



Operation: Integrity

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Description: Sam Elsner is the quiet type, especially when someone hurts him.

He caught the love of his life with another man. He isn't the type to face her. If he did, he might get angry which isn't his way. So he let her go, but he's never forgotten her.

Now she's at Wayside but it's not for second-chances. She's there as a patient.

Sam knows that only space and care is going to bring Kelly back from all the pain she's endured. When they dig carefully into their past, secrets come to light that might blow Kelly's kidnapping case wide open, and put a target on Sam's back.

But he won't let anyone touch her again.

Kelly Chambers only wants a normal life, but that seems way outside God's plan.

She committed her life to Jesus in her darkest moment, but she feels so separated from humanity that she can't believe for a moment that He cares about her. As Sam tries to gently peel back the layers of distrust and pain, Kelly wants to escape the pain of healing.

But when her captor threatens the man she loved, can she find the strength to accept the new life Jesus and Wayside offers, or will she sink back into the belief that nothing and no one can save her?

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Prologue

Connor hung up his desk phone and massaged the tender skin between his eyes as a reluctant sigh escaped his lips. Why weren't there any easy decisions in his world? Six months of work would come crashing down around him if he didn't make a serious decision. One that would involve making a change to the very fabric of Wayside Ranch.

"Anything I can do?" Lacy, his ex-wife, strode into his office without knocking and sat in a chair opposite his desk. "You look like you've had a rough year, which is interesting because you've married off three of your men in the last six months. You'd think you'd be overjoyed that your plan is working."

That hadn't been his intended goal, but it pleased him to hear it. The positivity from his men was a nice bonus. Months ago, he'd challenged all his men to take a good, hard look at one big regret when it came to women. They'd all had them, even himself, to be honest. He'd hoped they all would be better at helping the human trafficking victims who came their way if each of his men could understand what facing those regrets was like in real life.

He didn't expect any of those who stayed at Wayside to look for marriage, so in that way things were different, but at least each of his men had a new perspective. Those who had been through the process were more understanding than those who hadn't been.

"I don't think so." He closed his laptop. "Kelly Chambers isn't coming for another week and only if I can prove there are no tracking devices on the premises. Since I

have so many cameras for security and safety, I wouldn't be telling the truth if I said there aren't any. After we took the gate down at Deputy Blake's request, the cameras are our best means of defense."

Lacy leaned toward his desk, her pretty dark brows furrowed. "I'm still torn over this. I know you want Sam to face his regret, but this will be hard on both of them. As to our security, they can't expect a place like this to run without any protection. We've removed the gate, like you said. I'm not okay with even less security. How are any of us supposed to feel safe when anyone could walk on the property? Did you tell them we had someone literally row a boat down the river to get to us just a month ago?"

He massaged his nose again, the pressure in his head deepening. "Deputy Blake didn't appreciate that either. He's of a mind that we keep the cameras. I'm just not sure how to do that and say we have no tracking devices." The local deputy had offered to deputize all of them because he didn't have the manpower to run security way out there, but the gate hadn't been a deterrent and could instead slow down police response.

She tucked her feet under her, curled in a ball in his chair. No one else ever looked so comfortable in his office and he would never ask her to act any other way. Lacy glanced off at the ceiling. "What about Dominic and The Guardians? Could they come back here in place of the cameras?"

He'd thought about that. Dominic was trustworthy, but that option came with snags, too. "For how long? They have their own work to do. I could ask him to send a person or two, but what if Kelly is here for six months or a year?"

"Or forever?" Lacy's eyes laser focused on him. "I know you're worried because she's a victim. I'm worried, too. I certainly don't think it will happen the moment they see each other, but we've had guests stay for years before. Even before these missions started. Knowing that, we can't assume she won't ever fall in love or heal

because of what she's been through. Either you believe the power of God is strong enough to heal even this, or you're limiting His power."

Maybe he was, but he was also trying to be realistic. He'd never witnessed a victim who'd stayed with them willingly turn to a romantic relationship. Maybe they did long after they were done with Wayside, but never while he was following their progress. "I can't hope for that. She has been victimized just like so many other people who come through that door. I really think this is the one regret mission that will lead to . . . who knows. I'm hoping for reconciliation, nothing more."

She stared at him for a moment and an uneasy feeling passed over him, one he wasn't unfamiliar with. She was about to tell him exactly why he was wrong. "The only one, huh?"

How could he know how the others would go? He'd only just reached out to Edwyn's past relationship, Nadine, and she was still pensive about coming. His father wouldn't be able to because Mom had passed away years ago. Those were the only two left after Sam.

"I have no idea if Edwyn will have success. How can I know that? I only know Sam has the world stacked against him. He even told me he has no desire to start anything romantic with Kelly."

"All the men have said that so far, but that's not what I meant." She unfurled her legs, put her feet square in front of her and leaned forward, looking at him. "I've told you what I think of these second chance missions. We," she pointed to herself first, then him, "will not be doing that. So, you'd better keep any thoughts you have about trying this for yourself, to yourself."

He'd hoped after watching the positive outcomes with the others her mind would change, but why would it? He'd inflicted darkness on her life. He'd come back from

his time in the service as a completely different man than the one she'd married. He didn't deserve a second chance like the others. His men were good. He was not.

"I never said I would try. I was talking about my men."

She stood and crossed her arms, a rare moment of weakness splashing over her face. "Good, because I don't want to leave. I like it here." She turned and left, leaving the door open wide.

He let his shoulders fall, the weight of his desire to repair what he'd done to Lacy weighing so heavily on him he almost felt the imaginary boulder on him. There would never be another Lacy. He didn't even want to find anyone else. He'd hoped that, with time, she would want to be with him again. She cared about him, that had never stopped, but she couldn't be married to him. She insisted they were better as friends than anything else.

So, his second chance had already come and gone.

No time to think about that now. He had to do what he could to make sure Sam had the best chance possible. He picked up the phone one more time and punched in the number for Dominic Anderson, head of The Guardians, a security force that worked with him on another project months before.

Dominic answered on the third ring. "Connor, this is a surprise."

He held in a chuckle. Dominic was always one step ahead. "Probably not. You seem to know everything, sometimes before we think of it. Not sure how."

Dominic laughed softly. "I'm not omniscient, by any means. What can I do for you?"

Connor took a deep breath and laid out the issues the same way he had with Lacy a

few minutes before. “So, our hands are tied. Kelly’s caseworker is concerned about tracking devices being hacked. Not sure why they are so convinced she will be targeted for tracking. Kelly was directly linked to Evie Carvel, though we didn’t find that out until after we’d accepted her application, meaning her life is in danger.”

“You would have invited her, anyway. You don’t need the whole team? Just a few?”

Connor couldn’t risk upsetting the applecart. There were currently four residents working through their anxieties and trying to regain some stability at Wayside. Asking for a bunch of guys in tactical gear to come and be present would make their temporary home a lot less of an escape. “No more than two. I’m going to ask her caseworker for understanding. If you have someone on your team who knows tech better than my dad, then we can use that to our advantage. Preventing anyone from hacking into our security system is better than reacting when something happens.”

“I’ve got just the people. They’ll be there in a few days.”

“Thanks, man.” And he truly meant it. Dominic and his team were professionals, and he hoped they’d gotten their feet off the ground at their new home in Duluth, MN.

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“Not a problem. Glad we can help. Let me know when they arrive.”

“Will do.” He hung up, feeling slightly better about the situation but not about his relationship with Lacy. If only there were still hope for them.

Chapter One

Flakes of snow drove home the point that Thanksgiving would descend upon Wyoming in three weeks. Kelly was supposed to have arrived a month before, but odd circumstances had kept her. He’d tried not to let his curiosity get the better of him as to why. Sam Elsner moved a pitchfork that had been left in the wrong place in the barn as a nondescript black car drove up the driveway.

A blonde head appeared as a woman stood from the car. It soon disappeared under a stocking cap with a poof on top as she shoved it down over her ears. Even that brief sighting was enough to know exactly who she was. Kelly was now at Wayside.

Sam stepped back from the window and tugged his wool vest tighter around him. His immediate response was to worry. She looked rail thin, with sharp cheekbones. What could he do to make her comfortable? That was what Wayside men always did. But she wasn’t for him to worry about. In fact, after what she’d been through, he might never be able to step into the role of protector for her ever again.

She ruined all that. He’d caught her with another man.

Kelly hugged herself tightly as she rushed to the front door. She wore no coat, only a fleece vest. Sam reached for the windowsill, anchoring his feet to the floor. She

looked so vulnerable. A man got out of the driver's seat and headed to the trunk, opened it, then pulled a suitcase from the back. Sam had seen carry on luggage bigger than that. The driver delivered it to the porch, said a few words to Kelly that Sam couldn't hear, then headed back to the car.

Sam couldn't tear his eyes from the scene. She looked so distressed, so lost, eyes wide, standing on the porch and searching in place like she wasn't sure where to go or what to do. Connor stepped outside the front door and held it for her, beckoning her inside. Kelly still didn't move, and Sam couldn't look away. She swung her head from side to side like she was looking for an escape. She looked . . . trapped.

He glanced all around quickly. Where was Lacy? Usually, she was the one who met guests as they arrived. At least, as far as he knew, that was how it happened. He'd never taken the time to watch anyone arrive at Wayside. That part of the process wasn't his concern.

Kelly followed Connor inside, and Sam breathed a heavy sigh as the door closed. Just like the last time he'd seen her, he felt shut off from her. Life wouldn't be the same while she was there. He'd known this was coming, but part of him had never wanted to accept that Kelly would come to stay at Wayside.

He'd watched as his buddies reconnected with the women from their pasts. Some of the women had been successful, others had been near poverty. Thankfully, none of them had been trafficked like Kelly had. The sound of voices drew his attention back to the window.

Connor led Kelly toward the cabins, and they spoke in lowered voices. He'd assumed the initial meeting with Kelly would've lasted longer than a few seconds, but there was another of his assumptions proven wrong. Now he had to escape the barn in case Connor was giving her a tour.

Connor pointed toward the dog kennel, where Sam spent most of his days, then pointed right at the barn where he stood. For a split-second, he was sure she saw him. He backed away from the window a few steps, guilt slamming into his chest. He shouldn't be standing here staring at a guest, whether he'd known her in the past or not.

Sam gathered the security schedule from the barn office and headed for the back so he wouldn't have to walk right by Connor and Kelly as he showed her around. Edwyn pushed through the back door just in front of him, preventing his escape.

"Sam, Edwyn, one minute of your time." Connor's voice carried through the barn.

He held his breath for the count of two. Edwyn glared at him for a moment, then headed toward Connor. Edwyn was a rule follower, so if Connor told him to jump, Edwyn would ask how high, and he expected the same from the others. Sam turned and wished immediately that he'd avoided the barn completely.

If Kelly had looked uncomfortable on the steps, she looked mortified at seeing him. She whipped around so her back faced him and wrapped her arms around herself in a protective hug. Her actions made him feel as if he'd been the one to send her into trafficking.

Edwyn stood far closer to her than Sam ever got to someone he worked with, at least before he knew their comfort level, leaving him wanting to grab his friend and yank him out of Kelly's personal space. He strode toward them, but hung back, giving her room, though she didn't turn around to face him.

Connor gave her an encouraging look. "These are the two men who will be helping you. I think you know Sam . . ."

Kelly nodded with quick, abrupt head movements, making the pom on the top of her

hat bob.

“The other is your wrangler, Edwyn Brookings.”

She glanced his way for a split second but didn't turn.

“If you're ready, I'll leave you with them.”

She slowly turned to face him, and he couldn't miss the accusation on her face. Why would she be accusing him of anything? She'd cheated on him. She hadn't even tried to hide it.

“I'm fine. I can handle myself,” her delicate snuffle undermined her fake bravado.

“Great!” Edwyn's voice boomed in the quiet barn, making Kelly shudder.

“Edwyn, cool it.” Sam tried to intervene. He wouldn't let himself care about Kelly in any way beyond what she needed to heal, but Edwyn was already overstepping.

“Sam. Let's get this straight. You may have known Kelly before, but I'll be helping her.”

Anger pooled somewhere deep inside him. He wasn't trying to take over Edwyn's job, but he was doing it wrong. “All I said was to cool it. You're scaring her. You'd best take it easy on her.” He wouldn't threaten Edwyn. That would only make Kelly even more uncomfortable. She'd probably witnessed plenty of altercations and male swagger in the last few years. That wasn't needed now.

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“I think I can handle myself. I’ll bring Kelly around to see the kennels later. I’ll show her around the barn for now.”

Sam wasn’t sure if Edwyn knew Kelly was his one regret or not, though he seemed to by indicating he knew they’d known each other. Maybe that didn’t matter, since she was a patient first. He gave Edwyn a nod then followed it with one for Kelly. She said nothing, but he could feel her watch him as he finally made his way out of the barn.

Fear was a constant companion, though Kelly certainly wouldn’t call it her friend. She stood in the barn next to the guy who’d pretty much told Sam to take a hike. She hadn’t expected to see him here. She hadn’t expected to ever see him again.

“Care to talk about how you know him? It will stay between you and me. I don’t keep notes.” Edwyn headed for another part of the barn that seemed to be off to the left.

She shoved her hands in her pockets, wishing her friends at the halfway house had thought of gloves or even a light coat as opposed to a vest. Her whole body felt chilled in the frigid Wyoming wind and snow flurries. “I don’t think it matters. Ancient history.” Though her heart said it was anything but. The moment she’d seen him, all those feelings of abandonment had crept up. If not for him and his disappearance from her life, she never would’ve ended up where she’d been. Well, not as far in as she’d gone, anyway. He was supposed to have saved her. Instead, he’d stopped calling, stopped caring.

“Ancient history still has bearing on your life today. You looked like you wanted to run from Wayside at a sprint the moment you saw him. That won’t help you heal.”

Edwyn led her to a room that smelled like leather and oil where saddles and straps hung neatly on the walls and around the room.

Running had been her first choice, but her driver had already left and there was no other way to escape. It wasn't like she knew the area. Weird, too, that both Connor and Edwyn seemed to know she had a past with Sam but hadn't said anything to warn her that he was there.

"Look, it's not this big secret. Sam and I dated a long time ago. He ditched me one day. No call. No note. Not even a word about why. Then again, Sam has never been confrontational. So, I shouldn't have been shocked when he didn't confront whatever issue there was." She ran her finger along one of the imprints on a pretty saddle, surprised it was actually bumpy to her touch.

"That's true. Sam's the quiet type, but he also doesn't seem like the kind of guy to leave you high and dry unless there was something else going on." Edwyn didn't sound like he was blatantly accusing her, but he could be, and her hackles immediately went up. What was he accusing her of doing?

"Are you saying he was justified?" There was no way Sam could've found out the mess her life had become. She'd been trying to help a friend, but that friend stole all her money. Then, the friend turned around and tried to 'help' her get her money back by introducing Kelly to her pimp.

Kelly had been left with no choice. Her bank account was drained, her house had been heading toward foreclosure. Family wasn't an option, and she had no other friends. It had seemed at the time the only way out of the pit of despair was to take the pimp's offer. He would put money aside from all her work, then put that money in her account when her term with him ended.

Except, he'd never said when that was. Now, she could only hope he'd kept up his

end of the agreement after she'd left. After years with him, he should've given her something. At some point, she'd have to find a phone and a way to contact her bank, but that battle was not today.

Sam was supposed to have saved her from that. She'd done the work, hating it. Hating the person she'd allowed herself to become so she could survive, but it was supposed to have been very temporary. Sam had hinted he'd been ring shopping. Once he'd proposed, she was going to come clean about what her life had become. She'd been too ashamed to tell him before there was any assurance he wouldn't walk away.

Maybe her history didn't matter, though. Why would Sam have wanted to marry her? Looking back, she'd been hiding so many things from him. Things that would've made him want to walk away just like he did. God had probably saved him from her. God should probably save everyone from her.

"I would never say someone is justified in treating another person poorly. I'm only saying it's outside of his character. Something else must have happened. I hope you get the chance to talk once you're further along and starting to heal." Edwyn moved one set of what looked like reins from one peg to another.

She doubted Sam would want to talk, though he had come to her defense, strange as it had been. He looked the same as he had before, like time had stopped for him. He had rich brown hair and soft, gentle hazel eyes, with a smattering of stubble on his jaw that at one time had made her want to rub her hands down his face.

Now, she wanted to stay as far away from physical contact with anyone as possible. Even a hug was too much most of the time. "I think that ship has sailed. We are two completely different people now."

If he had been willing and hadn't disappeared, maybe she wouldn't have become so

entangled in what she had. She might not have needed the eventual rescue that had happened. Then again, wondering wouldn't change the fact that she'd originally agreed.

Sam was a good man, a Christian man, who wouldn't want a woman who'd been with hundreds of men over the past few years. Her pimp had expected a lot, telling her that her housing had to come out of her pay, so if she wanted to actually make any money, she'd better work harder.

After a time, she was able to do her job with little emotion at all. Her mind was disconnected from what she had to do to survive. Some men were cruel, others just needy. Her pimp wasn't usually violent, just brutally manipulative. After meeting some other women, she counted herself lucky for that much.

"Well, if you're given the opportunity and you have the desire, you should. Living with past regrets is painful," Edwyn's voice held a hint of what could only be commiseration.

"Thanks." She turned away, not sure what else she was supposed to do out there. Edwyn made himself busy doing something with a saddle and didn't seem to beshowing her around any further. "Did you want to show me anything else? I'm freezing."

Normally, she never would've complained. Stating discomfort with any of her 'guys' would've been a sure way to find herself a lot more uncomfortable. However, Connor had told her in the under two minutes she'd spent with him that she could state how she felt without any repercussions here. They wanted to know how she was doing and what she needed.

Edwyn looked her up and down, his eyes widening in shock. "You don't have a coat . . . Lacy will have to fix that right away. You can't ride or do anything out here

without a good coat.” Edwyn headed toward the front of the barn.

Kelly followed him in case he wanted her to, though he made no motion for her, nor did he tell her what to do. She trailed him to a cabin in the front row of four rows of cabins. Edwyn drew out a key and shoved it into the lock, then pushed the door open.

“Here you are. Lacy should’ve brought your bag over while you were in the barn and made sure everything was ready for you in here.”

“I’m still in here!” A voice came from the back of the small cabin. She emerged from a door and headed for them, holding out her hand. Wrapped in the other arm was a bundle of what looked like sheets. “Hello. I’m Lacy, and I’m here to help you in any way I can.”

“She’ll need a coat. Any way we can put a rush on that?” Edwyn’s mouth crooked up as his brow furrowed.

“No coat? Goodness.” Lacy grabbed the one on the back of a nearby kitchen chair and laid it on the sofa. “That one will be too large for you, but use it until I can get one ordered. I have a few, so it’s no bother. Wyoming is way too chilly not to have one. I can’t imagine why they sent you without.” She frowned. “I didn’t touch your clothes, but your bag is in your room. I put fresh sheets on the bed. There are extra blankets in the chest at the end of your bed. Turn the heat to wherever you feel comfortable. If you need anything at all, please don’t hesitate to ask me. Welcome to Wayside.” She grinned, then gathered the sheets together and waved as she left.

Kelly picked up the coat and shrugged it over her shoulders. The little cabin wasn’t cold, but she still couldn’t warm herself. Everything from the travel to the conversation felt like a drain on her system.

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“I think I need to rest.”

Edwyn nodded and took a step toward the door. “We’ll take this slow. You don’t need to ride on your first day, or even choose a horse. It’s just good that we got to meet and that you know you can talk to me.”

She could, but how much could she trust him? Would he listen or just condemn? He was friends with Sam and would probably tell Sam everything if she confided in Edwyn. She didn’t want him knowing she’d originally gotten herself in this situation willingly, at least somewhat, and that it was while they were still together.

Her stomach knotted. No one will ever want you again. You’re nothing but a bad girl.

Kelly ignored the near-constant inner thoughts. “Right. Where should I meet you tomorrow?” She hoped that was enough for him to understand she was too tired to do anything else that day.

“If you don’t want to go out anymore, either Victoria will bring your supper tray here or I will.” He seemed hesitant to leave.

“Okay.” Was she supposed to tell him what she wanted? Her heart picked up speed. Was he going to stand there or go? Did she need to choose a meal? What was the appropriate response? Nothing was easy anymore.

“If you need anything, pick up the phone in your room and dial #0, that will get you to Connor’s phone. He’ll get a message to me.”

She hadn't had her own phone in years since she had no money of her own and she wasn't allowed to talk to anyone, so having a phone had been an impossibility. Now, she had one in her room and the only one she could call was someone she didn't know. "I won't be doing that." Talking on the phone with a virtual stranger? No thanks.

"Then I'll see you at 5:30 when I bring your tray." He touched his hat and left.

She wasn't sure having Edwyn come to her door was any better than talking to a stranger on the phone.

Chapter Two

Sam finished releasing the dogs that weren't working that day into the huge kennel run they used to let the dogs play and get exercise. He checked the heated water dishes to make sure none of them had frozen over and were full. Then he headed for the house to talk to Brendon.

He honestly didn't use Brendon's therapy services that much. Of all the guys, he considered himself the least affected by his time in the military. He hadn't seen combat. He only stayed in for a short time. So, instead of wasting time that Brendon could use for people who needed it more, he only went when Connor told him he had to or when, like today, something was weighing heavily on him.

He knocked on Brendon's door and was told to come in almost immediately. He peered inside, making sure there wasn't anyone else in the office.

Connor glanced up at him. "Sam? I don't usually see you unless I get an order from Connor."

"Am I going to run into anyone else's time?" Sam didn't want to be interrupted once

he got started. He'd come back later if someone else was on the schedule.

"I'm free for the next hour and a half. Sit and tell me what's going on." Brendon closed his notebook and gave his full attention to Sam.

"I don't know how much you know about Kelly Chambers who just arrived?" He gripped the arms of his chair tightly, willing his words and thoughts to stay calm.

"I have a file started on her. Just like I do every other guest who comes to Wayside." Brendon offered noncommittally.

"She's my one regret. Kind of." How to say what needed to be said and still be sympathetic? Kelly would be one of Brendon's clients, putting him right in the middle of a sticky situation. His brain wouldn't let him relax. She'd used him or lied. One of the two.

"Kind of? You'll have to explain that to me. I haven't met with her yet, so I don't know what's going on in any sort of personal way."

"She wouldn't know what I have to say, anyway." Because he'd never told her, and she was much too wary now. Not to mention hurt, both physically and mentally. The fact that he might never be able to talk to her about their shared past ate away at him worse than he thought it would. "I regret that I didn't know her as well as I thought I did. I was going to propose to her but the day I showed up to surprise her, I caught her with another man."

Brendon didn't look surprised, then again, it took a lot to surprise him. "You caught her doing . . .?" He prompted.

Sam felt his neck go hot as he thought back to that day. While he hadn't caught her sleeping with another man, he could've just as well have. That kiss wasn't platonic in

any sense of the word. “Kissing.” He wouldn’t describe the scene in any greater detail than that, even though he would never forget it.

“Hmm, interesting.” Brendon slowly pulled open a drawer on his desk, then flipped through the files, the shuffling sound as his fingers flicked over the hard paperboard edges letting Sam know what he was doing, even though he couldn’t see. He laid open a file on his desk and ran his finger down the front page.

“When did that happen?” He glanced up at Sam.

That was a date he would never in his life forget. “September 23rd.”

Brendon’s eyebrow rose as he looked at Sam. “Her house was sold at sheriff’s sale in November, the year she went missing. Meaning her house was in foreclosure for probably at least eight months while you two were dating. Did she ever mention financial trouble to you?”

Sam shook his head. Toward the end, she’d preferred staying in to going out, often joking with him that she didn’t want to leave to go anywhere, that she had what she needed whenever he was there. Earlier, she’d been a social butterfly, often begging him to take her to parties. “She didn’t say anything to me. There wasn’t a For Sale sign in the yard.”

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Brendon's mouth flattened. "Interesting. I wonder if she was one of those who are roped into the trade because of need, then trapped and can't leave."

"Are you saying you think she was being trafficked while we were dating?" His stomach roiled. How could he have gotten so close to her, yet never noticed any signs? Yet, even thinking back, knowing what he knew now, he didn't recall anything he was trained to look for.

"I won't know anything until I talk to her and she may not feel comfortable enough with me for a long time to answer a question like that. I'm just telling you what I see right here in the intake information. I find it odd that you say you saw her kissing another man when she was in love with you?—,"

"She couldn't have been in love with me," the words felt like sandpaper in his throat.

Brendon held up his hand. "She was with this other man, kissing. We know that at some point between the last time you saw her and now, she was being trafficked. Correct?"

"Yes." He couldn't deny that fact.

"Then it's possible that, in order to save her house, she was doing what she felt she had to do. It's incredibly sad, but it happens."

Why wouldn't she have come to him? He'd loved her. He'd have given her the world if she'd have asked. "I thought she told me everything. I really thought I knew her. This is actually making the situation worse for me. Before, I thought she was cheating

on me with one stranger. Now, you're telling me she may have cheated with countless strangers, and she did it without talking to me at all, to tell me she needed help. She didn't trust me."

Brendon didn't change his stance or the expression on his face. He was good at making statements without adding his own two cents and letting the person on the other side of the desk infer what they would. "Were you in any condition to help her? Would she have known she could ask you?"

