusion. “Was there something you needed from me?”

Lacy glanced around the room again and crossed her arms. “Look, I know we may never be besties. I know you and I are very different, but I shouldn’t have let that determine how I treated you and what I said. I can have a short fuse sometimes and I’m completely unequipped to fake anything. I’m sorry.”

Ali shrugged, still not sure what she should say. “It’s fine. You are who you are, and I am who I am. It’s not like we’ll be sharing emails after I leave.” She laughed, hoping she hadn’t gone too far.

“Maybe.” Lacy glanced behind her.

In the short times Ali had been with Lacy, she’d gotten the impression that Lacy was always in control in every way, very much like Ali herself. She knew what to say and how to manage anything that came at her. But Ali was different than Lacy expected, and that made Lacy uncomfortable.

“You don’t have to stay. I don’t hold your words against you,” Ali said.

Lacy laughed. “Good. Look, there are a few cute places in Cheyenne that I thought you might like. After more than a week of being away from the big city, you probably need to breathe some car fumes or have your view blocked by some tall buildings.”

Lacy laughed again, letting Ali know she was teasing.

Ali couldn't stop herself from joining. The scenario was so absurd. "I always did like stifling architecture."

"Well, then grab your purse. We'll go look at the best 'stifling architecture' Wyoming has to offer within an hour of Piper's Ridge." Lacy headed for the door.

"Are you serious?" Ali asked. Lacy wanted to be confined to a car with Ali for a few hours?

"I don't really joke around." Lacy turned the knob and opened the door. "You getting your purse, or am I going alone?"

"Nope, give me thirty seconds." Ali ran for the kitchen chair holding her purse, shoved her phone inside, then rushed for the door. She slipped on some comfortable sandals and followed Lacy out the door.

What in the world could she talk about for an hour-long drive with a woman who wouldn't like anything she'd done in her life? Then again, until the case with Gene, when had she ever backed down from a challenge?

* * *

Riding as a passenger in the car with Lacy was strange. Ali's life was full of independence and definitely sitting in the driver's seat. Learning to be independent of and from those who'd hurt her was a skill she'd honed to perfection. The passenger seat was oddly unsettling as they barreled down the freeway without any control from Ali.

"I never thought a lawyer would be so quiet." Lacy glanced over at her from the

driver's seat.

"I still don't know what to talk about." Which also left her unsettled. Her life was a series of orderly events. Nothing surprising. She could be at the top of her game if she knew what was expected of her every minute.

"Well, you won't need to talk when we're there." Lacy pulled into a parking spot along the street. Cheyenne didn't look like it should be as large as it was. It had a feel of age, like it had been there for over a century and just didn't like to adjust that much. The fronts of the buildings were brick, and some showed wear and crumbling facades while others looked bright and new.

"Is this what the whole town looks like?" Ali stepped from the car and slung her bag over her shoulder.

"This part. There's a newer part that might be closer to what you'd think Cheyenne would be like, but it doesn't have this." She waved to a pretty sign above the door: Cherry's Consignment.

Ali held in a flinch. Used clothes. Had people washed them before bringing them in for donation? Was she going to have to embarrass herself by being worried over touching anything? She wasn't OCD. Far from it. But she hated a mess and having things out of order. Order made situations easier.

Lacy headed for the door and held it open. "Come on in. My friend owns it, and she's just the sweetest."

Holding in her reservations, Ali headed inside the cool store. Racks of dresses and slacks speckled the floor in the front. About halfway through the store, long racks were marked with signs that said things like "casual shirts – small." The store smelled of roses, and everything looked orderly.

Ali took a moment to take it in and just breathe. The first thing that caught her eye was a shirt she already owned. How could a store out in the middle of nowhere have designer clothes?

“You shop here?” Ali didn’t mean to offend Lacy, but this didn’t seem like her vibe at all.

“I do. There’s a whole section in the back for jeans and flannel.”

A woman in Jimmy Choo shoes and a floral Oscar De La Renta dress that hit just below her knees headed their way. “Lacy! It’s been months.” She wrapped Lacy in a hug. “How are you?”

Ali had never had a friend like that, and the show of affection made her even more uncomfortable. Apparently, today was the day for feeling out of place. Maybe this whole month would be a lesson in what life should never look like.

Ali flipped through shirts as the two women caught up. She flicked through item after item she would never wear, but casualwear had never been something she’d invested in. Why bother? Her hand stalled over a pink structured tee with bright rhinestones in the shape of a cowboy hat. She picked it up and held it in front of her, catching a glimpse of her reflection in a nearby mirror.

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“Oh! That looks so good with your hair color. Blondes always manage to look good in pink. I wish I did.” The owner thrust out her hand. “I’m Kensie. I’m so glad you chose to come browse through my store today.”

“Thank you.” Ali wasn’t sure what else to say. She’d planned on putting the shirt back, but maybe one tee wouldn’t kill her.

“I have the perfect pair of capris to go with that.” Kensie shuffled in her tiny heels over to a far wall. “You’re a four, right?”

Heat burned up Ali’s neck. She’d never announced her size in a store. Not even an almost empty one.

“Never mind. I know you are.” Kensie shuffled back with a pure-white pair of designer capris and held them up for Ali’s inspection. “The white with the rhinestones? Perfection.”

“Sure.” Ali took the hanger and draped it over her arm. If she kept going this way, she’d have a wardrobe for the rest of her stay. Unless her stay was only a few more days. Then she’d have these clothes hanging in her closet for the rest of her life, reminding her of what she’d left behind. Again.

“Need some shoes too? Those sandals are cute, but I’ve got some strappy white flats that would accentuate your calves.”

She needed air, but shoes would do. “Uh, sure.”

Ali couldn't wear sandals in the courtroom, but maybe she needed clothes for days when she wasn't working. She could wear these things to the grocery store. "I think I need an outfit for riding horses too."

Lacy's jaw dropped open, and suddenly Ali felt the comfort of controlling the situation land on her shoulders again.

"You're going to ride?" Lacy tilted her head. "Maybe I had you all wrong."

"It's okay. A lot of people do." Probably because she was suddenly learning she didn't know herself.

Three bags of clothes, one of shoes, and a stop for coffee later, Ali and Lacy were on their way home. Ali's feet were sore from her new sandals, but her heart was full after talking with Lacy all day. This was what having girl friends was like. The car ride didn't seem quite as long on the way home, since they had more to talk about. Laughter came easily and often.

Ali laughed at something snarky Lacy said, then both went silent as they saw a horse standing in a field just off the road.

"Am I seeing things?" Ali pointed to the silvery horse. She'd only seen Eric's horse a few times, but it was so memorable. That had to be Skyfall.

"No, you're not." Lacy quickly flipped on her blinker to merge into the exit lane, then slammed on the brakes to catch an exit. "We're going to check out who that is."

Ali gripped the door as Lacy drove like a racecar driver up the exit and back into rural America. She couldn't believe how quickly the speed of the four-lane highway melted away to the reduced speed of a gravel road. "How do you know where to go?"

Lacy turned on the gravel road that ran parallel to the highway. “I don’t, but there weren’t many houses between that pasture and the exit. It can’t be far.”

If Ali were caught trespassing, that would make the decision for her as to returning to work or not. She had to keep a very high standard. When she’d been married to an alcoholic, she’d worried about anything he might do that would reflect poorly on her, which was why she always drove herself everywhere. Even if it meant driving separately.

Lacy parked the car on the side of the gravel road and got out. Ali jumped out and rushed around the front to meet Lacy at the driver’s side. Lacy was already headed toward the fence.

Ali chased after. “What are you doing? We should call the police. This is madness. We can’t do anything if that’s the right horse.”

Lacy’s brows dipped low. “Are you afraid? We aren’t going to do anything but look. If they didn’t want anyone to see Skyfall, they shouldn’t have put her out in the pasture for everyone to see.”

Without waiting to see if Ali was following, she headed down the driveway, keeping to the trees for cover. Ali followed but kept back. If she had to make a run for the car to get help, she would. If they were discovered, they wouldn’t be helping anyone. It might even hurt Eric or the case the police were building. What if whoever had Skyfall moved her because of them?

“We should call the police,” Ali said again between her teeth.

“We will, just keep up or go back to the car.” Lacy waved her away.

This was for Eric. That horse was his heart. His joy. If she could be a part of getting

that back for him, then she'd have done something good to make up for the bad. Following Lacy proved difficult in sandals compared to boots, but she managed as best she could.

When they reached the fence, Lacy gave a low whistle just like Eric did to call his horse. Skyfall's ears perked up, and she looked around, slowly heading to the sound. Since Lacy and Ali hid behind trees so they weren't out in the open, Skyfall seemed confused, holding back from the fence.

"I don't see anyone. Are there any markings on the horse that we could tell Eric so he would know for sure this is his horse?" Ali asked.

"Have you looked at that horse? Everything about her is unique. From her silvery coat to that lightning bolt down her forelock, she's special." Lacy slowly ducked away from the tree and headed for the fence. "I'm here for you, girl. We'll get someone here right away to come get you. Are they treating you well?" She rubbed the horse's neck and patted her flank.

Ali had just gotten up the nerve to leave the safety of the tree when a man's voice came from the distant barn. "Who are you? What are you doing with my horse?"

Lacy turned around and yelled as she took off, “Run!”

* * *

After a long day and a far-too-short supper where Eric didn’t see Ali, he headed to Connor’s office for their evening meeting. He settled into his usual chair and waited for the meeting to start. The group usually kept pretty quiet since none of the guys other than Brendon and Connor spoke unless they had to.

Brendon handed Connor a few printed sheets of paper from his desk printer, then rolled back a few inches, giving the floor to Connor.

“Evening,” Connor started. “We’ve had a good day with the boys. Thank you to Eric, Sam, and Junior for working with them today. For the first time since they arrived, they looked tired at supper.”

Junior chuckled. “That may have been because a minor fight broke out between Big E and Jayzon, and I told them if they had the energy to fight, they had the energy to muck stalls. They’ll fight in private from now on.”

Eric snorted. Even the guests got to do some work around the ranch just to get the feel of real life again. Though the Wayside men usually didn’t ask guests to do that particular job. “Must have been some fight.”

Junior grinned. “Bloody lip. I sent Terrell to the tack room and showed him how to care for some tack while the other two were mucking. It might not have been a reward because it was still work, but because he stayed out of the fight, he didn’t

have to grab a pitchfork.”

Connor snorted. “You’re lucky they didn’t take them to each other.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll be careful not to leave next time.”

Snorts and soft chuckles filled the small room.

Connor glanced around. “Honestly, that brings us to the main thing I wanted to talk to you about tonight. Direction. I can tell that helping these boys isn’t where most of you saw this ranch going. You don’t complain, and I appreciate that, but I need to know how all of you feel about bringing Wayside back to the way it was meant to be.”

Everyone within Eric’s sight slowly nodded their agreement. Even though he enjoyed helping Terrell, Terrell didn’t have the same finish-line goal that the usual guests of Wayside Ranch had. With Viceroy all but silent, keeping people away seemed wrong.

“I know Viceroy isn’t into horses, so I don’t see the theft of my horse as an issue to think about before we bring people back, but we do need to consider that danger,” Eric said.

Connor nodded. “I heartily agree. We always need to think about what we’re doing at least three steps ahead of when we do it. But the boys are only here for a month, and over a week of that is gone. If we want to bring people in here, we have to start looking at applications right now. So, all in favor of starting up applications again, say yea.”

Every hand rose in agreement, including Connor’s.

“All opposed, nay.” Connor glanced around the room. Not a single hand rose.

“Good. Brendon and I have already tentatively started looking through our stack. We’re planning to choose people who were rescued from further away than we usually do. While this might make healing more difficult on them and their families, since they’ll be parted, it also makes their security and safety easier.”

Brendon nodded. “I agree. As much as I was happy to help someone who was close to being from our community return to health and security, they had to move in order to be safe. Speaking of which...” He motioned for Connor to continue.

Connor raised the pages Brendon had printed off. “I received an email from Artemis and the other Guardians this morning that I wanted to share with all of you.” He held up the page in front of him.

He read aloud, “Connor, I wanted to let you know that we are all settled on a rural plot of land outside of Duluth, Minnesota. There’s enough space for us to train, live, and have as a home base. It’s working for us so far. I’m not sure how we’ll get started as a security company, but I can promise you The Guardians will be more careful with our new employees. I hope you’ll accept my apologies for what happened.”

Connor glanced up to the group. “I assured him in my reply that we’re all fine. I don’t want him worrying about us when he’s got a new venture to run.”

Connor didn’t wait for the men to agree and continued with the letter. “I’m sure you’re wondering about Trace and Scarlet. They are both working for a coffee shop a few miles from our home. We offered them their own space when we arrived here, knowing they had nowhere else to go. They’ve looked at housing on their own, but the homeless and vagrant population is larger than I thought. Neither of them feel safe on their own yet. For now, they are safer with us and we’re happy to have them here.

“There has been no sign of Viceroy or anyone nosing where they shouldn’t be, but

I'll keep a watch out for anyone. Hopefully, the silence means Scarlet and Trace are finally free. Godspeed, Artemis.'"

The room stayed silent for a moment. Scarlet had wanted to be free the entire time she was at Wayside, and no matter what they'd done, she hadn't felt it. Until she'd left. That was the sticky web she'd escaped. It constantly wanted to draw her back in.

"I'm so glad they are slowly recovering their lives," Edwyn said.

Connor nodded. "Before we break up this meeting, I just wanted to tell you Officer Blake called and they have no new leads on the horse theft yet, but they are still working. We can't give up."

Eric wouldn't give up, but where could he begin?

ChapterEighteen

Ali raced to the car and locked her door the moment they were both inside. Lacy started the engine and whipped a U-turn, leaving the farm in the dust behind her.

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“We shouldn’t have done that. We should’ve just called the police and told them to check out the property. We should’ve tried to get the address.” Ali couldn’t quit speaking. She’d wanted the next few days to really consider her options, but if she got arrested, her options were gone. “Trespassing. I was trespassing.” Ali’s heart was beating so hard her hands shook. “How could I have done that?”

“You were fine.” Lacy merged back onto the highway. “We didn’t do anything but look. He can’t say we stole anything or damaged anything. All we did was pet a horse that isn’t his. There is no doubt in my mind that was Skyfall, but how did he get her and does he know she was stolen?”

“I don’t know.” Ali needed calm, a way to center herself and bring the crippling worry under control. That was one thing she’d never mastered in all her years of controlling her environment. “How can you be so calm about this?”

Lacy laughed. “Did you see me running? I wasn’t calm. But I have a peace about doing the right thing. I knew that horse didn’t belong there. Getting it back to its owner is the right thing.”

“Eric will be so happy to have some news.” Not that she had much to give him. She hadn’t seen an address. “What will we tell the police? To look for a silver horse along the highway?” A silver horse they would probably move now.

“Nope.” Lacy shook her head. “While we were heading toward the pasture, I grabbed my phone and dropped a pin on our location. All I have to do is text that location marker to Officer Blake.” She shifted in her seat, dug the phone from her back pocket and tossed it at Ali. “Text him now if you want.”

Ali couldn't do anything but sit there and stare at Lacy. She was so free. No password on her phone. No worry about whether what she was doing was right or not, even if Ali wasn't so sure Lacy's definition of right would qualify in a court of law.

But Lacy was happy, and Ali couldn't answer that question. In fact, of all the questions she could answer, that one had proven to be the most difficult. She focused on the task and opened Lacy's phone, saw that the officer's number was one of about ten on that phone and sent off the message with the map to the location.

"Is this your only phone?" Why have one with so few people on it?

Lacy shrugged one shoulder. "I hate technology, but Connor requires that I be reachable. Even in the middle of a ride. So, I have to have a phone. I'd rather just have my landline and call it good."

Ali was struggling to understand Lacy as a person. She didn't want a phone. She didn't want to live near people. Lacy didn't want to wear clothes different from those she wore daily. Her actions were hers. She didn't play fake with anyone and didn't hold back when she had something to say.

"Despite the ending, I had a good day," Ali said to get her mind off the things that made her so tense she was tempted to start itching.

"Good! I'd hoped you would. And I hope you go for that ride. With Eric. You'll like it. I know you will. Well, I don't know, but most people really do." She laughed, and Ali caught a hint of nervousness in it.

"Thanks for taking me."

Lacy grinned as she pulled off the freeway. "Any time. Seriously."

They pulled into Wayside a few minutes later, and Ali ran to dump her new clothes in her cabin, then find Eric. She'd only been gone for a few hours, but there was so much to tell him. She raced through the barn and found Eric in the back pasture, working on a fence.

"Eric!" She ran toward him.

He straightened, then stretched his back. "Hey, did you have a good day?"

She hadn't even realized how long she'd been gone. They had to have finished supper already, and she'd missed sitting with him. But nothing was as exciting as telling him about Skyfall.

"We saw Skyfall! Lacy made us stop and see her, she's fine. We sent the location to the police. It was crazy and stupid and...I had a blast." She laughed, realizing it was true.

Eric gripped her arm and tilted his head slightly, a confused smile curving his lips. "You saw Skyfall?" She'd barely nodded her agreement before he was tugging her back toward the parking lot. "You'll need to show me."

"Show you what?" She'd already broken the law once today and he wanted her to go back there?

"Where she is. I need to know." Eric shuffled her back the way she'd come.

"Eric, we need to let the police handle this." Was she a broken record? Didn't anyone leave things for the proper authorities anymore?

"In bigger cities, they have investigators and crimes get solved. Out here, big crimes rarely happen, and we don't even have an investigator on our police force. Officer

Blake will go out there. I want to see.”

In the span of his hurried explanation, they’d made it to his pickup. Eric held the door open for her. “Climb in.”

“You’re driving?” Was she the only sane person, or was she worried about things that she didn’t need to worry about?

“Yes.” He turned on the truck and buckled in, then fished his phone out of his back pocket. “Officer Blake’s number is in there, send him a text to tell him we’re on our way with a trailer.”

Before she could find the number or buckle herself in, Eric threw the truck in reverse and backed it in alongside the barn. He hopped out and got to work hitching the horse trailer. Ali sent the quick text to Officer Blake and was even more shocked when he replied right away that Eric’s plan sounded good.

She would be no help with the trailer, so she waited until Eric climbed back in, then let him know what Officer Blake had said.

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“Good, now you don’t need to be so worried. Why are you so worried, by the way?”
He checked his mirrors, then slowly pulled out of the spot.

Her first instinct was to hide her reasoning. Eric had his job, and he’d never even asked about hers. He might not be interested and might not care that she would have to go back. She was pretty sure he wouldn’t try to talk her into staying. So where would she go if she couldn’t go back?

“I’m worried because my mind is over-occupied with legal matters. My office called, and it turns out they need me back faster than they thought. I may have to cut my time here short and file the paperwork for Cole once he returns.”

“Through the mail?” Eric asked, though he didn’t look away from the road. He was speeding down the gravel road with only one hand on the wheel. Even if he normally drove that way, it felt dangerous because of his broken arm.

“Yes, I don’t see any other way.”

“I thought they gave you three weeks off?” He glanced at her quickly, then back at the road, making her remember her first crush as a young girl. Though the truck they were in would be no match for an orange Dodge Charger.

“They did. But a case came in that they feel would be best handled by me. I’ve been there the second longest, and this is a fairly high-profile case.”

Eric slowly nodded. “I see. I suppose I should wish you good luck.”

Her stomach twisted. “I don’t believe in luck.”

The side of his mouth hitched up. “I guess we have that in common. You seem unsure about it. Like you want to do it, but you’re holding back. Maybe you just don’t want to tell me because I’m just some cowboy, but maybe there’s more to it than that.”

He’d noticed her hesitation. Who else had ever known her well enough to be able to tell how she was feeling? “I have never thought you were lacking because you’re a cowboy.” She flicked his hat. “I’m holding back because for the first time...I don’t know what to do. They need me which means the decision should be made for me.”

“But it’s not. Is the case something that you’re morally opposed to?” He kept his focus on the road.

“Yes and no. We never want to know if someone is actually guilty or not. Our only goal is to convince others what the client wants them to believe is true. In this case, the fame that would come just isn’t sweet enough to make me want to go.”

“Is something keeping you here?” His voice was low, almost unsure.

She couldn’t dash his hopes—if he had any—again.

* * *

A little over one week was all it had taken for him to have hopes again. Eric wanted to smack himself upside the head. What was he thinking? Ali wasn’t going to stick around. She was a big-city lawyer with big-city dreams and goals. None of her hopes aligned with his.

Not a single one.

Offer to pray for her. The voice tickled the recesses of his mind, not quite a solid voice, but no less of a nudge.

He mentally shook his head and argued back. He couldn't offer to pray for her. Every time he'd even so much as hinted at faith, she'd turned chilly. He'd never figured out what it was that had turned her so solidly against God, but every outstretched hand he'd ever offered had been expressly refused.

Pray for her.

That he could do. He ignored the silence stretching between them and focused on what he wanted to say and the road ahead.

Lord, Ali has a hard heart. She's been hurt by a lot of people. I don't know what she needs now, but you do. I don't know if I'm a part of that or not, but I hope that what she needs to do will become clear to her.

"The turn is right up here." Ali pointed at an exit ahead. "It's just about a quarter mile up the gravel road when you get off."

He nodded. "I hope you're able to make your decision. I won't pressure you to stay. I know you never planned to stay longer than three weeks. I..." He wasn't one to say he was sorry. His parents never had, and he'd always tried to do right the first time so apologies weren't needed, but this felt necessary. "I know I was angry when you first arrived at Wayside. But I'm glad you came."

She ducked her head slightly and raked her hair behind her ear. "Thanks. That helps."

"Does it?" He wasn't sure how it could. Maybe his apology made leaving easier.

"Yeah. I wasn't sure if coming had done any good at all. This was really the one and

only time in my life I did things without a solid plan. I wanted to see you. I missed you. But I didn't know what to expect, and obviously I couldn't plan."

Officer Blake's car sat in a driveway ahead, and Eric pulled the trailer down the narrow drive. A large horse barn and fence comprised most of the area, but what was missing was a house. Did anyone live here, and how had Skyfall ended up here? He parked the truck, then turned to face Ali.

"If there were no rules, what would you want to happen?" He could hardly read her face in the growing darkness, and he wanted to jump out of the pickup and see to his horse, but Ali might not be there much longer, and she needed him this instant.

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“If I didn’t have to go back to work and I could figure out something to do, I’d probably stay as close to you as I could. I’ve never been one to make friends easily.”

“That comes with having trust issues.” He rested his hand over hers and felt her muscles jump under his touch.

“All I ever really wanted was someone who wanted to look after me. And the only one I could rely on to do it without question was me.” She slipped her hand from under his and reached for the door.

“I wanted the job.” The words clogged in his throat, but better now than never. This was what Connor had wanted. This was the second chance that Eric had been sure he didn’t need. He’d needed a second chance to say what he hadn’t thought he needed to say the first time.

“I wanted to take care of you every day of my life,” he continued. “I wanted to be the one to watch you succeed. Even if I didn’t share the same goals as you, I wanted to be the one to tell you to go for your dreams with all your might. There are horses everywhere. I could’ve trained horses no matter where you were transferred. I thought we could make our differences work.”

She froze and looked unsure as she closed her eyes. He didn’t move, willing her to say something so he didn’t feel like he’d bared his soul for nothing. Ali reached over and threaded her fingers in his. “I didn’t know. I didn’t think you had enough drive and that’s why you wanted to leave. I had to put myself first.”

He loosened his fingers from hers and cupped her cheek. Her skin was so soft it

momentarily shook him. "I would've put you first."

She slowly opened her eyes. "I don't think so. If you had to choose between Wayside or me, which would you choose?"

He couldn't answer that. He didn't know her now like he knew her then. What if he said one thing and couldn't live it, or worse, made her feel guilty and she agreed to stay even if she didn't want to, just because of how he answered?

She pulled away from his touch. "Your hesitation speaks volumes, but I'm not hurt by it." She took a deep breath. "Both of us found parts of our lives to make up for the loss of each other. Both of us threw ourselves into our work. I don't know what the answer is, but now is not the time to figure it out." She turned away from him and climbed out of the pickup.

Eric followed, his mind racing. What could he say or do to get her to tell him the truth? How would she answer a similar question? Would she be able to answer without thinking? There was no way he could make a choice like that without taking a pulse check on his life.

Officer Blake strode toward him and held his arms out wide. "That's definitely Skyfall, but the guy that Lacy said was here and confronted them is gone. There's no one here. Worse. The four other horses we found were also stolen."

Eric strode past the deputy toward the fence and whistled for Skyfall. His silver mare trotted toward him and nuzzled him through the fence. Officer Blake stood behind him. "Maybe you should take a look at the other horses in the pasture and see if you recognize any of them. If you can, maybe I'll have some lead to follow up on. If not, this feels like a dead end."

Ali crossed her arms. "Who owns the property? Wouldn't they be suspect number

one?”

Officer Blake frowned. “I wish it were that easy. This farm was owned by a huge ranching operation. They kept some of their stock here, on this side of their land, and some on the other. The owner recently died, and all his land was divided up between his two sons. Neither of them want anything to do with ranching, so they are waiting for the land to sell.”

“So, it’s basically abandoned until they get it sold,” Ali confirmed.

“Correct. Dead end.” Officer Blake rubbed his forehead. “Worse, all the horses come from different areas. If I hadn’t called Dr. Willis to let him know that I had these horses that might need a look-see, I wouldn’t have known they were stolen.”

“So, what now?” Eric leaned against the fence and scratched Skyfall’s neck.

“I think we need to leave a little something here for whoever is coming for these horses. A way to track them and catch them.”

Ali slowly nodded, then her brow furrowed. “Is there any connection between the horse theft and the boys at the ranch? It seems like a reach, but I never overlook a possible connection.”

Officer Blake scrunched his nose. “Not that I know of. Connor hasn’t shared much with me about your guests since he’s trying to keep them there and us out of it. But if he has any information, we’d be happy to look anything up that we can.”

Eric glanced down the fence, looking for the gate to let Skyfall out. “I can’t see any connection, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there. I’ll have Connor send you everything in the morning. In the meantime...” He strode farther down the fence and found the gate, then opened it to let Skyfall out. She still wore her bridle, making leading her a

lot easier. “I volunteer to be here when they come back.”

ChapterNineteen

Ali sat on the other end of the bench seat in the pickup feeling a million miles away from Eric, though he was only on the other end. She fidgeted with the long sleeve of her tee, wishing for the clothes that made her comfortable. Was she out of words because she couldn't think beyond herself?

“You're going to lie in wait for someone to come back for the horses we have in the trailer?” She swallowed hard, worried what would happen to him if he did. There were very few places to hide, and the horses were outside. If he were hiding, he might not even see anyone.

“Yes. That's my plan. I'm going to bring them home and make sure Skyfall is fine, then I'm getting back in this pickup and returning. I'll park it down the road where it won't be seen, then I'll walk onto the property and find a place to hide.”

“And the deputy is okay with that?” Rural living must be vastly different from what she knew. The police force where she lived had many layers, with each layer having specific jobs. The Piper's Ridge force seemed to be three men and two cars, all doing everything.

“I think ‘okay’ is a pretty strong word. He's not going to arrest me if I can figure out who is doing this.”

She closed her eyes, unable to think of anything but Eric waiting to face criminals in the dark with a broken arm and no protection. “Isn't that their job?”

“Sure it is.” He nodded once emphatically. “But there's only so much they can do. This is a small force, and they aren't even from Piper's Ridge. All three are shared

between about four little towns. Their jurisdiction spreads about fifty miles in every direction. When Connor offers help, they usually take it.”

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Ali shook her head and forced herself to look out the window. “Why don’t they just deputize you and give you some protection?”

“A badge protects you from litigation. It doesn’t protect you from bullets or anything else. Deputy Blake will be in Piper’s Ridge, waiting to hear from me.”

She couldn’t name her fear, but it clung to her skin. “I’m worried.”

“You seem to be doing a lot of that lately.”

She snorted. “Well, it’s completely your fault.”

He laughed, and it ended with a soft grunt. “That so? Seems like all of our issues are my fault.”

If he had both hands to drive, she’d have reached for his hand. She wanted to make him understand that she hadn’t left because of anything he’d done. It was what he hadn’t done and her misunderstanding of his feelings. She should’ve realized that he wasn’t nurturing because he hadn’t been nurtured. She shouldn’t have expected him to know how to care for her without showing him.

Back then, she’d assumed everyone should just know and crave that kind of relationship. Now she knew better. People knew what they knew based on their interests and their history. Very little else made an impact on memory or daily living.

“Not even close,” she replied. “There are two of us here.” The cab was too dark to see his reaction, and the glow from the dashboard didn’t reach his face. “I wish I could go

back, knowing what I know now, and change how I acted.”

“In a way, you can.” He shifted in his seat to adjust his arm on the armrest and flinched at the movement. “It’s called forgiveness.”

“You want me to forgive you? For what?” She already felt guilty for misreading him. What would he have done that she needed to forgive?

“No. Yourself.”

His words were soft but hit her like he’d yelled them. She needed to forgive herself? “I don’t know what you mean.” Was this more of that Christian stuff he believed?

“Ali, you’ve held on to this situation in a fierce grip just like I did. You say you never look back, but that’s because you don’t want to. Inside, you do. You think about the things you did. You justify them. We all do that. And if you can look back on it and not wish you did something different, you don’t need to forgive. But evaluating what you think you did wrong and deciding that you will do things differently next time or letting yourself grow means forgiveness. It’s easier when you have faith because there’s literally someone you can take your problems to. But forgiveness isn’t just a Christian thing.”

If they’d been anywhere but alone in his truck and if Eric weren’t the type of guy who needed to help people heal, she would’ve been shocked that he’d spoken more than a sentence about this. Eric wasn’t a talker, making her want to pay attention to what he’d said even more. That made him different than her ex-husband too. Frank was a braggart. He lived his life and loved to tell everyone how to live theirs.

Her mind slowly turned over what Eric had said, looking for flaws or errors in any part of it. “Letting go of something you can’t change is hard.” She clamped her mouth shut. The conversation bordered on everything she found uncomfortable, and

she avoided feeling that way with all that was in her.

“Even with help?” Eric offered.

“But it’s easier your way.” She couldn’t even manage the word Christianity.

“In some ways, yes. There’s a verse that would probably ruffle your feathers. Jesus was speaking, and he said, ‘Come to me all of you who are weak and weary. I will give you rest. I am humble, and my yoke is easy to bear.’ And superficially he’s talking about a yoke like oxen wear. But that word can also mean something like philosophy. Rabis at that time had their own determinations of what scripture meant, and it was their ‘yoke.’ Jesus was saying that his teaching was freeing, not cumbersome.” Eric took a deep breath. “Not that I’m a Bible scholar.”

She wanted to laugh but not at Eric, so she held it in. “You’re right. The word yoke would’ve made my blood boil. I just don’t see how anyone can believe any of it with all the things that go on in this world.” Maybe God existed at some point, but there was no way he had anything to do with people now.

“A lot of us believe because we’ve lived through the worst things and come out the other side. We’ve seen the mountains and the valleys. But there’s this thing about valleys. They make you look up,” Eric said.

Ali bit her lip so hard she almost tasted blood. She’d climbed out of the valley on her own terms and never looked back. Now she was at the peak and could see the wonderful things around her. Nothing stood in her way. Except a job that expected her to be there and didn’t respect her need for time off. And her house was empty of everything but what she owned. No one was waiting for her. No one wondered where she was at the end of a day.

A text came through on Eric’s phone where it sat in a holder on the dash. The bright

light made the text easy to read.

Where are you, man? Worried about you.

Ali blinked away tears. How could that text have come through in the instant when she was thinking about how lonely she was?

A second bubble appeared.

Is Ali with you? We can't find her anywhere. Lacy is frantic.

"I don't answer texts while I'm driving and especially not with one arm." Eric chuckled. "If you want to let them know we're about ten minutes from home and have Skyfall, that would be great."

He couldn't know what she was warring with in her head. That sending a text was the last thing she wanted when she was confused and her heart was searching for answers.

"I don't want to go." The words tumbled from her lips, and she repeated them, stronger this time.

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“Then I don’t think you should.”

“It will cost me everything.” All the work. All the things she’d done had led to this place in her life. She’d pushed everyone aside so she could have her dream.

“Not everything. There are things no one can take from you.” He flipped on his turn signal and turned down a shadowy gravel road that would take them out to Wayside.

Like serendipitous texts. Reminders that she was more than flesh and she deserved to be treated like a person. “The loss of twenty-five years is not insignificant,” she whispered so he wouldn’t hear the tremor in her voice.

“No, but until you’re six feet under, you can start over.”

The faint lights of Wayside came into view in the dark night, and suddenly she knew exactly why her body was worked to a tizzy and her mind wouldn’t settle. She couldn’t let Eric face this alone. “I’m going with you tonight. Don’t even try to stop me.”

* * *

Play it cool. Eric kept his speed just where it was, his face impassive. Inside, he was roiling like the sea in a storm. He couldn’t sit with Ali all night under the cover of darkness, waiting for danger to show up.

How could he protect her? How could he find a place where they were both safe and could see people arrive? He’d already thought being on a stakeout would be hard

enough alone, but with Ali? Would he even be able to pay attention? “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

She laughed. “We’ll make it work.”

Maybe he could rely on Connor to talk her out of it. The woman was as stubborn as any he’d ever seen, but her life had made her that way. He’d almost felt her trying to come to some kind of decision earlier, and her statement that she was joining him seemed to be a way to head off her thoughts.

“I can’t imagine why you’d want to spend a long string of silent hours with me.” He slowly drove his truck around the parking lot, then carefully backed it to the front of the barn. He had to check Skyfall and the other horses, and the only place with enough light to do so was in the barn.

Ali jumped out the passenger door before he could even kill the engine and headed for the trailer. He finished putting the truck in park and followed as quickly as possible. His arm was throbbing after a day of doing far too much. And it wouldn’t be over soon.

Ali had the trailer opened but had enough sense not to walk right into the back of it and scare the horses. Trailering a horse wasn’t easy, and many horses didn’t prefer to travel that way, especially down a freeway, then down a gravel road. Skyfall’s flanks twitched in the meager light.

“It’s okay, girl,” Eric said. “We’ll get you out of there and where it’s safe and you can relax. Just let me get you there.”

Ali made a soft noise in her throat and backed away from the door.

“There’s a light switch just inside the barn door. It’s old. Looks a little like a button.

Press it.” He left Ali, knowing she could figure out something as easy as a light switch and focused on Skyfall.

Ali’s phone flashlight turned on, and she made quick work of flooding the barn with light.

“There you are!” Connor’s voice boomed from the direction of the ranch house. He joined them a few seconds later. “Would it kill you to text me?”

Eric held up his useless arm. “I was down a few digits.”

Skyfall’s head bobbed up and down as she came down the ramp of the trailer, then headed into the barn. Something about her gait bothered Eric. He loosely tied her to a post and checked all of her hooves. The front right frog was caked with something. She pulled away instead of leaning in like she usually did when he cared for her.

“Should I call in the farrier, have a look at her?” Connor leaned in to get a better look.

“Usually I can manage. In this case, I think I’d prefer if Dr. Willis took a look at her. He can check the others then too. This shouldn’t be enough of an issue to cause her that much discomfort.” Then again, the thief had ridden her down the rocky gravel road. Had the rider ridden her all the way to that ranch? It wasn’t far by truck, but was a long ride if they were trying to escape police cars.

“I wonder where you’ve been.” He released her leg.

“I’ll call the doctor in the morning. Is Terrell with Junior?” Connor asked.

Ali nodded. “I asked him to stay with Junior and Gabby. No leaving out the window this time. Eric and I will be busy tonight, so he’ll have to stay there anyway.”

This was the perfect chance for Connor to talk Ali out her plan. If he laid out what he wanted from the start, Connor would agree with him. “I offered to sit at the place they found Skyfall and see who comes by. We have no leads into who this could be.”

Connor nodded. “There are only a few who it could be, but finding evidence would be the difficult part.”

And neither suspect made sense. Either the boys had some connection to stealing horses and—as Big E had flippantly said—they were using the money, or the owner of the auction where Eric used to work was the culprit. There were no other suspects unless someone unknown was pulling the strings and had just happened to choose Wayside.

“You both?” Connor glanced between the two of them. “Are going to watch for whoever is doing this?”

“Iam,” Eric corrected.

“Weare.” Ali narrowed her eyes, daring him to correct her again.

Lord bless him, he wanted to challenge her. Ali had lived to the beat of her own drum for a long time, and so had he, but with work, could they have now what they should’ve had long ago? If they’d only learned to communicate back then instead of reading each other like picture books with half the images missing. He’d never lived with encouragement; she needed that to survive.

Now he’d learned how to encourage people because of his life at Wayside. He could nurture and encourage her. But could she learn to live out on the land? Was she willing to? If he could learn to love her, could she learn to love what made him who he was now?

“I was going to, but I’m not going to argue with her now.”

Connor laughed. “Smart man.” He turned his focus on Ali. “You have anything to wear? You’ll be damp and cold in that.”

Eric had to give props to Connor. He’d pointed out Ali’s issue without outwardly saying that she was wrong. Her clothes would need a change, or she would not only be damp, but she’d stick out. Bright-white pants that stopped just below her knee were enticing to look at, but would be filthy after sitting in a barn and would be very visible in a place where everything was dirty by nature.

“Let me guess...” She smirked. “I’ll need boots, jeans, and flannel?”