Why couldn't she have asked him? Wouldn't talking to him have been better or easier than choosing what she might have, if that's indeed what he'd witnessed? He tried to think back to their time together. Had he knowingly given her the impression that he would think less of her for needing him? He liked being needed. This whole situation flew in the face of the core of who he really was.

"I don't see why she couldn't, but I'm not her. I've never been in that situation before. There has to be more to it than just talking because if talking could've fixed it, I'm sure she would've."

Brendon finally smiled. "Exactly. When people are involved, things are rarely as subtle as just having a conversation. There's always more to a situation than meets the eye. Guilt. Shame. Assumptions. Regret. Turmoil . . . They all play into our willingness to talk with others."

"So, what should I do? I still can't talk to her. She's been through too much." He still couldn't fathom why Connor hadn't let him leave when Kelly came. Having him here could hurt her chances to heal. Her healing was more important than his job or any second chance. "Maybe I should just leave. Connor would probably hire me back once Kelly has been through counseling and therapy. It would be better for her if I'm not here."

Brendon closed Kelly's file and leaned forward. "This won't be like anything we've dealt with before. If at any point you feel like your presence really is a detriment to her healing, I'll talk to Connor on your behalf. You're right, her healing is important, and I know Connor would hire you back. That said, let's not jump the gun. I'm not saying you should ask her out or anything, but there's nothing that says you two can't talk about what happened once she's more comfortable. Give me a chance to meet with her, get her side of the story, get her used to talking again. Then you can try to get her to talk, and you'll need to start a dialog, too. You saw her, but you never said she saw you. That tells me she has no idea why you were a huge part of her life, then you weren't. There's going to be trauma there, too. I'll need to work that through with her before you two work out your past. She deserves the chance to think all of this through beforehand. If you don't, then rehashing all of what happened will just be salt on her wounds."

He didn't want that. He wanted answers, but even with as angry as he'd been after seeing her kissing another man, he didn't want to see her hurt. If he could go back in time, he'd knock on that door and get answers instead of walking away. But it was too late for that. He'd have to settle for waiting until the time was right.

"Then I guess I'll just stick to my kennel and avoid the barn and house for a while." He stood. "Thanks for your time."

"Sam, you don't have to wait until you're so angry you have a white-knuckle grip on my chair. My door is open when you need to come see me."

Sam adjusted his hat back onto his head. "I know. I also know I don't usually have a need. See you later." He nodded his appreciation and headed back outside.

The following day, Kelly shrugged on Lacy's coat. The scent was strange, not unpleasant, but foreign. Nothing belonged to her anymore. Odd that the fewer things she had, the more out of control she felt. When she'd had a normal life, she'd felt like

she had a great life. Right up until her friend turned on her. Though, in hindsight, she now knew why her friend had stolen her money. Nathan had been her pimp and had taken everything. She'd needed the money, but the theft had left her with no choices.

She trudged to the barn, her footsteps sounding loud on the frozen grass. The few flakes of snow from the day before were gone, but cold still seeped through her coat. She'd arrived the day before and she'd yet to see anyone else who lived at Wayside. Would they keep the other guests from her? Was she too broken to see anyone else?

"Stop. Stop taunting yourself. You're the one who chose to stay in your room yesterday." She'd always found it easier to speak truth out loud instead of combating the negativity in her mind with more mental words. Giving them a voice gave them more power, at least to her.

Edwyn stepped out of the barn carrying a pitchfork. She only knew it was called a pitchfork because her grandmother at one time had a painting on her wall of an old man and woman standing in front of what she'd always thought was a church. She'd never even been in a barn until the day before.

"Good morning," he said, far too loudly with a slightly fake smile.

Kelly tried to keep her shoulders straight. If she didn't shrink away, her heart wouldn't race and she would be fine, right? "Morning." She had yet to see any good in it other than that she wasn't a captive anymore. At least, not until they found her again. Nathan always found those who ran away. Always. Sometimes, like Anna, the friend who'd shared Christ with her, they ended up permanently missing.

"Ready to meet your horse? You're going to have a great time once we get you in the saddle. I have yet to meet a single client who didn't respond well to the horses."

She snorted. "And how many clients have you worked with?" She didn't mean to

sound so discouraging, but no matter how hard she tried, her life was stuck on empty.

He looked momentarily unable to speak, then furrowed his brow. "I've worked with about one client a year since we started. So, about ten in total. My job is usually as the foreman, not as a wrangler." He headed for the barn.

She was again left wondering if she should follow him or wait outside. Since she was a guest, she assumed she was supposed to follow. "Why are you chosen once a year? Wouldn't it be better if you just did the job you were hired for?" Especially since he didn't seem to have the demeanor to work with people like her.

He frowned. "This is the job I was hired to do. I do everything that's expected of me. Let me introduce you to Bella. She's a beautiful bay with a black mane and tail. Due to her age, she doesn't run very often, and she has a very gentle gait."

"Gentle. Right." She would have to repeat that over and over. "What do I do with her?"

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Edwyn scratched the horse under the chin and Bella pushed against him with her nose. The whole interaction didn't look that pleasant, almost like the horse was pushing his hand away.

"I don't think I want to work with horses. Maybe I would be better with dogs? Is there any way to work with the dogs without working with Sam?" Her chest tightened and the room seemed to darken in her peripheral vision. She needed to calm down or she'd pass out. This couldn't happen now.

"You haven't even tried yet. We don't have to ride today. That's fine. But you need to meet your horse. That's part of the treatment plan."

Focus on breathing. In and out. "What do you do if people are allergic to horses or just can't?" This thing was massive. What if it stepped on her? What if it bit her? What if Edwyn forced her to ride it and she fell off? Everyone always forced her to do what she didn't want to do. Why would Wayside be any different from anywhere else?

"Kelly?" Edwyn stepped closer to her.

She screamed and covered her face as she crumpled to her knees. He would hit her. No doubt about it. That's what men did when she didn't do what they wanted.

"Kelly, it's okay. It's fine. We can do this later." His voice was finally calm and quiet, but it was too late. Quiet seemed fake in the light of his usual loud and boisterous voice.

She shifted to protect her face with her arm and opened one eye to see if he was only

saying that so she would move her hands to give him access to her face. Smacks to the face had always hurt the worst. He'd moved back a few paces, out of reach.

"I don't want to be here." Her voice shook and she hated herself for the tears gathering in her eyes. She would never be normal again. She would never know what people expected when they spoke to her. The last few years of her life would forever cloud her ability to function in society. She hadn't even lived at Wayside for a day, and she'd already proven that.

"We want you to stay." Edwyn crouched but stayed too far away to touch her.

He'd probably meant it to sound welcoming, but it was just more of a trap. Kelly backed away and her rear hit something metal. Something slammed forward, knocking her on the back of the head. She screamed and whipped around to see who had hit her.

Edwyn rushed forward. "Are you alright?"

Her heart sped up even faster, painful now. The ring around the outside of her vision grew darker and she reached out to keep her balance. "Don't touch me!"

He held out his hands in front of him to show her where they were. "I won't. I just wanted to make sure you were all right. Can I look at your head?"

She shook her head so quickly she lost her balance. "I just want to go."

He reached for his phone and pressed a few things on the screen. "Yeah, it's me. We're in the barn. Can you come help?"

He shoved his phone back in his pocket and held up his hands. "Just a second, okay?"

A few seconds later, Sam slowly strode into the barn a few feet away. If Edwyn thought this was going to help, he was wrong. She made a noise in her throat she didn't recognize and turned to get up and race for the door.

"Kelly."

Sam's voice was so calming, so much like her memories and dreams where she'd actually lived the last few years, her life was no life at all. She stalled for a moment, unsure where she should go or what she should do.

"Talk to me," Sam stayed back, giving her space. "Kelly, you don't need to be strong right now."

Her knees gave out and she crumpled hard on the cement floor, her arm the only thing that kept her head from hitting the cement. A cry escaped her before she could stop it.

Sam lowered himself down on the floor and sat about four feet away, his knees crossed, so she assumed he couldn't get up quickly. "Edwyn, why don't you find Kelly a bottle of water? I think she could use a drink."

Edwyn headed off, leaving her alone with Sam, the one man she was terrified to be alone with. Not because he would do anything to her, but because she was ashamed of what her life had become. He was supposed to save her. He was supposed to be her rescuer. She'd relied on him completely. Too much.

"I want to leave," the words barely registered to her own ears.

"Can you give us two weeks? If not, we'll need to find another safe place for you to go. We aren't holding you here. You aren't forced to stay." Sam watched her, but his eyes weren't condemning like she expected.

“Just two weeks? I don’t have to live here if I don’t fit in?” Who was she kidding? She wouldn’t fit in. Why was she even thinking about agreeing to stay when she just wanted to be alone?

“Yes. I’ll tell Connor to look for a place you can stay. Sometimes, the families of other people who’ve already graduated offer to take in someone who doesn’t have a family or who has nowhere to go. We can see if one of those families is available.”

Sam wasn’t supposed to offer to do things for her. She’d convinced herself he would be angry with her. That he would accuse her of all the awful things she’d done. He had to have known. Why else would he leave?

“I . . .” She wanted to go, but staying would mean she might finally find out why Sam had abandoned her. She might finally know for sure and be able to move on. “I think I can do that.”

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He slowly stood and offered his hand. She held back but only for a second before accepting the help to stand. She rubbed the back of her head, but it didn't hurt that bad.

“Did you hit your head?” concern laced his voice.

She gritted her teeth. “It's only a bump. I'm fine.”

“Good. I'm glad.”

If only that were actually true and 'fine' wasn't a total lie.

Chapter Three

With long strides, Sam headed for the back of his cabin to the small storage closet next to the dining room. Inside, he kept all the equipment he needed for hiking. When the weather was good, he'd take a few dogs up the trails, let them run and be dogs for a while. Today, he had no time for watching anything but where he placed his own feet. He just needed a few moments of quiet, some time to think.

He stuck his head into the dark recesses of his closet and hunted for his equipment. The weather had only recently shifted to the point of needing winter gear, and it was still buried underneath what he used in the spring, summer, and early fall. With a few grunts and swallowed words he shouldn't say, he tugged what he needed free of the closet.

Shoving his foot into his hiking boot, he grumbled about how long he was taking,

knowing that he wasn't really angry about the time, but how he felt. He wasn't supposed to feel anything for Kelly. He was supposed to step aside and let her heal. Why was he feeling anything? What kind of a monster allowed himself to be attracted to a woman when she was clearly hurting and wanted nothing to do with men, possibly for the rest of her life?

"Me. I'm that monster." He jabbed his thumb into his sternum and shook his head. He'd told himself he couldn't feel anything for her anymore. Not since she'd cheated on him. But helping her had not been the same as the women he'd helped before. She was a victim, yet his mind and heart couldn't separate the fact that she was also Kelly, the one he'd wanted to marry. The one he'd loved.

He finished lacing his boots and shrugged on the jacket he wore for hiking, grabbed his walking stick, the tracker he clipped to his coat in case of injury, along with gloves and his emergency backpack, then headed out the patio door. Making sure he'd secured it, he went for the trails that led in various directions away from the main house.

When he reached the kennels, Zeus, a large rehabilitated German shepherd, barked for his attention. The other dogs made themselves busy with the various toys in the run, but Zeus wanted nothing but Sam's attention. Sam unlatched the gate and let the dog out, despite his desire to be alone. He couldn't walk past a dog who wanted his attention.

Usually, the dog's joy at being near him would've immediately bolstered his mood, but today Zeus's energy seemed more than he could handle. Zeus ran ahead, then stopped and looked back at Sam, tilting his head to the side. His long ears looked strange, like they should flop, but they didn't.

"I'm not in the mood to run today, boy." Sam tried not to sound gruff. It wasn't Zeus's fault that he was angry with himself. Zeus just wanted to be a dog and do dog

things with the guy who usually let him.

Zeus gave a single bark and sat, waiting for Sam to catch up. Sam picked up the pace, allowing Zeus to choose the trail. He wasn't in the mood to make choices, anyway. Sam's mind wandered back to years before when Kelly had been his world. No other woman had given him the time of day. He wasn't flashy. He wasn't pushy. He wasn't an athlete.

She'd been bubbly, friendly with everyone. There wasn't a soul who couldn't be her friend, at least peripherally. He'd let her be the sunshine to his shadow. He preferred staying out of the limelight, which made them a great couple. She was the talker, the one who got them invited to parties. The trouble was, he'd noticed that many of those people were little more than acquaintances. None of the people who took all her energy knew her well when he asked them questions.

Now that he thought about their history, the man he'd seen through her window wasn't anyone he'd ever seen her with before that day. He hadn't known the man. Over the time that they were close, he'd gotten to know all her friends, including one he'd warned her about on multiple occasions. Kelly had argued with him about Jasmine, claiming she wasn't really trouble, she was troubled. There was a difference, according to Kelly.

Had Jasmine been the issue all along? Sam stopped in his tracks and looked around, noting how far he'd gone. Trees surrounded him, and Zeus sniffed the ground about twenty yards ahead. Nothing seemed out of place, but the chill in the air and the environment didn't work its usual therapy on him.

He wasn't an angry guy. He didn't yell and never used his fists. His father had taught him to walk away from situations with hot heads because circumstances where emotions were high would get him in trouble. Kelly had only proven that true. He'd let his emotions have free rein and look where it had gotten him. A broken heart and

no chance at love again.

He stuck his walking stick into the dirt and took a deep breath then let it out in a puff of vapor. Zeus trotted up to him and sat on Sam's foot, pushing the top of his head into Sam's thigh to look up at him. The utter trust on Zeus' face stabbed Sam in the heart. He had to do better.

Kelly deserved the chance to heal. The past was the past and it should stay there. No matter his feelings when he looked at her. No matter the clench in his chest when she looked so vulnerable and hurt. He wouldn't act on that. She was a guest. There were rules specifically meant to keep the Wayside men from this situation and to protect their guests from advances. He just needed to follow them. Be accountable.

He'd go back, take a hot shower, then go and talk to Connor about his plans. He couldn't be the one to help Kelly if she had any chance at all to have the kind of experience at Wayside she needed. He wouldn't keep her from that. It was too rare. If he had to leave, he would.

Zeus whined and pressed his back into Sam's leg, letting him know he wanted to go further. It hadn't been half the walk they usually took. Sam scratched Zeus behind his soft ear, and finally smiled down at Zeus.

"Okay, boy. Let's go."

Zeus leapt off toward the trail and raced ahead, but always circled back so he stayed within sight of Sam. They walked down toward the river and stood up on the high bank. The narrow river was partially frozen over already, only the center flowed, the water looking much darker than the ice.

Sam shivered and his breath puffed as he let himself rest for a moment. Once his breathing was back to normal and his feet felt slightly cold, he knew it was time to

return Zeus to his warm kennel. He needed a hot shower himself. With a sharp whistle, Sam called for Zeus to return.

Within seconds, Zeus's head poked from behind a tree. His ears perked up until they pointed completely straight, like he could hear everything for miles around. Sam whistled one more time and Zeus bounded toward him.

He never really stopped training any of the Wayside dogs. Even great adherence to training could falter with a bad day, too much stimulus, or an outside force like other dogs. Sam dug in his pocket and held out a treat for Zeus, then gave the whistle for him to heel.

Zeus never missed a cue when a treat was involved, so he immediately followed the command. Sam rewarded him for his good behavior, and they headed back toward the ranch. Maybe that's what he needed, a little positive reinforcement for good behavior. If he could do what he needed to, what was right, then he could reward himself with some time off or a good, long ride on his horse.

Sam let his shoulders relax. He might have been on the wrong track before, but he didn't have to stay there. He'd always tried to be a good guy. The unsung hero. The one anyone could turn to. That was practically his persona. So, now he needed to be that guy for Kelly.

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He returned to the kennel and opened the gate. Zeus went right in without complaint. He reached through the fence and gave Bubbles a few chin scratches, then made his way toward home. Tomorrow would be better. He wouldn't let it be any other way.

Kelly woke early and made herself a cup of coffee in the single-cup coffee maker in her cabin. She made use of the toaster and, feeling like she wanted to avoid everyone today if possible, made the decision to use the phone and let Connor know she would be staying in.

She didn't want to explain to him that Edwyn was just too assertive, too gruff, too loud. She didn't want to work with him anymore. After Edwyn had scared her so badly the day before, Sam had come to her rescue. He'd even called Sam to come. Her heart had done something she'd never expected to happen again, she'd melted into a safe space, a place she'd thought was dead inside. A place that was very dangerous for a woman like her.

Nathan would find her. It was only a matter of time. When he did, everyone around her would be in danger. She gripped her hot coffee and headed for the patio window. Even that felt forbidden. She was so used to hiding, staying behind locked doors, away from windows. Her life was always waiting to be told what to do and where to go. Even the choice to stay in her room was novel and scary.

A cloudy sky threatened to spout more snowflakes. Cold air seeped through the patio door making her shiver and she backed away. Recalling what Lacy had said the day before, she turned the thermostat up a few degrees and waited for the clicking of the baseboard heater to turn on. Cradling her mug between her hands, she headed for the sofa. Now that she had time, what could she do with it? What did she enjoy doing

anymore? There wasn't anything.

With startling clarity, she saw her reflection in the television screen. How could she still allow herself to feel anything? Hadn't she been through enough? Her heart should be dead. Even if she could ever love again, she would never have a normal relationship. Any man who decided she could be loved would have to deal with her night terrors, her constant feeling of being permanently damaged, her worry that they may have stolen her very soul.

There was nothing left of her to love.

So why had Sam's light touch yesterday made her feel safe? That was a feeling she hadn't known in years. Even coming to Wayside hadn't done that. She was still alone, still unsure. Coming to Wayside was supposed to open doors to healing, but being out in the wide open left her feeling vulnerable, watched, exposed. Sam was like a protective blanket over her.

"You can't stay here. If you do, you could make him fall for you. That's not fair to him." She stared at her reflection, willing herself to get up and find Connor. She had to do what was right, but her heart rebelled. Knowing what she had to do didn't make it any easier. Leaving would be giving up the one thing that had made her feel almost good.

"Toughen up, buttercup. You have to do what's right because this is his job. He can't leave here, which means you have to. For both of you." She stood and left her coffee on the kitchen table.

Shrugging on Lacy's coat, she ducked outside. Since she'd told Connor she was staying in, being outside left her tense, like she was misbehaving. Would she get in trouble? She searched the area to see if anyone might see her. Finding no one, she made her way to the ranch house, keeping near buildings and as out of sight as

possible.

Opening the front door, she glanced both ways and around the room before making her way to the hallway where Connor's office was the first door on the right. He'd told her that one of their guests stayed in the room across the hall from Brendon's office, but she hadn't been down that far yet.

Connor's door was open, but she hesitated outside. Voices came from the dining room, since breakfast was still being served. If someone found her hanging out in the hallway, would they think she was breaking some rule? No one had told her what the rules were other than pointing out the numbered plaque on the wall and explaining that those rules pertained more to the men than the guests. Knowing that, she'd quickly dispelled them from her mind.

Kelly took a deep breath and approached the door. Connor looked up before she could knock, and he smiled. The man was roughly the size of a grizzly and more daunting than he probably realized. She shrank back a step.

"Come on in, Kelly." He waved her forward. "I wasn't expecting you."

She bit her lip and slowly approached his desk. This would be easier if she just came right out and said what needed to be. "I would like to go back to the halfway house. I don't think this is going to work. I know I told Sam I would give you two weeks, but I don't think I can."

Connor observed her for a few seconds, and she fought the urge to squirm as she sat. What was he looking at? Why couldn't he just give her an answer?

"You spoke to Sam?"

What a strange question. Why wouldn't she talk to Sam, though she supposed he

might have thought she would talk to Edwyn. “Yes. Edwyn and I don’t really make a good match. He makes me feel tense, worried, anxious . . .” Among other things. She wasn’t sure what kind of man he was. Maybe he never hit women, but the tone of his voice was too close to men who had. Those men who’d come before Edwyn would forever cloud her thoughts. She couldn’t heal with a man who put her on edge just by opening his mouth.

Connor frowned and threaded his fingers together in front of him. He was about to disappoint her. She could read that clearly in his body language.

“I’m sorry, Kelly. The coordinator at the halfway house told me they would be giving your bed to someone as soon as you left. They have a list of people who need housing and they couldn’t wait to see if you would work out here. I had to assure them that I would keep you here until you were either ready to move on or we could find a safe place for you. I can look for that if you’d really like me to, but it will take time.”

Time. Everything in her life that had gone wrong had something to do with time. When her friend had stolen her money, she’d been out of time with the bank. Foreclosure had been eminent. When she’d been held against her will to get the money back, Nathan had told her she only had to work for him a short time, then she would be free. Yet that time had never come. Now, she’d have to stay here and risk hurting Sam all over again because she had to have hurt him before if he’d walked away from her.

“You don’t look like you can stand that answer. I wish I could give you what you want, but I can’t. Can you tell me what happened so I can try to fix it?”

Not without saying something that would probably make him angry about Edwyn. And whose side would Connor take? What would he say if she told him the truth? No one asked her how she felt. No one cared about her comfort or safety. “I don’t fit well with Edwyn.” She ducked her head, waiting for him to defend his man.

“I was worried that might be the case. Edwyn is used to being a foreman, telling people what to do. He’s usually softer with guests, but even trying his best he can sound like he’s ordering people around.” Connor drummed his fingers on the desk. “Sam is working with Rebecca right now. Junior won’t have the time if you’re going to stay for as long as usual because his wife is pregnant.”

“And what if I don’t stay? If you’re going to look for a place for me to stay, then I won’t be here long.” She hadn’t met Junior yet, but he was obviously married. That might make him a little safer, if he actually cared about his wife.

“I’ll talk to him and to Edwyn and see what they think. If Junior agrees, I’ll let you know. I suspect Edwyn knew this was coming. He mentioned at our evening meeting last night that he’d failed with you.”

She jumped, locking eyes with Connor. Edwyn had admitted he’d failed her? That was shocking. “He talked to you?”

Connor nodded slightly. “Yes. We’re committed to honesty here. He was sorry and wasn’t sure what he’d done, but clearly he wasn’t the right person to work with you. So, I was planning to talk to you today at some point. I just hadn’t decided who I was going to ask to take over as your wrangler.”

She let her shoulders relax slightly. “Thank you.” The words came easy, and surprisingly, so did the feeling of gratitude. Maybe staying wouldn’t be so bad if she could avoid Sam and if they really did care about her feelings, as it seemed they did. “I promised Sam I would stay for two weeks. Do you think you could find somewhere for me to go in that time?”

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Connor glanced down at what looked like a planner. “I can do my best. In the meantime, why don’t you go down and have a session with Brendon. He’s open right now and I’d like you to feel like you can tell him when things happen that make you scared or uncomfortable. Let him help you.”

Kelly gripped the arms of the chair, wishing she could run. The idea of talking to a counselor who she didn’t know was almost more terrifying than the idea of talking to Sam.

Chapter Four

Kelly followed Connor down the hallway and into Brendon’s spacious office. He sat behind a large desk with immaculate stacks of papers on each corner. A golden bowl of chocolate sat at the far edge of the desk, closest to guests. Connor led her in and sat next to her.

“Brendon, I’ve brought Kelly in for her first meeting with you a little earlier than scheduled because we’ve already encountered some issues. I hope you can help Kelly feel a little more welcome and relaxed here. I’ll be adjusting her wrangler to help accomplish that as well. She has asked to go back to the halfway house.”

Kelly’s face heated by degrees until she felt ill. Were there no secrets around here? If every word she said to anyone was shared with everyone, then she still had no privacy. She tucked her hands between her knees and waited for Connor to leave. Then Brendon could take over where Connor had left off.

Connor closed the door and Brendon leaned forward, nudging the bowl of chocolate.

“Feel free to have as many as you’d like. I’ve found that chocolate works wonders to help people feel better about sitting in that chair.”

Despite the teasing she’d endured her entire life, she’d never been a fan of chocolate. “Anything fruity?” She knew her question was a test. Would he be annoyed by her request?

He pulled open a drawer of his desk and drew out a bag of fruity toffee. “Will this work?”

Her heart gave a quick lurch. He hadn’t put her down for wanting something different, for not immediately taking what he’d offered. He didn’t even seem angry.

“That’s perfect. Thank you.” She took a piece of what she remembered being her favorite color and slowly unwrapped the wax paper, then popped it in her mouth. In that moment, she remembered that all she’d put in her stomach that morning was a few sips of coffee. Yet the taste was like childhood, swings, summer days, and playing in the sprinkler.

“Let’s start at the beginning. I find it’s the easiest.”

Maybe for him. She sucked on the candy for a while, gathering her thoughts. She could tell the truth, that Jasmine had befriended her, knowing that Kelly was too trusting, too friendly, unwilling to set boundaries. That Jasmine had used that to slowly take advantage of her and finally left her completely penniless. No one would ever confront Jasmine. Blaming her would be safe, but probably wasn’t completely accurate. Sam had warned her many times, but she’d convinced herself that he was just too practical to have close friends.

“The beginning is a very flimsy line. I’m not sure when I crossed it, exactly.”

Brendon made a short note on his paper. “Unless people are abducted, which isn’t always the case, I find that to be true. It’s like they are slowly drawn in and before they can change course their life is no longer their own. Start wherever you feel comfortable starting, even if it has nothing to do with where you were. Talk about what comes to mind.”

Kelly focused on her breathing, on not squirming, just relaxing. “Sam didn’t usually tell me who I should or shouldn’t hang out with, so when he said Jasmine was bad news, I probably should’ve listened. She had no friends and I felt bad for her. We worked together at a little mom and pop drug store that also sold cards, figurines, ornaments, stationary, stuff like that.” Life had been so easy back then.