“That’s a good start. Let’s see if Lacy has anything you can borrow.” Connor motioned for Ali to follow him.

Eric held his breath as he watched her leave, realizing he didn’t want to see her walk away from him again any more than she wanted to go. I don’t want to go back... Her words taunted him. How would he have to change if she couldn’t live with his life?

“Skyfall... I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

His mare didn’t have any more answers than he did.

* * *

Ali hadn’t wanted to leave Eric in the barn. What if he decided to go on his stakeout without her? What if he went all chivalrous and protected her like she’d wanted him to do all those years ago? This would be the worst moment to become what she’d hoped for because she wanted to go with him and do some protecting of her own.

She followed Connor through the dark to the welcoming lodge. He said nothing as he pushed open the door and held it open for her. During the day, the house felt like an office that people could sleep in, like a professional hotel. At night, with the dim lights and the large dining room shut, the house felt like a home.

Lacy sat on one of the huge leather sofas, flipping through a magazine in a pair of flannel pajama pants and a loose-fitting tee that hung off her shoulder a bit. It looked old enough to have been hers when she was a teen. The image on the front was a faded Strawberry Shortcake, her huge pink hat taking up most of the real estate.

“Lacy, Ali is going to sit on a stakeout with Eric. Got anything she can wear?”

Lacy stood and stifled a yawn. “I’m sure I do. Boots will be the issue. She’s got tiny

feet.” Lacy laughed as she headed for the stairs.

Ali glanced down at her sandaled feet and felt self-conscious. Were her feet too tiny?

“Follow me. I doubt you want to try clothes on in the living room.” Lacy called down.

Ali zoomed up the stairs after her. She’d never been to the second floor of the lodge. Up here, it was even more like a home. It was comprised of a long hall, similar to the one below where Connor’s office was, but the feel was totally different. Relaxed. Welcoming.

“I’m down here,” Lacy called from the one open door near the end.

Ali followed the sound and found Lacy in her room with two drawers hanging open. The room smelled like a lemon had taken a bath in there. Lacy had already piled a few pairs of jeans and a few flannels on the bed.

“Pick what you think will fit.” She turned to face Ali with a gleam in her eye. “I can’t wait to see what your life is like after tonight.”

Chapter Twenty

Eric’s truck bounced down the gravel road past the place where they’d found Skyfall. Ali resisted the urge to roll up the sleeves of the flannel shirt against the heat in the pickup cab. She’d chosen dark jeans, an equally dark flannel, and the only boots Lacy had that came close to fitting. They’d both had a good laugh over Ali trying to walk in the ones a size larger.

But now her stomach roiled with the tension of what they were about to do. “If my superior knew...” She bit her lip. This was breaking the law. She’d sworn to defend

people, not encourage lawlessness by breaking it.

“Then let’s make sure they never do.” Eric splayed his fingers wide as he slowly turned the wheel to pull them down a short access road that led to a field. There were no crops, but they also hadn’t seen a single car, so the truck was probably safe there.

“This will be quite a walk,” she said to change the subject. She still hadn’t told Eric the reason why she wanted to stay at Wayside and didn’t want to go back and face her job. The reason didn’t fully make sense to her. In the last week, she’d discovered many things about herself that she was sure weren’t true before. Now she wanted to test those things and see if her assumptions matched with reality.

Eric climbed out of the truck and closed the door with almost no noise. Ali followed suit and came around the back of the truck bed. A gravel road spread out in front of them full of large rocks and places to twist her ankle in her loose boots.

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They trudged along the road, watching for vehicles and animals. Ali's heart seemed lodged in her throat, and swallowing was difficult. "What if the people we're looking for are already there when we arrive?" She wanted to ask all the questions floating in her head while she had the chance before she had to keep silent.

"I've been told to only get information. I'm not supposed to face them without the police. So, I'll be documenting as much as I can and as best I can."

Ali felt tension rising inside her, and she wanted to argue. Any sort of video or photography on private property was illegal and could land them at the very least with a hefty fine. "What sort of documentation?"

He grinned, and she barely caught sight of his white teeth in the inadequate light. "I can't take photos of people on private property, but currently that property is owned by the county since it was abandoned. That being said, I'm more interested in getting photos of things the police can use. People are great, but finding a face in a database without their name is difficult. Finding a license plate is not."

And taking a picture of someone's vehicle wasn't illegal, even in the strictest sense of the law. "I see. So, our mission is to remain hidden and get as much information as possible. By trespassing."

"We were told we could be here by the police. At least, I was. They know exactly where we are and what we're doing. My horse was found on this property, so I have an interest in finding out who is running this operation."

He held up a hand in front of him for both of them to keep silent. Ahead, light spilled

from the cover of trees that surrounded the barn and fence where Skyfall had been. The low rumble of a truck broke the quiet night.

Ali whispered, “They’re going to get away!”

Eric jogged closer, and Ali kept to his side. This was her first stakeout, and she didn’t want to be the reason Eric got hurt when her entire motive for coming was to make sure he made it back home in one piece. He slowed his pace, keeping roughly to a crouch, and headed for the ditch. Tall grass soon covered him almost to his thighs.

He waved for her to join him, and she picked her way through the uneven foliage to his side. She opened her mouth to ask him a question, and he held a finger to her lips, the pressure as soft as velvet.

Voices came from the other side of the trees, and Ali scooted closer to Eric’s side, making sure she didn’t block his good arm. Eric slowly and carefully moved closer. One pace at a time. Keeping the noise to a minimum.

“Can someone explain to me what happened to the horses from this morning? Especially the gray? It was here when we went into town. That one was going to pull in the highest sale price. She was in great condition, looked good, healthy... Are you sure that car that came up here was just a couple women being nosy? The boss is going to be...”

Ali stepped on a twig as she moved, and the snap sounded loud enough to be a gun shot in the dark. The men who had been talking comfortably a moment before went silent. “What was that? Clayton, go look.”

“I ain’t going anywhere alone. That could be a bear for all I know.”

“Bear? Out here?” The men chuckled.

“Could be.”

Eric slowly dropped to his knees and pulled Ali down with him. From that position, the tall grass was almost enough to fully cover them. Eric lowered slightly more as two men broke free of the tree coverage with a high-powered flashlight. They swung it back and forth along the ditch over the tops of the grass.

The light caught on the tips of the stalks, throwing strange shadows over the men's faces. Ali closed her eyes and kept completely still. The men would see anything that moved and would probably skip over anything that didn't. She held her breath just to be certain her breathing didn't move the grass around her.

“Nothing there. Must have been something in the woods. You afraid of the big bad wolf?” the first man teased. “He's going to get you.”

“Shut up. Let's get those horses in the other trailer and get out of here. I don't like this. Feels like we're being watched. Next time, you can do this all on your own. We take them, we shouldn't have to deliver them.”

“The boss doesn't want any connection to him to be seen out here. That's why we have to switch the trailers. If anyone notices that trailer at the auction, then people might suspect what's going on.”

Eric gripped her arm tightly. They might be able to testify to what was said, but it would be he said/she said and very hard to prove, especially since they were trespassing. Proof that the deputy had agreed to this was flimsy at best. They needed physical evidence. Something beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Ali pressed her lips to Eric's ear and whispered almost noiselessly, “I'm going to take my camera and get as many photos as I can of the truck, trailer, and horses. You can't move as easily because of the cast. They might see it reflect in the moonlight. I'll be

careful.”

His skin was warm under her lips, heat radiating off his neck, and she forced herself to back away. Eric gripped her arm and held her there for a moment, shaking his head. He mouthed the words, “I don’t want you to go alone.”

She squeezed his hand and smiled even though she knew he couldn’t see it. This wasn’t the time for niceties. She’d come to help him, and she would. She fished her phone from her back pocket and held it almost to the ground while she adjusted the screen brightness to the dimmest setting, set the camera to take fifteen shots in succession, and turned the flash off.

She reached for Eric’s shoulder to use his strength to rise, and he suddenly gripped her hand and tugged her back down. The cone of light from a flashlight appeared in front of the truck headlights, and Ali squeaked at the sudden appearance.

The man holding the flashlight flicked the light toward them, and Eric dove deeper into the grass, pulling Ali on top of him and out of sight. His hand clamped over her mouth as they laid face to face in the grass. The entire area went dark and silent as the man muttered to himself about raccoons.

Ali’s breath was stuck somewhere in her chest as Eric took his hand off her mouth. She balanced her body over his, trying not to either fall or move. If she got up too quickly, she might injure his broken arm. If she didn’t get up quickly, she might not be able to resist the lure of those lips just a few inches away.

Eric buried his right hand into the hair on the back of her neck and in seconds, she found herself drowning as the grass brushed against them in the breeze. His lips ignited everything she’d held back for so long and forced her to feel again.

She anchored her hands on either side of his head and drove herself to end the kiss.

There would be time for that later when she wasn't wrapped in clothes that made her feel lousy and wasn't worried about getting shot.

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“If you think I’m letting you go alone, you’ve got another think coming.” Eric pushed to his feet alongside her, surprising her with his agility.

“Fine, but let’s get this over with.”

Eric chuckled softly like he knew exactly why she wanted to be done.

He was only half right.

* * *

Eric glanced in his rearview mirror again, hoping they weren’t being followed. Ali had managed to get pictures of the truck, trailer, and all the horses that had just arrived. He wished he could’ve been there earlier when the men had discovered that the five horses that had been there earlier were gone.

None of them had slipped up enough to mention their boss’s name. That would’ve made everything a lot easier. But at least Eric and Ali had what they had and he’d heard a very familiar name that got his mind racing. Clayton... Could Big E’s brother really be a part of this? Without seeing him, he couldn’t be sure. There had to be a lot of Claytons in Wyoming.

“Shoot,” Ali muttered from the passenger seat.

“What’s wrong?” Eric glanced across the cab at her, and his breath caught at seeing her profile in the glow of her cellphone screen.

“The license plates don’t match.” She scrunched her face. “I don’t know if one or both of them are stolen, or if they could be taken from other vehicles owned by the thief... But the front plate and the rear plate were different on the truck. No wonder they drive at night.”

“So, it’s a dead end.” He held his frustration in check. They’d found out other things, but the photos were the concrete evidence. The rest would require memory and would force Ali to admit she’d been there. She’d been sure that she would lose her job for that since it was trespassing which came with a heavy penalty.

“The plate on the trailer was originally on a boat trailer.” She sighed. “It was all for nothing.”

“Not nothing.” At least they’d managed to rescue five of the horses from earlier and gotten pictures of those that the thieves were transporting that night, though those pictures had been taken through the windows on the trailer and weren’t clear.

“What do we do now? We should’ve followed them.” Ali glanced back as if they weren’t already ten miles from the plot of land where they’d stayed hidden for a few hours.

“And on empty roads, they would’ve figured out we were following them within minutes.” He’d already considered that.

“Then I don’t see that tonight was helpful at all unless these plates are owned by someone who would lead us to the boss. I doubt they would be that stupid.”

“Probably not,” he agreed. “But running the plates won’t be a waste of time. I also had another idea. There’s a livestock auction in five days and they mentioned the auction. The only other people who know how many horses Wayside has, and what they look like, are the owners of the Endangered and Abused Livestock Auction

company. I used to work for them.”

“Endangered? What kind of animals do they get?” There were a lot of animals people wanted for pets that were not legal to keep. Many times, they were on endangered lists or considered rare or too dangerous for untrained people to keep. That’s how they became the animals that got neglected or abused, because they were more than the average pet owner could handle.

“When I was there, they had a few tigers come through, but both went to proper zoos. There were some alpacas and even a llama. I don’t know if things have changed since I left. I haven’t been with them for quite a few years.”

“Maybe they started to realize they could make good money off of animals that were in good condition and highly sought after, not just abused ones.”

Her speculation about Herb, his former boss, made him terse. He’d liked working for him. There had been nothing wrong with the operation then. “I don’t know. It was just a hunch that I’m willing to test by going to an auction. Especially since I would usually go anyway.”

“As an expert at reading people, would you mind if I tagged along?” she asked.

“Five more days puts you after the date you were supposed to be back to work. Didn’t you tell me you had to be back? That would put you past the deadline. I know you said you didn’t want to go, does that mean you’ve made your decision?”

He wanted to make certain she really felt like staying before he made any move toward a commitment with her. He wanted to start something meaningful, but only if she really wanted to be at his side this time. His heart didn’t want another investment, then early withdrawal.

“I don’t know what to do, but I still don’t want to go,” Ali said. “I feel like we’ve only just begun here, but I’ve worked so hard to be there. It’s not an easy decision to make.”

And as much as he wanted her to stay, he didn’t want her thinking about her job or what she’d lost and just create another regret. He wanted her to be here and excited about a new path full of change and lots of new things. Excitement. Not trepidation.

“If you need time, I’ll be here. I’ll probably be here for the rest of my life. If you need to go back and get things settled, then I think you should.”

“You want me to go?” Her head whipped up from where she’d been buried in her phone, and she stared at him.

He couldn’t afford to keep his eyes off the road for more than a few seconds, but that wasn’t the reaction he thought he’d get. “I didn’t say that. I want you to know that I understand if you have to. I would like you to stay here for selfish reasons, at least until we can get things figured out. But you worked hard to get where you are, and I don’t want you to lose that when I’ll still be here. The job might not.”

And that was the long and short of it. Her job wanted her and had threatened to terminate her if she didn’t return when they needed her to. He wasn’t going to make her choose again. Granted, he wasn’t ready to hand her a ring again yet either.

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“I don’t know what to say. There are so many facets to my reasons for wanting to stay away from my job. Many that I don’t want to talk about, especially with you. I don’t need it rubbed in my face that life would’ve been better with you. I get it. I’m versed.” She sighed.

“Hey...” He slowly angled the truck off the road and parked at the end of the Wayside driveway. “I’m not going to come back at you and say, ‘I told you so.’ That’s just not helpful and it’s not who I am. You came back. That was all you, not me. I can’t claim anything in this situation. You’ve done all the work. I just don’t want you to lose your job thinking that I’ll disappear or change the moment you drive away. I won’t. I’ll still be here.”

Eric might not like it, but he would be there. He also wouldn’t admit to Connor that Connor was right. Eric had needed a second chance with Ali as much as any of the other guys. Eric had been certain he didn’t.

“I’ll think about it, but I make no promise that I’ll go. Facing what’s waiting for me would be scarier than facing you like you were on my first day here, like, times ten and for many days straight.”

Hearing worry from the strongest woman he’d ever met made him have to fight back an angry response. How dare anyone go after her? “I wish I could offer to go with you, but I don’t think that would help you or me.”

He couldn’t even picture what kind of house she must live in or what the inside looked like. He suspected that the moment she opened her car door in her own garage, then went into her own spacious home, she wouldn’t think twice about the

aging cowboy from Wyoming.

“The fact that you even considered going is a testament to what kind of guy you are.” She furrowed her brow. “You know... I wonder if there isn’t something I can do. Even out here.”

He waited, wondering what Ali could possibly be thinking.

“I had to keep up with all of my health and fitness training, even as a JAG. I’ve always wanted to help people who were like me, people who needed help but had no one to turn to. Maybe I could become a private investigator and help people like you do. I was pretty good tonight.”

He had to hand it to her—she was. Even when he’d been momentarily distracted by her familiar body draped over his own, she’d only allowed the distraction for a moment before she went right back to work. If she hadn’t, they’d still be in that ditch enjoying kisses much longer than they should.

“I think you’d be good at it, but being a PI is a lot different from being a JAG. Are you sure that’s what you really want?” Eric asked.

Ali grinned, and she looked almost like the woman he’d loved so long ago. “It isn’t all I want. But it sure is a start and I’m pretty good at setting goal and then crushing them.”

He pulled the truck back onto the driveway and headed for the gate as the first rays of sunlight came over the horizon. “It’s going to be a long day.”

“It is, but now I think I know what I’m going to do with it.”

ChapterTwenty-One

After spending an entire evening and night in Ali's company, Eric didn't know how to leave her off at her front door. A kiss was welcome, but frankly strange after all their conversation. She felt closer to him than that.

While she hadn't told him everything, she'd shared more than he'd thought he'd get from the woman who never looked back at her past. As she trudged alongside him toward the cabins, he wasn't sure how to deal with that. Her thoughts were important, and he wanted her to know that.

"Thanks for coming with me," he said.

Ali gave a rapid exhale that was too delicate to be a snort. "I didn't give you much choice."

"No, but I appreciate it. You were able to get close enough to get pictures that I couldn't have." He lifted his bum arm. "At least not without making a lot of noise."

"They didn't do any good anyway." She sighed and glared at her cabin.

She really hated staying there, and he'd given her a hard time about it from the moment she'd arrived. "Something besides the size bothers you about the cabin, doesn't it?" He tipped his forehead toward the little string of tidy homes.

She crossed her arms and slowed her steps, hedging and protecting. How could a lawyer be this easy to read? Unless she being real with him, not like a lawyer, comfortable, like a friend...

"It's okay to talk about it. I've got no one to tell," Eric said. And he wouldn't anyway. Guys just didn't share secrets and emotional things. At least, not very often.

"Remember the lake cabin?" Ali's voice was so quiet he could hardly hear her.

“Vaguely. You went out there with your aunt and uncle during the summers, and it was too far for me to bike that first summer when you were fifteen.”

“Because you weren’t old enough to drive. I was so thankful you got your license and I didn’t have to be at that cabin all the time after that first year.”

His shoulders tensed, sending pain shooting down his arm, but he didn’t care. “I would’ve thought a lake cabin would be a nice getaway.”

“I wanted to get away.” Now her voice was little more than a whisper.

Eric waited, silent. It seemed like the right thing to do, and he had to listen to his spirit because his brain was no help at all in this situation.

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“My uncle took me in when I was nine but didn’t want me there. He took me in because my drug-addicted mother asked him to. He’d rescued his sister from everything since she was a child, so he felt he had to do it again. I would bet my mother grew up getting hit too, which is probably why she turned to drugs.”

“And you turned to work to escape,” he surmised.

“I don’t like feeling out of control. I saw what it did to my mom. She escaped the pain in some ways, initiated it in others. When I saw this cabin, it was exactly like that cabin so long ago. I hate it. I haven’t slept well since I got here.”

Eric stopped her and turned her to face him. He didn’t see a single dark line under her eyes or any sign of fatigue. “How do you manage to keep that a secret?”

She snorted a little more forcefully. “I’m very good at keeping secrets. I’ve done it my whole life.”

Suddenly, all the pieces fit into place. “That’s why you turned me down. You needed, to your very core, to know you could get away from your uncle and be your own person. If you loved me, you’d have to depend on someone else and...you can’t do that. When I said I wasn’t going to stay in the military, you were worried you wouldn’t be able to do what you needed to in order to get away from your family.”

She paled slightly and looked away. “I’ve never been an open book, and I don’t suspect I ever will be. If that bothers you, I can go back home right now.”

Eric brushed her tousled hair from her face. “I’m not either. I think we both have a lot

to get used to.” He pulled her close and held her, relishing the feel of her arms around him and her cheek pressed to his chest. “I don’t want you to go, but like I said in the truck, I understand if you need to. Don’t make your decision based on feelings. Look at what that did for you so far in your life.”

Ali stiffened slightly. “I know you’re right. I know what you’re saying. I turned you down because of fear. I didn’t tell you what was going on in my head then, because if I did, I would’ve had to tell you about my uncle. You weren’t the same guy then...”

It was his turn to chuckle. “Are you saying I had anger issues? Because I was young and had trouble controlling it back then.”

“It doesn’t seem to be an issue now.”

He swallowed back the self-deprecating remark that bubbled to the forefront of his mind. He’d shown her his anger for the first week she was here. He now wished he could go back and be who she’d needed him to be.

“When your horse was taken, you could’ve been angry and yelled. You could’ve acted out, but it just made you driven to find her and find answers. You never lost control,” Ali said.

“I’m not perfect. I was still angry with you when you got here.”

“Justifiably. I see now that the reason I didn’t want to tell you why I had turned you down in front of everyone wasn’t because I don’t look back, it was because I was ashamed, and you were angry for a good reason.”

“Good reason or not, I should’ve tried. I’m not proud of how I acted.”

“I’m not either. I justified myself for years because what I did helped me succeed. I

had the success, but it was a lot of work to keep up. I needed more and more to feel important, to feel needed. Now I'm indispensable in some areas, but I feel even less successful because it's just more work to maintain." Her shoulders fell. "Then there's the guilt I carry for wanting to just give up."

He felt an internal nudge to forgive her. To let all of it go. Holding on to his anger wasn't helping either of them. "Remember I told you about forgiveness in the truck? Forgiving yourself?"

She looked up at him and nodded. "I still haven't figured out how I'm going to do that."

"You might not need to." He took a breath and hoped he was saying the right thing. "I forgive you. I don't hold what you did against you anymore."

She took a step back, and her mouth dropped open. "I can't... I didn't even say I was sorry. How can you do that?"

He felt her pulling away even more than just physically. This separation would be his fault if he didn't clarify himself. They'd waited too long. "Because I don't want it to stand between us anymore."

Ali slowly shook her head. "People don't do that. They always want punishment for crimes committed. They want restitution, if not retribution. People don't just forgive without...something."

"I do." He kept his words simple. If he tried to defend himself, he'd only sound like he was lying, and he wasn't.

"I don't know how you can say that." She blew out a long breath. "I don't even know what to say or how to react to that. I didn't expect it, and I don't know if I want it."

She turned and rushed toward her cabin.

Eric followed her. “Ali, don’t let this hurt you. I’m letting my emotions over our past go. It’s gone. We can start over just like you asked.”

She fumbled with her key and jabbed it in the lock. “You say that now, but what about when we have an argument? Will you bring all of this back up then? Will you use it against me later?”

He tugged her around to face him and to look him in the eye. “That’s not how I treat forgiveness. When I’m done, it’s done. You don’t have to worry about this coming between us anymore.” He hoped she could eventually forgive him too. He’d been rash and angry, which was probably another reason she’d turned him down in front of so many people. He never would’ve hurt her, but she couldn’t know that. Not with the life she’d had. She probably thought refusing his offer in the middle of a crowd was a safety measure.

He took a deep breath, and his focus shifted with a scent on the breeze. Smoke... “Ali, I’m not trying to change the subject here or diminish your reaction, but do you smell that?”

She looked up and scrunched her face. “Yes, it smells like fire. It’s kind of early in the morning for the fire pit, isn’t it?”

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“Way too early.” He backed off the porch and saw a thin ribbon of gray smoke catch on the wind. Wyoming was known for wind, and if there were a fire, the gusts would turn it into something terrifying very soon.

“I’ve got to find it and put it out. We aren’t finished talking.” He kissed her cheek and backed away from the row of cabins. The only other place that smoke could’ve come from was the barn in that direction.

As soon as he was about five steps back, the line of smoke drew his eye down to a cabin in the back row, far too close to Junior and Gabby’s home. Suddenly all the fatigue from being awake all night melted away, and he raced for his friends’ door.

“Junior, Gabby! Get up, there’s a fire!”

* * *

Eric pounded on Junior’s door, then raced toward the empty cabin. While there might not be anyone inside, he had to get the fire out before it could spread. In his periphery, he saw Ali run for the lodge, hopefully to wake up Connor and Lacy. The fire department would take at least twenty minutes to get there, and by then, all the cabins could be destroyed.

Junior rushed toward him, still in flannel sleep pants and shirtless. Eric tested the door, but it was locked. “Break it?”

“Or check the back door.” Junior pushed him toward the steps to go around the other side of the house. Barefoot, Junior kicked the door right above the knob. “Go!”

Eric didn't waste any more time since he couldn't help with the front. There wasn't any electrical service to the houses when they weren't in use, so how could a fire have started in an empty cabin? He checked the windows as he went around, but nothing moved inside, and he couldn't see the glow of a blaze.

At the back door, he jiggled the lock on the sliding door, and it gave. Someone had been inside and he wasn't sure how. Only Connor had the keys to all of the houses. He slowly opened the door, hoping to avoid feeding the fire with a draft. Smoke billowed out, thick and black like something had been smoldering for a long time.

He tugged his tee over his nose and went inside. Just like his own house, the kitchen was directly to the right of the back porch door. He would have to go all the way to the living room in the front of the small cabin to get to the short hall that led to the two bedrooms.

A loud crack came from the front and light spilled into the room as the front door broke open. "The fire isn't in the main areas. It has to be in one of the bedrooms," Eric said as he headed toward Junior. They met at the entrance to the hall, then saw black smoke pouring from under the master bedroom door.

"We need water. I'm going to guess this is too big to smother with a blanket," Junior said and headed to the kitchen. Eric grabbed a thick wool blanket out of a basket near the woodstove and ran it under the water after Junior filled the largest pitcher he could find in the kitchen. Junior tugged a potholder from the drawer, then headed for the master bedroom.

Eric held the blanket, aware that he wasn't sure what his cast was made of, but if it melted, he'd be in a heap of trouble. Junior wrapped the potholder around the bedroom doorknob as Connor rushed in the front door with a pair of fire extinguishers.

Junior opened the door, and heat blasted them back. Connor pushed forward and handed one extinguisher to Junior. Eric followed Connor inside. Both the bed and the reading chair had been pushed to the middle of the room and were smoldering with small flames licking over the edge of the bed.

The room smelled musty and smoky at the same time. Eric tossed the wet blanket over the chair, which hadn't caught as much as the bed, leaving Connor and Junior to take care of that with the extinguishers.

"Is everyone okay in there?" Gabby called from outside the front door.

Connor and Junior turned to her voice. Eric waved away the smoke off the bed and noticed three clumps in the center of what had been a patchwork quilt. Although each clump was blackened with char, he could tell each was a small device with hard plastic around it and a thick melted nylon strap with a clasp.

"The ankle bracelets." Eric pointed to the lumps. "They decided to burn their ankle bracelets in a bed inside one of our cabins." He wanted to let his anger boil just as hot as the fire, and he would have words with Terrell, but this wasn't the time for yelling. That would solve nothing.

"Has anyone seen the boys?" Eric asked.

"Terrell was staying with us," Gabby said as she leaned into the room, then gasped and covered her mouth. "Oh no."

"What's wrong?" Connor asked.

"Lacy told me that quilt was made by her mother. She's going to be so sad."

Gabby was tenderhearted that way, always knowing just what people would need.

But the quilt was, unfortunately, the least of their worries. “Did you see him before you ran over here?”

Gabby slowly shook her head. “His door was closed, and I didn’t want to look in on a teen boy who is not my child before I ran out of the house dressed like this.” She grimaced and glanced down at her pajamas.

“I’ll go check on him.” Eric headed out the door. There was little he could do in there now.

A fire truck slowly pulled down the driveway with its lights on, but no sirens to wake anyone. Eric waved but kept right on going, straight to Junior’s front door. He didn’t bother knocking because Junior wouldn’t care if he went right inside.

“Terrell!” The time for consoling words had long past. He felt cheated. How could Terrell help him and tell him he wanted a future and tell him he wanted Eric’s help, then turn around and light a house on fire? He’d told all the boys, one more chance. Now, their chances were up.

Terrell opened the door to his room, his eyes bleary. “What? What’s going on?”

Eric almost believed the act, but it was an act. “The fire. Did you think we wouldn’t notice? Did you think a fire like that would stay contained to one cabin? Who is going to pay for that and for the ankle bracelets which happen to be the property of the State of California?”

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“I don’t know what you’re talking about, old man.” He looked away, his tired frame now rigid, ready for an argument.

“Ah, so we’re back to that?”

“You promised you wouldn’t lump me together with them.”

The accusation hit the mark, but what else could he think when there had been three bracelets lying on the bed? “Show me your monitor, and I’ll apologize. I know Gabby wouldn’t have forgotten to remind you to put it on last night, so don’t tell me it’s back at my house.” He tried to cross his arms, remembered one couldn’t bend, and finally thrust his fist to his waist.

Terrell raked his hand over the top of his short hair and sighed. “Look. I didn’t plan for this. Okay?”

“Plan for what?” He motioned for Terrell to join him in the living room. If Eric didn’t sit soon, he was going to start pacing.

“If I don’t do what Big E says, I’m dead. There’s a hit out on me. Jayzon told Big E he wouldn’t do it. We have too much history. Big E wants to take his place in the gang and he’ll get it if he kills me.”

“So, why the fire?” Eric would tackle the other huge issues with what Terrell had said after they dealt with this one.

“Big E told me he might change his mind about me if I did what he said. He was in

my room. They broke in through the window that I escaped out of before. You can look. They pried it up with something from the barn. I'm not lying." Sweat broke out along his brow. "I promise I'm not."

"So, he made you go along with setting the fire to see if you would do as he asked?"

Terrell shook his head slowly. "No, man. He made me light it, and he made me put the monitors in the fire so that if anyone could get any prints off of them, they would be mine."

Eric rested his head against the back of the sofa, feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders. He wanted to see Terrell succeed, but he never would with the other boys here. Micha, with the Board of Corrections, already said the group was all or nothing. If the other two came back, Terrell also had to. So, how could he save Terrell from ruining his life?

"We need to get you away from them. We'll need to think of something. The police will be here shortly, which means your time at Wayside is drawing to a fast end. I'll do what I can, but when they ask you what happened, you will be one-hundred percent honest with them and you'll do whatever they tell you. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." He hung his head. "I'm sorry."

Everyone made mistakes in their life, but some mistakes were visible and life-altering. Worse, sometimes they created a domino effect, as they were with Terrell.

"I know you've got the strength to walk away from this. Someday you're going to be talking to kids who are the age you are now, and they'll look up to you for what you're doing. We just need to get you to that point." Connor had taken the boys in as a test for Micha so maybe he could pull some strings for Terrell. But only if Eric could convince Connor that Terrell wasn't as guilty as he looked.

ChapterTwenty-Two

Counselling Terrell, that's what she had to think about. How would she counsel Terrell? Ali walked in the narrow space between the rows of cabins, staying out of the way of the emergency vehicles and investigators. Police had already arrived and were talking to Big E and Jayzon. She doubted either of them would talk, or if they did, doubted they would tell the truth.

She'd heard the conversation between Terrell and Eric since she'd been following Eric to find out what had happened when he'd gone inside Junior's cabin. The window to the living room had been open and neither of them had kept their voices down, so she'd heard the whole terrible situation.

Now she wasn't sure what to say. Eric's attention would be taken, and rightfully so, by Terrell's circumstances. He wouldn't have time to talk to her about her misgivings, but the word forgiveness still felt wrong.

She recalled the text from Connor when he'd been worried about where Eric was. It had been so strangely unexpected. How was it possible that she'd thought about her loneliness, then received proof that having people care was an option? There was the possibility it could've been a coincidence. She'd always found fate to be little more than preparation meeting opportunity. But this didn't fit that. Connor had cared about Eric and sent him a text. That couldn't have been prearranged. Connor couldn't have known she would be having an existential crisis that very minute either.

But was one text enough to change her feelings on faith and religion? She wandered back to her cabin and in the front door. A chill swept over her the same as it did whenever she walked into her cabin. She headed back to her bedroom and opened the closet. It was even more full now after a few shopping trips. Leaving would be even more difficult than coming because she'd almost doubled the amount of clothing that had to fit in her luggage.

At the bottom of the closet was the plaque with the list of ten rules. She bent and lifted it off the floor. Number one was faith. She now knew just by watching how they treated the boys that they didn't force faith on anyone. She wouldn't be writing them up for abusing government funds.

On the contrary, she wanted to write grant requests for them to get more funding. Rule number two was clean slate. She laughed two short choking laughs before she sank to the floor on her knees. Who needed a clean slate more than she did? She'd watched Eric work to give that very thing to Terrell. Over and over the boy had failed, then succeeded, then failed again. Eric had gone back to him every time, lifted him up, and kept him going.

Eric was the example, and he was showing her without shoving his faith down her throat what that clean slate really was. It was hope. It was the forgiveness she was so terrified of. It was becoming what she'd never been before in all her forty-two years. Free.

If she gave up on needing the perfect surroundings and the perfect clothes and the perfect job, then would she have the clean slate that Wayside offered? If she took it, she could finally whiteboard her memory of her ex-husband, her uncle, her mother, all the people who had let her down. Including her former self. She traced the etching on the wood with her finger. They weren't the Ten Commandments Eric had told her about when they were young, but if she'd seen those hanging on the wall, she wouldn't have read them in the first place.

Ali laid the plaque down on the floor and took a deep breath. "Ali Adeena Wellthorp, I forgive you. You were scared and made decisions that hurt people so you could avoid that fear, but you never succeeded. I forgive you for trying."

She swallowed and felt a weight on her pressing in, not heavy, but present. Eric had talked about forgiving her and forgiving herself, but maybe she needed to forgive

Eric too. He hadn't done anything to win her back after she'd rejected him, but he hadn't tried to prove her wrong either. If he'd come after her when she'd said no and asked her why—asked her to really define why she didn't want to marry him when they'd been so happy—she wouldn't have been able to answer him and may have told him the truth.

While she was at it, she needed to apologize for lying to him. He was a wonderful guy, and she hadn't wanted him to love her anymore. In order to get him to move on, she'd said things that were untrue and hurt him. It was an awful thing to do, and now she knew that. Guilt stabbed at her, and she stared at the plaque, trying to gather all her thoughts.

Number nine, truth, stared at her, begging her to do the right thing. Eric needed to know, even though he'd already forgiven her, that nothing she'd said that day was true. Not even her refusal. She hadn't wanted to say it. She'd wanted to believe they could live happily ever after, but she'd firmly believed that would never be possible for her.

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And then she'd proceeded to make sure it never happened by marrying a man who could never love her.

It was early in the morning, light barely reached over the horizon, but someone would answer the phone in the office even with the time difference. She tugged her phone from her back pocket and pressed the contact. The phone rang loud in her ear. Once. Twice. Three times.

Amelia answered. "Ali. I have the office phone forwarded to my home phone."

Ali cringed. She'd done that for the office too when there had been major clients who might need something in the middle of the night. "I'm sorry for waking you."

"You'd better be on your way back. I've had to run second for you all this week, and I don't want the job anymore." Though Amelia was probably exhausted, she sounded as she always did, completely in control and monotone.

"I can't. I just can't make myself do it."

"You can't make yourself keep your job. That's...interesting." Her monotone morphed into slight derision. "Ali, pull up your big-girl pants and do what you need to do for you. You've never struggled with this. I shouldn't even be having this conversation with you."

"What if there's more to life than just me?" Ali had never considered herself selfish for wanting to be safe and feel secure every moment, but now she saw the trap she'd stepped into. By needing her job to be the stability in her life, she'd allowed herself to

be put in a position where she could be used for that need. “What if I want more than the nine-to-five?”

“Well, you’ll be stuck in the unemployment line if you don’t get that little sports car of yours back to the office.”

Ali snorted. “The sports car needs to go to the shop. I won’t be able to drive it for a while. Oh, and there aren’t shops on every corner out here, so it could be a while. I guess you’ll have to have HR send my discharge paperwork.”

Amelia was silent for a full minute. “You’re serious. Like, you’re not coming back?”

Maybe at some point she’d have to drive back and empty out her house and her desk. Though just thinking about going back to the city made knots form in her stomach. There might be more to her feelings of self-preservation than just the case. Maybe she wasn’t meant to live in the city.

“There must be something in that air out there,” Amelia mumbled, totally unlike her.

“I’ve stumped you. That’s interesting. And yeah, you should try it sometime. The wide-open spaces do something to your heart. It’s good.”

“Thanks, but I actually like my career. Namaste, my friend. Be sure to stop in to clean your desk and say hello at some point.” Amelia hung up the phone.

Ali closed her eyes as her knees screamed at her, reminding her she was on the floor and should get up soon. She’d be limping for a minute or two when she tried to walk. When she’d gone back to her cabin, she hadn’t felt sleepy in the slightest. The room never made her tired, but now her body felt heavy and ready for sleep. She hobbled to the living room, climbed up on the sofa, laid the plaque on the coffee table, and pulled one of the soft throw blankets over her and up to her chin. She drifted off to

sleep to the sound of the men outside her window investigating the fire.

* * *

Eric's footsteps dragged a little more than usual. He'd talked to Terrell, then to the other boys who'd reacted just as Terrell had predicted. They'd told Eric the fire was all Terrell. They'd had nothing to do with it. They'd claimed Terrell had come in and taken their monitors. Either both their stories matched exactly, like they'd practiced ahead of time, or they were telling the truth. He couldn't immediately trust Terrell when it was possible he was the best liar of the three of them—not that Eric wanted to believe that.

One of the firefighters approached him with a clipboard. "Hey, Eric. I just wanted to confirm that the only things lit on fire were the bed and chair. Nothing else in the room was intentionally lit."

Eric assumed as much from what he'd seen and nodded his agreement.

"You might be able to get a service to come out and get the smell out, but it's not foolproof. Once a building has had smoke damage, it's really hard to permanently get rid of the odor," the firefighter told him.

Eric was too tired to think about the situation critically, and his time awake still felt like a waste. He hadn't gotten the pictures he'd needed because of the different license plates. He hadn't gotten any new information because he was hindered by the fact that he wasn't a cop. He'd tried to get to the heart of what was wrong with Ali, but all he'd managed to do was drive a wedge between them when he'd forgiven her.

"Nothing I say is really working out the way I planned today. You might want to talk to Connor if you need information. He owns the cabin anyway."