“I had an old car that kept breaking down. I needed a new alternator and got behind on my mortgage, then I had to take a pay cut because the little shop had a break-in and they couldn’t afford to replace everything.” She curled her feet under her and hugged her knees. Her parents had told her she wasn’t ready to be on her own and she wasn’t ready to have a house of her own. They’d lived far away, and she’d been sure she knew better than they did. They didn’t know her bank account or her work ethic.

Brendon didn’t say anything, he simply waited for her to go on. Oddly, it gave her the sense that he had all the time in the world to listen to her. She took a deep breath and went for another taffy to help her go on.

“My friend Jasmine told me she had medical bills she needed to pay, that if she didn’t pay them, she’d go to jail. She was just as affected by the pay cut as me. I didn’t want to see her go to jail for something when I had the power to help her. I offered to write her a check, but she said she couldn’t remember the exact amount. Since my car was in the shop, I couldn’t take her to pay the bill. I did something really stupid. I trusted her.” Kelly still felt sick to her stomach. Hindsight was always perfect, but that didn’t mean it was without pain.

“Did she take advantage of you?” Brendon asked.

“She wiped me out, not just my checking account but my savings. She’d stolen my driver’s license, went to my bank and transferred everything from my savings account. Then she wrote out a check to pay the man who I later found out was her pimp. He’d been threatening to kill her if she didn’t repay some stolen money.”

Brendon glanced up from his notes. “Her pimp?”

Kelly bit her lip. She never talked about this. What good would talking do? She’d made errors and then she’d doubled down on them. “Yes.”

“And did he become your pimp?”

Heat scorched up her neck and all the way to the roots of her hair. She’d been sure she couldn’t feel embarrassed anymore, but the last few days had proven her wrong on that front, too. “Eventually, but not right away. At first, he didn’t tell me he was her pimp. He said he was her friend, that he’d helped her. Jasmine lied to me and told me he was very good to her and that if I listened to him and did what he said, I might be able to earn the money back quickly and keep my house. I tried for a while to get back on my feet, but without my car, I couldn’t find a different job. I was stuck.”

“I know you’re embarrassed, but nothing you say will leave this room. What you tell me isn’t like what you tell Connor or any of the others. This room is confidential.”

Kelly swallowed hard and gave a quick nod. At least Sam wouldn’t hear about all of this from Brendon. “Like I said, I have trouble saying no, backing out, drawing a line in the sand. I felt trapped, like I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t pay for my car repairs anymore or my house. I couldn’t even afford groceries.”

“And this was when you knew Sam?” Brendon jotted down a few more notes.

“Yes,” she barely got out the word. She’d been so terrified to tell Sam that he was right about Jasmine. What if Sam had seen Kelly for who she was, someone who was far too accepting of people for her own good? Someone who was unable to tell right from wrong in a situation until it was too late.

“And you didn’t feel you could go to him?”

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Kelly closed her eyes and willed herself to come up with an answer. If only she'd trusted herself to come clean to Sam. If only she could go back in time and do things differently. "I didn't go to him. This was my problem, not his. He'd told me he might be ring shopping, but until he did, I still had to answer for my own actions. And if I told him about all that was going on with me, he couldn't have helped me and bought a ring. I thought the ring would solve my problems."

Brendon nodded slightly, but didn't press further.

"Nathan told me I only had to work for him for a short time, then I would be right back where I was. He told me the opportunity for making money was limitless if I would work for him. He was right, the opportunity was limitless. For him. I hated it and kept waiting for him to pay me. Before I knew it, Sam had disappeared, and the bank evicted me from my house."

"And Nathan swept in to," he held his hands up and made air quotes, "help you?"

Kelly nodded. "Yeah, since I was now homeless, he offered me an apartment, but my rent would have to come out of my pay. I asked him when I would see that pay."

"Did he give you an answer?" Brendon's brows rose.

Gullible again. She hadn't asked for a contract or any kind of paperwork. Though, even then, she'd known Nathan wouldn't stand to be tested. Asking questions was a bad idea. "No, not really. He told me I'd have to work for him for a time and when I was done, he'd put \$50,000 in my bank account, which would more than pay for what I'd lost."

Brendon's face softened. "Clearly he didn't understand what you'd lost."

"I want to leave." She couldn't explain why, but having Brendon come close to understanding her was doing something akin to a nuclear meltdown inside her. Emotions swirling, she gripped the arms of the leather chair and couldn't move.

"Why? Connor has offered to change who you'll ride with and talk to daily. That should help you acclimate better to Wayside. I can understand how having someone help you who is innately more gruff might bother you. It won't change the situation, but I can promise you that he would never lay a hand on you."

That wasn't much comfort since she'd tried to convince herself in the moment he wasn't going to hit her, but her fear wouldn't allow her to consider any other option. Her fight or flight reflex always slipped to flight, even when she hadn't been allowed to flee.

Brendon went on, "Is there another reason you'd like to leave? There doesn't have to be one, but I'm curious."

Maybe, since he seemed to be angling for her feelings on Sam, she could use that to her advantage. Brendon would tell Sam all her flaws and to stay away. All she had to do was tell them the truth about why she wanted to leave. If she had to stay, she'd be safely away from Sam, allowing him to go on with his life as he should have.

"It's Sam. He had to come help me when I had trouble with Edwyn and I . . . felt something when he was near me. I felt safe. I have no right to feel anything for him or toward him. I know he doesn't feel anything for me anymore, but I don't want anything to grow between us because he deserves better than what I will ever have to offer."

Brendon focused on her. "I know the pain you have is deep. There will always be a

scar. You will probably never forget. But I can promise you that you have so much more value than you will ever know. I would normally never tell you to discount your feelings, but this case is different. Your feelings, in the case of your worth, are lies. Everyone has value. I hope you'll see that soon, too."

She shook her head, unwilling to change the conversation to herself again. "I don't want Sam to get hurt. I don't want to feel anything for him, and I don't want him to feel anything for me."

Brendon leaned forward and one side of his mouth quirked almost into a half smile. "What if Sam would agree to be your wrangler? No strings attached. He will promise to be here for you and stand back, letting you heal with someone you trust. Then he'll let you go when you're done."

No one ever made promises without strings. Especially people with past hurts to protect. Not even Sam was that good. "He wouldn't agree to that." And if he did, it would be his training she saw. He wouldn't be a protector anymore. Only cold comfort. That promise would kill her in that she would wonder if his kindness was simply the promise he'd made or genuine.

"He would. Every Wayside worker agrees to it with every single person who comes here. We all agree to help them learn where they fit into the grand scheme of this world, without us. The whole goal is to provide a safe place to heal and become the person you're meant to be now."

She couldn't even picture that yet. It was so distant as to be almost unimaginable. To hear that some people made it to that point was promising, though. She said nothing in agreement, but Brendon reached for his cellphone and punched what had to be a text into it.

"Sam will be by shortly."

She tensed and bit her lip. Connor had already come up with a solution. Would this make him angry? Would he think she'd gone behind his back? "Connor told me Junior would take over as my wrangler."

"While I think that's a suitable option and Junior wouldn't say no, he needs time with his wife right now. When one of our guys is helping a guest, that's a full-time commitment. Sam's current client, Rebecca, is doing well and has formed a very good friendship with Gabby, Junior's wife. I wouldn't normally suggest switching wranglers, but in this case, I think it's a good plan."

Someone knocked on the door and Kelly fought the surge of sick in her stomach. She'd come to the office to get away from more time with Sam, and now she would be spending time with him daily. "This isn't fair," she whispered as Brendon beckoned Sam inside.

Sam came inside and sat in the chair next to her. "Is something wrong?" He glanced quickly at her, then at Brendon.

"Sam, thanks for coming so quickly. Kelly told me briefly about her situation yesterday. Thanks for coming to help her right away then, too. In talking with Kelly, we've come to the conclusion that—despite your past—I think it would be best if you would take over as her wrangler. Junior will take over with Rebecca. To do that, though, would require that you follow Connor's rules to the letter."

"You know I wouldn't break Connor's rules." Sam's voice was gruff, more unyielding than usual, and he didn't look at her.

"Good."

Sam sat back in his chair. "Why this sudden adherence to Connor's rules? You're usually the last one to press following them. Especially in this case, where my

presence breaks one of them.” He laid his elbows on the arms of the chair and threaded the tips of his fingers together.

“I don’t disagree with the rules. I merely think the originals they are derived from are better. If you’d rather agree to follow those, I’m all for that.”

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Kelly wished she'd paid more attention to the very brief explanation of the rules. Then she might understand the strange undertow that suddenly seemed to yank her emotions in every direction.

"Kelly needs someone to be her wrangler for the next few weeks while we try to find a safe place for her to go."

He glanced at her. "You had a rough first day. I'm sorry about that. I'll try to help you with the next few weeks. You can trust me. You don't have to be frightened. I know that won't be easy for you and you have no reason to trust anyone here. I'm just saying it out loud so you can begin to trust what people say. I'll prove my words true."

He always had before, except when he'd disappeared from her life. She wanted to believe him, but so many people had lied to her. There had been so many who had used her. Sam could be trusted, but her heart didn't want to trust anyone and risk being hurt again. If his words proved to be lies, it might break her.

"I know you don't believe me. I don't expect you to. But I will do my best to make the next few weeks comfortable for you." Sam's head tilted slightly in her direction, but he didn't look her in the eye.

There was a pain he was hiding from her, and she wanted desperately to know what it was. Had he known about the world she'd been thrust into? Did he think she'd chosen that life? If he did, he either didn't know her as well as she'd thought he did, or he'd let himself believe he didn't know her then. She hadn't knowingly chosen to be a prostitute. She opened her mouth to ask, then shut it tight. Now was not the time.

She'd already bared enough of her past in front of Brendon. Her heart was raw from releasing the venom trapped under years of pain.

No more for today.

"Fine. Two weeks." She glanced up at Brendon. "I'm trusting you to do your part and to look for a place for me."

He gave a sharp nod. "Just understand that this might take time. You were only allowed to come here because we have an understanding with our local police. They know about the danger that we might be in out here with the guests we have. Nathan was in direct contact with a woman known as Evie Carvel. If you were that close to the top, you are in danger. They will be afraid that you know too much."

Kelly swallowed hard, now understanding why Nathan never let anyone go free and why those who escaped were quickly found and disposed of. She was actually shocked she hadn't been found at the halfwayhouse, though the protection around her had been extensive. They'd never let her outside, she'd gone by a different name, and they'd required that she wear a hat and glasses when she was with the other residents. It had apparently been enough to save her. That and no one had known where she was going.

"I understand. Implicitly." But that didn't negate the fact that she felt too much for Sam and would now have to control her every thought and word around him for the next two weeks.

"Good. Sam, why don't you take Kelly outside and introduce her to her horse?"

Sam finally smiled. "That, I can do."

Chapter Five

The rumble of an approaching truck distracted Sam from grooming his horse. Strange vehicles coming up the Wayside drive always drew attention. Sam stood next to his horse, a pretty paint named Picasso, running the curry brush over his sides. Sam paused momentarily to watch the car, forcing Picasso to nudge his hand to remind him to continue.

Sam resumed; glad he'd done the job so many times that it took little thought. Two men got out of the car, and he immediately recognized both of them. The first was Dominic Anderson, leader of The Guardians who'd helped Wayside a few months back when Erica had brought her son Pete to Wayside. They'd needed help with security to keep the boy safe. Shortly thereafter, Erica and Cole had worked together, allowing Cole to heal from some of his damaged past and giving Erica a family she'd never had. The other man worked for Dominic, Spenser Cadence, a tech genius and munitions specialist.

Both men were met by Connor almost immediately. He had to have been watching the cameras on the poles where the gate had once stood. Otherwise, he couldn't have heard the quiet car approach. Sam patted Picasso and gave him a scratch under the jaw. "I'll be back in a few. I need to find out what this is all about. Don't get too impatient on me." He patted the horse's flank and headed toward the house.

"Is this a private meeting, or can I join?" Sam asked. Connor had an open-door policy with things, allowing the guys to be part of all that went on around Wayside, but access wasn't a given. They still had to ask.

Dominic grinned at him and held up a hand. Sam clasped it like they were going to arm wrestle, but instead the huge guy drew him into a crushing man-hug and slapped him on the back hard enough to make a cloud of barn dust fly from his back. "Good to see you, Sam."

"Likewise." Though he suspected they hadn't come a thousand miles across two

states just to visit and catch up. Connor would only ask them to come if something was wrong and they could be of assistance.

“I don’t see why you can’t join us. I was going to inform all of you of the details from this meeting at our usual evening meeting.” Connor headed back into the house, and all three of them followed.

When they reached Connor’s office, he was already in the process of arranging three chairs facing his desk. He went around and took his seat behind it then organized his paperwork off to the side. Sam took the seat closest to the wall knowing that, although they were completely safe, both the other men would want the spots closest to the door because it afforded a better line of sight to the exit. Both men would want to know at all times what was going on.

Dominic and Spenser took their seats and Connor exhaled, gathering his thoughts. “Dominic, I wasn’t expecting you to be the one to come, especially when you told me to let you know when your men arrived. When you said you had the perfect men for the job, you didn’t tell me you were one of them.”

Sam held in his surprise. Connor usually asked the guys their thoughts on this sort of thing before making plans to have anyone come. Why hadn’t this come to a vote, or at the very least, why hadn’t he let the guys know? Travel took almost twenty hours between them, there would’ve been time to make the guys aware.

The towering, dark-skinned man grinned. “You accused me of never showing my hand. And you’re right. I don’t. I had to keep you on your toes. But this couldn’t be helped. I’d planned to send Artemis, but he broke his wrist the day they planned to leave. Bringing Spenser was a given. He’s our tech expert and you said you needed him. He’s trained enough security officers back home that I wasn’t concerned about bringing him along. I’m a security and special ops specialist, so my qualifications were a perfect match for the need. Given the situation, I thought both of our unique

abilities would qualify and having us here would bring no complaints.”

Connor nodded. “They do, and I’m not complaining. But I hope we aren’t taking you away from already contracted work. I know you said you aren’t worried about the tech aspect, but you’re the leader. Won’t they miss you? Are things going well?”

Though Dominic usually hid his feelings behind either a smile that you never quite understood or a stone face that could put the fear of God in about anyone. His face currently reflected a worry that wasn’t like him. “The slave trade is alive and well in Duluth. There are two sides to the city with a distinct line between them, but they are unfortunately close. One is joyous and for the tourists, it brings people north for the draw of Lake Superior and the shipping trade. The other, darker side of the city shows poverty, homelessness, and fear. Duluth needs prayer for workers. The kind of workers who bring freedom to those who would soon be whisked out of Duluth aboard ships where they aren’t listed as cargo . . .”

Connor gave a solemn nod. “You can count me in.” He scribbled a note down on a nearby notepad.

Dominic gave a slight head tilt. “Thank you. As to if I’m needed at home, I’m only a call away. Artemis is my second and right-hand man. He can handle everything I would. All the men know how and when to contact me. One thing I learned while I was here last time is that finding a man you trust as your second is as important as teaching obedience and communication. To that end,

“Now that we have the welcomes out of the way, tell me why we’re here. I know the phone isn’t always the best and safest way to talk about this kind of thing.” Sam hadn’t been in the military that long, but he could only describe Dominic’s shift in the chair as being ‘at ease’, though that was normally a standing position.

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“I asked you here, and I allowed Sam to join us because he’s very much a part of the situation. As I indicated on the phone, we had a recent victim join us who came from a man uniquely tied to Evie Carvel. Evie MacKenna is her real name, but no one else knows her by that identity. If you recall from when you were here before, she is probably equal in rank to Viceroy, or perhaps just under him.”

Dominic pursed his lips into a frown. “I thought you’d told me in one of your emails that she is currently in jail awaiting trial, a maximum-security women’s prison?”

“She is, but that only adds to the issue.” Connor pulled a remote control from his desk and turned on a huge television behind him. He cued up a video and pressed a button to play it. On the screen, a grainy video came up of an interrogation room with a man and an officer. The man was shifty, nervous. Unlike a usual interview, the cop never faced the camera. He stayed with his back turned. After about thirty seconds and speaking so quietly the audio system didn’t pick up more than mutters, he opened a fridge in the corner and offered the male suspect a bottle of water.

Connor paused the video.

“See that?”

Sam didn’t see anything out of the ordinary other than the camera-shy cop. “What are we supposed to see? I can’t see anything about the suspect or the cop. It’s just two guys in a small room.”

Connor nodded his agreement. “I know. It wasn’t until after the fact that the cops realized this slight dent in their armor. That bottle of water given to that suspect, right

after this video, he died of poisoning. You can't identify him from this horrible video, but you might recall the name Gregory Diamond. He was the man who burned his hand when he threw a pipe bomb from his car, injuring an officer and completely destroying evidence of human organ harvesting . . . practically in our backyard."

Sam recalled what Brendon and Dee had been through, out at the false church where this Gregory had left a crater in the earth. "So, he's dead."

Connor sighed. "Yes, before he could testify. He was found in his cell hours later. The poison was powerful. You'll also note that there was hardly any sound on the video, even though he was there for questioning. No one can tell me who that investigator is. No one was supposed to be in that room that day. The badge used to sign out the prisoner was stolen from a man who was in the hospital having surgery for gallbladder removal. So, you can see that this spider reaches far and wide. The officer whose badge was used was thoroughly questioned, but he was under anesthesia during the time stamp on this video. Either someone from the hospital stole his security badge or someone broke into the hospital to grab it. There's nothing and no one these people can't reach. Including Evie."

"They aren't God. Are they ruling his death a suicide?" Dominic asked. "Even though it was poison, I wouldn't be surprised. Suicide covers suspicion, and any fingers pointed at the police."

Connor glanced down at his notes. "No, there's too much evidence to prove it was homicide, but there aren't any clues. No suspects. Do you know how many fingerprints are in a room like that? The suspect twisted off the bottle top for Gregory and pocketed the cover. If you notice when he pulls open the fridge, he uses the toe of his boot and he grabs the bottle by the cap. He doesn't lay his hands on the table and he took the empty bottle with him when he left. This is a pro who knows exactly how to keep evidence to himself. Yet, he was bold enough to be on camera, knowing that if the video didn't show up in evidence, that would cause concern. Leaving the video

gave him time to get away.”

Dominic slowly nodded like he was taking in every detail. “If this man’s and Evie’s lives are in danger, then you assume Kelly’s is as well?”

Sam answered before Connor could. “She feels like she’s in danger. She told me that her pimp, Nathan, never let anyone go. If they escape, they were found and disposed of. She’s terrified of re-capture. She’s terrified of just about everything.”

“Because being caught means death,” Spenser filled in.

“Yes,” Sam answered.

“The issue is that the halfway house where Kelly came from was working very closely with police to keep her safe. They only allowed her to come here if we could assure them we had no tracking devices on the premises,” Connor said. “No cameras. No video. Nothing that could be hacked to confirm Kelly is here. She isn’t supposed to go to town like we allow the other guests. Frankly, she’s a prisoner here, she just doesn’t know that because I don’t want her to live in fear. Even if it’s warranted.”

“We noticed the gate had been removed when we pulled in and the usual security questions aren’t being asked.” Spenser glanced behind them at the closed door. “Does this mean anyone can come and go from Wayside at will?”

Connor answered immediately. “That was by the request of the sheriff. If we call him for help, he wants to be able to get here. He told us that if we are in serious danger, it’s most likely that whoever made the attack would go for the man controlling the gate first, leaving us not only down one man but allowing our attackers free access, anyway. Not only that, if Deputy Blake needs to get on the property for an emergency, he would be held up by the gate. We offered to get him a security badge, but that was one more thing he would have to keep on him, plus he doesn’t work

twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.”

Dominic leaned forward. “I don’t agree with his theory absolutely, but you only have eight men here capable of defending an entire ranch. Losing even one puts you at a disadvantage.”

“That’s where you come in. You are our tech without tech. You are our eyes without a trace.” Connor stared him directly in the eyes. “And I trust you.”

Dominic cleared his throat, ignoring the compliment. “To be clear, you want tech, but you don’t want anyone to be able to track or trace it. You want safety and security without a hint that there’s a net around Wayside. Is that correct?”

Connor finally gave a half smile. “I knew you’d get the idea. I think security is in your blood.”

Dominic laughed. “I’m a man who likes to protect things that are important to me. Wayside has become important to me. In our line of work, you keep your friends, as few as they have to be, close. I think I can help you, but what I’ll be setting up is not anything like you’ve had before. It will take time. There are many acres of area to cover and not much time. Is she resigned to one area of Wayside, or can she go anywhere on the premises?”

Connor drummed his fingers. “I don’t like the idea of limiting her movement any more than it already is and was at the halfway house. Can we make this an invisible net over the entire ranch? Maybe even the Haven next door? We’re building homes there for my men, especially those who have recently married and should have a home of their own.”

Spenser gave one curt nod. “Agreed. Family time should be separate from work. I’ll do my best and we can have a meeting after I’ve looked around at what you currently

have.”

Spenser answered, seeming like he was finally able to offer something to the conversation. “Domenic can help me, since he’s the expert on security. Is there anyone here who’s been doing the most with the cameras currently in place? Someone I could talk to about where they are?”

Connor grinned. “That would be my dad, Teddy. He’s the one who orders the cameras and he’s usually the one to place them. He enjoys it. Security gives him a feeling like he’s doing something helpful around here without rigorous horseback riding, and I tend to agree. His polio keeps him from being a wrangler, but manning the security has always been something he takes very seriously.”

Dominic replied, “Then we’ll need to talk to him and get a good idea of what he knows and where he sees any gaps that he’d like to fill. By the time we leave, your father will know more about the tech side of security than he ever thought he’d need.”

“Good. He’s said he would like to have more knowledge, but most security firms won’t let someone take classes or learn more. Your help will be an asset that stays with us long after this situation is in our past.”

Sam watched the interaction. Having such knowledgeable help should’ve calmed his raging nerves, but it did just the opposite. The things they were talking about setting up were so military and precise. Kelly was in far more danger than she could know about, and he absolutely couldn’t tell her or risk her fear overriding what they were trying to do to protect her.

That meant the job of protecting both her body and her mental well-being fell to him, a man who shouldn't be helping her at all.

Chapter Six

With a racing heart, Kelly waited beside the Wayside kennel for Sam to come out with a dog. He'd joked that if she was going to take a walk outside the range of the buildings, having a dog with her was always a good idea. She'd never had a dog growing up, and the idea of having one at their side was frightening.

The kennels were well maintained with fresh red paint and a green metal roof with a stiff peak. The windows were narrow so she couldn't see inside, but she could hear barking and Sam's voice. He sounded different with the dogs, commanding. When he was with people, Sam faded to the background, often silent and listening to everyone else. She wondered why he was so different with the dogs.

Sam opened the door, and a huge German shepherd strode directly at his side, his eyes locked on Sam, not on where he was going. Almost like the dog was one with Sam. He literally stuck to Sam's thigh. She'd never seen a dog heel like that.

"Is that what he's supposed to do?" she asked. She couldn't keep a slight note of worry from her voice, though she hadn't meant to. What kind of training would he have to put the dog through to get him to do that?

Sam gave her a half-smile that didn't leave her feeling worried like most smiles from men. "He's trained to do that because he was in danger of euthanasia for attacking someone. He has to be on his best behavior all the time because this is his last chance.

When he first came to Wayside, he'd been abused and even came close to attacking a child. He did bite a man. Connor warned me that if this dog couldn't be 100% rehabilitated, he'd have to go somewhere else. Animal control wanted to eliminate the threat completely. If I didn't help him, he'd likely be put down."

Sam scratched the dog behind the ear. "Honestly, not all dogs can have the fear and aggression trained out of them. This boy had the one thing that leads to success, which is why I even asked for a chance to help him. This good boy wanted to please someone. He wanted someone to see him as a good boy. That's what it takes. Without that, no amount of training will overcome what was originally done to him."

"He was abused . . ." Like she had been. This dog would understand her deepest hurts, or at least in part, what she'd been through. But he was a good boy in his heart. She wasn't a good anything.

"We don't know for sure if he was physically hurt but, based on his training, there are things I suspect. Yes."

Kelly dropped to her knees on the frigid grass and held out her hands to the dog. Her mind raced. What if he attacked her? What if Sam was wrong and he wasn't rehabilitated? But what if he was? Dogs weren't humans, but the fact that this dog had a job, had someone he loved and trusted, and was a contributing member of the community, gave her a little hope.

Sam said a word that wasn't English and the big dog laid down, then belly crawled to her, touching his cold nose to her hand. Tears escaped her eyelids, immediately burning her face in the crisp air, but she didn't care. She let the dog sniff her fingers for a moment and then scratched him under the chin. The dog inched closer, closer still, until he laid over her lap. He stretched up and licked the side of her face.

"What's his name?" she asked, scrubbing away the fresh tears.

“Zeus,” Sam said quietly, almost reverently. “I’ve never seen him do that before.”

“He knows we’re alike, he and I. We have a lot in common.” She buried her face in his bristly soft neck but didn’t hug him. She’d heard somewhere along the way that dogs didn’t like embraces. Then again, she usually didn’t either. Funny how she’d collected all this knowledge of what dogs didn’t like, but she had no idea what they did.

Finally, she stood and brushed the grass off her legs, then cringed at the wet splotches. “I’m going to get cold fast, huh?” Why was she always winding up on the ground in front of Sam? What was wrong with her?