The firefighter nodded and gripped his shoulder above the cast. "I just wanted to tell you that you all did a good job. Thanks for making sure that fire extinguishers were on hand and up-to-date. Who knows what situation we would've arrived to if you hadn't." He squeezed once more, then turned away.

Eric glanced up and down the row of houses, but Ali was nowhere to be found. He'd hoped that after she'd had a few minutes to think about what he'd said, that she would come back and find him so they could talk. He wasn't about to take away his offer of forgiveness, but she needed to understand that it was meant to free her, not bind her, as it had seemed to.

Connor trudged toward him. "Brendon is waiting for an update in his office. I've spoken to the fire chief, and he knows how to reach me if they need anything else. Now we need to figure out what we're going to do before I call Micha back about the boys."

Exhaustion pulled on Eric, but he trudged after Connor. He wasn't twenty anymore. An awake night wouldn't have bothered him even ten years before, but in his forties, he couldn't do all the things he'd done then. Or at least not as often.

They headed into Brendon's office and settled into the chairs. Brendon was the only man on Wayside Ranch who didn't look like a cowboy, ever. He wore polo or button-up shirts. He wore khaki pants instead of jeans. He would occasionally wear a cowboy hat when he rode a horse, but that had been rare lately.

"Brendon, you look pensive." Connor grinned. "Wonder why that could be."

"Might be the paperwork you left on my desk last night. I don't think this is a good candidate," he mumbled, shoving the folder in front of him to the side.

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“Why? Because she has similar issues to you?”

“You know why.” Brendon bit out each word like they physically hurt.

“Because of Dee,” Connor said.

“You could’ve found any other nurse, but you had to pick that one. So, I don’t approve of this application.”

At first Eric kept his mouth shut, knowing there was more going on than what was on the face of the discussion. He suspected Dee was Brendon’s regret. If so, Brendon was about to face the same situation Eric had just gone through.

“I may not be planning a wedding, but having Ali here has been good,” Eric told him. “We’ve talked.” Eric wasn’t to the point of being at peace about what had happened, but he was closer, and that was the whole point of the mission.

Connor raised his chin and stared at Brendon. “Don’t you think your decision is selfish? This woman needs us. Maybe more than others. Her spine was broken. When her handler brought her to the hospital for treatment, the nurse figured out what was going on and called the police. She doesn’t know how to deal with life in any sense. Before she was captured, she could walk. Now she is relearning how to not only live, but how to live a full life from a wheelchair. Who better to help her than us?”

“We can help her just fine, but you and I both know that’s not what this is about. You’re using this client’s disability to get me to agree to this. That’s wrong on every level. So, who’s being selfish?” Brendon stared at Connor until the tension in the

room was palpable.

“I have the final say. You can agree or disagree, but this is how it will go, and you will work closely with Dee to get the client to a place of safety and contentment.”

“If that’s what you want, Dee is one hundred percent the wrong candidate, and that’s my last word on this.” Brendon looked away and visibly hardened his jaw. Eric had never seen the man wrestle with what to say, or not say, more than at that moment.

“Maybe we should switch gears here and talk about the fire, the boys, and the truth.” Eric glanced between the two men as Junior and Sam walked in and sat down.

“Fine with me.” Brendon pushed aside the rest of the files on his desk. “What happened?”

Connor nodded toward Eric, giving him the floor. “This morning, when I returned with Ali from our stakeout of the abandoned ranch, we came back and noticed the smell of smoke. It was still dark outside, and seeing where the fire was coming from wasn’t easy.” That had to be why he hadn’t noticed it when they were walking, but he had also been distracted by Ali and her reaction to his forgiveness.

“We discovered that one of the empty cabins was on fire.” He paused and nodded toward Junior. “I got Junior up, since his house was immediately in danger, and together we got it under control. But that’s not the end of the story.”

“Nope, that’s the surface story.” Brendon tapped his pen on his desk calendar. “What else?”

“I went to talk to Terrell when I noticed the three melted tracking devices on the charred bed. Those had to be from the boys. Terrell admitted after a few minutes that he was the one who started the fire.”

“What?” Connor turned to look at him. “Are you serious? He was the one I was least worried about.”

Eric nodded, knowing the feeling. “He did it under threat. I don’t know how, but Big E is somehow getting correspondence from the outside. Someone put a hit on Terrell, and Big E is the one who says he’ll do the job. But he’s using the opportunity to play with Terrell’s mind. We need to get the other two boys out of here and back where they can be monitored better.”

Brendon tugged out a drawer, fished around for a file, then drew one from his desk and opened it in front of him. He ran his finger down the first page, then tapped a section. “I don’t know how we’ll split them up. Micha seemed convinced these boys were nonviolent, and if one made trouble, they would all have to return.”

Connor nodded. “Unless I try to manipulate Micha like he did with me. He knew we needed the help, and he offered us a situation that benefited him more than us, with a lot of hoops to jump through. I think that counts as a favor. Which means I can push for a favor from him in return now.”

“You want to see if Terrell can stay? How will that work with offering space to our regular clients?” Brendon asked. “Or is he going to be counted among those?”

Eric wasn’t sure, but Terrell had been a good student there on the ranch and had the potential of doing really great things once he learned to make the right choices. Or at least avoid the bad ones. “We can try. If he gets charged with arson, there’s no way they’ll let him stay though, and he admitted to starting the fire. Our police and fire units might be small, but it won’t take them long to determine what happened.”

“Then we’ll need to trust that God will find a way where there is no way.” Connor stood and went around to the back of his chair and gripped the seatback. “We’re halfway through our missions. Only Brendon, Sam, and Edwyn to go.”

“I think you’re forgetting one very important member of Wayside.” Brendon looked up from his file directly at Connor.

“My dad won’t because Mom is...unreachable. So, three left,” Connor evaded.

“Four,” Eric agreed. If he had to go through the discomfort to get to the truth that was on the other side of regret, then so did Connor. “You need to do this for Lacy too.”

Connor slowly shook his head. “If you want to see Lacy leave, then you keep right on pushing this. She told me that if I ever tried to win her back, she would leave. No questions asked. She wants nothing to do with my sorry heart ever again.”

“Then we’ll have to work to change her mind. Or you will.” Eric shrugged. He’d seen the two of them talking together, and romance didn’t seem like a huge stretch for them.

“I’m not going to push her, and I won’t see her leave because I’ve done something stupid again. I’ve done enough to her.” Connor headed for the door. “But that doesn’t mean you’ll be getting out of it.” He grinned at Brendon. “You’ve encouraged everyone else, now you need to give yourself a pep talk.” Connor held the handle as he turned back to face Eric. “Eric, I’ll let you know what Micha says. In the meantime, plan for that trip to the auction. That’s the only lead we have left to find out who stole Skyfall.”

Eric nodded, wishing he had some other information or offer of support for Brendon, but Brendon wouldn’t want that. Eric hadn’t when Ali had shown up.

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“He doesn’t understand why I don’t want Dee here.” Brendon looked up at him.

“I guess you’ll have to convince him or trust the process.” Eric stood. “It’s not easy.” Lord knew it had been the hardest thing he’d done in a long time.

ChapterTwenty-Three

Ali took a critical look at herself in the mirror. Over the last four days, she’d started wearing a cowgirl hat from the Wayside Ranch hat shed. She’d turned to wearing the tees she’d purchased in Cheyenne and had even broken her rule and purchased two pairs of jeans and some boots that actually fit her feet.

But she hadn’t told Eric yet that she’d quit her job. What if he really had wanted her to go back? If he knew there wasn’t really a date for her to leave, would he be disappointed? She looked in the mirror again, feeling as if she’d forgotten something. Earrings? Check. Cute top that would remind Eric of the things he may have forgotten? Check. Boots that wouldn’t give her blisters? Check.

What could be bothering her? She turned around and her open laptop, though asleep, beckoned her. Something about work... She slapped her forehead and groaned. Cole. If she didn’t actually work for the government anymore and wasn’t working under the protection of an office, how could she help him?

Poor Cole and his situation had been left behind with everything else. Amelia could do the job, but would she? She’d seemed angry to have to do Ali’s job, and this would just be added on to the load. She slowly closed the laptop, settled by the softclickas it closed. This was not a day for that kind of work, and she would deal

with the situation when Cole returned.

Today she had to think about Eric and the stolen horses. Today she could test her idea. Was becoming a PI in her future? Would they even need a private investigator around Piper's Ridge? Would she be able to do it without law enforcement training or would her lawyer knowledge be enough? She shook away the questions. Too many things to think about that she would face after today.

Eric knocked and opened her door. "You ready? The drive is about two hours. Just so you know how long you're stuck with me in the truck."

His blue tee hugged his muscled arm on one side and crumpled up to his shoulder on the other with the cast. Despite having had it put on at a veterinary clinic, he'd taken good care of himself and it was still fairly white and clean. He carried a red-and-black plaid flannel draped over his hand at his waist and his jeans showed off his lean legs.

"Why do cowboys wear their jeans so long?" Ali stared at the pool of fabric around his ankles at his boots. "Do you purposely buy them too big?"

"If you'd let me take you for a ride, you'd understand." He grinned. "Nothing says 'new rider' like showing off your entire boot every time you climb on your horse."

She laughed. "I thought that's why they made all those cool designs on the legs of cowboy boots. Are you telling me those never see the light of day?"

He wagged his eyebrows, and his eyes warmed. "Well, they usually get seen by two people, but that's all that really matters."

A vision of Eric's boots sitting by her front door filled her mind momentarily, and the dirt didn't even bother her, though she did have to also picture a scrub mat just outside. "Is that so? Well, I guess I'll avoid buying such cute boots next time if no

one is supposed to see them.” She put her foot up on her kitchen chair to show off the purple and teal leather that she’d loved the moment she saw them.

Frankly, she’d been surprised that all-leather boots had been more affordable than a lot of the other shoes she owned. Shoes that had to be easier to make and definitely were made of less material.

“They’re great. We’ll need to get them a little dirty next week.”

Ali didn’t remind Eric that he’d told her she could leave and that she should’ve been gone already. And he hadn’t asked her about leaving like she’d expected him to. Then again, maybe he didn’t want to know. The time had gone so fast. Her life hadn’t slowed like she’d hoped it would at her age.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” she said.

He opened the door again and held it for her. A few hours later, she stood at his arm as they waited in line for admittance to the auction. She wasn’t used to the scent, stronger than the barn at Wayside, and pungent. She stayed at his side until he led her up into the small covered arena area, though the barn itself was open-air. Hundreds of people sat scattered around them, holding their auction fans and talking in small groups who all seemed to know each other.

“I suppose I should be careful not to use this to cool off.” She fanned her face.

“Unless you decide you want a horse or two of your own, I wouldn’t.” He laughed.

She enjoyed the feeling of just talking to him, just living alongside him, and doing what needed to be done. While here, she could experience things Eric liked to do, which gave her more joy than she’d expected. She loved the race of her heart when his arm brushed against hers, and she fought against wanting to touch him whenever

he was nearby.

“Terrell is staying. We got word late last night. The other boys will be headed back to California in the morning. Sam took drug-sniffing dogs through their room, since one of our dogs was a retired police dog. He scented, but Connor found nothing else new. There must have been some residual scent from before. Neither boy would talk about how they are getting information from the outside.”

Ali watched the people around her, especially the teens, trying to use them as examples of ways the boys might be communicating with the outside. More than half of the children there, the twelve-to-eighteen crowd, seemed attached at the hip to their phones. Despite their parents being active in conversations with others around them, the younger generation was stuck in tech.

“Do Big E and Jayzon have access to phones?”

Eric shook his head. “No, and our Wi-Fi is fairly spotty. Even if they had phones, they couldn’t use them at the ranch unless they could tap into Connor’s special satellite internet. They’d need a device and the password, though.”

But it was possible. “What about gaming devices? Some of those have chat capabilities and can seem innocent.” Phones seemed to be the common denominator in the crowd, but kids would use whatever device they could get their hands on.

“As far as I know, they didn’t have anything when they came to Wayside, but they also managed to hide meth. It wouldn’t surprise me if they hid other things. I think the boys thought this was going to be a vacation, maybe even a chance to escape.”

She slowly nodded her agreement. “And everything was checked last night?” Maybe she was looking in the wrong place, but a device seemed the easiest way for Big E to get word from the outside. “What about the monitors? Did you get access to see

where they went while they were on?”

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Eric frowned. “No, that was all done on the web, and I’m not sure how they managed to keep enough signal so they knew where the boys were.”

“So, it’s possible that Connor had to set them up with internet in their cabin, just so the bracelets would transmit the location data?” She tapped her chin. “I wonder if the boys figured out how to use that.”

A man behind them grumbled loudly. “I don’t see how this auction is going to be any good when they’re only selling the decent horses to people who can pay to get into the exclusive area. Not fair. I drove three hours to get here. Why should they hold back the good horses?”

Eric glanced at her and nodded toward the exit. She blinked quickly instead of nodding her understanding so the man behind them wouldn’t notice and followed. She hadn’t noted two lines earlier, but now there were two obvious lines forming outside the door. One led to the arena, the other to a separate smaller barn.

A hand-painted sign read that admittance was two hundred dollars.

“Yikes, that’s a steep fee.” Eric glanced around and grimaced. “I don’t have that kind of cash.”

She did, but would he be offended if she offered to help? She’d already received the bottle of wine and had decided that had been a bad idea. This was a genuine way to help. “I can get us in there if you think we might see something we need to.”

He glanced from one barn to the other. “I think it’s fairly safe to say that if the horses

we want to see are here, they are behind that door. That fee will keep out anyone who might suspect what's going on. No one is going to pay that much just to find out if horses are stolen."

Ali threaded her hand through his and headed for the line. "Well, we will. Maybe we'll finally figure out who is behind all these stolen horses."

* * *

Watching Ali pay for the admittance to the private area pricked at his pride more than Eric wanted it to. Pride was a dangerous thing, just as ugly as anger. He'd washed himself clean of the anger, but the pride was more difficult. He wanted to be the one to do things for Ali, but she was as self-sufficient as anyone could be and he could never provide for her more than she could on her own.

The line of people wasn't long, and soon they meandered into the little viewing area with about fifty other people. Eric slowly examined those standing around him, listening for familiar voices and looking for faces. No one around looked immediately familiar.

There was no seating, so all of the men and a few women made their way to the smaller arena, fenced in by wide wooden rails. Ali smiled at a few people and blended in easily with the crowd. Eric was shocked at how quickly she adapted to the group. She'd gone from looking like a complete city girl with very expensive tastes to a woman who fit in easily with him.

"Eric, look." Ali directed his glance to a few men standing on a raised area where announcers would normally sit.

There was a young man standing up there who didn't fit in nearly as well as Ali. Big E's older brother Clayton stood next to Herb, Eric's former boss. Eric's mind raced.

How in the world were those two connected? Herb had never done anything like stealing horses before. What would make him do that now, and what influence did he have over gangs in California? Or was it the other way around? Was the gang threatening Herb for some reason?

“That’s Big E’s brother, isn’t it?” Ali’s voice quivered slightly.

He hadn’t been the boy to aim a gun at her, but that didn’t matter. Seeing him there was probably just as frightening to her. “It is. But why and how is he here and connected to Herb, my former boss?”

She slowly shook her head. “We need to get closer and hear what they’re saying.”

“Not easy to do. They’ve put up a barrier between them and the crowd, and if we get too close, they’ll recognize me for sure.”

She gripped his arm. “Now is the time for you to use that old friendship. Go and talk to him. Ask how he’s doing and about this new venture. He doesn’t have any idea that you know about the stolen horses.”

He threaded his hand through hers because having her touch him on his arm like that distracted him. While her idea was sound, he wasn’t so sure they didn’t suspect he would know. They’d tried twice to take horses from Wayside. Having someone from Wayside suddenly show up and start asking questions would be a giveaway.

“Except he knows me, and that boy up there would recognize me in a heartbeat. He would know that I’d recognize him too.”

“What if we try to get close to them from behind? We might hear something then.”

He loved her enthusiasm. That had been absent in almost everything she’d done since

coming to Wayside. She'd let herself have time off, but now she was all business. He hoped she could find something to do that excited her since she hadn't gone home like he'd thought she would.

"We'll miss looking at the horses if we go back there, and it will be hard enough as it is to be sure that any of the horses we took pictures of in the back of that trailer in the dark are the horses here."

"If Skyfall had stayed, we could've been completely sure." She scrunched her forehead. "Not that I wanted to leave her there any more than you did."

She slowly maneuvered her way through the crowd toward the men on the platform. They were all talking and not paying her any attention, luckily. Eric adjusted his hat to hide his face from the two who would certainly recognize him.

"Excuse me?" Ali added a twang to her voice. "Can you tell me when this is supposed to start? My father is still over in the arena. I don't want to leave him alone for too long. Don't know what kind of trouble he could get himself into." She laughed.

Eric's former boss chuckled softly and leaned over to talk to her. "Well, you should've brought him in here. If he was going to do a little damage to your bank account, he should do it on the good horseflesh."

Eric grimaced at how callously Herb was talking about the abused and neglected horses in the other arena. He'd never questioned where those horses had come from, but there had always seemed to be an abundance of them. Had he been stealing horses all this time?

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She laughed in an airy way that was so different from how she usually sounded. “My father is one of those souls who wants to help hurting animals. That show is where he wants to be.”

“Oh, there’s a few in there that might be worth saving, but just wait until you see what we’ve got for you. Sit tight, little lady, the show is about to start.” Herb turned back to his conversation with the others.

“The boy didn’t recognize me.” She turned her back to the platform and kept her voice low. “I know. Innocent until proven guilty. But Herb seems to know exactly what’s going on. Is this how they usually have it? With two separate places to buy horses?”

Eric had never seen the auction set up that way before, and he’d come to quite a few of these events even after he’d stopped working for Herb. If they had been doing this for a while, he’d missed it completely. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Unless...” She glanced back up at the platform. “What if Big E’s brother Clayton saw the horses when they came to Wayside the first time and he had the idea to take some and use the money for...I don’t know. Maybe setting Big E free? There has to be a lot of money in selling horses.”

Eric nodded as he thought about all the Wayside money he’d spent over the years on buying auction horses. They were often cheaper than buying a foal, but they also involved a lot more training. Especially because the horses needed to be gentle to a fault in order to help the guests.

“Very big money if there are a lot of horses and if the damage to them isn’t so bad that taking them on would be a risk.” He’d purchased only one of those. Thankfully, the horse had made it and become a success, but it had been a huge risk.

“So, the issue is finding the connection between your boss and Big E and the abandoned corral. There has to be something we’re missing.”

The first horse came out from the chute tugging on her reins. The cowboy leading her didn’t have good control, and he held a crop in one hand.

“I don’t want to see that.” Ali turned away from the arena. “Is that one of the horses we saw?” Her face paled at the sound of the man yelling at the horse.