“Stop putting yourself down. I can see on your face when you’re doing it. In your head. You do it a lot.” Sam whistled and Zeus immediately took a seated position at his side.

Her own doubts were always raging where she’d thought they were private. When she could be beaten or worse for saying anything, she had to question her world and what would happen on the inside, for self-preservation.

Sam went on, “I know. You’ve had to think about your every move, every breath, every deed, for years. It’s natural to keep questioning. All I’m saying is, try to get in the habit of letting us take some of that burden of worry for now. That’s our job. That will allow your mind to start thinking of ways to heal or even good things once in a while. I don’t want you to ever lose your situational awareness, because that can protect you out in the world. But you don’t have to worry about every word or thought while you’re here. Okay?”

“Having faith is one of the most difficult things in the world to do.” She’d never told anyone of her fears, because they seemed like blasphemy. “There was another girl with me. We didn’t get to talk often, but she was so sweet. She didn’t deserve to be

there.”

“Do you think you did?” Sam asked quietly, as he led her toward a trail where long grass had been cut during the summer months, making the path easy to see.

“I made my choices.” She hated admitting that to Sam, but she refused to lie. “She didn’t. She was at church one night and stayed late to help the youth pastor clean up. He had to go because his wife suddenly went into labor. She called her mother to tell her she needed a ride, but the church had to be locked. She felt safe there. It never occurred to her that a car would drive up. Men would jump out. Her life would be forever altered. She never went home.” Kelly’s voice cracked. That girl had changed her life, and Kelly had never gotten the chance to repay the favor.

“I’m sorry. There are so many men out there working to find people. But for every worker, there are thousands of missing people.”

“I know. Her name was Anna. I’ll never forget her. I was beaten pretty bad. I don’t want to go into what else, but I thought I was going to die. Anna cried over me. She told me about Jesus. She told me that Jesus would give me peace. Nothing can give you peace while you’re there, but I had to believe something. I had to cling to something. I still believe that I lived that night because I called out the name of Jesus.”

Sam gently gripped her hand, not tightly but firmly. “Jesus saves lives. If there wasn’t a plan for you here on this earth, he would’ve taken you home right then. You are valuable to Him.”

“I don’t feel it.” She’d wanted to. She’d begged God to let her feel worthy of Jesus’ death. She’d begged God to let her feel her purpose, but since that night she hadn’t felt that power. “That doesn’t mean I don’t believe. I clung to that flimsy faith the whole time. I don’t have sermons or a Bible to go off of. I’m probably not doing

anything right, but I believe.”

“Then you have a good start.” Sam took her along the gently sloping path. Zeus ran on ahead, then came back when he felt like they were getting too far behind. Birds chirped in the distance.

“This is what Connor was talking about. He talked about feeling free. When I’m up by the buildings, I feel like I’m being watched because when I was held, I was. But out here . . . there’s nothing but trees and grass, and birds. There’s nothing to judge me. No one to look at me. I finally feel . . .” There were no words. She held her hands out wide and felt the sun hit her face. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she consciously smiled. In that moment, she felt that swirling inside her, the stirring, just like that night. The healing presence of God.

Sam waited for her to finish speaking, but she seemed too overwhelmed to continue. It wasn’t an unusual thing for clients of Wayside to go through. At some point, they often reached what could only be described as a break. They came to the realization that life would be forever different from what they had ever experienced before. It would never be as it was before they were taken, but it wouldn’t be like it was there. For some, the realization was terrifying. For others, freeing.

He resigned himself to letting her process her emotions without pushing her for comments or to examine her thoughts further. Doing so would only cloud her moment. He’d had his own come-to-Jesus flashback in the last day, and he still didn’t know how he would deal with it or what the next few weeks or months would look like.

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Brendon had trapped him into a commitment he'd been committed to avoid. He had to help Kelly, something that broke one of the fundamental rules of working at Wayside, without feelings. He had to be helpful but emotionless. He had to find ways to help her heal, be present, but prevent himself from becoming reattached to this woman. A woman he already felt too much for.

Kelly finally spoke, breaking the peaceful silence around them though her words were quiet. "I finally feel a measure of peace. I never thought I would. I clung to Jesus, thinking I was going to meet him almost daily. You say He has a plan for me. I didn't want a plan. I didn't want to stay. I didn't want to keep breathing." She turned her face away. "Even seeing this, what I went through crowds out anything good and yells obscenities over any joy I try to experience. I can never wash it away."

Instead of reaching out like he did before, a move he would have to control if he needed to stay emotionless, he paused and took a deep breath. "I don't think that's abnormal. We're all wired for self-preservation. You were in a place where you never saw anyone freed. You only saw abuse and death. The only one benefiting was your captor. I wouldn't ever encourage taking your own life, but I can see why your brain would want to see an end. The only end you could envision." Thinking about the termination of Kelly's life put his own feelings in perspective.

She'd hurt him. That was a given. No one could, with any honesty, say their feelings wouldn't change if they found the person they loved and thought was faithful in the arms of another person. He hadn't believed in the cliché 'broken heart' before that moment. But when he'd looked through that window and saw Kelly holding someone else. Kissing someone else . . . He'd drastically changed. His chest had ached. His mind couldn't focus on anything else. He'd been broken.

“So, what now? Do you think I can get past all that? Will I want to go on? I had a literal moment of joy. So brief. Then the world crashed in around me and memories flooded back like I don’t deserve happiness. I don’t deserve peace.”

He swallowed hard. This was Brendon’s forte, not his. “And while you were there, were you taught that you didn’t and don’t deserve to be treated like a human being, with wants and needs and happiness?” He’d heard Brendon say that having a client come to their ownrealizations instead of feeding thoughts to them was always the best way to counsel them.

“I suppose.” She shrugged. “We were just bodies. To them, we were only human in that we fit the mold of a person. Mentally, we weren’t people at all.”

Sam prayed for the right words to say. In Luke 12, Luke talked about the Holy Spirit giving the right words to say. Even though that was in a completely different context, Sam prayed for the same words. They were just as important. He could feel Kelly’s faith in the balance. Wavering. He had no clear thoughts, no guidance.

He took a moment, then let what was on his spirit come out of his mouth. “People always ask why God allows awful things to happen. Truth is, he doesn’t allow anything. In a perfect world, we would all follow the nudging of the Holy Spirit and Satan not only wouldn’t be here, but we wouldn’t have trouble because we would never go astray.”

“Thank you for not blaming me outright. I wasn’t following God at that time. I felt hesitant to do what Jasmine and Nathan were asking of me, but I didn’t see any other way out of the pit I was in.”

“Even Christians are guilty of ignoring nudges. We are in no way perfect. And to assume that Satan isn’t powerful is to cripple the power of Jesus. Satan was so powerful that Jesus had to come and die for us so we had a way to be saved. Saying,

‘if only I’d done this’, in a small way, takes away the power of the cross. Jesus overcomes Satan, but he has a very real power on this Earth.”

Kelly nodded her head and swiped at her eyes. “I’ve seen it. It looks like black death coming from their mouths. No one else saw it, but I did. It was like smoke from tar.” She stopped where she was and Zeus immediately sat on her feet, looking up at her and pressing his head into her legs.

She scratched behind his ears. “So, will Jesus help me see joy?”

“Yes.” He knew that beyond a shadow of a doubt. God didn’t want Kelly to stay in the pit. He had a plan for her.

Zeus barked and raced off to the west. He didn’t usually do anything like that, especially barking. They’d worked on training him to only bark when there was truly something wrong. Sam took out his small binoculars from his jacket pocket and searched the area.

With a leap, Zeus jumped in the air and snapped at something above him. Sam focused on the sky and dialed the focus control on the binoculars until he saw what had caught Zeus’s attention. A small drone flew about fifty feet off the ground, directly toward them. “Kelly, get behind me.” He didn’t yell. If that drone had the capability to record sound, he wanted Zeus’s barking to drown out his words.

Kelly did what he said. “Plug your ears.” He hated shooting anything in front of a guest, but they were at least a mile in all directions away from land that didn’t belong to Wayside. This drone was a threat.

He drew his pistol and shot it out of the sky.

Chapter Seven

Kelly tried to keep her shaking under control. She wasn't stupid. Sam wouldn't have shot down that drone if it hadn't posed a danger. Maybe a direct danger to her. What if the person on the other end of that device was Nathan or one of his men? What if they were looking for her?

Sam didn't rush faster than she could keep up, but certainly faster than they'd come. He seemed in a hurry to get back to the house. Zeus kept at her side, though she couldn't recall Sam telling him to do that.

"Is everything all right?" The question sounded stupid to her ears. Why was she always asking the obvious?

"I just want to make sure you're close to more protection. I don't know who this device was after. Could be any one of you, or none of you. A few guys came yesterday who are a lot smarter than I am when it comes to gadgets. I'm hoping they can figure out what this thing was looking for."

Now she understood why Sam had only shot one of the propellers off and waited for it to crash, instead of shooting the center of the device. "Do you think you can get information off of it?"

He shrugged, but pressed forward at a rapid pace. "Not sure. That isn't my thing. I train dogs. I don't have anything to do with drones."

Other than being an excellent shot at them. She shoved her hands in her pockets, suddenly chilled to the bone. If Nathan or one of his men had been controlling the device, they'd probably seen her. That thing could've been flying in the air for a while before Zeus noticed it. She hadn't heard it until one of the propellers was missing, making it weave around until it crashed into the ground.

Kelly moved a little closer behind Sam. Having him right there and the giant dog at

her side gave her a small measure of security. The tall barn came into view ahead and her dread warred with her fear inside her. All those buildings had given her a feeling of being watched before. Yet it had been when she'd given up her fear that something bad had actually happened.

Her initial feeling was to question herself, yet that hadn't helped her so far. Sam said she would learn new ways to handle life without so many questions. That meant she had to look at what she'd been through recently to start making decisions, not what she'd been through before coming to Wayside.

"I'm safer there, in the cabins and buildings, aren't I?"

Sam took a moment to look at her, and those gentle hazel eyes melted some of the frost around her heart.

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“I believe so, but I didn’t think I’d be putting you in danger by taking you for a walk or I wouldn’t have.”

She hadn’t meant to accuse him. “I didn’t think you would. But the barn and big house kind of scare me. Connor scares me.” She hadn’t admitted that to anyone but herself.

“Only small measures of learned trust will help you feel better. You won’t immediately trust anyone, and that’s a good thing.”

Except she had immediately trusted him. Even after he’d walked away from her, hurt her in what had felt deeper and more personal than any other things she’d been through, she’d still trusted him. She’d tried to blame him at the time, but coming face-to-face with him, she’d felt deeply like the divide between them was her fault. It always would be.

“Distrust is a good thing,” she repeated. She’d never learned that before.

“Distrust is self-preservation until you can relearn body and facial cues that give us clues about who is trustworthy and who isn’t. When all else fails, trust your gut. God gave it to you for a reason.” Sam came up short as a car pulled up the drive. He reached out and tugged her behind him. Zeus lowered his head, and a soft growl came from his chest.

“Who is that?” There was something familiar about the vehicle or maybe the driver. The car came to a stop and the engine shut off.

Nathan emerged from the car and Kelly gasped, burying her face in Sam's shoulder. Zeus took her cue and his growl deepened as he moved into a protective stance.

Connor's voice came from her right, and she peeked over Sam's shoulder.

"Can I help you with something? Are you lost?"

Nathan laughed and she recognized it as fake. Would Connor? "I'm looking for my girlfriend. She was kidnapped a few months ago. I got a tip from the police to check at a halfway house. They told me she was somewhere out here. Any idea where I can find Kelly Chambers?"

Sam inched her closer to the barn, holding her in place behind him.

Connor answered, keeping Nathan's attention. "I don't know a Kelly Chambers."

Nathan looked their way and his gaze dropped to the drone in Sam's hand. "I think you're lying." He strode toward Sam.

Kelly's legs turned to jelly, and she couldn't move, couldn't run. Nathan would take her away. He'd take her somewhere no one could find her. He'd kill her and he'd brag about it to whoever would listen, back where he was safe from police.

"Stop right there. If you come any closer, I'll call the police," Sam said, his hand moving to his pistol.

"Call the police? What are they going to do? We're at least twenty minutes from town. I just want my girlfriend back. You might think you're doing the right thing, but she'll trick you. She's wily like that. Let me take her off your hands. You want to come back with me, don't you Kelly?"

Sam moved his hand out, preventing her from going even if she'd thought about it. She hadn't planned to, but the protection was something she wasn't used to.

Connor stomped off the steps, his footfalls heavy and intimidating. He stood more than a head taller than Nathan. "I think it's time you get off my property. If your girlfriend decides to return to you, she'll ask to go. Until she does, consider yourself unwelcome here."

"You'll pay for that drone you destroyed." He pointed at Sam's hand. "You don't have any clue who you're dealing with."

Connor laughed. "I think we do. Tell Evie that Kelly isn't going anywhere."

She heard Nathan's gasp and peeked from behind Sam's shoulder. Nathan scowled at her, his eyes as cold as ice. "This isn't finished. I'll be back."

"Bring the police with you next time. Otherwise, you're not welcome here," Connor said. Sam shifted his position in front of her and she felt momentarily exposed. In that second, Nathan stared at her.

"You owe me. I've done so much for you, given you food and a roof over your head, protected you when everyone kicked you to the curb, and this is how you repay me? Did you try to send the police after me? They didn't believe you. No one will ever believe you. You're nothing but a?—"

Sam turned to cover her ears and the sound of his hands brushing against her thankfully drowned out whatever Nathan called her, but the sentiment hung in the air like smoke.

How could she defend herself? She'd reported his name and where she'd thought she'd been held, yet here he was. Didn't that prove he was right?

“Kelly, let’s go inside.” Sam tried to direct her steps, but she wanted to see Nathan leave, never mind that her feet were planted and she couldn’t have left on her own if she’d wanted to.

“Want to go out, Kelly? You know you enjoyed it. You agreed the first time. You agreed every time. You liked it.”

“Stop. Right now.” Connor took a few more steps toward Nathan.

“What are you going to do, big man? I haven’t threatened you, so there’s nothing you can do.”

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Kelly's spirit shriveled and all sense of freedom vanished like it had never been there. Nathan was right. They couldn't do anything, and she would never be free. Worse, now Sam and Connor would believe that she was crude and disgusting, that she wanted the attention she'd had to endure for so long. "No," she said too quietly for anyone but Sam to hear. "I don't ever want to see you again."

Sam had never been more thankful to see Lacy come running out of the house, though he couldn't say Connor looked all that happy about it.

"Lacy, help Kelly get back to her cabin." He looked Kelly right in the eyes. "I'll come see you in a minute. I didn't believe a word of that. Just go. She'll help you."

He couldn't leave Connor alone to face Nathan without backup, but that left Kelly in the open until Lacy had come out.

Lacy jogged over to Kelly and threaded her arm through Kelly's. "Let's get you back to your cabin, but we'll take the long way. No one needs to know which one is yours."

Praise God Lacy always thought ahead. No one said anything until Lacy and Kelly had disappeared into the barn. Sam went over to Connor's side, so they showed a unified front. This guy wasn't getting any further and the goal was to get him to leave. Unfortunately, they couldn't just pull a weapon and make him go until he did something that threatened their lives.

Dominic came out of the ranch house next and stood up on the porch. The man was just as intimidating as Connor, maybe more so because Dominic wasn't readable like

Connor.

“You need to leave now. There is nothing for you here.” Connor crossed his arms and widened his stance. He knew he was intimidating, though perhaps not to a man like Nathan.

“You have something of mine. I don’t plan to go anywhere until I get it back.” Nathan stared at Connor.

“It?” Dominic growled. “What, exactly, do we have that’s yours?”

“I don’t need to tell you anything. If you think herding Kelly off to her cabin is going to keep me from her, you’re wrong. I will see her. Looks to me like you’re keeping her in a little prison here. Wonder how long it will take her to fly your little coop, too?” he snorted.

Sam tensed and though he wasn’t the kind to start a fight, the desire to punch Nathan in the face crossed his mind.

“Just stay here. He’s baiting you. He wants to get one of us to make the first move so he can attack. Don’t give it to him.” Connor raised his head again, directing his words to Nathan once more. “You can leave now, or I will call the police. If you think the police will be on your side, then please call them. I’d like to see what Officer Blake has to say about your story. I’m sure he’d find it as interesting as we do.” Sarcasm practically dripped from Connor’s words.

Nathan snorted again. “I’m not calling the police.” He backed away two steps toward his car. “I can promise you that you will see me again. But if you know Evie, then you already know that. Next time, it won’t be a drone that checks things out first. It will be an army. You have one last chance. Give me what is mine or you will not live to see next month.”

“That sounds like a threat,” Dominic rested his hand over the Glock on his hip.

“It is, but until he makes good on it, our hands will remain at the ready,” Connor said.

“That’s right. Wouldn’t want to make yourselves look bad.” Nathan opened his car door. “I guess I’ll just have to get my property back the old-fashioned way. You won’t win. We literally never fail. It isn’t hard to keep business going.”

Sam’s stomach knotted at the way Nathan could talk about people, human life, as worth nothing. He didn’t care about anyone other than himself. Sam had never met someone so far away from God that being near him actually made the hair on Sam’s arms stand on end.

Nathan got into his car, turned it on, backed from where he’d parked and drove away. Yet the feeling after he left lingered like a stench.

“Those were some big threats,” Dominic crossed his arms as he leaned against the porch railing.

“I understand now why the halfway house was so concerned about tracking, but it’s too late for that,” Connor said.

Sam glanced between the two men. “You don’t really think the halfway house gave him any information, do you? Why would they be so worried about her safety, yet tell Nathan where she was?”

Connor shook his head. “I doubt it. I doubt anything he said was the truth. How he found her doesn’t matter though, he did. Our job is to keep her protected.”

“Do I need to bring in more of my men?” asked Dominic. “If you need, just say the word.”

“Thank you,” Connor muttered. “I’m not interested in terrifying everyone just yet, but I also want to make sure everyone is safe. I need to notify Nixon and let him know what just happened.”

“We should probably tell the halfway house that all bets are off with our tracking technology. We need to be able to see every inch of Wayside,” Sam said as he followed Connor to the house. He wanted to go see Kelly, but he wanted to give Lacy time to calm her. Women were better about that than men, or at least better than he was.

“One thing I want everyone here to know: if they stay here they are safe. Period,” Connor slammed the door open and stomped into the lodge.

Chapter Eight

Sam followed Connor toward his office. A few steps inside the house, Dominic broke off from them and headed for the kitchen. Since Connor didn’t stop and seemed to want Sam to follow, he did. Unlike usual, Connor shut the door behind them, giving them privacy that wasn’t the normal mode of operations at Wayside. Unless there was a threat or someone was having a session with Brendon, most doors stayed open to convey a feeling of welcome. This change added to the growing knot in Sam’s stomach.

“Have a seat.” Connor went around to his side of the desk, sat heavily, and scrubbed down his face with both hands as he deeply sighed. “I hate that feeling.”

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Sam didn't have to ask him what feeling he was talking about. He understood implicitly. It was the feeling of helplessness. Military men, at least all those he'd met, all felt that to some degree. They were trained against the feeling of helplessness. "So, what do we do about it?"

"We know Nathan isn't going to give up, so we have to make a plan. We have to be aware. We let Nixon know what's going on. Dominic was there, so he can do what needs to be done for security."

All those things were good but didn't loosen the tension in his gut. "Deputy Blake doesn't have the manpower to be out here watching us constantly and Dominic and Spenser just got here. They haven't had time to make any changes." Which begged the question, why were they keeping Kelly at Wayside if she was safer somewhere else. "If you've decided to keep Kelly here for my sake, don't. I don't want that on my conscience. If she gets taken, violently, because she was here . . . And we both know that the only reason you brought her here instead of leaving her at the halfway house, was me. Then I don't want you to. Send her where she's safe."

"I wasn't lying to you. They won't take her back there. We accepted her here, knowing that the more she travels, the more she's at risk. They warned me that once she's doing better, federal investigators might be coming out to question her about her knowledge of Evie Carvel."

"I don't think she knows." Sam tried to recall exactly what she'd said about Nathan and Evie. It had sounded to him like she wasn't even sure exactly where she'd been held captive. It had sounded to him, wherever she was, was like some of the horrible places overseas he'd heard about.

“Thinking and knowing are two different things. I know you want to protect her. That’s the kind of guy you are.” Connor stared at him, daring him to question his statement.

“That may be true, but I shouldn’t be doing it. We both know that. I’m going to end up caring for her again when I shouldn’t. That’s not good for her. I made a promise to protect her, no strings attached, because she doesn’t trust anyone else. I think we both know she’s going to get hurt when this is over. You’re putting me in the position to hurt her and I don’t like it.”

“I don’t know that. Brendon keeps telling me my rules, my version of the ten commandments, is wrong. He’s the one who drew that promise out of you, not me. I had to go with it because he’d already established it as a done deal with the client. I had planned on having Junior help her with you as a second.”

Sam tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling. He’d assumed Brendon had checked with Connor first before the meeting had ever happened. “So, he went behind your back?”

Connor snorted. “I don’t think he intended to. I don’t think he set out with this mission to break me of the use of my rules, though maybe he did. He’s the only one who has ever pushed back on them.”

Sam accepted the rules because they were part of the job. He saw firsthand with Kelly why they were a good idea. A victim, newly removed from a horrible life, needed the protection of those rules if they were going to be working with men all the time. They needed some assurance there would never be anything romantic or physical between them. “How do I do this? You’re asking me to just turn off my past, to forget that anything happened and treat her like a stranger.”

“For now, yes. That’s what’s going to be the best for her. You’re a man of your word.

I trust every man that works here. If my life was in danger, there isn't a single one of you I wouldn't want at my side. You know this. I don't pick favorites except maybe my dad and Lacy."

Sam had the sudden realization that someone probably had known about Dominic coming before anyone else, most likely one of those two had been the team he'd spoken with. "And were one of those people the ones who talked you into bringing Dominic and Spenser here?"

Connor chuckled. "I know I didn't talk to all of you first. I didn't want any of you thinking I thought you were incapable. You're not. We just need experts."

"And you didn't want me to know when Kelly was arriving." He'd been warned it would happen, but not exactly when. Connor had withheld that information from all the men so far.

"True. If I had told you when she was supposed to arrive, you might have found a reason to leave or you could've made up excuses to avoid her."

Sam raged silently inside. "She may be my regret, but you don't understand the backstory. You don't understand that she is literally my biggest mistake. I thought I knew her, but I didn't. I cared about her, but she used me. Brendon thinks she might have wanted me to save her from a life of prostitution." The idea turned his stomach. He hadn't been a true Christian then. He'd believed but his faith had been more of his parents' than his own. Yet, even then, the idea of marrying a woman who'd given herself willingly to so many . . . left him hollow.

"Brendon and I know that you are, at your center, a good man. In fact, you are probably the best man for this job because you have never looked at one of our guests as anything but a human who is broken but can heal. I'm astounded by how well and how quickly your clients bond with you and trust you. You don't move too fast. You

don't talk too loudly. Kelly needs you to do that with her. She doesn't trust anyone else."

"And she won't grow to trust anyone else if I'm there. She thinks she knows me, but she doesn't. I'm not the man I was before." And he didn't feel like the man Connor had described. That man didn't feel anger or resentment like Sam did.

"I hear you, Sam. I do. But I'm not changing anything. Kelly has had the wool pulled out from under her too many times. She wasn't allowed outside at the halfway house. She isn't allowed to leave Wayside. She is in more danger than we probably know about. And . . ." Connor paused and took a deep breath. "we were going to keep her situation under wraps but with Nathan showing up we can't. Kelly knows her situation now. You can't take away the one lifeline she has to trust. You are the only one she trusts here. Even Lacy can't get through that wall of self-protection Kelly has put up."

Sam rolled his shoulders, refusing to answer immediately. He'd never felt trapped at Wayside. He'd even hoped after he met Kelly when she arrived that he would be vindicated and he would feel nothing. He'd hoped they would help her and she could move on quickly. Now, he knew the truth. She probably couldn't go anywhere for a long time. Most likely, not until Evie stood trial and that could be for more than a year.

A year. Or longer.

What would his heart look like in a year with Kelly there, talking to him daily? Tattered ribbons blowing in the wind came to mind. He'd lived through her scheming the first time. He'd managed to move on when he'd been sure he couldn't.

"I don't have a choice in this, but don't misunderstand me, I can't lie. I can't pretend our past never happened. I promised her no strings, so she will never know this, but

you will.”

Connor threaded his fingers together and leaned on his desk. Connor stared him in the eyes. “I would risk Kelly’s thread of hope if I thought, at all, that you couldn’t manage this. No one here has your character. If you struggle, I want you to use Brendon as your sounding board. Are you worried that you’ll fall for her again?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to risk himself all over again, but he had felt something. Not love, but protection. Maybe that wouldn’t morph into anything else, but he’d never felt quite that protective of any other client. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t know if she’s capable of loving like that ever again. I can’t make that call. Only she can. I’m sorry we’re risking your heart for her, but . . .” Connor stopped.

“But that’s a risk you’re willing to take.”

To Sam’s amazement, Connor nodded his agreement.

Lacy had left Kelly’s cabin an hour before. Even though Kelly wanted to be alone while Lacy was there, now that she was, worry held her captive. Nathan had found her. She wasn’t sure how, but she’d known he would. How often had he told her that no one ever escaped him, at least, not for long.

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Her stomach knotted to the point where she couldn't pace anymore and she sat on the sofa, then slid to the floor. Somehow, the floor felt more grounded, more stable. With deep breaths, she closed her eyes and focused on making her heart slow down. Without a little calm, she couldn't think straight.

There was a way out of this without hurting Sam or anyone else here at Wayside. Even Edwyn, who she didn't like that much, didn't deserve what Nathan would do if he came back. Would he bring ten men? Twenty? She shuddered, then tried to pray. Even thinking words to string together for the Lord was too hard.

She laid fully prone on the floor and rested her head against her arm. While the floor was cold and hard, it was also something completely solid. It wouldn't disappear. It wouldn't go away. She wasn't in any danger as long as she simply laid on the floor and tried to think. Nathan had just left, meaning she was safe in this minute. As each moment passed though, she was closer to reckoning with him.

Something light hit her window and bounced off, scaring her. It tapped again, then she heard it whirring right outside her door. Kelly gingerly crawled toward the window and waited, hoping the noise would stop and that she wouldn't have to find out what it was. That window was right near her front door. She could go out the back, but what good would that do? Something had found her.

Suddenly, she heard a faint beep then another. Curious, she crept along the floor and reached for the knob to open it. Would Sam open the door? The thought was like a hit over the head. Of course he would, but he was strong and capable. What was she? She refused to answer that internal question meant to pull her even deeper into stinking thinking.

She tugged the door open and a drone similar to the one Sam had shot down sat right outside her door. It had a small red light on the top that seemed to flash a light in her face. She dodged behind the door, realizing too late that the device might have been scanning her.

The beeping started up again, almost insistent, refusing to be ignored. Call Connor. Her thoughts yelled at her, but Connor had already dealt with Nathan today. Sam had already dealt with a drone. She could disable this one and then bring it to them. She wasn't completely helpless, and it wasn't like the device could hurt her.

She tugged the door wide, and the drone immediately shot into the air and flew into her cabin. She shrieked as it barely missed the top of her head. It landed with a few bounces on the coffee table and turned. The little machine seemed to stare at her.

The beeping seemed louder now. What could she do to stop that noise? No one else could hear it since there wasn't anyone else around, but the noise was almost to the point of being mentally more than she could take.

“Stop!”

If anything, the thing made more noise. Kelly clamped her hands over her ears then thought better of it. She ran to the kitchen and grabbed the one frypan in the small kitchen. The drone rose slowly and hovered in the air, the four whirring blades holding it perfectly in place. It dropped a small box from the bottom and then it shot toward the door.

In a moment, the whirring drone was gone. Now she was left with the tiny beeping box. Was this how Nathan would kill her? Would he send a bomb through her front door? “Sam told you to stop asking all these questions in your head.” She clenched her fists and tried to wipe her thoughts clear of all the questions. “Asking them doesn't do any good.” She reached for the box. “But that doesn't mean I shouldn't

ask them out loud.”

She ripped off the top, half expecting to see Jesus in the next instant. When nothing happened, she stood there paralyzed in fear until she realized the box had quit beeping and she was fine. Peering inside, she found a small smart watch that almost looked like it was made for a child.

“What?” This couldn’t have been for her. There had to be a mistake. Maybe the box was meant as a gift for one of the wives or children there at Wayside. She cringed. The box was a mess. If this was meant to be a gift, she’d ruined it.

She took the watch out to get a better look. The front screen flashed a bright blue button that said, incoming text. Curious, she pressed it.

Tiny text print filled the one inch by one inch screen.

This is Nathan. You have betrayed me. I saved your life when you were going to starve. I gave you a job and a place to live. I made sure you had food.

A dot blinked on the screen and she knew he was typing more. Her gut clenched.

You had friends. Your bank account would’ve been full, but not now. Not after this. I’ve had to spend quite a bit of that money looking for you. Did you think that would be free? Now, you’ll need to work for me even longer to earn back what I’ve had to spend for you. You failed me.

Kelly sat down hard on the sofa. There was no way to respond to the texts. No way to tell him to leave her alone. She didn’t want to go back to him. She didn’t have to pay Nathan back. Sam wouldn’t want her to. Neither would Connor. They would protect her. Wouldn’t they?

“Stop it. You’re asking questions again.” She shook the watch and another message popped through.

Good. I see you have my gift. Put it on. Now.

Kelly ran to the window, but the drone was gone and no one was around. How could he know she had the watch? Would he know if she put it on or not?

It buzzed in her hand as another message came through.

You will listen to me, or Jasmine will die. She is right here. I just cut off some of her hair. You know how she feels about her hair. She’s crying. Put on the watch or I’ll cut more than her hair.

She fumbled with the little plastic fake wrist that the watch had been on and slapped in on. “There. Are you happy now?” she screamed. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. Just having the watch on was like being imprisoned again. Maybe only a little, but it was the first shackle in a line of many.

Good. I see you put it on. Now we’re getting somewhere. I will know if you tell anyone about this watch, so don’t you dare do it.

She watched the small screen, praying Nathan was finished with her and knowing he never would be.

It can be worn in the shower and anywhere else. You will only take it off to charge it and you will charge it once a week while you sleep. Do not betray me again, Kelly.

She wished she could answer him, tell him that she would listen and do whatever he said, just don’t hurt Jasmine. She might have been the one who got Kelly mixed up in this mess the first time, but she was also her closest friend and the one she’d wanted

to bring with her when she'd been rescued. If only Jasmine had agreed to come.

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Good. Very good. I can already tell you're calming down and realizing that this is right and good. We'll be in touch very soon. Do not say a word to anyone. Just do what they tell you to do and be a good girl. I'm so glad to have you back. I'll see you very, very soon.

Chapter Nine

The watch felt strangely hot against Kelly's wrist. Whenever she'd moved in the night, the device had pulsed and lit up, waking her even more than rolling over usually would. The lack of sleep made the task for the day even more daunting than usual. She had to meet and perhaps ride her horse today. Brendon had encouraged it, telling her she might feel like she fit in more at Wayside if she tried some of the things that would give her something in common with the other guests. Something besides their somewhat shared pasts.

Flakes of snow drove over the open landscaping, stinging as they hit her face. She buried herself deeper in Lacy's coat and quickened her pace to the barn. There, she would find warmth from the horses, light from the windows and lights, and quiet from her thoughts. At least she'd received no new texts that morning. Maybe Nathan would allow her a day to process this new hidden part of her life.

Her mind whispered softly, hiding things from Sam hurt you before. He can't rescue you if he doesn't know But telling him would make him disappointed in her or distrustful. She'd put the watch on. Even though she'd done it to save Jasmine, she'd still done it. Nathan had gotten to her, and she couldn't believe how easy it had been for him.

She trudged into the barn and Sam waited near the back. Zeus sat just outside the horse stall, away from possible kicking hooves. Kelly snorted and a puff of cloudy breath hung in the cold air. Without the wind, she could see it whereas outside, she hadn't.

"Morning," Sam called as he continued to saddle Bella the horse Edwyn had introduced to her. The days seemed to run together in her head, and she could no longer recall how many she'd been there. Had it only been one, two? She wanted to say two but couldn't be certain of anything.

"Morning," she replied shoving her hair from her face and tucking it under her hat so she could see better.

Sam tilted his head slightly. "Something is different about you today. Everything okay? I know yesterday was probably stressful on you. I was in meetings all afternoon, or I would've come to check on you."

She was glad he hadn't. There was no way she could've kept what had happened from him before she'd had a chance to work her way through her own plan. She would do what Nathan wanted as far as she could without putting everyone who lived at Wayside in danger.

"There was no need. I was fine." She twisted the watch on her wrist, trying to find a comfortable position for it. The band made her itch, but she didn't want to make it obvious that she wasn't used to wearing it. If someone took it from her, Jasmine might be hurt or even killed and her death would be all Kelly's fault.

"Are you sure? You really don't look fine." Sam led the horse by slowly walking it back out of the stall, one slow step at a time until it was in the wide middle aisle.

"I am. It's just the cold. I couldn't get my cabin a comfortable temperature last night,

so I didn't sleep well. That's all." How she hated lying to Sam, but it was for his own good.

"I'll stop by after our walk today and see if there's anything wrong with the thermostat. I don't want you to have to worry about anything and Connor usually asks me to check out maintenance things before he hires anyone. Usually, I can fix a problem if it isn't too complicated." He tossed the reins over the horse's back so they hung on the other side. "Have you ever ridden before?"

She'd never been in the presence of a horse before she'd met this one the day of her arrival. Kelly slowly shook her head.

"Are you scared of the horse?" Sam asked without a hint of condemnation. He wasn't speaking like she would expect him to speak to a child, but there was definitely a primary teacher vibe to his question.

"Not really. I'm not sure that I want to ride today but I would try walking it around. I want it to like me. What if I hurt it?" Climbing on a horse's back had to hurt, didn't it?

Sam grinned. "Good question. I like that. This horse will like you before you ever even get close. She is the kind of rare horse that really likes people, the kind we travel across the country to find. And as far as hurting her, you won't. She could probably carry four of you, but I wouldn't do that to her."

"Four of me?" the thought was terrifying. "One of me is plenty."

Sam paused and looked at her, his earnest eyes boring into her broken soul. "One of you is exactly what this world needs." He held out his hand for her.

Without thinking, she reached out the hand with the new watch. Her coat sleeve

tugged back, exposing the face. She flinched inwardly. If she tugged back her hand now, he would know something was wrong. Kelly forced herself to relax. Act natural.

He paused, looking at the watch and frowned. "Is that new?"

"I had it in my bag. I didn't wear it yesterday." Another lie. If she was ever going to make up for lying to him by omission last time, she had to stop lying to him now.

"Interesting. It's one of those fitness watches. People who have those usually wear them all the time. Are you trying to count your steps or something?"

Though he was most likely only making small talk, she didn't want to answer questions about the watch. "No, I just treat it like a watch." She tugged her sleeve over it and stepped closer to him.

He nodded that he was agreeing to drop the subject and gently ran his hand down the horse's cheek until he swung the animal's head to face Kelly. She was a handsome horse, though she wasn't sure if she could pick her out of a herd yet. She looked about as common as any other horse, though her dark eyes with long lashes held a friendliness she couldn't explain.

She puffed a breath, and her cloud of vapor was much larger than Kelly's making her laugh. The sound made the horse lift her head a little more. She then reached her nose out to Kelly and with slightly more force than she was expecting, nudged her elbow.

"She wants you to pet her. The girl loves her attention. She's telling you that you have a free arm that could be put to good use." Sam chuckled.

Kelly couldn't fault her. If she felt comfortable telling people what she wanted, life would probably be easier. Unfortunately, over the past few years, she'd learned to never open her mouth. Her desires were less than unimportant. They were

unwelcome. Humans had wants and desires and she hadn't been human.

With slow movements, she reached out toward the horse's nose. While the part closest to her nostrils was soft, the further away from the nose she touched, the rougher she felt. "I thought a horse would be softer." She tried not to recoil.

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“In a few days, she will feel soft to you. And when you touch a cat or dog next, in comparison, they will feel like the softest animal you’ve ever encountered. That’s what horses do for you. At least, one of the things.”

Kelly looked at the saddle Sam had put on the horse in preparation, in case she changed her mind and decided to ride. When she’d come to the barn, she was sure she wanted nothing to do with actually getting on a horse’s back. Now, she couldn’t wait to try.

“Can I?” the question slipped past her lips before she could pull them back.

“Of course.” Sam grinned. “Let me find a mounting stool for you. Wait here and get to know him a little better. I’ll only be a second.” He jogged off in the direction she’d come.

Alone with Bella, she stroked the mare’s neck. Bella leaned into her slightly and she was sure she heard the horse grunt in approval. Sam came back with a sturdy step stool and set it up near the horse.

“Now, it’s important to mount on the correct side. The horse’s head should be facing your left. Put your left foot in the stirrup, straighten up to distribute your weight, then swing your leg over. At first, you’ll feel like a robot, uncomfortable, but soon the action will be so fluid that you won’t hesitate at all.” He took hold of Bella’s bridle.

Kelly glanced at him. “Do I hold the saddle to get on?”

Sam pointed to where she could grip for stability where the horse wouldn’t by

annoyed by it. She held back. What if she did this wrong? What if Bella hated her once she was in the saddle?

“Stop worrying about the unknown in this circumstance. I’m right here to do the worrying for you,” Sam whispered.

She hated that he could practically read her mind. Why couldn’t she do that with him? It was like he was friendly but hiding his true feelings. She steadied her grip and did what she needed to do. All of a sudden, she found herself on Bella’s back high above Sam. He moved the mounting stool away and she thrust her feet into the stirrups. Oddly, they seemed perfect for her legs. “How did you know to fix the saddle for me?” She knew they were adjustable, but not how.

He shrugged slightly and handed her the reins. “I guessed.” With that, he turned and led her outside the barn and back into the cold.

Kelly shivered against the wind, but oddly, having Sam and the horse direct her steps left her mind free to enjoy her surroundings. Zeus sniffed the ground a few feet ahead of Sam, then took off running like he’d caught the scent of a rabbit. Sam didn’t whistle for him to come back but watched his progress.

“What do you think?” he asked, angling his glance back to her.

What did she think? That was a good question.

Sam’s mind raced with questions surrounding Kelly’s watch. Connor didn’t like those. The ability to track a person was built into the device. He wasn’t sure on the particulars, if it only tracked where someone was going when they turned on certain features or all the time, but either way, it violated the rule that the halfway house had set. No tracking. How could she have had that watch with her there if they’d had that same rule?

Something was off. Kelly hadn't looked him in the eye until he'd waited for her to meet his gaze. Now, that wasn't a foolproof way of measuring dishonesty. Guests at Wayside often had difficulty looking anyone in the eye for a long time. But this was Kelly. He knew her. Or he thought he'd known her. That's where his trust failed.

He led her around in a wide circle in one of the fences near the barn. Though they could've roamed for acres, he didn't want to go off too far. If Nathan could follow them with a drone, he could find them out on those trails. Connor had told him at breakfast that Dominic and Spenser were still working on the security system, but they were making progress. Until that was sealed up tight, he wanted to stay within sight of the barn.

The drone had been a great idea if he was going to give props to the enemy. It wouldn't have been seen on the cameras unless it literally hovered in front of one of them. It had been small and moved like a bug.

Anyone watching the cameras would've thought it was a stray hummingbird. Why would anyone consider movement like that to be a drone? They'd never had anyone take such a successful yet hands-off approach. Yet the method had worked.

Someone had to have been directing the device and been in communication with Nathan, who waited for the signal that Kelly was there. Once he was sure, all he had to do was drive up the driveway and try to take what he wanted.

The brazenness of Nathan's request made it all the worse. He clearly didn't see any issue with human slavery. He expected Kelly to do exactly as he said without question. So, they had to make sure Nathan never came on the property.

Bella tugged on the bridle, wanting to do her own leading. He grinned at the horse, not that she would understand. The horse was smart and could read people pretty well, but he doubted she was as good as being able to understand his facial

movements.

He loosened his grip a little since Bella was behaving so well. “Be sure to grab the reins. She would like you to drive.” Sam hoped he’d kept his voice light, and that Kelly wouldn’t be frightened by that.

“And how do I drive?” Kelly’s tone rose an octave.

“Pull to the right if you want to go left and vice versa. If you want her to slow or stop, tug straight back.”

“Oh, I see.” She twisted her whole body to the right, dragging the reins tightly and pulling Bella’s head to the left.

Sam’s loose grip wasn’t enough to hold onto the bridle as Kelly’s movement jerked it from him. Bella assumed Kelly wanted to go fast with the quick and forceful movement. Bella reared slightly then took off at a gallop for some trees in the distance.

He whistled, but the only thing that responded to his call was Zeus. The dog shot after the horse like a cannon, racing to catch up.

“Bella, hold!” He’d tried to verbally train the horses, but all of them were better at bodily cues because all of them had learned those first and they were used the most often.

Sam ran but Kelly was now many yards ahead of him and gaining ground by the second. Ahead, he saw the area of new fence they’d had to put in when horse thieves had attempted to steal their whole herd. But would Bella make it to the fence, or would she come around before then?

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He blew three sharp whistle blasts to let anyone around know there was trouble in the pasture. If anyone happened to be saddled, they might get to Kelly faster than Sam could on foot. Kelly leaned over Bella's neck, clinging to her. Dread washed over him. Every time she felt a little freedom, something happened to ruin it. Why God? Why can't Kelly be allowed to heal?

His legs ached with the strain of running that far until they were almost quivering, yet he couldn't hear any hoofbeats behind him. No one was coming to help so he'd have to find a way to rescue Kelly himself. Another job he shouldn't be doing. If Edwyn had been there, he'd have led her on horseback. He wouldn't have let himself be in this position.

Bella adjusted course slightly, headed for a low hanging branch. "Kelly, look out!" He called to her. Bella ran under the branch, but Kelly was too low on her neck to be peeled off. That didn't deter Bella who was now agitated enough to be twitching. Something outside of Kelly's direction had spooked her and she was having no more of this ride.

Bella trotted back toward him, giving him time to get close. Having her seemingly working to help him gave him the drive he didn't think he had. He picked up the pace. Within a few feet of reaching her, Bella veered back for the trees.

Kelly glance up at him. "Sam, help!"

"Kelly, duck!" He realized too late that she couldn't turn back to face the front and lean close to Bella's neck like she had before.

With a harsh thud, Bella trotted under the tree and scraped Kelly off her back. She landed in a pile under the tree. Bella took one look at him and kicked up her pace as she raced back to the barn. “Kelly?” he finally reached her and brushed the hair from her face.

She groaned quietly. “I think I might be done riding for a few days . . . but that was kind of fun until I landed on the ground.”

He wanted to hug her, to tell her she had a fantastic attitude. He wanted to tell her that with her way of thinking, healing was possible. Instead, he felt along her back waiting to see if she flinched or if he could feel anything wrong. “Are you hurt?” He couldn’t let himself act toward her in any way that he wouldn’t for anyone else.

She brushed away his hands. “Yes, just sore. The ground must be frozen because it’s really hard.” She laughed as she slowly took to her feet and massaged her back through her coat. “I think I’ll need a hot bath when we get back.”

He glanced over his shoulder, already knowing how far they had to go. The barn wasn’t even within sight anymore. “It’s going to be a long walk, a little more than a mile. On the plus side, at least your muscles won’t seize up . . .” He tried to think positively.

“I guess you have a point there.” Her watch buzzed and Kelly’s eyes widened momentarily.

“What was that?” The timing was so odd for that to go off right after her accident. Had someone been watching them and frightened Bella to make her throw Kelly?

“Nothing.” She pressed the side of the watch. “It just wanted to know if I’d finished my exercise. I guess it must be paying attention to my heart rate.”

Or it had been paying attention to where she was and how fast she was going, therefore thinking she'd been running. He would have to talk to Dominic about these watches and see if there was any way to disable the tracking information without scaring Kelly even further. He'd also start praying that God would give her the chance to heal. Obviously, Satan's minions were working overtime to make sure Kelly felt unwelcome and hurt.

He wasn't about to stand for that kind of warfare.

Chapter Ten

Kelly tried to act tough but her back and legs hurt after the fall. The walk probably had helped like Sam said, but she couldn't be thankful for that yet. Right now, everything just hurt. Plus, Sam had quit talking to her about ten minutes before and had been looking at his watch every few seconds. Was he late for something or just tired of being with her?

"Sorry, I have a longstanding riding appointment with Rebecca. Even though Junior took over as her wrangler, they still want me there to help her mount since she's not able to do it on her own and Junior doesn't feel confident using the hoist."

"A hoist?" She hadn't met Rebecca or any of the others at Wayside yet, since she'd mostly stayed in her cabin when she wasn't with Sam. Reaching out to others was work, both physically and mentally. She wasn't ready to tackle anything so emotional yet. Especially when the first thing she had agreed to do had left her really sore.

"Rebecca is in a wheelchair. She loves riding but needs assistance getting onto and off of the horse. She'll eventually get to the point where she can do it herself, but she has a lot of muscle to build before that, and I'm happy to do it."

Kelly nodded, wishing he sounded that happy about helping her. Instead, he had

agreed but it felt like a duty. He was doing it because she felt most comfortable with him, not because he wanted to. He was also a man driven by principles of what was right and good, so he'd always been willing to put his own feelings aside for others. Now, she wished he wouldn't. She wished he would tell her what he was feeling so they could move past the old hurts.

"Maybe I'll get to the point of loving to ride at some point." Kelly curled her toes in her tennis shoes and wished she'd thought to wear two pairs of socks. Her feet tingled in the cold.

She opened her mouth to comment about the chill when her watch buzzed again. She couldn't look at it in front of Sam or he would know she was receiving communications from Nathan. He didn't look up or seem to notice the sound and she hoped that was the case. If he knew but wasn't saying anything, he might tell Connor which would mean she'd lose her watch. Without it, she wouldn't ever know what happened to Jasmine.

They came to the barn and found Junior and Rebecca waiting for them. Sam grinned the moment he saw them, and her heart jolted. Did Sam care for Rebecca? He'd said there wasn't supposed to be any feelings between guests and wranglers, but Rebecca's face certainly lit up when she saw Sam.

Jealousy stabbed her so hard it took her breath away. When Sam laughed at something Rebecca said, the knife twisted. Kelly headed for a chair so she could rest and be alone for a minute. Sam would understand. After falling off her horse and walking all that way, he wouldn't question her actions. With her back turned, she checked her watch to see what Nathan wanted.

Perhaps you've forgotten that I'm here. I can see you. If you tell anyone about these messages, Jasmine will die.

Kelly frantically looked through the watch options, swiping left and right but she couldn't see how to respond to Nathan. Why did technology have to be so hard? She hadn't told anyone about the watch.

That's right. You're scared. You should be. You will meet me tonight by the new section of fence where you were about a half hour ago. Come alone. If you don't, you know what will happen.

Keeping her fear to herself no longer mattered. She needed to know where Nathan was that allowed him to see her. How had he known she was by the new section of fence? How had he known she was frightened? She glanced down at the watch again. He had to be tracking her or watching her with the watch, but what could she do? If she took it off, he would know.

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Kelly turned around, committed to telling Sam about the watch and what she thought. He was crouching in front of Rebecca's wheelchair, smiling up at her with a happiness she hadn't seen from him in a long time.

"Are you alright?" Edwyn approached her from the other end of the barn. "I saw you head away from them like you were being chased.

In a way, she was. Only it was from her memories, not from anything physical. "Yeah. It's just that watching Sambe so happy with someone else hurts. You know?" He probably didn't but at least he'd tried to be nice this time. He'd moderated his voice to a low rumble instead of his usual direct attack.

"I imagine so. Can I tell you something?" He gestured down the path and she took a deep breath, considering her options. Her back was in no shape to take a longer walk. "You can tell me all you want as long as you do it on the way to my cabin. I have a hot date with a bubble bath. I took a fall off my horse while we were out."

To his credit, Edwyn flinched. "I'll even run the hot bath for you, then, of course, I'll leave. I'm not sure why it is, but when you're sore, running a bath takes so much more energy than it should."

"Thanks." Part of her didn't want him anywhere near her bathroom, but Edwyn was so black and white when it came to rules that she wasn't worried about anything from him. "What did you want to tell me?"

"All of us, all the men who work here at Wayside, had regrets pertaining to women. Many of us have reconciled with those women in the past few months. I can't even

believe how fast it's happened. All of them were 'the one who got away', if you know what I mean."

She nodded and a sudden surge of hope warmed her chest. Was she Sam's regret? Was that why she was here? Did that mean there was hope where she'd been sure there couldn't ever be any?

"I haven't had my chance yet and I'm worried that she won't want to come. Connor hasn't mentioned her or where he is in the process of finding her, but when she left . . . she was mad. I deserved it. I guess what I'm saying is, sometimes when we see someone living their life and doing the things we once did with them, it hurts. If I saw Nadine again, smiling at another man, I would have a tough time with that. But there is hope."

"Is there? I assume you're telling me this because I'm Sam's regret. I want to believe it, but that's a tall order. I didn't leave him. He left me. No talk. No note. Nothing."

Edwyn opened the door to her cabin and held it for her. "Have you ever read Romans 8: 28?"

Her chest clenched tightly. This was a trick question. If she didn't answer correctly, he'd think she was a fraud. A bad Christian. He would judge her. "Um, if I did, I don't recall." There had to be thousands of verses in the Bible. How was she supposed to remember one?

"Don't stress over it. I remember it because it's one of my favorites. It says that God works all things to His glory for those who love him and are called to his purpose. What it doesn't say is that bad things and misunderstandings don't happen. It doesn't say sunshine will follow us all the days of our life. It says that He'll take the bad stuff, turn it around, and show His glory through it."

She sat down on her couch and massaged the tops of her aching thighs as Edwyn headed back for her small bathroom. “So, what you’re saying is that bad things happened between Sam and I. I might never know what they were, but God can take that bad stuff and mold it into something that brings Him glory?” It sounded too good to be true.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’m not someone who walks around spouting verses. We are more of group of guys that will show you rather than tell you what we believe to be true. Cole couldn’t tell you a single verse in the Bible, but he goes to the chapel every Sunday and listens to the service. He contributes. All the others do, too.” He turned on the water and stopped talking.