Eric glanced at the arena and put his arm around Ali to steady her. “I don’t think so. Let’s go along the wall where it’s quiet and call Deputy Blake. I think the police should know what we’ve seen.”

She nodded and followed him to a quiet area where he caught sight of a roan with a wide diamond on its forehead very similar to one of the horses Ali had photographed. “I think that’s one of the stolen horses.” It waited just outside the ring while the bidding went on for the first horse.

Eric called Deputy Blake’s cell phone, and he picked up on the second ring.

“Blake.”

“We’re at the livestock auction in Simon. I think we’ve seen something you’ll want to know about.”

“I’m here too. Where are you? It’s too loud to hear anything.”

Eric glanced around the private area, but the deputy wasn't there. "We're in the smaller arena next door. You might want to see if you can get in here. I'm pretty sure the rest of the stolen horses are here."

"Give me a few minutes. I'll do my best. I don't have extra money to get in there on a whim."

Eric dug his red paper ticket out of his pocket. "I've got an in for you."

Ali narrowed her eyes in question as he hung up the phone.

"We need to go out for a minute," Eric said. "Deputy Blake will come back in using my ticket."

"And how will he know the horses are stolen?"

"You'll be with him." He walked alongside her, shuffling through people gently as they headed for the door.

"And what about you?" She glanced over her shoulder.

"Not sure if you noticed, but there's not much I can do." Though he hated just letting her go back inside without him.

Deputy Blake met them outside the door by the ticket taker. "Eric, Ali." He nodded at them. "You're sure those are the stolen horses?" He kept his voice low.

"At least one of them," Ali said.

Officer Blake looked at the door, then touched the walkie on his shoulder and said something to the dispatcher. "Let's see if they'll let us all in to ask a few questions."

It's time this case came to a close."

ChapterTwenty-Four

Ali clung to Eric's hand as they followed Deputy Blake back inside. He'd managed to get past the ticket taker by saying he was the security, but the man didn't seem to believe him. The moment they got past the clutch of people near the door, the feeling in the arena was different from before.

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Big E's brother wasn't on the podium, and neither was Herb. Only one man stood up there, nervously calling bids and searching the crowd. The horse Eric had been sure was stolen was gone, probably back in holding, waiting for the winner to pay, or just hiding evidence.

"Where did they go?" Ali asked him quietly.

Deputy Blake slowly looked over the whole arena in a sweeping glance. "You two, head that way. I'll go this way. Meet me around the back. If you see anyone, do not engage. Wait for me to get there."

Eric touched his hat brim to give silent agreement, and Ali followed him around the left side of the arena. Horses stood with their handlers in a line, waiting to go out into the arena. Skyfall would've been part of that lineup if he hadn't found her. But so many other families were missing horses, and he had to make sure this was stopped. Helping abused and neglected horses find good homes had always made him feel like he was doing good work. This was so wrong.

Ali stayed close to his side as they went farther away from the crowd and the safety of being out in the open. Could he protect her if they came upon Big E's brother or Herb? He wasn't wearing his gun since he generally only needed it on the ranch. That decision seemed poor the farther they went.

"It feels strange to be back here," Ali whispered. "I don't like it."

He didn't either. There were too many places for people to hide and surprise them. Walking through the quiet, out of the way area was risky. He held his finger to his

lips and concentrated on listening to every sound. People made noise before they moved so he just needed to listen for noises.

Big E's brother swung out from behind a stock trailer and leveled a pistol at them. "What are you two doing back here?"

Eric put up his hand. "Just exploring. Didn't figure you'd mind after charging so much for a ticket. I was just looking for a quiet corner to be with my gal."

"Go find a quiet corner somewhere else." He waved the gun to the left. "You don't need to be back here."

"Are you the security team? I thought I saw the Piper's Ridge deputy doing that." Eric stalled and shrugged, hoping he looked and sounded innocent.

"There's no deputy doing anything. Now, get out of here. This area is private."

"Sorry, man. I didn't see it blocked off." Eric turned but walked very slowly, hoping the boy would just walk the other way. If they made it look like they'd listened, Big E's brother would have no reason to stay there and he and Ali could continue on their way to meeting Deputy Blake on the other side.

"Just mind your own business and go buy a horse or something." Clayton spread his feet and crossed his arms, blocking their path.

As soon as they were around a corner and out of his sight, Ali stopped. "What do you think is beyond him that he's hiding? Is there proof back there?" Her eyes lit up. "We need to get past him."

"Not sure if you noted this, but he has a gun and we don't. Plus, and I don't mean to point out that you're usually the one to tell me to call the police. We should wait and

let Deputy Blake find him.”

“I’m sure he’s coming around the other way. I wonder if Herb headed him off?” She craned her neck to look behind Eric again. “Clayton is still standing there.”

Eric grabbed his phone and called up Lacy’s number. Ali gave him a suspicious look, but he held up his hand for her to wait. “Hey, Lacy. I need a favor.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“I want you to look up any connection between Herb White, my former boss, and Big E’s family, especially Clayton. I’m not sure if there will be anything online, but would you look for me?”

“Sure,” she answered. “I’ll have Brendon help me too. That man, despite hating anything having to do with the internet, can find a needle in a haystack.”

“Great. Let me know what you find, if anything.”

“Dare I ask why? I know you’re at the auction, is Herb dirty?”

He hated to think someone he had connections to might have been practicing something so awful. “Innocent until proven guilty, but it’s not looking good.”

“Sorry, Eric. You left his employment years ago. Nothing he does says anything bad about you.”

“I know.” But that didn’t stop him from feeling anger and resentment. People weren’t supposed to change that much.

Deputy Blake came around the back and stopped where Clayton was standing. Eric

waited, listening.

“Can I see your ID, please?”

The boy raised his chin. “I don’t need to show you anything. I’m part of the team running this whole thing.”

“Actually, you do. You see, in Wyoming, it’s legal to open carry if you’re a resident of Wyoming and over the age of twenty-one. If you do not fit the requirements, then we have a problem.”

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Clayton reached in his back pocket and, in the next instant, pulled a knife and jabbed toward the deputy's neck. Eric raced over to help, and Ali screamed for him to wait. He couldn't stand there and let the deputy be killed.

"You think you can help?" Clayton laughed.

He'd only managed to nick the deputy, but his neck was already bleeding. Eric widened his stance and tried to distract Clayton so the deputy could call in help. Ali spread her arms wide to keep the boy from running. Eric wanted to tell her to stay back, but that would only distract her, and he wanted her to remain focused.

Deputy Blake radioed in what was going on as he applied pressure to his wound. Eric slowly moved closer to Big E's brother.

"What do you think you're going to do?" the boy taunted.

"Make sure you go to jail. Not just for assaulting an officer, but for horse theft, sale of stolen property, assaulting the boys on my ranch, and a whole list of things. I'm sure the good deputy would love to come up with more things to add to the list."

The boy smirked. "And while you're here worried about me, who's watching Terrell? You were so focused on the horses that you forgot about him. Not surprising at all. Boys like him fall through the cracks. We all fall through the cracks. I'm not going anywhere with you guys, and neither is my boy, E. The others are already out there making sure E is free."

"What about Jayzon?" Eric hoped to distract him long enough for help to arrive.

“He’s a nuisance and he knows too much.”

Ali slipped in closer to Clayton, and Eric had to hold back from saying anything. Clayton waved his knife at her. “Get out of my space.”

Eric’s cast was made of some kind of plaster and would probably require a saw to get through, meaning that little knife wouldn’t do much damage. Assuming that he used the knife and not the gun. Either way, Ali was getting too close, and if anyone got hurt, it would be him. Not her.

Eric tucked his arm in front of him like a shield and rushed the juvenile. Clayton’s eyes widened slightly as he jumped back, raising his knife to protect himself. Eric blocked the thrust with a quick lift of his casted arm, sending the knife flying. While he had surprise on his side, he swung his arm down over Clayton’s head.

Deputy Blake raised his pistol. “Freeze. Hands up.” He’d managed to bunch some fabric and staunch his neck wound, but he was looking mighty pale. “Ali, an ambulance is on the way. I want you to stay back.” He didn’t take his eyes off the boy.

Ali raised her hands and backed up a few steps. Eric found himself in a precarious position. He held on to Clayton’s wrist with his good hand, but the other was fairly useless for anything but a club. After hitting the boy twice, his arm was already in more pain than he’d had the last few days.

“Eric, slowly back away,” Deputy Blake said.

“If he moves, I’ll shoot him,” Clayton said. “He’s my ticket out of here. See if you can stop me.” Clayton raised his gun and shot at Deputy Blake. Eric tried to free himself in the split second Clayton was focused on the deputy, but the boy was too quick. Clayton wrenched his arm around, flipping Eric’s hold and freeing himself.

Clayton grabbed Eric and wrapped his arm behind his back. “Now, you’re my shield. Get me out of here.”

Eric didn’t want to go anywhere because if he did, he was dead. This kid wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him, and he had no protection.

“You heard me. Move.” He kned Eric in the back of the legs, forcing him forward toward the back doors and away from anyone who could stand in their way.

ChapterTwenty-Five

All the air left Ali’s lungs in a squeak as she watched helplessly as Clayton shoved Eric through the back door. She glanced at Deputy Blake, but he was in no condition to run after anyone, and neither she nor him were safe yet. Herb was still somewhere, probably nearby.

She headed for Officer Blake and helped him sit. With his thick and heavy tac vest in the way, it wasn’t easy. “Who will go after him?” she asked.

“Backup is on the way.” Officer Blake winced. “Do not go after them. That young man is wanted in two states. He’s not going to just drop his weapon and come quietly.”

That wasn’t the answer she wanted. After waiting for over twenty years to finally have her chance with the man she loved, watching him get forced to walk away and possibly never return was tearing up her insides. “What can I do?”

“Stay right where you are.” He closed his eyes and slid back carefully until he could lean against a wall.

Finally one person wandered back where they were from the crowded arena. “Oh

my!”

Ali held up her hands. “It wasn’t me. He ran that way. Get help!” She pointed to the open door in the distance. The man turned and ran out the way he’d come. She had no way of knowing if he would help or not.

“What can I do for you?” She helped Blake press the cloth to his neck, though she had no idea where he’d gotten it from. It was already bright with blood.

“Stay here with me. That way my backup can focus on going after Eric and helping me. If they have to go after you too, we might be spread too thin.”

“What about Herb? We can’t just let him get away. He has to be somewhere in the building.” Not that she was feeling particularly brave enough to go after him. He could be just as armed and just as dangerous as Clayton.

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“We know his name. We can find him. He can only hide for so long before we will. Then we’ll know what’s going on and where the connections are.”

Ali’s phone buzzed, and she pulled it free of her jeans pocket. Lacy had sent her a text.

Where is Eric?

Ali quickly replied, telling her that Eric had been taken by Big E’s brother. Lacy quickly replied.

We’ve found the connection, but it doesn’t matter. There are three cars here full of young men with guns. We’ve kept Terrell hidden, but the other two seemed to know this was going to happen and were ready to go with them.

Ali swallowed the bile in her throat and the overwhelming rush of fear that laid on her. She told Officer Blake what the text said. “It wasn’t just a threat. I thought the rest of his friends were in jail. I thought Clayton was trying to distract us, not telling the truth.”

Officer Blake was losing his fight with consciousness, but he opened his eyes. “Couldn’t hold them indefinitely.”

Ambulance sirens wailed in the distance. Soon Ali could hand over the officer’s care to someone who knew what they were doing. But then what? No one knew where Clayton had taken Eric or what he would do with him once he didn’t need Eric as a shield anymore. Would someone find him on the side of the road? She was far from

home with only Eric's truck and no keys. Stranded.

If only she'd pushed forward and helped him instead of standing there. Why did she always let people bully her? Two people rushed in pushing a gurney, and Ali backed away from the officer to give them room. One of the EMTs shouted questions at her, and she responded, but her focus was elsewhere.

Where were the officers who were supposed to come? Were they helping Wayside or were they still hours away, driving here? Piper's Ridge was two hours away. If they weren't nearby, they would be no help at all. Ali tugged her new hat low on her forehead and ducked back along the way Clayton had gone since no one was paying her any attention.

The door was still open where Clayton had taken Eric, and no one waited in the parking lot. There were trailers and trucks, but everyone was busy with the auction inside. Most had no idea anything was going on just a few feet away.

She pressed against the back of the building and slid along, looking down the rows of vehicles for any movement. It had been too long. Eric had to be gone, but she couldn't give up. She might be the only hope of finding him.

When she reached the end of the building, she crept around the corner and found Herb standing there smoking a cigarette with another man. He narrowed his eyes at her and strode her way. "Fancy meeting you back here."

Her stomach protested, telling her to run instead of talking to this man. "I was looking for someone. They wandered out the back door, but I can't find them anywhere."

He nodded slowly, and the reek of cigarette smoke clung to him like a haze. "Looking for someone, eh? Your father or the man who was with you earlier?" His

eyes gleamed, and he gave a half smirk like he was much smarter than she was.

She hated the feeling of oppression pouring off of him. She wanted to scream for the police and have this all be over, but the police weren't there. She was all that stood between finding Eric and letting him die. "The man who was with me."

"I guess he should've known better than to wander into a private area. This back here is where we conduct business, and that isn't a welcome place for just anyone. Understand?"

She slowly nodded, letting him think she was simple and had no idea what was going on around her. "Yes." She swallowed.

"Now, I think I know right where your man is hiding. Why don't you come along with me." He gripped her arm in a fierce hold. "And if you scream, you'll never see him or your father again."

She turned her body so he couldn't see her reach into her jeans pocket and pull out her canister of lipstick. It retailed for over eighty dollars, and if anyone found it, they would know it didn't belong there. She dropped it in the hay and prayed Herb didn't see it later. Ali bit her lip to keep from screaming as Herb led her toward a large stock trailer that looked like it could carry horses or cattle. She wasn't sure if there was a difference. He opened the back door and led her inside.

With a tug, he opened a door to a very small sleeping area in the front of the trailer and shoved her inside. Eric wasn't there, and she turned to scream as he locked her in. He laughed on the other side. "If you scream in here, I'll come out and gas you. You can either be awake when you see Eric again, or not. Your choice." He laughed as he walked away.

* * *

Eric took a moment to be thankful that Clayton had dropped his knife. At least he only had to worry about one weapon now. The one firmly pressed into his kidney. For as many people as he'd seen milling about before the auction, the area behind the arena was barren. There was no one he could look to for help.

His phone buzzed in his back pocket loud enough for Clayton to hear. He released Eric's arm to grab the phone while pressing the barrel of the gun harder into his back. He tossed the phone under a nearby car and kept them moving toward the edge of the gravel parking area.

A black sedan waited under a tree, secluded from the other vehicles. The plates were from California, meaning this was the car Clayton had brought with them, or at least one of them.

"What's the connection?" Eric stalled. "How'd you know Herb?"

"Nice try." Clayton shoved him toward the car. "Open the door and get inside."

He didn't have much choice in the matter. If Clayton shot him at this range, he wouldn't live long enough to finish his breath. He opened the door and climbed inside the stifling vehicle. They couldn't trace him using the location of his phone now. No one but Ali knew who he was with nor where they would be going. He tried to give his worry to God, but this was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

Clayton got into the car and turned the ignition. "If you try anything, I'll leave you in a secluded ditch with a shot to your gut. That way you'll know I meant business for hours before you die. Alone."

Alone hadn't bothered him before, but now he had a life to look forward to. He wouldn't just sit back and take what was coming or he'd end up dead anyway. At some point, a moment of weakness would appear, and then he'd strike. He just

needed to live long enough to see it.

ChapterTwenty-Six

Ali headed to the farthest corner from the door, afraid Herb might be standing there listening for her to react. She was a good actress most of the time, but faking hysterics wasn't one of her strengths, and Herb had left her with a secret weapon. She lifted her billowy shirt and tugged her phone from her back pocket.

The text from Lacy stared at her. The ranch was in danger. How could she ask them for help? She sent off a quick text, letting them know again that Eric had been taken by Big E's brother and she had been locked up in a horse trailer by Eric's former boss.

She watched as her connection slowly spun. Being outside her phone's normal time zone meant she'd had to charge it twice a day just to keep it charged. Now, after hours of being off the charger, it was nearing a dead battery.

A reply came quickly. The boys here got Big E and Jayzon and left after they searched for Terrell and couldn't find him. Connor convinced them the police were coming, even though all of the squads are currently busy.

One of the officers would be in the hospital, probably for a while. She hoped he didn't die. Her heart sped up painfully. If Eric were here, he'd pray for him. Eric would trust that his God would take care of Officer Blake. She glanced up at the ceiling of the trailer. "If you're real and you're out there, I will listen to Eric if you let him and Officer Blake live."

She wasn't sure if that counted as a prayer or not, but that was how she felt. If Eric's

God was powerful enough to get all of them out of a situation that seemed inescapable, then she'd have no choice but to listen.

The little living and sleeping area in the trailer was cramped and hot, making her dizzy. All the windows were closed and sealed shut. She couldn't unlock them or open them, and sweat gathered in her armpits and glistened over her forehead. The heat inside a vehicle could kill a person if they were left closed up for hours in the summer. Herb would have to run the auction, meaning she was stuck until they were done. If he didn't come back until they were finished, would she still be alive to escape?

She felt around all of the windows, looking for any hint of an opening or a breath of air. She found a desk and started pulling open drawers, looking for keys for the windows. Inside she found cancelled checks and receipts. As she flipped through the crumpled papers she found veterinary bills in various states, including California. Another was a tour of a park preserve for wild horses.

She held those aside. Maybe her search was illegal, but she wasn't an officer and Herb had locked her in. What else was she to do besides slowly lose her mind in the tightly locked up area? At least it was different from the cabin at Wayside and smelled like horses, not like all-season carpet.

Shoved in the back corner of the drawer was a small ledger with three names and multiple dollar amounts. Were these the guys he paid to steal the horses? Or were they the other three boys who had been in the car with Big E's brother?

A memory forced its way to the front of her mind. Jayzon's brother had been in that group too. Would he protect Jayzon, or were those two boys part of the plot to steal the horses? If only she knew the names... She grabbed the ledger and set it aside with the receipts.

If this was where someone had stayed, were there other clues here or even something she could use to get free? She started lifting the mattress and pulling up sheets, looking for anything useful, but all that came from her search was fatigue and more sweat. The heat was like a sauna, and she was struggling against crippling lethargy.

On the other side of the locked door, someone opened the gate to the trailer and led a horse inside. She couldn't see who it was to know if it was Herb or someone who might help her. Then again, Herb had probably warned all his men not to touch the door. A few minutes later, the truck used to pull the trailer started, and she lost her footing as it lurched forward.

All the windows in the sleeping section were marbled glass, and she couldn't see out, but she could feel as they accelerated out of town and even when they pulled off the smaller road to speed onto the freeway.

She dug her phone from her pocket and sent Lacy a text. Her battery was now down to three percent.