Kelly was thankful he’d decided to wait until the bath was finished because yelling over the loud water would take away all of the expectation of relaxation. She wanted to get up and gather a change of clothes, but her body just wanted her to rest for a minute. If she had to, she could wrap herself up in the robe she’d found in her bathroom when she’d arrived. That’s what it was there for, right?

Edwyn came out of the bathroom, leaving the water running. “It’ll just take me a minute to make sure all these blinds are closed. I figured you’d want privacy after your bath. Want me to ask Sam to bring your tray for you?”

“You’re making me regret my actions. I’m sorry I got you taken off my team.” She wasn’t sure what else to call it.

He shrugged. “I don’t think it was a bad decision. We weren’t immediately compatible. You look better now.” He grinned. “And don’t take Sam’s reactions to Rebecca too deeply. They are friends. He had to help her a lot when she first came because the wheelchair she had then was cheap and uncomfortable. She got it stuck a few times. He was so thankful when she was finally able to get a chair that worked, but in the time that she didn’t, they became very good friends. Probably closer than

Connor would like, which is probably partly the reason why he agreed to let Sam take over as your wrangler.”

“Well, then I’ll do my best to avoid becoming too close or I’ll risk losing him again.”

Sam turned around to see where Kelly had gone and found her completely missing. She’d been there limping toward the barn one second and gone the next. He turned, looking for her, and caught a slight glimpse of her disappearing around the cabins. With Edwyn.

He tried not to let that get to him. Why would Edwyn be helping her when Connor had specifically told him that he wasn’t good for Kelly? He’d switched Kelly’s care over to Sam. But Sam still had to help Rebecca once in a while and Rebecca still felt the most comfortable with him. He took a deep breath and tried to reason with himself. If she’d been bothered, she wouldn’t have gone with Edwyn. She’d have found somewhere to sit and wait for him or she would’ve just gone back home.

Getting bothered wouldn’t solve the problem. Talking to her would. He headed toward her cabin, his long strides eating up the distance quickly. Within a few seconds he’d reached her cabin door. Muffled words hit him, and he froze with his hand a few inches from knocking on the door.

“I’ll run your bath and be done in a minute.” Edwyn’s voice left an overwhelming shock on his shoulders. He couldn’t move.

Edwyn? Had Kelly requested to work with Sam because she’d wanted a relationship with Edwyn? Had they discovered so quickly, within one day, that they were compatible for a relationship? He’d been fooled again. He’d believed she wanted to be with him when what she’d really wanted was time with Edwyn. He pulled back his hand like the door was flaming hot, turned on his heel and headed for Connor’s office. He had to direct his energy to something that would lead to good. Going down

the road of questioning what was going on behind that door to her cabin wouldn't help Kelly.

He pounded on Connor's door a little louder than he'd planned.

"Come in," Connor answered.

Sam headed inside and settled into the chair across from Connor. "I just saw something that I can't explain. Maybe you can."

Connor waited silently for a moment, giving Sam time to gather his thoughts and where he wanted to start.

"Was Kelly wearing a watch when she arrived? One of those smart watches that tracks your heart rate, whereabouts, and everything else."

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Connor's brow furrowed. "She wasn't wearing one when she came to seem me, but she was only in here for a minute. She was so uncomfortable in the small room that I didn't want to make her stay any longer than she had to. Normally, my initial meeting lasts longer and I'm able to go through the rules. That wasn't the case this time."

"She has one." Sam leaned on the arms of the chair, feeling the need for their support.

"Are you sure? It's not usually an issue. Our guests come here with almost nothing. There hasn't been a single one that had all that they needed when they arrived. She had one small bag. I've seen women with bigger purses. How did she get one of those? They're expensive."

"I don't know, and she doesn't have any family left who would reach out and send things to her. I can't imagine the halfway house would've given it to her or let her have it with how they feel about tracking."

Connor snorted, then cleared his throat. "That's true." He pressed a few buttons on his desk phone and waited a moment for the person on the other end to answer. "Dominic, can you come to my office, please? Thank you." He set down the phone and scrubbed his face. "Nothinglike testing the capabilities of the new security system right away."

"We can test it all we want, but if someone has already gotten on the property then we need to worry about if they're still here. Did you take apart that drone? Is that an option? Could it have gotten to her before we saw it in the field?"

Connor shook his head. "It wasn't a delivery drone. It was for surveillance. Dominic

was able to take apart what was left of it and determine that it had a camera that was sending a feed somewhere else, but it wasn't recorded. There were no clamps or any other way to attach something to it and it was very small, too small to carry anything else."

So, that idea was a bust. "But it could've been a test run. To see if they could fly one onto Wayside. Is there any way to check the cameras and see if they saw anything abnormal in the last few days?"

A knock sounded on the door and Dominic came inside. "Good afternoon," he said as he settled into a chair. "You asked for me?"

Connor nodded and gestured to Sam. "Sam has some questions. Kelly, our newest guest, suddenly has a watch that tracks movements and we don't know how she got it."

Sam took a breath. "I know the cameras before weren't detailed enough to get images of birds flying, but do you have a way to scan those images for drones. You wouldn't have to go back further than two days."

Dominic narrowed his eyes in thought and frowned slightly. "We have quite a few cameras to check. It's a fairly tall order and also possible that nothing would show up at all. If you think a secondary drone came on the property that was as small as the first, there is no way we would see it."

"I think it may have been bigger if it delivered the watch," Sam said. It also had to be big enough to see where it was navigating because, if this belonged to Nathan like the other one, he wasn't close enough to see exactly where the drone was going without a camera.

"Spenser and I will take a look. Teddy would usually help me, but he's been called

away.”

Connor looked at him and his brows bunched. “Called away? I can’t imagine he would go anywhere without telling me.”

Dominic shrugged a single shoulder. “This isn’t my argument. You’ll want to take it up with him. I’m merely the messenger, telling you that he’s taking this opportunity while Spenser and I are here to man the cameras to do what he called ‘unfinished business’.”

Sam shifted in his chair. Connor’s blood was obviously boiling, but he held his emotions in check quite well. Only someone who knew him would ever know how angry he was. “I’m sure he was going to tell you. He wouldn’t just leave without talking to you,” Sam said, hoping to break the tension so they could get back to worrying about Kelly.

“I’m sure you’re right.” Connor drummed the table. “Do you have anything else you need to do today?”

Other than avoid Kelly’s cabin so he didn’t say something that would hurt her and probably end his friendship with Edwyn, no. “I have nothing scheduled.”

“Good. If my dad is going to be headed off somewhere, then I’d like you to help Dominic hunt for anything of value on those cameras. Maybe, while you’re looking, you can see if we need any additional devices. I want to be able to see the entire perimeter of the property. No gaps. No one gets on or off my land without me knowing. Understood?”

Dominic gave a nod and stood. “Understood. We’ll let you know if we find anything. I know this is important, so we’ll get started right away.”

Good. Hunting through thousands of images would keep his mind busy and keep him away from anyone else. Sam stood and followed Dominic. “So, where do we start?”

Dominic laughed for about a second, before halting the sound so abruptly it resembled a cough. “Like you said, we’ll start at the very first images taken on all the cameras two days ago. Thank the Good Lord that they only take a picture when they sense movement or we’d be here for a very, very long time.”

A very long time was exactly what he needed to get his mind and his heart in the right order.

Chapter Eleven

It was like Lacy had known Kelly was supposed to be somewhere and wouldn’t leave her alone to let her go. Kelly paced her living room, window shades still drawn, heart still racing. She hadn’t meant to ignore Nathan’s direct order to meet him. What if something awful had happened to Jasmine because of her?

She waited for the watch to buzz again. It had to. He had to tell her what she needed to do to make up for missing him. Hopefully, he hadn’t killed Jasmine after such a small issue. She bit the inside of her cheek. Drat Lacy. Kelly had used every excuse she could think of to get rid of the overly friendly woman. She’d pled a headache, backache—which had been the absolute truth — and finally that she was exhausted after a long day.

Lacy had insisted on hanging out with her long into the evening, well past the time when Nathan had said he wanted to meet her. “If only I had a way to message you.” She shook the watch fiercely. “This isn’t fair.”

As if on command, her watch buzzed seconds later. She looked at it as she headed for the sofa to sit. Though she’d wanted to hear that there was nothing wrong with

Jasmine, hearing from Nathan was still terrifying.

Where were you? You must be too stupid to know how to use the watch. Did you read the directions that were in the box? Scroll to the bottom, click the button, and speak your text. Here's a hint, you'd better start with an apology and end by saying you'll meet me tomorrow.

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Her fingers shook as she read the entire message, then read it again. The text was so small that making out the words was difficult. She glanced around her. Silly goose, you've been alone for hours. Though she still felt strange about talking into the watch. She wasn't James Bond.

"I tried. I'm sorry. I need to know that Jasmine is okay." She waited and the watch asked her if she wanted to send her message. She pressed the little button that appeared, and her dictated text whooshed away. Her breathing wouldn't calm down, no matter how often she tried to slow down and think. She was going to make the same mistakes over again. Was she destined to be a bad girl the rest of her life?

Her grandma had been the first one to tell her she was a bad girl. She'd been flirty. Not physically, but she loved to laugh and smile and being friendly with guys had always come easier than friendships with girls. She loved to joke in a way that made men notice her. Since she'd gone much of her life unnoticed by women as friends, this sudden interest and affection from men felt good. She'd always wondered how people could have friends and acting like a flirt—or so she'd been called—fixed that problem.

Her lack of close women friends was her first slide into the dark world of human trafficking. Since Jasmine befriended her, probably for her money and the fact that she was one of the few women she knew that had a house to herself at her age, Jasmine had immediately wanted to move in. Kelly had agreed, even though Jasmine had been unable to help with the house payment or the groceries.

If only Kelly had known then that Jasmine was already stuck in a life she couldn't leave. That life had soon become Kelly's. She shook the watch once more and headed

for the phone in her bedroom. She'd avoided using it other than that one time to talk to Connor. Talking aloud still felt strange when she hadn't used anything technological in years.

She dialed her old landline number, hoping someone friendly had been assigned that number it over the years. She had no other way of getting information.

"Hello?" An elderly man answered the phone.

"Hi, don't hang up. Please." She bit her lip for a second. "I'm stranded and I need to call my bank, but I don't have their number. Could you look up a phone number for me?" It was a long shot, but an elderly man was more likely than most to help her.

"What was that? I can't hear so good." He chuckled and it sounded more like wheezing.

"I'm looking for the West Central Savings and Loan, but I don't have a way to look up the number," she said slowly and loudly into the receiver.

"Oh, the Savings and Loan? Sure." She could hear pages flipping, and Kelly almost laughed. She would've done the same thing, reach for a phone book. If she'd had one for her hometown, that's exactly how she would've solved the problem. But without access to the internet or other means, calling someone in town was the only answer.

"Yup. Got a pencil?" he asked.

She tugged open her bedside drawer and found a golf pencil and tiny notepad inside. "I do. Go ahead."

He gave her the 1-800 number and said he hoped that she found what she needed, then hung up. After all the worry about Nathan, the old man had been a breath of

fresh air in her life. She took a moment to pray for him, whoever he was, then dialed the number.

Before the phone quit ringing once in her ear, someone picked up. “Vanda Darin, West Central Savings and Loan. How may I direct your call?”

Kelly fumbled over the words, then realized she didn’t have a check with her or even her identification. “I need to find out my account balance. I lost my register . . .” And everything else.

“One moment please, while I transfer you.”

Kelly waited, knowing her wrist was going to buzz any moment with a new text from Nathan.

“Good afternoon. This is Becca Tumes, account specialist. How may I help you?”

“Becca, hi.” Kelly sighed and scraped her hand through her hair. “I’ve lost all of my information, my checks, my driver’s license, everything. But I remember my social security number. If I provide that for you, can you look up my account and tell me the balance?”

“Absolutely, and if you need further assistance in getting a debit card or anything else, please let me know.”

Kelly gave her the information rapidly. Even after losing everything, she was still protective about her social security number. It was the one thing Nathan hadn’t gotten to, at least that she knew of.

“Miss Chambers, I’m sorry. Your account is empty and has been for quite some time. We haven’t had any action on that account in over three years when the last of the

funds were drained. It looks like the secondary account holder wrote most of those checks.”

“Secondary?” She’d never added anyone to her checking account, and she’d been glad of that fact after Jasmine had emptied her account the first time. There should’ve not only been a few thousand dollars in her account from before Nathan held her; he’d promised to put money in there.

“Yes, it appears that you came in here about six months prior to the last use of the account and added Nathan Klein to your account. After that, none of the checks on file have any other signer than him.”

“I didn’t add him. How can that be?” She’d given him a deposit slip to put money in the bank for her, but she’d never agreed to give him access to her account.

“Well, you must have. We don’t simply add people without a signature. I’m sure you’ve just forgotten after this much time has passed. Since the account is empty, I won’t be able to send you a card until you deposit something. Will you be sending money in?”

Kelly thanked the Lord that she hadn’t signed up for an account like her parents that charged them monthly for additional security. Namely, if she had, Nathan would’ve gotten around it anyway and all those years of monthly charges would be waiting for her, ruining her credit even more. Nathan had won again.

She’d let him use the lie that she would get money as a dangling carrot in front of her. There was no way that years of work would be spent to find her, especially since no money had been added to that account in years. But what about Jasmine?

She hung up the phone as her wrist buzzed.

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You obviously don't care about Jasmine. She paid for your mistakes as usual. Don't miss the next meeting. It will be more than Jasmine who pays if you don't. Meet me by the fence tomorrow night at 8PM. Come alone.

"I hate you." She wasn't supposed to hate anyone and immediately felt guilt for saying the words yet couldn't bring herself to take them back. "I'm sorry, God. I'm sorry that I can't find a shred of care for him. I need to leave that up to you."

She scrolled to the very bottom of the screen and pressed the icon to reply, speaking her text aloud. "Where is my money? You said you were saving it for me. I called my bank. I know you're a liar. Why should I believe you now?" She pressed the send button.

Her breath came faster as she waited for a response, but what could he really say that would change the truth? He'd lied. She'd done horrible things thinking she was working her way out of a pit and into the truth, only to discover the pit was bottomless.

Her wrist buzzed and the reply was short enough that she didn't need to scroll at all to read it.

I own you.

Sam sat with Connor and Lacy in Connor's office. He was getting used to having the door closed, but not feeling trapped. He hated that his leg bounced, giving away his worry. He wasn't supposed to worry. He was supposed to always have everything under control. Since Kelly had arrived, his entire world had been tossed into the air

like confetti and pieces of him were landing all over like he'd never be one again.

"It's okay, Sam. We can do this," Lacy said as she gave him a weak smile, "but we're going to have to think of a new way to protect her because I think Kelly caught on to me last night. She knew something was up when I wouldn't leave her alone." Lacy toed off her boots and tucked her feet under her with her legs akimbo on Connor's sofa.

Sam wanted a distraction, needed it like he needed air, but couldn't let go of the worry. "She's going to do it. She's going to find a way to meet with him against our wishes. We can tell her not to, and she will. What is the hold this guy has over her?"

Connor took a deep breath and laid a huge hand on Lacy's knee, completely covering it. "You're right, Sam. Until she trusts us, we won't know. Dominic thinks he's found the line of communication, but it will take time to hack into. It's like the watch has its own internet and that makes hacking it more difficult."

"It's a good thing you saw that image, so we had confirmation she didn't have that watch before she arrived here. I would've looked pretty ignorant if I'd called the halfway house and accused them when they knew nothing about it," Lacy said, twisting her long hair into a loose knot.

"Nathan has some pull over her, whether it's real or imagined, physical or psychological. I talked to Brendon this morning and he told me she hasn't said anything about the communications, but he did note that she was really nervous at her session today. She kept gripping her wrist, spinning the watch, and looking out the window every few seconds. He said if he didn't know better, he'd think she was on drugs. She seemed that paranoid. We know that isn't the case," Connor said.

Someone knocked outside Connor's office, then opened the door. Dominic came inside and sat in a chair near Sam, facing Connor and Lacy on the sofa. "I did some

digging into the drone Sam shot down. They are made at a shop in Denver, Colorado. Most of the sales are over the counter and they come in two sizes. Interestingly, the smaller one is used for surveillance and the other for deliveries. Lots of small cafes and similar places use the larger ones for food delivery to save money. They don't have to hire someone if they can deliver by drone, take a picture of the door as they're dropping it off and email a picture to the consumer."

"We're only a couple hours or less from Denver." Sam shifted in his seat. "Is that where the halfway house is?"

Connor nodded. "That's why the halfway house was somewhat eager for us to provide a place for Kelly. They didn't think it was safe for her to remain in the same town she'd been kept for so long. Though, whether it's a mental block or if she truly didn't know, Kelly has never said where she was held."

Sam hadn't asked her. There were a lot of things he hadn't asked her. He'd avoided her the rest of the evening the day before, letting Lacy do the job of making sure she stayed in her room. There was no way he could face her after hearing Edwyn run her bath. He hadn't been able to stay there to make sure Edwyn left when he should. Not even to tell Connor what he might have heard. Confrontation was his worst enemy, but avoidance left him tied in knots.

"I think Edwyn should stay with her. We should move her into one of the family cabins and Edwyn can stay in the second bedroom." His words stumbled out of his mouth like he hadn't slept in days.

Lacy's eyes softened as she looked at him. "Why do you think Edwyn would be good for that job? Didn't he scare her the first day she was here?"

Should he accuse Edwyn when he didn't know everything? He would hate to be accused of a crime if he didn't commit one. "I heard him helping Kelly earlier. I think

they are closer than either of them let on.”

Connor sighed and let his head fall against the couch. “First my dad gets a wild hair and decides he’s going to a little town near Devil’s Tower for a month, now Edwyn is doing things behind my back? What is going on around here?”

Dominic grinned. “People tend to have their own minds. I know your rules are there for safety purposes, but your men are respectful. If Kelly feels comfortable with someone, she should be able to.”

Connor shook his head. “No, that’s where your lack of training in human trafficking betrays you. Kelly barely trusts anyone. She literally can’t make the choice to have a relationship yet. If she is choosing that, it’s because she thinks she has to, for some reason. Even if we count the time she was at the halfway house, which was less than two months, that’s not long enough for her to know herself well enough to commit to anyone. There must be another explanation. Not to mention the fact that Edwyn knows Kelly is at Wayside, so that Sam can work on mending the disagreement between them.”

Dominic glanced quickly between Connor and Sam. “Sam is part of the second chance missions? Kelly is a second chance?” His eyes widened. “I’m surprised you allowed that.”

Connor frowned, and Lacy laid her hand over his. He took a moment before he spoke. “I had to pray about it. Ultimately, I decided that if Sam could talk with Kelly and they could come to some sort of an acceptance of one another, a happy ending after a bad break, then that might help her heal from other trauma, too. It would show her that she’s worth working for. She’s worth fighting for.”

Dominic slowly nodded. “Very commendable. I hope it works.” He paused, then took a deep breath that foretold he had something very weighty to say. “I’ve broken into

the messages sent between Kelly and Nathan. He is telling her that he is hurting one of her friends if she doesn't do as he says. She is to meet him tomorrow night in the pasture where she was knocked off her horse. I suspect that accident wasn't an accident because she was supposed to meet him there yesterday. I'm glad you arranged for her to stay in her room last night, since you didn't know what was going on. If you hadn't, she wouldn't be here now."

Sam closed his eyes and breathed a prayer of thanks. Sometimes God worked in little silences, not in weighty sentences. "So, now we need to figure out how to keep her out of his clutches when she is clearly working against us," said Sam.

Connor looked Sam straight in the eyes. "Well, I think it's time we have a meeting with all the Wayside men, except my dad, and tell them what's going on. We're to keep eyes on Kelly at all times. If she's outside her cabin, she's not alone. I like Sam's idea that we move her in with someone, but I don't think Edwyn is the right man for the job."

Sam slowly shook his head, knowing exactly what Connor would ask of him. This was too much. Working with her was too much, but living in the same cabin? He couldn't. He'd have to watch her every moment. How would his heart be able to withstand that? "Don't."

"Who else?"

All eyes were on him, and he hated that he knew there wasn't anyone else he would trust to do the job. He'd already accused, at least only in his head, his friend of doing something with Kelly merely because of what he'd heard. If he had no right to look at her the way his heart screamed at him to look at her . . . then no one else could either.

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“What about Lacy?” He knew Connor would never allow that. Connor wanted Lacy close by at all times, and she wasn’t one of the guys, as much as she sometimes acted like one.

“I could?—”

“No,” Connor’s definitive response silenced Lacy.

Dominic grinned. “If you want the opportunity to make amends, then this will give you all the time in the world to do so.”

Had he really asked for time just a day before? Now, he wanted none of it. “I don’t feel right about this.”

Connor nodded. “I know. Because it’s not the way we do things. But Junior had to stay with Gabby when she came and got mixed up in Scarlet’s family mess. He had to protect her even though he didn’t want to. Protecting is what we do.”

Connor was right, but that didn’t make Sam hate the idea any less.

Chapter Twelve

A pile of clothes laid behind Kelly in a heap where she knelt on the floor in front of her closet. The heap was smaller than most people would expect, but represented her entire wardrobe. Even after Lacy had brought over a large suitcase of clothing that fit her, she still didn’t have enough to fill a closet. She whimpered as a splinter dug deep into her thumb as she scraped her hand across an old floorboard.

Nothing. No camera.

How could Nathan see her? How had he known just when she was angry and when she was out walking? How did he know when to message her? Obviously, he was close by, or he wouldn't keep urging her to meet him. But that didn't explain how he was seeing her. The men at Wayside wouldn't let a stranger hang around the place.

She headed for the small storage closet near the back patio door. Edwyn had told her all the cabins were the same, except for the back row that had two bedrooms, and that some people stored their outdoor gear in that closet. There wasn't anywhere near the front door for that kind of thing.

She'd hung her coat from Lacy in there and the vest she'd gotten from the halfway house. Other than that, there hadn't been anything to store back there. If Nathan had planted a camera inside that tiny space, she wouldn't have seen it. That also would tell him when she was leaving because she couldn't go outside without a coat.

After feeling along the shelf and hunting along the floor, she came up empty. What about fire spigots, smoke detectors, or even charge cord plugs? All of those could house cameras. But could Nathan have placed them? He'd only been at Wayside once and he hadn't been allowed to leave the parking lot. Still . . . better to be safe than sorry.

She dug around in the kitchen junk drawer and found a small flashlight. The bulb was dim, but should be enough to reflect back at her if there were camera lenses hidden anywhere. She hunted through each room, scanning heating vents, smoke detectors, plugins, and even doing the finger test on the mirrors to be sure they weren't two-way. Everything in her room checked out safe. So, how was he seeing her?

Her wrist buzzed and she flinched, tired of the contact. Why couldn't he leave her alone? She was gone. His secrets were safe with her because she never wanted to talk

about what she'd been through ever again. If he would just leave her be, they could both move on. It wasn't like he didn't have many other girls to take her place.

She sucked in a breath and tugged on her sleeve to look at the text.

You'll be there tonight. Don't leave me waiting.

She clenched her fists, refusing to give him the pleasure of responding. If he was going to hurt Jasmine, he would anyway. Her connection didn't matter. He liked controlling people. Maybe physical abuse wasn't his usual method, but he loved emotional torment. Who knew that better than her? He'd enslaved her merely with words for years.

The physical buzz against her wrist felt more insistent, though it probably wasn't. Her whole body was sensitive to stimulus. The ranch sounds outside suddenly seemed obnoxiously loud. The heat in her room was too much. The scent of the soap in the kitchen assailed her nose.

Answer me.

Kelly closed her eyes and slowly took the watch off her wrist and laid it on the desk in front of her. "I will not," she said, but didn't send it as a message. She didn't quite have the strength to stand up to him that strongly yet.

It buzzed again almost immediately.

Put it back on or Jasmine dies.

Kelly squeezed her eyes shut as tears burned so deeply she could feel the harsh reality through her whole body. She'd been sure she was beyond tears, beyond feeling, beyond caring. At least she still had a heart because it was breaking. Sobs took over

as someone knocked on the door.

She swiped the watch off the table and put it back on as she headed for the door. Not answering would arouse suspicion and that would mean she couldn't go to meet Nathan or whichever thug he'd sent to meet her. She couldn't risk being the cause of Jasmine's death. There were too many marks against her that Jesus would make her account for when she met him.

Unable to speak through her tears, she simply opened the door. Sam stood there and his face immediately shifted from a complete lack of emotion to the deepest compassion in the space of a second. "What happened?" He rushed inside and closed the door.

His firm hand on her back didn't do anything to stop the tears, but she couldn't deny that she felt safer with him there. Sam wouldn't let Nathan hurt her. Not if he knew what was going on. She opened her mouth to tell him everything when she felt her wrist buzz again.

"Let's sit. You can tell me what happened when you've had a minute to get it out. Sometimes, emotion just needs to vent. It's okay." Sam's steady words should've helped the well stop, but instead made the tears come all the faster.

No one had allowed her to cry. No one had let her mourn her old life. She'd been flung into a new existence, perhaps slowly at first, but the death of her old self was no less harsh with a slow start. His encouragement might have come years too late, but there it was. Why hadn't she told him at first? Why hadn't she shared her burdens with him?

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Because she'd expected him to rescue her without asking. He was supposed to be the knight in shining armor and the princess shouldn't have to tell him she was in danger. The knight was supposed to foresee anything and everything. But this wasn't a fairytale. It was a nightmare, and the rules of fairytales didn't apply.

"I'm sorry." She wept, reaching for him, surprised that he allowed her to cling to him. Wasn't that against one of the rules Connor had briefly mentioned?