I don't know if you'll be able to send any help, but I'm still trapped and we're on the move. I'll send a pin as soon as we stop.

If she left her phone map open, the battery would drain quickly. Lacy answered that they were doing their best and that she would pray. Ali turned off her phone to conserve battery and shoved it back in her pocket to keep it hidden, then stuffed the ledger and receipts into her bra strap since she didn't have big enough pockets. If she lost any of those things, there would be no physical proof of what Herb had done.

As the trailer rumbled down the road, the windows slowly opened, sending air flying all around and finally cooling her down. She sat on the rumpled bed and held on tight to the wall. Wherever they were headed, she wouldn't have anyone close at hand to help her.

After quite some time, the truck pulled off the highway and onto a road that sounded rumibly like gravel, and dust floated into the windows. If the driver were concerned about her screaming, he didn't show it by closing them. She caught sight of trees and farms, but no people.

Finally, the truck turned and came to a slow rolling stop. She heard the driver leave the pickup and slam the door, then he came back and slowly took the horse out, giving her plenty of time to worry about what was coming next.

People didn't live after they saw who had captured them. She'd seen Herb and Clayton's faces. Knew their names. This wasn't going to end well for her, and the end was coming with the opening of the trailer door.

She raced for the flimsy locked door and looked for something she could use to barricade herself in. Other than the thin mattress, everything was secured, built into the frame of the trailer. She remembered her promise to Lacy and fished out her phone, hit the button to pin her location and shot the text to Lacy.

Keys jangled outside, then slipped into the lock. Ali shoved her phone back in her pocket as Herb opened the door and stared her down. "Time for you to come on out and face the music. Time to tell the truth, little lady."

* * *

Visionsof his eminent death stalled Eric's thoughts. One match would start an inferno. That's all it would take in the room full of dry hay and dust. Normally, he enjoyed being in the barn. He knew exactly what was expected of him there. He could be who he needed to be, no anger, no resentment, just the peace of knowledge of his surroundings.

But this barn didn't hold that peace.

The stalls had been cleared of all the animals, which were probably at the auction that he hadn't stopped. If most of Herb's team was headed back to California soon, did they need the barn anymore? Would they just torch it with him locked inside to get rid of the evidence? He searched for a way out again.

The door swung open, and Herb shoved Ali toward him. He caught her before she could fall to the cement floor. At least if they had to, they could try to brush all the hay away from the center of the room. That might save them in a fire if the whole barn didn't collapse on top of them. Why he kept thinking of fire, he wasn't sure.

Ali clung to his arm as she caught her footing, but he couldn't do anything before Herb slammed the door shut again.

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“I’m so glad to see you alive.” She flung her arms around his neck. “I was sure they’d just kill me and be done with it.”

Eric had thought the same. What were Herb and Clayton hoping to accomplish by keeping them alive? There had to be something. But was it better than the fiery death he kept envisioning?

“They’ve given me no clues. I don’t know why they didn’t just finish us off at the auction, unless they didn’t want to be found out quickly, which would make sense.”

Ali fished in her back pocket and handed him her phone. “I told Lacy I would send a pin when we stopped. I did, but my battery is almost dead.”

He turned the phone on, and the battery sat at three percent. On his phone, the last minutes of battery life seemed to go the fastest.

“When was the last time you sent a text?” He glanced at the time. He had to estimate what time Clayton had taken him based on when they’d arrived at the auction and what time it was now. That meant he’d been missing for about two and a half hours.

She took back the phone and looked at the text. “When the truck stopped, about five minutes ago. The ride in the trailer was tough. I don’t think people are supposed to be back there when it’s in motion.”

“Not saying people don’t do it, but, no, I don’t think so.” He rested his hand at her waist, needing to touch her and make sure he wasn’t imagining having her with him. “How did you get caught? Herb wasn’t there when we faced Clayton. Is Officer

Blake all right?”

She flinched. “I wanted to go after you even though he told me not to. I was worried that if no one went after you, no one would find you. Herb didn’t believe my story about my father. I thought I’d fooled him, but he must have recognized you when we went to talk to him before. You didn’t show your face and I was sure that with the cast, he wouldn’t be able to tell who you were from your body, but I was wrong.”

“It’s all right. We just need to get out of here now. I don’t know where we are in relation to Wayside, but I doubt there’s any way they could know where we are. That means it’s up to us.” Which meant he had to make sure Ali didn’t get hurt in the process.

“The trailer was backed into the barn when we arrived. I don’t know where we are.”

He thought he knew, but couldn’t be certain until he could look outside. “I think we’re back at the abandoned ranch, but I can’t be sure.”

The door swung open, and Herb came in. He pointed a gun at them and dipped the barrel to the floor. “Sit.”

He wasn’t a dog, and getting up off the ground quickly with his arm in a cast would be difficult, which was probably why Herb wanted him to do it. At least now they might learn why they’d been kept alive.

Ali lowered herself by crossing her legs and slowly dropping to the ground like a queen of yoga. He wasn’t going to look half that graceful and might even look a little stupid. He crouched, his knees cracking slightly at the pressure.

“All the way down, Eric. I’m not having you lunge at me. You might only be five years younger, but I’m not taking any chances.” He cocked the pistol.

Eric complied, though he hated to. That meant Ali would be off the floor quicker than he could be and putting herself in danger first. “Okay, we’re your literal captive audience.” He stared at his former boss, wondering what could’ve happened to the man to make him do this.

“I’ve struggled to find a good horseman after you left. We had it good, you and I. I would find all the pretty horses, and you would make sure they were fit for buyers. Our system worked. But in the last few years, buyers have had less desire to take on the challenge of a horse who’s been neglected. They want a horse they can ride when they have time and ignore or just look at the rest of the time.”

Eric had noticed that the stock of neglected animals was much smaller than when he’d worked for the auction. Not even half as many. Were people taking better care of their animals? If so, that was good, but what had Herb done to keep up his income?

“That’s when I met Kameron at a casino in Wind River. He was passing through Wyoming on his way to Chicago to visit family there. Who knew that high-level gang members took road trips?” Herb laughed. “I never did. But he was a nice enough guy and told me I was missing out by focusing on horses that should be made into glue. I needed to get my hands on good horses and sell them for profit.”

“And that’s how you met Clayton.” Eric filled in the gap.

“Not until about two weeks ago. He doesn’t want to be here, and he’s headed home soon. He’s just staying with me until he can get his brother and get out of here. When I told him that I was wanting a few things from Wayside, he was all for helping me. I never dreamed that one of the things I would want would walk right up to me at the auction. But you didn’t even say hello.” Herb sneered. “I thought we parted on good terms.”

Eric had too. At least Herb hadn’t been dirty when Eric had worked for him. “What

do you want from me?”

“I need someone to take care of my horses, especially now that I’m losing over half of my team. Through Kameron, I’ve met someone who is helping me get horses from California. They are virtually untraceable. It’s perfect. But they’re unbroken. Fully wild. I need someone who can break them enough to show them. I don’t care if someone gets them home and finds out they need thousands of dollars in training. That’s not my job. My job is to sell pretty horses.”

“Including mine.” Eric kept his voice low. Angering Herb while he was stuck on the floor was a bad idea. He had no weapon, no shield, no help against a gun and an angry man.

“Yours is so pretty. I could’ve gotten so much money for her if she’d been in better condition when we got her the first time.”

“So you thought that, by taking my horse, I would come find you and you’d...what? Offer me a job?” It sounded ludicrous.

“You forgot one important part.” Herb aimed the pistol at Ali.

Eric flung his arm in front of her. It wouldn’t do much except slow down a bullet, but maybe that would be enough.

“You forgot the part where I tell you that if you don’t take my offer, you’ll die. You see, I’ve gotten very rich this last year. I’m not willing to go back to doing what I was before. Barely able to pay my bills. I only do the other auctions to keep up appearances and keep my tax exempt status. By charging so much for admission to see the horses I want to sell, I make sure that no one gets in who might not be interested or who might be too interested.” He laughed. “And the fee just adds more money to my pocket.”

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“Interested like Deputy Blake?” Eric asked.

Herb rolled his eyes. “I had him taken care of. We don’t need security there, so when my ticket taker sent me an urgent message about the police, I sent Clayton after him. I’m sure he won’t be a further issue.”

Ali touched his arm and squeezed. She hadn’t had a chance to tell him about Deputy Blake yet, but he hoped that squeeze meant the officer was going to be okay.

“So, the offer is that I work for you, or you shoot me?” He wasn’t going to help Herb commit crimes. End of story.

“Oh, no. I’ll shoot her so it’s over quickly for her. But you... I have much more drawn out and painful plans for you to give you plenty of time to change your mind. Agree to my terms and you save both of you. Say no, and you both die. Now,” he turned his cold stare on Eric, “what will it be?”

ChapterTwenty-Seven

Aplan formed quickly in Ali’s mind as she linked her arm around Eric’s elbow in what she hoped Herb would think was a show of support or fear. All that lifting she’d done in the gym was about to come in handy. Slowly, while Herb was focused on Eric, she gathered a handful of hay dust in her opposite fist.

“What do you say, Eric? You know there’s only one choice.”

Eric wasn’t powerless, just hindered, and she wasn’t about to let both of them die

because he'd been trampled. But she couldn't accurately throw dust in Herb's eyes from her position on the floor. She closed her eyes for a second and felt peace like she'd never felt before. All of the questioning and worry disappeared as she tightened the muscles in her legs in preparation to push them both up off the floor.

Eric weighed more than she did, and she hoped that as she rose, he'd help too and lean against her. With his uneven weight distribution because of the cast, he'd need her help to stand from the floor at all. Getting up quickly would take faith.

Suddenly her peace made all the sense in the world. Okay, I get it. I'll ask Eric more about You when we get out of here.

With a silent count to three, she braced her arm tightly and gave Eric's arm a slight squeeze to warn him, then forced her body to rise as quickly as she could. Eric was surprised, but only for a fraction of a second before she felt him add his momentum. She made it to her feet and flung the dry dust in Herb's eyes.

He tried to block her with his arm, but that meant he was no longer aiming a gun at them. Ali raced to the door and flung it open, Eric right on her heels. "Go!" He put pressure on her back to get her moving.

She didn't know what or who was out there. Would there be more people to shoot at them? A bullet whizzed by her, and she fought against the urge to drop to her belly and just give up. Eric gripped her arm and took off running for the trees.

The area looked so different from where they were, but they'd been taken to the same little ranch holding area where they'd found Skyfall. Ali ran past trees as branches cut into her cheeks and pulled on her loose shirt.

Eric gripped her arm as she raced by and yanked her behind a tree. He let go of her arm and held a finger to his lips for quiet. They weren't going to just let her go. Not

Eric either, but for sure not her. Even if he'd said he would take the job, they would've had to kill her because she could report them.

"We have to keep going," she whispered without making a sound. The hair on her arms stood on end, and she could hear men walking toward them. Just ducking out from behind the tree would be dangerous. Staying there would mean certain death.

Eric nodded, looked over his shoulder, waited about three seconds that seemed to drag on forever, then ran for another tree. Ali followed, taking a slightly different route. If the men shot at them, she didn't want both of them getting hit. If they stayed apart, they both had a better chance.

She heard the sound of cars and remembered the four-lane highway that was on the other side of the small pasture. The area wasn't that big, but it was open. The men chasing them would be less likely to shoot or come after them if there were witnesses to catch them in the act.

Reaching Eric, she silently motioned for the road. He looked confused since she was pointing in the direction they'd come, but she had to make him understand without giving him the whole play by play of what she'd just thought about and turned over in her head. She gripped his cheeks tightly, feeling the roughness of the stubble coming in so many hours after his morning shave. She kissed him, trying to put every ounce of feeling for him in that one kiss. Lord, if you're there and only one of us can make it out, make it him. Just reconnecting with him has been the fulfillment of a lifelong goal. Thank you...

She broke free of his hold and raced back into the trees.

* * *

Eric opened his mouth to scream her name, then swallowed it back. If he made noise,

he'd draw attention to them. Where could she be going and why? He dodged behind a wide tree and looked back at the men slowly hunting through the trees to find them.

He counted three men, none of them Herb or Clayton, meaning there were at least five men available for the chase. Five against two, and they were all armed. He and Ali weren't. Eric tried to make his mind work like Ali's, but he couldn't think of what her plan might be. They had to get off this property, not race back onto it.

Eric followed her, picking his path carefully. His cast, though dirty now, was still a huge white mass in the middle of a densely treed area. Not the easiest to hide. Someone behind him shot what sounded like a small caliber pistol, and he held his position, turning his search toward Ali.

He couldn't see her anymore, so there was no way the men could've been shooting at her, but that didn't mean a bullet couldn't manage to get through. Trees were pretty good at stopping bullets, but he refused to trust completely in their ability to protect him. He dodged ahead, trying to keep out of the men's line of sight.

Road noise from the freeway made hearing the men's movement almost impossible. If he couldn't hear them, he had to be even more careful. A little white outbuilding that looked like it might house ATVs sat to his left. He barely caught a glimpse of Ali's brightly colored boots as she ducked around the corner.

He raced after her, needing to know that she was protected. She could be walking into a trap, and he would never be able to get her out. His phone was gone, so he couldn't call for help. Hopefully her text to Lacy was enough to get someone on the way. If they weren't, rescue was up to them.

How could he communicate with her without making a noise? He caught up to her as she slowly crept around the building, scaring her.

“I wasn’t sure where you went,” she whispered with almost no sound.

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“I wasn’t sure where you were going.” He gestured to the little shed. “We’re twice as far from where we need to be now.”

She shook her head and pointed toward the horse fence about sixty yards away. “The highway is on the other side of that fence. If we can make it there, we’ll be out in the open, and there’s enough traffic that no one is going to shoot us in front of that many witnesses.”

Smart. He hadn’t thought of that. He nodded his agreement, then headed back to the corner of the shed to see how far away the men were. There was a long stretch of wide open grass they would have to cross before they could hide in the trees again. If they stayed inside the trees, they’d have to go way out of their way, meaning more danger.

Their pursuers weren’t far behind. If he and Ali didn’t run now, they’d lose their chance. Ali pointed at the little shed. “They would never believe we stopped and hid in here.”

He shook his head vehemently. “No. Your highway idea was good, but that is not. We’ll get caught for sure. They know where we were headed. When they don’t see us, they’ll double back and find us hiding in here.”

She ignored him and inched her fingers under the grungy window, then slowly slid it up. He cringed at what that had to have done to her nails. She was tougher than he’d thought. She turned to him. “You’ve only got one arm, you go first. If I hear them, I’ll shove you in and follow.”

He snorted. “I’d bet you’d love to shove my rear into the unknown.” He leaned in the window, then tucked and rolled. It wasn’t graceful or correctly done with his cast, but he made it into the building quickly.

Ali followed with a lot more grace, then quickly closed the window and sank to the floor with her back against the wall, completely hidden from view if the men peeked inside. Eric hated maneuvering onto the floor again, because getting up quickly was impossible without Ali’s help, but since he was mostly there after falling in the window, he crawled over and sat next to her.

“Now what?” he asked, reaching for her hand with his good one.

“I think now would be a good time for you to pray.” Her jaw was firm, her hold tight, and her stare held somewhere across the room.

He opened his mouth to question what had changed with her when he heard voices right outside the building. Now was not the time for asking questions out loud about her sudden come to Jesus. He bowed his head and silently said the most fervent prayer he could recall praying, all while squeezing her hand tightly.

While it felt like forever, the voices outside faded quickly. Ali glanced up at the window, keeping her voice low. “It won’t take long before they discover we didn’t run across the clearing. We should go now. But not toward them, obviously. We should head back toward the trees, just to the west, then around to the fence. Keep to the fence until we get all the way to the road.”

As long as the fence kept them in cover, he could agree to that. “Is your battery dead?” If it wasn’t, now was the time to send one last plea for help.

She leaned against him to pull her phone from her back pocket. Now would be the worst time in the world for another kiss, but the thought crossed his mind as her soft

hair brushed against his cheek. Even with all she'd been through, she still looked amazing to him.

Ali clicked the side of her phone, and the screen stayed completely black. "Dead." She winced. "I think I hate that word."

He nodded, committing himself to helping her off the ground this time. He pushed against the rough wall and used it as leverage to slowly stand, then held out his arm for her. "We'll get through this. I know it." He didn't, but nothing good could come of actually considering the odds.

Ali sighed and brushed off her palms on her jeans. "Okay, let's get out of here. On the count of three, we open this door and run for cover."

Eric nodded, prepared to actually open it and race ahead of her. If anyone waited out there, they'd be focused on him, not her. She might escape to the road if he could divert the men chasing them. As she opened her mouth to start the count, his mind raced. He could allow her to run to safety if he took off heading in the direction he'd gone at first, toward the gravel road they came in on.

"One, tw—" The door swung open, and Big E and Jayzon stood there looking far older than seventeen with pistols in their hands.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ali froze in place as Big E glanced between the two of them slowly. She could see him thinking, calculating, but she wasn't sure if he was going to help them or deliver them to Clayton. Then again, why would he help them? He'd said from the start he wanted no part of Wayside.

"Big E, you've got the chance this second to do the right thing. Let us go." Eric held

his hand up and slowly positioned himself in front of her.

“You want me to let you go? My brother told me to help find you and bring you back. When we follow orders, we stay out of trouble.”

Eric kept his voice steady and stayed still. “That’s life. You don’t have to follow his orders. Following the law is following orders.”

Jayzon lowered his gun slightly and looked at Big E, then behind him. His eyes and movements were far too twitchy, making Ali worry he might shoot someone accidentally.

“What good has following the law ever done for me? The police in my neighborhood know who I am. They know my brother. Once he joined, the cops treated me just like him. It was in the family, see? If I’m going to be treated like a criminal, I might as well be one.”

Convincing people wasn’t Eric’s strong suit, but it was hers. “Indie.” She remembered Connor saying that was Big E’s real name and possibly the one his mother called him.

His eyes widened slightly.

She loved the surprise advantage, but that wasn’t the goal. “Every life is about choices. All of us make bad ones. All of us do things we regret. I know I have. I’ve turned people against me on purpose for what I thought was my own gain. I didn’t realize until it was way too late to fix that what seemed like a sure path to success was really my own failure. Because it was a prison I made for myself.”

Big E turned his head away, and the gun muzzle dropped a few inches.

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Ali swallowed hard, measuring her words. No manipulation, just honesty. And if anything happened to them, Eric would die knowing she wished she could go back and change what she'd done. She would go back and say yes. Maybe her fears wouldn't have clung to her so tightly if she'd dealt with them when she was younger and at the side of someone who cared.

"I grew up poor, Indie. My mama was a drug addict, and my daddy died when I was almost too young to remember him. I never had new clothes for school. A lot of times, I was too afraid to use the shower at home, not because anything was ever done to me in the bathroom, but because it's a place of vulnerability and I refused to be vulnerable."