"For what?" Sam asked.

She couldn't answer that. The tears came and came until she couldn't breathe with the force of the sobs. It was like her body was catching up for lost time. Fear for Jasmine's life only added to the spring that wouldn't let up.

After a few minutes, though she couldn't say how many, Sam fished a handkerchief out of his back pocket. He didn't let her go as he handed it to her. "I know it's silly and old-fashioned, but you'd be surprised how often we need these around here. So, I always keep one."

Why did Sam care? He shouldn't. He shouldn't be offering her anything to catch her tears or a shoulder to cry on. He shouldn't be there at all. He'd walked away from her. Listening to her now would only entangle him in the same mess as before. She knew better now. Sam wasn't going to rescue her from the inevitable, he would be trapped by it.

She swallowed her tears and handed him back the red bandana. "You need to go."

“What?” His dark brows dove downward in confusion. He was so sweetly handsome, and she knew his nature wanted truth and justice. There would never be justice for what she’d been through. She would never see Nathan in prison. He wouldn’t pay.

“I said you need to go. It isn’t right for you to be here.”

He slid back from her, but his face didn’t change. He obviously was confused, but still wanted to show her care. Drat him, why couldn’t he just leave her to fend for herself?

“Connor is moving you into one of the family cabins. You’ll be staying with me. There are two rooms, so you’ll have your own space, but he doesn’t want you to be alone.”

It was her turn to let shock flow down her spine. “What? I can’t . . .” If she did, she wouldn’t be able to meet with Nathan. One more mistake and Jasmine would die if she wasn’t dead already. “I don’t want to.”

Sam didn’t quite hide his flinch. “I told him it wasn’t a good idea and even offered Edwyn instead of me, but his decision was final. I’m sorry.”

Edwyn? That would be even worse. Edwyn had managed to be understanding of her peculiarities for all of ten minutes. If she had to live with him, she’d pitch a tent in the barn and stay there. “Edwyn would be worse.”

Sam stood and turned his back to her as he headed for the door. “I know you’re keeping secrets from us, and I know that he’s one of them. It’s okay. I get it. Connor won’t let that go any further, but secrets just don’t keep around here.”

Secrets about Edwyn? What did he think she’d done? It was like living the past all over again.

In some ways, time had stopped when he'd given up on Kelly. He'd shut down any plans to ever let anyone that close to him again. So, his heart had closed a door that he hadn't had any intention to open. Sam headed for his bedroom and pulled a boot box off the top shelf of his closet.

Blowing off the years of collected dust, he paused. Just like life, he had to let the dust settle before he tackled anything else. In years past, he would've called his dad or someone he trusted to help him through the problem, but everyone he trusted now was too close to the issue. They were all at Wayside.

"Nothing will happen until I make it happen." He set the heavy box on his bedside table and took off the lid, then tossed it on the floor. More dust puffed into the air as it hit the rug. That's what vacuums were for.

Right on top were the letters he'd gotten from Kelly, wrapped lovingly in twine like a gift. He'd treasured every note back then. No one wrote personal things like that anymore. Kelly had always hated phones, hated television, so a written note was how she showed she cared. She'd barely listened to the radio, preferring to talk to people face-to-face. He set the bundle of notes and letters to the side.

Right under those was a stack of pictures. His appearance hadn't changed much between when they'd been taken and now. At least, he didn't think he had. Maybe a few more lines around his eyes, but other than that he was the same old Sam. Kelly, on the other hand, had changed drastically. She was thinner and had worry lines around her eyes. Where she used to have almost a perpetual sunshiny smile, she rarely let her mouth get anywhere close to making one now.

He slowly flipped through the images, taking the time to remember those moments. He hadn't let himself do that since that day. As he slid one picture to the back, he found one he'd forgotten about. It was a picture he'd taken at a party shortly before he'd found her cheating on him. Nathan was talking to her. He hadn't recognized him

since he'd never actually met him at that party. He'd wanted the picture of her. No wonder why she hadn't wanted a copy of that one.

He tapped the picture, really taking a look at her face. She didn't want to be talking with him. She had a smile on her face, but he could see that it was plastered in place, not genuine.

"What were you doing at a party with us, Nathan? How long did you know Kelly before I found her?" He set the picture aside and focused on the few other pictures from that party, but all the others were taken with mutual friends that he could recall. If he hadn't taken that picture, he wouldn't have ever had proof Kelly had known Nathan before.

Which meant Brendon could be right. She may have been tricked or coerced into a life of prostitution before Sam knew anything was wrong. It still begged the question, why didn't she ask him for help? Was she ashamed? Worried that he would walk away from her because she wasn't pure as the freshly fallen snow? He had walked away from her, but would he have done the same thing if he'd known why?

He set one of his favorite pictures against his bedside lamp. When the light shone down on it, brightening the picture and making Kelly's smile radiant, he wanted the old Kelly back. If he hadn't walked away, would she still be there? Her life would've been better if he would've busted into that house and asked her what was going on. But he hadn't. Just like with Edwyn, he'd assumed the worst. Not only of her, but of himself. He'd assumed he wasn't good enough. He wasn't exciting enough to keep the attention of such a beautiful, vivacious woman.

So, which was the truth? One could ask about the chicken or the egg, but a religious scholar would tell you it was the chicken, as God didn't create a world of babies, but fully grown animals. Science might have another view, but he didn't much care about science at the moment. He cared about what he'd done. The Kelly he knew could

easily find herself in over her head because she was trusting of people and loved to be with them. She always assumed that they felt the same way about her, which had led to hurt while they'd been dating. He'd have to remind her that he thought she was amazing, but she'd always said he was biased.

He set the stack of pictures aside and found various ribbons from gifts given, a little paper heart Kelly had made for him for Valentine's one year, and a ring made from wax that she'd melted and molded to be his size. He'd worked really hard, so wearing a metal band had scared him a little. A friend of his had lost a finger while putting in fencing when he was a teen. Since then, Sam had been worried about wearing rings. Kelly had understood. He'd never planned to wear the wax ring as a wedding band, but he'd gladly worn it while they were dating. He slipped it from the bottom of the box and put it on his finger. It still fit perfectly.

If he was already this sentimental about all of Kelly's old things, how was he ever going to live with her? Even though she didn't want to, Connor would have the final say. She wasn't safe alone. Not with the messages that had come through. He'd read the string of texts Dominic had hacked into and they made him sick. Nathan should be in prison. If Sam could find a way to put him there, he would.

He couldn't remember exactly when that party was, if it was months before that fateful day or merely days, but he'd thought it was longer. Memory was fickle though, and he hadn't bothered to think about any of it for so long.

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The image of Kelly and Nathan haunted his thoughtseven after he'd put the pictures back in the box. He'd been trained to see signs of human trafficking now, but if he'd known back then, he might have saved her. If he'd only tried to be a little more assertive, but that just wasn't who he was. One of the women he'd served with in the Army had called him a cinnamon roll, whatever that was. He was still fit, no muffin top to speak of, so he had to assume that was a dig at his character.

"If I apologize for walking away and tell her that I know she knew Nathan before I left, will that encourage her to tell me the truth now?" he mumbled as he headed to the bathroom to wash the dust off his hands. He scrubbed all the dark smudges away, then feeling a tickle in his nose he splashed water on his face for good measure. That picture needed to go to Connor, so he would know about what had happened and when, but was Kelly ready for that? Maybe asking Brendon would be a good idea? He just didn't know. There was so much between them, yet they couldn't deal with any of it until she'd had a chance to deal with being trafficked first. He'd never thought the two issues would be so intertwined.

Sam grabbed a duffle bag and slowly packed some of his clothes, his alarm clock, some items from his bathroom, and his favorite pair of slippers. If he needed anything else, he could come back and get it. The ring was warm against his skin from the hot water and caught his eye. Would she notice it? She'd told him to leave earlier. There had to be some way to call a truce between them and let her know that he was a man of honor. She could trust him. He wouldn't hold their shared past against them.

He shouldered the duffel and headed for the door, then turned around, gathered the box of memories underhis arm, and headed for the cabin that would be his home for . . . who knew how long. But if he was going to start over, he had to do so

understanding that the past was the past. Just because he lived through it, didn't mean he knew the truth.

Chapter Thirteen

Kelly glanced at her watch, unsure of what she should do next. There was an hour until she was supposed to meet Nathan and darkness already prevented her from knowing where she needed to go. In the daylight, she could find the pasture they'd used. In the dark, she was lost. Maybe she should've left her cabin more.

Then again, according to Sam she'd be moving tomorrow. No, you won't. Her inner voice startled her, mostly because it didn't sound like her. If she met with Nathan, he wasn't going to let her go back to her cabin. For the first time, she considered the fact that this might be how those people Nathan had bragged about never getting away had all disappeared. They'd either been rescued, or he'd found and disposed of them after they'd escaped.

She leaned against a tree, trying to find the area where she'd ridden with Sam. Maybe if she had her horse, it would know where to go. Saddling it would be impossible, though. She'd only ridden once and hadn't paid the slightest attention when Sam had saddled it. No. She had to do this on her own. The whole point was to make sure Jasmine was still alive and to make Nathan leave Wayside alone.

She hadn't met any of the other guests. Other than seeing Rebecca, she hadn't even seen them. There were only a few of them, but since she hadn't gone to a meal yet, she hadn't had the opportunity to talk to anyone. Nathan wouldn't want anything to do with a woman in a wheelchair, but what if Nathan wasn't there just for her? What if his real plan was to take all the women who lived at Wayside Ranch?

A twig snapped in the distance, and she held in a scream. That wasn't going to help her get there without anyone noticing. A cold, wet nose pressed into her palm. Odd

that the feeling was a comfort. She glanced down to find Zeus standing at her side.

She shook her head and kneeled, whispering softly to the dog so no one else would hear her. “You can’t be here. I need to go, and you can’t go where I’m going.” The overwhelming urge to hug the dog and succumb to more tears was almost unbearable.

Zeus gave a soft snort, similar to a whimper, though the muscular dog could barely manage the weak sound. Kelly needed a dog like Zeus in her life. A dog who cared about her safety and found her even when his master didn’t know where he was.

“Kelly?” Sam’s voice cut through the darkness.

Kelly closed her eyes tightly and jumped back to her feet. She pressed her back to the tree, wishing Zeus would go away, yet she wouldn’t hurt him and couldn’t speak to tell him to go. She nodded her head slightly in the other direction, hoping he would get the hint.

Zeus sat down instead and tilted his head, as if he was curious what she was doing.

“Kelly?” He was only a few feet away now. “What’cha got there Zeus?” Sam’s voice was so friendly toward the dog. No one had cared for her like that since Sam, talking to her in a voice laced with care and affection. She hadn’t realized how much she’d craved that, needed that, until that moment.

Sam came around the tree and glanced at her. “Out for a walk?”

She’d expected condemnation. At the very least, she’d expected to hear that she was in trouble. Even with the coat, it was freezing outside. Not the kind of weather that would usually make her want to take a stroll.

“I just needed to be outside,” she said as she lifted her chin in mild defiance. Sam

wasn't her boss. She shouldn't have to answer to him.

"There are large animals in Wyoming that might appreciate a wandering woman all alone in the dark. If you don't want me to go with you, take Zeus. It seems like you like his company and he'll protect you. Though even Zeus can't do much against a bear."

"Bear?" her voice definitely squeaked that time.

"Not often, but sometimes." Sam didn't seem to want to leave.

Asking him to do that the day before had been one of the hardest things she'd done since coming to Wayside. "Why are you out here, Sam?"

"You missed supper. I brought your tray, and you weren't home. We don't care if you go out for walks, but it's pretty standard procedure to let someone know where you're going or at least that you won't be in your cabin, so we don't think you've been kidnapped. It's a real fear when all the people we work with have been trafficked. You wouldn't believe the number of people who become victims a second time: more than one in four. We're trying to change that, by equipping our guests not only with the means to talk, but to know their surroundings and be aware."

One in four. And in less than an hour, she would either add to that statistic, or she would help add to another one. "And how many die?" she whispered.

Sam looked away, his face shadowed in the dark. "That's a tough statistic. Both to think about and to find the answer to. A guess is almost worthless, so why don't we say that if even one person dies, it's too many," he matched her moderated tone.

Everything inside her urged her to tell him. If he knew the situation, maybe he could help her come up with a plan. She'd never been good at thinking ahead, but Sam was

a professional at it.

“He’s going to kill her, Sam.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the tree. She didn’t want to talk about her time ‘there’, but Jasmine had been the closest friend she’d had.

Sam moderated his voice, “If you’re ever going to trust me—and I hope you do because we’ll be in the same cabin as of tomorrow—then I have to trust you with what I know. Dominic knows about the texts you’ve been receiving and sending. We’ve read them. I remembered Jasmine and even had her in a picture. I gave that to Dominic.”

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The quality of his voice had changed. He sounded somber, sad. She knew without asking that nothing she did was going to help Jasmine anymore. “She’s already dead, isn’t she?”

Sam slowly pulled in a breath and let it out just as slowly. “I’m sorry. Her body was found a day after you were rescued.”

“He lied to me. Again.” She knew she shouldn’t ever believe a word he said, but in this case, if she hadn’t, she’d have been risking a life.

“He’s never going to tell you the truth, Kelly. But I do have good news. Come with me?” He gestured back toward the barn. “On the off chance that he’s out here, I don’t want to announce anything.”

She knew it. Sam had a plan. He was still the same Sam she’d always known. Protector and constant Sam, a shoulder to lean on. She followed his lead, and Zeus stayed at her side. He didn’t look up at her as he walked like he did with Sam sometimes, but she still felt safe with the huge German shepherd next to her.

Once they reached the barn, Sam glanced down at her hand. “I don’t know if that watch has the capability to hear, so I’d like you to take it off and leave it outside. I’d prefer if you left it off completely, but I can’t make you.”

She slipped the watch off and put it in the grass outside the barn. Sam led them all the way to the other end, so there was no way it could hear anything. He paused by the tack room where Edwyn had talked to her the first day and offered her a seat on a short bench just outside.

“Okay, I’m listening. What is this good news?”

Sam tensed, which made her worry meter slam into overdrive. “Sam? What’s wrong?”

“This has to do with the time we were together before. We haven’t talked about it and bringing it up isn’t easy.”

“But . . .” He had said this was good news. Why was he bringing up the past? She hadn’t told him what she was doing when they were together. Did this mean he knew? What was left of her hope shattered into a million pieces. He’d never love her again if he knew she chose that life. What kind of woman would do that? Whether she’d become saved since then or not, it didn’t wash away what she’d put him through, nor what she’d been through. She was a bad girl and always would be.

He held up his hand. “Just let me get through this before you start panicking. I saw Nathan when he was here, but I didn’t recognize him. When I was looking through some of our old pictures earlier tonight, I found one of you talking with him at a party. I have no way of knowing if that was the first time you’d met him or if you’d known him for years at that point. Pictures don’t tell me that. What I do know is that I gave that picture to Dominic. The man is a tech genius. He was able to isolate Nathan’s face and find it. We now know exactly who he is, and we were able to give that information to not only local law enforcement, but to the feds, too”

Her breath came fast and hard. Nathan might be arrested? No more texts. No more broken lives. No more death. It also meant that all those lies he’d told her about paying her would never come true. Somewhere deep inside, she’d hoped that was the one thing he hadn’t lied about. She wanted to trust that promise. If she did, maybe she wouldn’t be stained by this label of human trafficking victim anymore. She would just be a woman who chose an ugly path but who won in the end.

“What does that mean for me and for all the people he was holding?”

Sam reached out and touched her shoulder. She couldn't understand how every other touch left her skin crawling, but his was simply warm and welcome because she knew that's how it was intended.

“It means they'll have to find where he was holding everyone. He doesn't deserve leniency, and I doubt he'll survive long in the system if they catch him. But I also didn't want him to hear anything through that watch and disappear.”

She couldn't bring herself to think anyone deserved to die, but she'd leave that up to those who had to protect Nathan once they caught him. Catching him would be the first step.

Sam sat close to Kelly on the bench, thinking about his words and where this conversation needed to go. Just hours before she'd asked him to leave. Now she was standing so close to him he could smell her shampoo. She wasn't running and she hadn't been shocked when he'd told her that they'd known about the texts. That might have been because he didn't accuse her of doing anything.

When he'd first come to Wayside, Connor had taught him that many of the victims would hide things from them. It could be information, parts of their pasts, food, or, in this case, communications with someone who could harm them. When those things were discovered, it was really important that they confront the behavior in a way that didn't accuse the guest. They've been manipulated, groomed, conned, abused, and lied to. They've been trained to feel guilt for everything. Helping someone overcome that way of thinking was a slow process and couldn't be done if the client felt the same about the path to healing as they did about being a captive.

Unfortunately, she now knew that he was aware of the possibility she was already a captive when they were together. He hadn't forced her to answer that question and

had given her multiple options for talking to Nathan. He'd hoped giving that bit would lead to better trust between them. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

She hunched her shoulders and seemed to shrink by three sizes there on the bench.

He didn't want her to feel condemned. "This isn't about guilt, Kelly. You aren't required to tell me anything. It's only a question." He wasn't her husband. She could see anyone she wanted to. Trouble was, he didn't want to hear about her wanting to see anyone because his past hadn't really caught up to the present yet.

"I should've told you that he'd contacted me, but I was afraid. He told me he was following me. I'm still afraid. You sent his picture, but he hasn't been charged with anything. He could still be free. He's good at hiding."

"They all are. Let's agree to drop this right now. I won't ask you for that watch, but I want you to know that he only wants to make sure that you don't tell anyone what you went through. Being here puts him in danger. He knows that. That's why he wants you back." He didn't mean to sound so callous to her situation or make her think she was worthless, but to her pimp and trafficker, she was. To the rest of the world, she was valuable.

He'd become just as good at reading body language as he was at avoiding blaming victims, and Kelly's body language spoke volumes. She didn't want to talk about their past or Nathan. She didn't want to talk about what she knew or how it could help them. Probably because the information she had would hurt Sam. Victims were also good at taking on pain to make sure others didn't have to deal with it. They almost felt like mental anguish was their superpower.

He'd failed her. She didn't say it out loud, but she didn't have to. He'd realized when he'd found that photo that Kelly had likely been trafficked back then, before he'd left, and he hadn't seen it. He hadn't been trained back then, but he had loved her and

noticed she'd changed. He even remembered asking her about her stress, her lack of smiles, and her continual fatigue. She'd brushed it off as life and told him that it would all change once they were married.

Now he knew why.

The unfortunate truth was that a marriage certificate didn't stop a woman from being trafficked. Nathan had probably tricked her, or he'd lied to her as he had been the last two days. He couldn't change what he may have done back then. No matter what he thought, it would be speculation. He could do something right now, though.

"No asking about the past. Not now anyway," Kelly said quietly, and looked up at him with wide eyes, pleading for him to understand.

"When Brendon asked me to work with you, I said no strings attached and I meant it. If you don't want to broach the past, then we don't. No questions asked. But you may want to break that rule with Brendon, because I feel like you need to process some things. If that picture is any indication, this guy coerced you into believing in him. That's a lot to deal with."

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Instead of nodding, Kelly's mouth dropped open as she glanced behind him. He turned as Edwyn walked into the barn. Edwyn glanced between them, then focused on him. "Everything all right?"

Kelly immediately nodded with her mouth still slightly open, as if they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't.

"Yes. I was just worried. Kelly had gone out for a short walk, and I didn't know she'd be gone. We were having a chat out here."

Edwyn, who was Mr. Rules at Wayside, ignored him and went straight for Kelly. Sam's internal hackles went up. Maybe there was something between Edwyn and Kelly, at least in the foreman's mind.

"Do you need me to bring you back to your cabin?" Edwyn asked.

She shook her head. "No. I think I can manage. I'm sorry for wandering so far without letting anyone know where I would be."

He wasn't about to let her go alone. Not when he knew she'd been headed to meet up with Nathan or someone who said they were Nathan by text. Kelly got up and headed for the back of the barn where she'd left the watch. Sam went after her, but Edwyn grabbed his arm.

"Let her be. You're not acting like a Wayside wrangler."

Sam watched as Kelly left the barn and was out of sight. "Zeus, follow." The dog,

sitting quietly in the corner out of sight, would either stay with her all night or he'd come right back when she made it safely to her door, but he wouldn't leave her without some protection. Zeus had bonded so quickly with Kelly that he wouldn't let anyone near her if she appeared frightened. The dog obediently followed.

“What’s this all about, Edwyn? Really? Is this about running Kelly a bath? Because that’s an issue. Wranglers don’t do that, either.”

Edwyn turned white, then red. “Did she tell you that?”

“No. I heard you as I was coming by to see how she was doing after her fall. For a man who follows the rules, that seemed like a red flag to me.”

Edwyn swiped his hand down his face. “Look, that isn’t how I normally am, and you know it. I’ve got no feelings for Kelly. Connor told me that I really messed up with her. I was too loud, too direct. I had to do something to get her to trust me again. So, I did something nice. That’s all I did, Sam.” He slowly shook his head, all the steam gone from his voice. “You know me.”

His thumb touched the red wax ring on his finger. He’d known Kelly and had been so wrong about her, too. He’d trusted his eyes instead of his heart. In Edwyn’s case, he’d trusted his ears over what he knew about Edwyn.

“Sorry, man, it just seems like you’re ready and willing to accuse me of doing the wrong thing. This isn’t easy for me. I’m in a very sensitive situation.”

“I can’t imagine. I really can’t.” Edwyn sat on the bench. “I know this is hard, but if you’re feeling too drawn to her, too much for her, you need to step back. Stay distant at least a little. You can’t let those feelings build. She deserves to heal. No matter what Brendon and Connor say. She’s more important.”

Sam glanced back at the door where she'd disappeared and couldn't agree more.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam shuffled into the little Wayside chapel at the same time as Edwyn. Was that God's way of telling him Edwyn was right? It certainly meant Edwyn was watching his every move. He'd thought all night about what he'd discussed with Edwyn, after staying up to see if Zeus would return.

When the big German shepherd didn't come back to the kennel for the night, Sam called Kelly's cabin. When she answered, it surprised him. She hated talking on the phone, but he hadn't wanted to go to her door so late at night.

"Hello?" Her voice held so much worry.

"Kelly, this is Sam. I was just checking to make sure you got home all right, and that Zeus is with you." At least she answered, which meant she was most-likely fine.

"Zeus is here and I'm safely in my cabin. Thanks for checking."

He heard the distinct change in her voice when she smiled.

"Of course. If he makes you feel safer, keep him with you. He seems to have chosen you as his human."

Kelly actually laughed at that, and he hadn't realized how much that meant to him. She hadn't laughed or smiled since her arrival. He almost wished he could be there to see it. Which meant Edwyn was right, he should back off and just be Kelly's wrangler.

Now, as he mingled with the twenty or so people in the tight space, he knew avoiding

Kelly would be almost impossible. There was only room for about thirty people in the little chapel if they sat hip to hip on the benches. She wouldn't know anyone except him and Edwyn though, so likely she would look for him.

He saw her profile in the doorway and took a breath. Avoiding her was good for her. He had to keep telling himself that. Edwyn was right. She couldn't heal from the physical and mental trauma she'd been through if she started thinking romantically, or even deeply, for someone so soon. If he cared about her and wanted a future with her, he had to back off. Doing anything too soon could literally ruin her chances of a happy life forever.

Junior sat next to Gabby in the front row and there was just enough room for him at their side. Since the place would be fairly packed, he didn't need to explain himself when he asked to sit with them. Gabby smiled up at him and moved over a bit. "Sure, us front of the church dwellers are always happy to invite a new convert."

Junior grinned. "And some of us are only here because our wives are front of the church dwellers."

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She elbowed him in the ribs and they both laughed. He and Kelly had been like that long ago. Joking and flirting had been the norm, not the exception. She was that kind of person, but he was not. She'd brought that out in him. He glanced back to where she'd been a moment before.

Kelly looked lost, standing in the doorway. Her head slowly swiveled, and her mouth hung open slightly, eyes wide. She was afraid, probably of being alone. A new church could be scary for anyone. There was always the worry of being judged.

Rebecca came in just behind her and welcomed her to Wayside, mentioning that she'd seen her the day before but didn't have a chance to meet. She invited Kelly to sit by her in the back, since those two rows were shorter to accommodate wheelchairs.

He tried to feel good about the fact that she'd met someone new. Her world was expanding and meeting others who had been through similar circumstances was good. She could form solid friendships and bonds with people who would understand her difficulties better than anyone else. But that didn't stop him from worrying that he'd done the wrong thing. As her wrangler, he should be sitting with her. In fact, since he'd been Rebecca's wrangler, he should be sitting with both of them.

Gabby touched his arm gently. "Is something wrong? While you're not the smile-iest of guys, you're even more reserved than normal."

Sam ducked his head to hide any reaction that might give him away. He'd always been called the calm one, the solid friend. He tried not to let his emotions get in the way of anything, but that often led to being the one who kept everything to himself.

“Yeah, it’s just been a rough week. Good day for church.”

Gabby was a counselor and gave him the eye, as if she knew he wasn’t telling her everything in his head. He was a man though, and what was in his head was rarely given a voice. Men weren’t supposed to be talkers; they were doers.

That was his issue. He was being asked to not do something he felt he should. Action, not sitting stationary. He looked at the front, hoping the preacher had arrived, but the small altar was still empty.