Jayzon frowned. "You got money now. I seen your car."

She nodded. "Yes. I have a lot of things, but I wasn't happy getting them...and I'm not happy now. Everything I had, I was afraid of losing. That made me work hard to keep it all. I never enjoyed any of the things I bought because there was so much fear."

Big E slowly shook his head. "That ain't me. I ain't afraid. And if I get money, I'll enjoy spending all of it."

"I didn't think I was afraid either. I was so caught in the trap that, until I stepped outside of my regular life, I didn't realize I was even in one. That's you right now. The difference is that you could make a difference. You could be free. But not if you stay with the gang."

Eric squeezed her arm, and she stopped talking. “Big E, I’ll do what I can to help you, but you’ve got to help you first by walking away from this.”

“E!” someone called from behind the shed. “Anyone in there? You looking for them in the shed?”

Big E lowered his pistol, stuck his head inside and made a point to look back and forth. He backed out and raised his hand like he wanted someone to stop. “I looked. They aren’t here. I’ll check back in the horse trailer. They couldn’t have gone far.”

Big E slowly closed the door, and Ali rested against the strength of Eric’s back, laying her forehead against his shoulder. He’d protected her with his body the whole time. She held her breath, waiting for the waves of nausea and tension to pass. Voices kept talking right outside in mumbles too low to hear. She wouldn’t speak and give them away. Not when Indie had saved them. If she blew it, that would hurt him too.

Eric’s body was rigid with tension, and he still held his arm out, protecting her against anyone who could open the door. How could she have ever thought he wouldn’t do enough for her? How could she have thought so little of him? He’d been everything for her, right up until she’d met Frank and had realized one of them would help her career without question while the other didn’t seem quite so sure.

The voices moved away from the door, but she was terrified to open it and find Indie had set them up. That would be so easy and the perfect way to prove to his brother that he could be trusted. She kept her voice low. “We need to get him out of here. When they discover he lied, he’ll be in just as much danger as we are.”

Eric gave a single nod of agreement. “Herb made his choice. He wanted the profit. You sleep in the bed you make, and the potential danger is what he’ll reap. I wish he’d just stuck with the auctions he used to do.”

Ali could imagine what Eric was going through. Watching someone you liked and respected go down a path they can't turn away from was almost as difficult as going down the path yourself. "You can't save him. He's broken the law too many times."

"I know. But I don't have to like it." Eric finally moved, forcing her to relinquish her spot on his shoulder.

She wanted to be at his side, if he would let her, for the rest of her days. At first, she hadn't thought another marriage could be possible. After her last marriage, she didn't think she ever wanted to be married again. The chance that Eric would even listen to her had been so small that she'd considered it null.

Eric slowly opened the door and peered around. "It looks clear, but stick close to me. Behind me, that is."

In other words, he wanted her to let him protect her. She gave a salute and gripped his shirt on either side of his waist so he could feel her without having to look or pay attention to her. His focus needed to be solidly in front of him, not worrying about where she was.

"The road is about a hundred yards ahead of us once we're behind the shed again." At least they didn't have to climb out the window they'd had to climb in the first time.

Eric's chin dipped slightly like he was almost becoming something else, a warrior. He slowly scanned the area like a soldier on recon. Keeping up with him wasn't easy, but she kept hold with one hand until they reached the trees.

Three shots behind them made Eric pull up short and yank her for cover behind a tree. He held her close, his chest quickly rising and falling. "I think they've discovered we're on the move again."

* * *

Too much sound made discerning what the noises were and where they were coming from impossible. Loud stomping of multiple people headed right toward them was the most concerning, even above the gunfire. He and Ali were too out in the open to avoid being seen. Neither of them had dressed to hide since they'd thought they were going to an auction, not a kidnapping.

"Run." That was his last option. They'd barely escaped too many times for Herb not to pull out all the stops to catch Eric. He had to know his scheme was finished if Eric got away. Ali gripped Eric's hand and raced for the wooden fence in the distance.

Car engines grew louder as they pressed forward.

"They're over here!" Clayton's voice made Ali trip slightly.

Eric held tight to her, hoping the momentum would keep her on her feet and she could continue running.

"Eric, wait for us!" Jayzon called.

Eric glanced over his shoulder and released Ali, Jayzon, and Indie were running toward them. Instead of taking to the trees like they had, Indie had led them right through the open area. One of the kids who had been in the car stood next to the shed with a rifle pointed right at the boys.

"No!" He couldn't let them be gunned down. Even if Indie hadn't helped him, he couldn't let that happen.

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Indie glanced behind him and stumbled, reaching for Jayzon to stay upright. Instead, the force of his fall pulled both of them to the ground just as the man with the rifle let off a shot. It buried into a nearby tree, sending splinters at Eric.

Eric ran to them, tugged them both to their feet, and headed them toward the trees as bullets rained from all directions. Who was shooting back? There was no time to look, not when they were caught in the crossfire.

The moment they reached the cover of the trees, Eric checked both the boys over. “What in the world happened?”

“Clayton called me a liar. He knew I’d hidden you. I thought blood was thicker than the hold of the gang. I was wrong.” Indie’s eyes glistened, but he didn’t cry.

“I will testify that you risked your life to help us.” Eric laid a hand on Indie’s shoulder. “You did the right thing. It was hard, but I’m proud of you.”

Jayzon glanced every few seconds behind Eric. “I think we should get out of here. We’re too exposed here.”

“Agreed.” Plus, he needed to know who had come to their rescue or if Herb’s team got split in two, not realizing they were shooting at each other.

Eric led them along the trees, showing them how to avoid being seen but to keep moving in the right direction. He hadn’t been in any sort of Army training exercises for many years, but those actions and reactions came back when they were needed.

Ali waited close to where he'd left her huddled behind a wide tree before he'd run to the boys.

"Who's shooting?" he asked her as he came up at her side.

She grinned. "Connor showed up with one of the Piper's Ridge deputies. Deputy Blake is in the hospital, and they would be more than happy to have the man who stabbed him in custody. I told them which way to go to find him, but wanted to wait here so you could find me."

She was the best thing he'd seen all day, but they were still too close to the action for comfort. "Where did they come from?"

Ali pointed behind her to the highway. "They parked there, knowing they could come in this way without notice. It worked, and I was the first person they saw. My plan would've worked even if they hadn't come."

"But I'm glad they did." He forced his knees to hold him upright even though he wanted to fall to the ground and thank God for protecting them.

Eric led Ali, Indie, and Jayzon toward the safety of the waiting vehicles. Lacy met them near the fence. She grinned for all of a second before she noticed the boys, and her mouth flattened.

"They held us at gunpoint while they looked for Terrell. What are they doing here?" She crossed her arms and glared.

Both boys had the good sense to bow their heads. Indie, as usual, spoke for both of them. "We thought we were doing the right thing."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Jayzon said quickly.

“Me too,” Indie finished.

“They have a long road ahead of them, but they’ve taken the first step. Some would argue that first one is the hardest because it’s against the current.” Eric stayed at their side. He’d promised he’d help them, and he wouldn’t go back on that promise.

“We’ll see what the deputy and Connor say.” Lacy turned her focus on Eric and Ali. “Do either of you need an ambulance?”

Ali slipped in at his side and wrapped her arms around his waist. He clutched her close and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I don’t think so. We do need some time and a couple very hot showers.”

Lacy nodded. “Terrell has been worried sick about you. You’ve made quite the impression on him.”

What Terrell didn’t know was that he’d made quite an impression on Eric too. He followed Lacy toward Connor’s truck. He wasn’t sure how they were all going to fit, especially if the deputy and Connor arrested all the men who’d been part of the operation. There had to be at least five of them.

“We’ll need more vehicles.” Eric only saw one police cruiser and Connor’s truck.

“I’ll have Junior bring over a car. We’ll get all of you home in one piece,” Lacy said.

Home. That word had never sounded so good.

ChapterTwenty-Nine

Ali came out of her cabin and closed the door softly behind her. After being locked in the trailer and fighting for her life, the cabin didn’t seem quite so scary anymore. A

lot of her old fears had melted away and been put in perspective that day. Only three days had passed but it already felt like a lifetime because so much had changed.

Sam waved to her from just outside the kennel where he had a collie on a short training lead. The dog was new to Wayside and was a retired service dog who had helped an elderly woman with severe anxiety. After the woman had passed, her family donated the dog to Wayside.

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The only issue with that, that Ali had heard about, was that someone had leaked Wayside's true mission to some type of news outlet. Now they were not the private location they had been before. Connor had tried to spin it as a positive thing at the meeting two days ago when he'd told them after the arrival of the dog, but many of the guys didn't believe it.

Many of them mentioned someone named Viceroy as the potential leak. She wasn't sure who that was, but she wanted to learn. When Ali had cornered Lacy after the meeting, she'd been less than forthcoming with any information. Gabby was surprisingly quiet on the subject too.

"What's got you so distracted this morning?" Eric's low rumble startled her from behind.

She swatted at his good arm. "Don't sneak up on me." Not that she minded all that much.

"Is today the day?" He waggled his eyebrows.

She sucked in a long breath like she was suffering for real and let it out. "I suppose. I did promise, and I'm a woman of my word." Especially since she'd given her life to Jesus the night they'd returned to Wayside.

Eric had walked her through the prayer, explaining to her what it meant to profess with your mouth and believe with your heart that Jesus is Lord. He was so patient with all her questions—which, let's face it, she was good at questions—and answered every one. Then he'd bowed his head right along with her and walked her through it.

Afterward, she'd felt this exhilarating rush like she'd just run a few miles. Since then the rush had worn off slightly, but she was excited and nervous to attend her first church service next week. But definitely not her last.

"Am I appropriately dressed for a ride?" She held out her hands to show off what had become her regular wardrobe choice.

"Jeans that cover your ankles? Check. Shirt with long sleeves to keep you from getting burned? Check. Boots that will comfortably sit in a stirrup? Double check." He grinned.

She loved this man, his humor, and his steadfast mien. He could be trusted and relied upon.

"What?" His brow furrowed. "Did I do something?"

She shook her head. "Regrets are getting to me again."

He wrapped his arm around her waist. "You know what I say about regrets?" His brow quirked slightly.

"What?" She grinned, knowing the answer as her heart raced.

"The only good regret is a past regret. And ours are in the past. Let's leave them there." He kissed her far too briefly.

She gripped his shirt before he could pull away. "Eric... I need you to know that I forgive you. Not because you did anything wrong. I still don't feel like you did. I forgive you because I feel like you need me to. In case you still hold any of those feelings that you did something to me, I want you to know that there was nothing. If there were, it's forgiven and gone."

He kissed her again. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Enough!" Big E strode toward them with Jayzon and Terrell at his sides. "You two need to get a room." He laughed.

Eric kissed Ali again just to make them groan, and she laughed at the young men.

Terrell grinned. "I just talked to Officer Gallup. I'm all signed up."

"Was the letter I wrote good enough?" Ali hoped they didn't need more, but since she wasn't working for the government now, she hadn't been sure.

"I guess so. He said he didn't think there would be an issue. I'll get a letter of acceptance soon."

Eric glanced between the two of them, obviously confused. Ali touched his arm and loved the feeling of immediate pleasure that came with touching him. "Terrell asked for my help in making his time in juvenile detention less of an issue with the recruiter."

"The recruiter?" Eric repeated. "What branch?"

Terrell laughed. "Well..."

Big E slugged him in the shoulder. "You can tell him or I can."

Terrell grinned. "All three of us, if we're accepted, will be headed off to Army basic."

Eric's mouth dropped open slightly, but he quickly recovered. "That's wonderful! I'm so proud of all of you."

Jayzon looked at the ground. “Ma’s proud too.”

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“Let’s let these two get back to holding hands and kissing.” Big E rolled his eyes. “Brendon wanted to talk to all of us anyway.” He took two steps, then turned around and walked backward. “Oh, and Ali, I’m supposed to ask you to go talk to Lacy later. I guess some guy named Cole is coming home a little early.”

Not that she could really help him in the same way. She still knew the process and what to do, but she wasn’t a member of JAG anymore. In fact, after she helped Cole, she wasn’t sure where her life would take her. She hoped to stay close to Eric, but now that she’d had the chance to investigate a crime up close and personal, she wasn’t sure she was cut out to be a private investigator. Only time, and prayer, would tell.

“Let’s go ride, then you can go talk to Lacy. Cole won’t be back anytime in the next hour. You’ll be fine.” Eric gently ran his nails up and down her back in a motion that had become the epitome of soothing over the last few days.

“You got it. I can do this.” Why did climbing on a horse scare her so badly? She’d been in the military, dealt with some of the worst things people could throw at her, and survived all of it. Yet, allowing a horse to have a little control left her shaky and unsure.

“I wouldn’t put you in a position to hurt you. Do you trust me?” He stopped his trail of pleasure up her back and cupped her cheek.

“You know I trust you. It’s the horse that has me suspicious.”

“I’ll teach you.” He let go of her cheek and held out his hand.

She loved that he didn't just grab her and go like she was an unruly child, even though he probably thought her fears were unwarranted. Then again, the man worked very closely with people who undoubtedly had many fears that to an outsider would seem unwarranted.

"Thank you, Eric."

He tilted his head slightly, and the shadow of his cowboy hat tilted across his face.

"For what?"

"For being you and for accepting me back, wrinkles and all." She'd even given up the hold all of her creams had over her. She still used lotion at morning and bedtime, but she didn't put it on multiple times a day anymore, and she stopped her subscription to have all her serums sent to her. Her bank account would be happier without the expense, even if it meant she started looking her age.

"What wrinkles?" He grinned. "You've got nothing on me."

She said a little prayer, hoping it wasn't vanity, that when her wrinkles came—and she knew they would—that they would look as good as Eric's and that they would look like she'd lived a happy life.

* * *

Eric slowly and carefully saddled Ali's horse, then asked Junior to check it for him. The last thing he wanted was to have a saddle malfunction while Ali was riding. The little jewelry box that had waited in his top drawer for twenty-one years pressed into his hip as he crouched to check Skyfall's ankle. She'd hurt it when Herb's men had stolen her, and it was slowly healing.

He gently rewrapped it, then begrudgingly chose a different horse. Today had to be

perfect, and as much as he wanted to share his big day with his two favorite girls, the most important one would be there. Skyfall probably wouldn't miss the occasion.

His stomach was in bigger knots than when he'd been taken at gunpoint. What if she said no? What if she thought he was crazy for thinking he could provide for her? What if he was crazy for believing all that? He checked the cinch strap one more time.

"You going to be okay?" Junior jokingly punched his shoulder. "I'll make sure the boys stay far away from the trail. You don't need anyone listening in on you."

"Thanks." At least that was one worry he could cross off the list.

"She's going to say yes." He squeezed Eric's shoulder.

Eric looked over his shoulder to make sure Ali was still over by her horse. "But she isn't happy here. I'm not enough to keep her happy out here in the middle of nowhere." That thought had been keeping him up for the last two days, but he felt the pressure of the Holy Spirit to do what he'd been led to do before. He felt certain that God had wanted him to ask all those years ago, but that didn't mean Ali couldn't say no now.

"I'm just nervous. Doesn't mean I'll back out."

Junior laughed. "Of course you won't. And she'll think of something. She seems like a resourceful gal."

She was that, and so much more. He'd forgotten just how much he loved her.

Junior gave him a slap on the shoulder, then gave Ali a nod as he left the barn. She laughed nervously, and though Eric hated that she was nervous, he loved that she now felt comfortable enough with him to show her true feelings.

Eric couldn't help her up, so he led the horse over to a mounting block many of their female guests used. She climbed up, stuck her foot into the stirrup, and then settled over the horse. She looked uncomfortable, and he talked her through a few methods of relaxing. When she was finally looking settled in the saddle, he mounted his own horse with a little difficulty, though he'd learned to rely mostly on his legs anyway.

They followed a trail past the area of the fence that had been rebuilt, reminding him of all they'd been through. He'd never thought Terrell would agree to go to basic training, but if anything could help him become a man who could make decisions, that might be the place. The military wasn't a cure-all. It wasn't even a cure-some, but in the case of Terrell, he was certain the outcome would be positive, and he'd stick close to see Terrell through to the end.

"Eric?" Ali's voice had stopped sounding nervous, and he let himself relax into the saddle a bit.

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

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“I think you just did.” He grinned, knowing she’d playfully smack his arm if she were close enough.

She cracked up laughing. “I suppose I did. But what I wanted to know is if you would mind if I look for a place between Cheyenne and Piper’s Ridge? That way, it would be a half hour for me to go to a bigger town or a half hour to see you. I’m used to driving farther than that just for a really good coffee. I don’t know what I’ll find to do as far as work, but I’m sure I can think of something. I’m not useless...” she rambled.

“Ali?” He slowed his horse and waited for her to stop alongside him.

“Yeah?” Her eyebrows rose.

“I think that would be great.” He’d hoped to have her at Wayside, in his cabin after they married. Knowing how she felt about those cabins, this was probably a better compromise. At least for a while. If she got a house, it would give them time to truly start over again like she’d asked. “Now, I have a question for you.”

“Oh?” Her eyes widened. “If you’re going to ask me what I’m going to do with myself, I have no idea. I thought I wanted to be a PI, but I not so sure I’m cut out for that. I’m in my forties. Lots of people start new careers at that age, right?” She visibly swallowed.

“They do. I know you’ll find something.” He dug into his pocket. Originally he’d planned to go down on one knee, but he still struggled to get up off the ground with his weird weight distribution and the way the cast went over his whole arm and up part of his shoulder. He tugged the little box free of his pocket.

“Ali, I didn’t know when you showed up at Wayside that it would be the best thing that’s ever happened to me, but it was. I didn’t see the blessing. I only saw the curse. I’m sorry for that. Now, I want to make up for the time we lost. I don’t want to miss a second with you.” He opened the ring box. “I’m not asking you to marry me tomorrow, but sometime in the future...will you marry me?”

Her mouth hung slightly open, and she covered it with her hand, then closed her eyes. “That’s the same ring. The one I tossed back at you.” A tear ran down her cheek. “I’ll never forget it or the look on your face.”

“Then look at my face now and change your memory.” That was a tactic he used with the clients who came to Wayside, and it worked. It was called reframing, and it meant taking back something that was ruined and making it yours again.

Her fingers shook as she took the little box from his fingers. She slid the ring out from its cushion then onto her finger and looked at it. “It’s beautiful, Eric.”

“I know your other ring from your first husband w—,”

“Ex-husband, and let’s not talk about him.” She waved away the words like a cloud of gnats. “The ring is beautiful, and my answer is yes. Though I do agree with you that waiting is a good idea. We still have so much to catch up on.”

And he wanted to start this instant, but at least he knew the direction they were headed. “Perfect.” He flicked the reins and started them moving again. “Absolutely perfect.”