“You know . . . if you don’t want to talk about it with anyone, you could always take it to the one who won’t tell a soul about your troubles. He’s pretty good about helping you decide the right course, too.”

Gabby was right, of course. Why didn’t he turn to prayer as often as he should? It was just easier to try to muscle through or think his own way out of a problem than to bug the God of the universe with his little problems.

“I’m sure you’re right.” Sam reached for one of the little envelopes the preacher left in a little shelf under the benches and wrote out his check for his tithe. Since he had no bills to pay, he felt it was his duty to give a bigger portion than most men his age. They had families. They had rent or mortgages. They had food to buy or a truck payment. He had none of those things. God had blessed him richly with a life he couldn’t have dreamed of when he was serving in the military.

The hair on his arms prickled to life, and he could feel someone watching him. Tension coursed through his shoulders as he folded his check and affixed the flap of the envelope. Unable to keep himself from looking, he searched the church one last time.

The look of utter dejection on Kelly’s face tore at his insides.

He faced the front and didn't close his eyes. It wasn't important for the world to know he was praying. That was between him and God. Lord, I did what Edwyn said because his advice sounded reasonable and good. But is it what you want?

The prayer was short and to the point, much like all his other communication. He couldn't say that he'd ever had a supernatural encounter with God. He'd never heard the voice of the Holy Spirit, nor had he received anything other than a mental nudge when he'd asked for help with decisions. Yet, this time, there was a very clear voice in his head, familiar, yet he couldn't name whose it was.

Pray that she sees the truth.

He blinked where he sat as the preacher approached the podium atop the small rise of the altar. Hadn't he already prayed for that when he'd seen those texts? He'd known Nathan was manipulating her.

I trust you. I pray that she clearly sees the truth and knows who she can trust. I pray that the lies would be like scales falling from her eyes.

He waited with awe filling him with warmth, wondering if he would hear any more. If that was what he was supposed to pray, he'd keep praying that. In the next instant, whether it was his imagination or the Holy Spirit showing him things he didn't want to see, he saw in his mind Kelly bound and crying. He saw her cowering at the feet of someone much bigger than her. At the end of his vision, he held in the sick that roiled in his stomach.

If that was even a hint at what Kelly had been through, she needed so much more than he could ever give her. She needed someone strong, who could protect her from the world. He was just Sam. Faithful, but not strong. Capable, but not a leader.

Keep praying for her, Sam. You are faithful and your faithfulness is heard.

He blinked back tears. He couldn't do that now. Men weren't supposed to cry. He took a deep breath and let it out. God had asked him to pray, but he hadn't said to go to her. For now, he'd wait until the right time, keeping their relationship professional.

Except for all the prayers. That wasn't how he usually cared for a patient at all.

Kelly tried to listen to the preacher, but she hadn't even caught his name. Rebecca sat to her left and Edwyn to her right. He'd returned to the semi-overbearing Edwyn that made her uncomfortable, like he knew everything in the world and was trying to protect her from herself.

He probably didn't know that his treatment left her feeling dirty. Like the bad girl she'd been told she was. She was too bad for church. Too bad for Sam to sit by her. Why wouldn't he want to sit with her? Hadn't they just talked on the phone last night? When she'd returned Zeus to the kennel on the way to church, she'd assumed she'd meet Sam there and they would walk together.

Then again, assumptions had never gotten her anywhere good. From the moment she'd walked in the door, she'd been uncomfortable. Connor had told her that the church service was not required in any way. She could come or not as she wished. As she'd considered her options, she'd decided the church was better than sitting at home.

This would be her first service as a believer, and she'd wanted Sam to guide her through the process. What should she do? What was expected? She wasn't even sure how she should dress. Everyone else looked nice, cleaned up from what they usually wore, but nothing formal. A tall blonde woman stood at wrangler Cole Bradley's side. She was the only one in the church who was dressed like Kelly had expected churchgoers to look. Sunday-best was different at Wayside. That should've been expected.

Kelly shifted on the hard bench, trying to pay attention. Since she'd never read the Bible because she didn't have one, and she didn't know much more than what she'd been told by the woman who led her to Christianity, most of what he said went right over her head. What did 'washed in the blood' mean, anyway? From her perspective, that sounded awful.

You don't belong here . . . Why did the evil voice in her head always sound like her grandmother? Kelly closed her eyes.

She fought with her grandmother's stubborn memory. I do. You're the one who doesn't belong here. Her jaw trembled. Why couldn't she move on? Why couldn't her escape truly be a fresh start? Why did her mind carry so much baggage?

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The voice laughed at her, the sound filling her head until she couldn't hear the pastor's words anymore. Edwyn bumped her with a shoulder.

She glanced over at him, wondering what she'd done that he needed to point out she was doing anything? She'd been sitting there the whole time. He pursed his lips, conveying that he wasn't happy with her. Grab a number and wait in line.

Kelly hung her head and closed her eyes. Are you there, God? Do I belong here?

The same mocking laugh of her grandmother grew louder. She tried to focus on anything but the sound, but that only made it worse. God was stronger than her grandmother. That much she knew, so why couldn't she hear God? Did He just not care until she was well-studied? Would He ignore her pleas until she'd read the Bible?

Rebecca reached over, threaded her hand through Kelly's, and she whispered, "It's okay. You're okay."

Heat flowed up her neck to the top of her head. She had to have made a noise, something to let Rebecca know she was going through something. How could she have grown so weak in such a short time? Just a few months before, Nathan would've used any weakness, any hint at her feelings against her.

Kelly squeezed her hand then released Rebecca. The touch was too much. She couldn't force herself to stay in the contact. If Sam was at her side, maybe. His touch carried a feeling of protection, whereas everyone else felt like they were trying to take something from her.

She closed her eyes tightly. Lord, I don't belong here. I don't belong with Nathan, either, but I have nowhere to go. I can't go back to the halfway house and I have no family. Please, tell me what to do.

The preacher's voice broke through all the noise in her head. "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord rest His countenance upon you and give you peace."

Peace. What did that even mean? Her thoughts pulled her in so many directions, but all of them pushed her toward one conclusion. If she couldn't hear the voice of God when she called out to him and if Sam was embarrassed to be with her, then she didn't belong there. She needed to run. Somewhere. Anywhere.

Kelly shot to her feet and raced for the door as others slowly rose. She didn't even care that it slammed behind her as she ran.

The banging door made Sam swing around. Everyone around him was in shock, but he'd known the moment he heard it who it was. He searched for Kelly next to Rebecca, but there was only an empty seat there.

Go after her.

He really wasn't sure if that was a nudge or just common sense, but he took off at a run for the door. Edwyn caught him and gripped his arm, almost slamming him into the wall.

"What are you doing? I can't just let her run off like that?"

Edwyn looked him in the eye. "Whose mission are you on, yours or hers?"

He shook free of Edwyn's grasp. "I'm on God's mission. He wants to see her

healed.” And that was the truth. He’d been told to pray for her. God wouldn’t have asked him to pray for her if she were totally lost. If her soul would never react to the Holy Spirit, God wouldn’t ask him to do what pulled him apart. Now he knew what Hosea felt in some small measure, though Gomer continued to choose her path, much like the Israelites. That was eye-opening, too, though. How much of Israel’s choice to follow other gods and be disobedient was actually human misunderstanding?

Pushing through the door, he searched for Kelly. There were very few places she would know to go. The kennel, where he assumed she’d left Zeus, was the first place to look. She could be in the barn with her horse, or back in her cabin. Connor had given him the key last night to the cabin he was supposed to share with her, and they were to move today. If he found her.

If she was too emotional about it, he couldn’t force her. Safety was important, but her fragile state was more so. Moving was another change. She’d had so much change recently that even that small thing might push her over the edge. If Nathan could hear her, he would use that against her.

“Kelly?” He didn’t want to yell, since the others would be pouring out of the chapel soon. He headed for the kennels. That was the most likely place she’d be and the place he went when he wanted time alone. No one ever bothered him in the kennels.

He slowly pulled the door open. “Kelly?”

There was a small sniffing sound in the back corner. He made his footsteps heavy so she should be able to hear them, but tried to make them noisy, not menacing.

Kelly was on the floor, sitting on Zeus’s dog bed with him. Her face was buried in the dog’s neck and Zeus’s eyes were wide, like he wanted to back away but knew he was needed right there.

“It’s okay, boy.” Sam lowered to his knees and gently pried Kelly’s grip loose from around the dog. She was shaking, literally shuddering, in his hands. Deep sobs turned her face red. “Kelly . . .” He held his arms wide to give her somewhere to go that wasn’t Zeus.

The dog dashed off, still uncomfortable with hugs. Kelly clung to Sam, and he slowly arranged himself so he could sit at her side, giving both of them a more comfortable place. If he was going to give emotional support, he might be there for a while.

“What happened?”

She shook her head, clenching her jaw tightly. Words weren’t going to get him far. He needed time and so did she, so he settled in against the wall and waited for her to tell him what was on her mind.

After about ten minutes, her sobs had slowed to sniffles. “I had to leave. Jesus would be unhappy with my thoughts. They didn’t belong in a church. Jesus would be angry with me.”

If Sam was going to break every rule in the book, he’d break the most important one, too. He brushed his fingers through her hair and felt her relax against his side. “That’s not how Jesus works. He holds out his hand to those who want to repent and move on. It’s those who are convinced they’re right in their faith but are wrong, that’s when he flips tables and brings out the whips. Kelly, Jesus loves you with a tenderness no man can match.”

Not even him.

Chapter Fifteen

The kennel had narrow windows, letting in bright shafts of light all along the wall. Down the right side, there was a kennel area for all the dogs to be together if they wanted to be inside or eat. It led outside to an area with a high fence for them to run around and play. All the dogs were outside, so the kennel felt private. Almost private enough for Kelly to bare her soul.

“You know about the texts. You’ve read them. I know how you feel about Nathan, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling deep inside like that’s all I’m worth. I don’t belong here. I certainly don’t belong at church. Nothing he said made any sense.” She couldn’t bring herself to blame him for avoiding her. Why wouldn’t he? He hadn’t even wanted her to come to Wayside.

“Would it help to know that you’re not alone in feeling that way? Almost every person who comes to stay here goes through those same feelings. Many of our guests become Christians while they’re here, so they have no understanding of what the pastor is saying.”

Kelly tugged away from him so she could pull her knees up and lean against the wall. Outside, one of the dogs barked. “Then why does Connor keep asking that preacher to come? Wouldn’t it be better to have someone willing to bring it down a little bit, for those of us who don’t know anything?” That wasn’t really the issue, but tackling this question was easier than the others.

“Connor has been friends with him for a long time. He’d really like Connor to bring all of us to the church in town, so we had the option of different classes. That’s just

not feasible though. Our people would be overwhelmed, even with the congregation in town only reaching one hundred on a big day, like Christmas.”

“So, what can we do? I want to learn, but when I was talking to God back at the church, I felt like my prayers were hitting the ceiling. It’s a pretty ceiling, don’t get me wrong, but that’s not where I want my thoughts to get stuck.”

Sam grinned and bumped her gently with his shoulder. “Do you really think the God of all creation is going to be held back by a layer of wood, tar paper, and shingles?”

She supposed not, but that didn’t stop her feeling from remaining stubbornly the same. “So maybe it’s not physical, but the issue is still there. I feel like He doesn’t want to hear from me. Like I’m too small.”

Sam pulled his phone from his pocket and then gripped her hand with the watch. He downloaded some app that she couldn’t see, then waited. A big circle appeared on his screen with the word ‘downloading’ underneath it. The percentage went up quickly. As soon as it hit 100, he was asked if he wanted to pair his watch to his phone.

“Wait . . .”

Before she could stop him, he paired her watch to his phone and all the texts appeared in a long list. Had she really received so many? Her mouth went dry as she read the first few words of the long string.

“This is why you feel that way.” Sam used his finger to scroll through the messages. “He made you feel like you aren’t even worthy of the truth. He convinced you with his actions and words that you have no value. No one here feels that way, and God doesn’t feel that way.”

He stopped on a threatening text and his face changed subtly. “I should’ve been there

for you. I shouldn't have assumed that what I saw was the truth that day. I knew you better than that."

Kelly gripped her knees. She'd wondered all this time what had sent Sam away. The idea that he'd seen her with one of the men Nathan sent made her sick to her stomach. It was one thing for him to forgive the idea of her being with more men than he would ever know about. It was another to witness the truth for his own eyes. "I'm sorry for what you saw."

"I can't change the past. But the whole point of what I wanted to say is that God knows what you went through. He was there at your side. I know you'll probably wonder why He didn't rescue you right then. I can't answer that. But I know that He didn't abandon you."

He opened the threatening text and his shoulder and arm tensed at her side.

"I knew you'd be angry if you looked at those again. I tried to get you to stop."

She leaned forward to stand. He would be angry with her for answering those texts. He would think she was stupid for agreeing with Nathan. No one ever understood that no matter how often he lied, he was still in control. There was something inherently wrong with her or something because she always believed him.

Sam touched her knee, stopping her. She glanced at him and though his face was hard as stone and so unlike the Sam she knew, she also knew that stony reaction wasn't for her.

"No one will ever talk to you like that again. Ever. I want the watch." He held out his hand. "It's not that I don't trust you. I don't trust him. He's tracking your every move with this. Look." He opened the app and was able to select a map that showed every step she'd taken. "He somehow turned on all these settings. I still don't know if he

can hear you. I don't see a camera on the phone, so at least I'm pretty sure that he's not watching you."

She breathed in heavily and let it go. She'd avoided taking a shower for the last few days, terrified that if she took the watch off he would know, yet also terrified of what he could see. She often wore many layers of clothes now, the more the better, so she could hide everything about herself.

"I guess I'm glad he didn't get a watch that could do that."

"I doubt he has many limits, but the fact is, there's something you know that scares him. If not, he'd walk away. The world is full of available victims. Spending the money and resources to go after you means you hold something of his that is valuable. Even if that value is your memories."

What could she know that would scare Nathan? Had she met someone important and didn't realize it? "I don't know what I know, though. So, that's not helpful."

"He won't hurt you. Not now or ever again. I won't let him talk to you, see you, or hurt you. You belong here at Wayside. Never believe anything else."

She wanted to believe that. She wanted to think she had value beyond what could get her killed and that Sam wouldn't let anyone hurt her. Sam's words were thrilling, but were they true? She wasn't at all sure she could ever love again or be part of a relationship, but this was Sam. If anyone could help her cross the finish line and get back to the life she once had, it was steady Sam.

"I belong here," The words were far too quiet to sound believable, but it was a start.

"Good." Sam whistled softly, the few notes making all the dogs outside quiet down. Seconds later, Zeus poked his head through the dog door and looked at them. Sam

whistled again and Zeus trotted toward them, more like a small pony than a dog.

“Good boy.” Sam scratched the dog behind the ears when Zeus sat down. “Kelly, I want you to take him. You need to feel safe, and if that means we share that cabin, then we do that. But if you’re not ready, then we don’t. But I’m not leaving you unprotected for hours at a time. Zeus is a guard dog. If you blow on a whistle three short blasts, Zeus will come running no matter where you are on the property. But if he’s at your side, you’ll never have to blow that whistle.”

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Zeus laid down, pressing his nose into her side. He was a good boy, the best boy. She'd always wanted a dog, and Zeus was like an answer to prayer. Her mind immediately reminded her that maybe God was providing an answer to her prayers in His time, not hers. "I'll keep him and take good care of him."

Sam nodded, as if she'd given the answer he expected. "Then I'll move his bed and dishes over to your house. I'll bring over some food, too. I want you to keep him with you at all times, even when you come to the house to eat. Okay?"

It was somewhat like house arrest with a great big furry protector, but at least she didn't have to move yet. "Understood." She scratched Zeus behind the ear, and he raised his head letting his tongue loll to the side. She unclasped the watch and handed it to Sam. Time for Nathan to know she chose freedom.

She wasn't quite ready to take the plunge and let Sam give her all his time. But a dog . . . that was easy.

Sam gripped the watch tightly as the sounds of the kennel surrounded him once again. The thing buzzed, shaking him from his thoughts of Kelly and what he needed to do to build her trust. He glanced down at it as a text came through.

A little worked up, are you? Where were you last night?

Max, a sweet golden retriever, came through the dog door, bulldozing a large rock with his nose as he often did. Sam had never figured out why the dog liked rocks, but it didn't matter how often he scoured the yard for them, Max would find more.

“Bring that here, buddy,” Sam called to Max.

The dog looked up at him with what could only be called a smile on the older dog’s muzzle. He pushed the rock with his nose, like a kid kicking a soccer ball down a street, side-to-side until he’d made it to Sam’s feet.

“Mind if I borrow your toy?” He pointed to the large granite looking rock roughly the size of a softball by his foot.

Max whined, but laid down, giving Sam permission to play with his toy. Sam picked it up and laid the watch down on the cement floor. Since Max’s ears had been injured a few months back by a bomb, he sent the dog back a few feet. Max didn’t want to go, probably since he’d lost so many rocks to Sam.

“I won’t take it. I’m just borrowing it. I promise.” Max laid down by the dog door, clearly pouting over the loss of his rock.

Sam picked it up and smashed the watch, just enough to make sure it wasn’t going to track anything again, nor would Kelly ever see another text. He hoped Nathan was angry. Angry enough to do something stupid. The police and feds knew he was in the area. All they needed was for him to slither out of hiding.

Sam nudged the rock back toward Max. “Here you go. Thanks, buddy.” He made sure every tiny broken piece of the watch was picked up. The last thing he wanted was for this to cause his dogs any harm. It had done enough damage.

He took the watch to the main house and knocked on Connor’s door. To his surprise, Edwyn was already there. “Can I come in?”

“Probably a good idea. We happened to be talking about you.”

Sam took a seat. “I figured as much. What now?”

“Edwyn feels like I’m not putting enough emphasis on Kelly’s healing. He thinks I’m letting these second chance missions get in the way, and that having you work with Kelly is only going to hurt her. Would you agree?”

He wasn’t sure what to say. In many ways, Edwyn was right. There was no easy answer in this case. Kelly didn’t trust anyone else, and she currently felt so bad about herself that any change and her healing would continue to be stunted.

“I think we need to not rock the boat right now. She does not want to move from her cabin. She’s already had to switch wranglers and deal with the contention that has caused. Not only that, she doesn’t really get along with Edwyn, yet he keeps trying to help her. It’s not helping. It’s only adding more confusion to the situation. Edwyn spoke to me yesterday, warning me to keep my distance. When I do that, she suffers.”

Edwyn shook his head. “See what I mean? There is no way he can be impartial.”

Sam took a deep breath. “Today at church, she was sure that she’d done something wrong, probably because I didn’t sit with her. The reason I didn’t was because Edwyn told me not to.”

Connor glanced from Sam to Edwyn. “Why did you tell him not to sit with her? It’s customary for wranglers to stay with their guests if they choose to come to chapel. Otherwise, they’re left alone. That’s the last thing we want.”

“I was there. I sat with her. Rebecca actually asked her first. She wasn’t alone.”

Sam couldn’t allow Edwyn to force Connor into doing anything. “Kelly doesn’t know either of you. Why do you think she ran out of the church?” Sam resisted the urge to raise his voice. It wouldn’t change anything, and he’d only end up looking more

emotionally invested. He was already walking a fine line here.

“The service got to her. She made small noises allthrough to the end.” Edwyn crossed his arms in an obvious challenge.

“And how did you address her distress?” Connor asked. “I didn’t notice, though I was closer to the front.”

“Since she was being somewhat loud, I gave her a look that I hope let her know that people could hear her.” Edwyn didn’t seem the least bit concerned that his response might be taken as anything but commendable.

Connor frowned and his brows gathered. “And did that work?”

Edwyn shifted in his chair. “Not especially.”

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Sam slammed the watch down on Connor's desk sending bits flying. "Let's drop this. I am her wrangler. End of story. I will take care of her. I will sit with her at church. I will be above reproach, but I need your help. If we're going to track whoever gave her this watch, it needs to happen soon. He's going to know it's broken and make a move."

Connor and Edwyn looked at the broken pink-and-black watch on the desk. Connor picked it up and turned it over, running his thumb across the broken face. "I wonder if we can get anything out of this? Probably not. But I think I know how he was keeping track of her."

Sam tried not to get frustrated. "I downloaded the app and paired it to my phone." He tugged it out of his jacket pocket, opened the app, and showed it to both of them. "Here are the texts, but you can plainly see where she's been in the last few hours. It tracks her every movement. It tracks her heart rate. It clearly shows her returning to her cabin daily."

Connor nodded slowly. "That heart monitor is interesting. He could tell when she was excited, running, or scared. I'd wondered how he knew when to send her a text for maximum effect, and that must be how. He waited until she was already weak and her heart rate was through the roof. Then he'd send a text knowing she was frightened or worked up and couldn't think straight. He never messaged her when she was calm."

Edwyn reached for the phone and scanned the records. "I apparently don't have the same effect as you do. He sent her a text while I was there running her bath for her after her fall. She never told me about the watch, but I noticed she looked scared

again before I left.” He glanced up at Connor. “And I did leave as soon as the bath was run.”

Connor snorted. “I wouldn’t expect you to break a rule like that. You can’t even manage to clock in for work less than five minutes early.” Connor laid the watch down in front of him. “I’ll give this to Dominic. Honestly, I’m ready to tell him to go full-on technology in protecting Kelly. She was tracked. We didn’t see that drone until we combed through hours of footage, frame by frame. We can’t risk this happening again.”

Sam wished he’d been able to convince Kelly to make the move, but that just wasn’t possible. “I wish I’d gained her trust enough to protect her. She isn’t ready to move. I did give her Zeus as personal protection. Zeus is not going to let anyone who isn’t from Wayside anywhere near her.”

Connor drummed his fingers on the desk. “I guess that will have to be good enough for now until Kelly is ready to trust, but I feel like if she trusts anyone it will be you.”

Edwyn looked uncomfortable for a moment. “I hate to ask this, and I don’t mean to change the subject, but have you had any success in finding Nadine? You haven’t said anything yet and . . . if you can’t, it’s fine. I just wish I could tell her that I’m sorry.”

Connor frowned. “I haven’t. Not yet. Dad was doing a lot of the research for me while he was watching cameras. I’ll have Lacy continue the task. We’ll find her. This isn’t over. You’ll be our final mission. You deserve the same chance as everyone else.”

“What about you?” Sam wouldn’t usually challenge Connor, but this was different. Connor and Lacy needed to be together, not just friends. Anyone with eyes could see they were more than that.

Connor shook his head. “Lacy has already said no, never, multiple times. That ship has sailed. I had my second chance, and I blew it.”

“Have you heard from Teddy?” Edwyn changed the subject yet again.

Connor shook his head and rolled his eyes. “He’s in in a little town near Devil’s Tower, and whatever he’s up to is a secret. He’s not telling me anything. Kind of wish I had one of these watches on him.”

Sam chuckled, though the situation with the watch wasn’t funny. “I hope he comes back soon.”

Connor’s look said he doubted that was going to happen.

Chapter Sixteen

Sam sat at Kelly’s small kitchen table playing solitaire. The irony wasn’t lost on her that he was playing a game meant for one. When they’d been together, they’d played a version where they each contributed to the other’s game. It had been fun, and she’d forgotten all about quiet moments like those until his subtle, and probably unintended, reminder.

She’d given up her watch the day before and Sam had never given it back, but he also hadn’t given her more than a few hours on her own. Even that morning, he’d knocked on her door at 5 A.M. to make sure she was there and safe. If staying apart meant that she had to get up early every day, she wasn’t so sure she couldn’t bear making that happen. Even Zeus looked grumpy over the wake-up.

The dog loved her. Even now, with the choice between her and Sam, he laid at her feet. His head rested atop her left foot and every once in a while, he’d shift his gaze up to hers as if to ask if she was all right. As she’d suspected, dogs were the most

loyal of God's creation. Zeus barely lether use the bathroom without putting up a fuss if she stayed in too long.

Kelly cleared her throat to break the uncomfortable silence that hung in the room. There were words between them that needed to be said, but her mouth had a serious blockage when it came to talking with him. What she had to say would bring him pain and he'd been hurt enough. She'd already told him that she'd been trafficked while they were together. Any other details would only tear the wound deeper.

"Is something wrong?" Sam glanced up from his game.

"Sort of. I had planned to call my bank today and figure out if there's a way to get Nathan off it." She rolled her shoulders to relieve the tension, but it was fruitless.

"What bank?" Sam tapped the stack of cards in his hand to the table.

"West Central Savings and Loan, but I don't bank locally. I've never been to Piper's Ridge before now." Her bank wasn't even a big chain.

"Let me look on my phone and see if they're connected to any bank in Cheyenne. I know you're not supposed to go all over the place, but with Nathan supposedly hanging around here, going there might be a little reprieve." He tugged his phone free of his flannel shirt pocket and laid it on the table.

With a few taps of the screen, he pulled something up, then started scrolling. Kelly knew nothing about cell phones. She hadn't been able to afford one when she'd bought her house and, after that, she hadn't been allowed to have any communication with the outside world, though she hadn't ever wanted any.

"Looks like they're connected to a bank in Cheyenne. Let me text Connor so he knows where we're going. He may ask me to take someone else along, like Edwyn.

Just warning you.”

Kelly couldn't hold back her flinch. Outside of the one time he'd been nice, Edwyn just rubbed her the wrong way. It was like the actions he did naturally just were not compatible with how she lived. Oil and water. “I'd prefer not. If there's anyone else on the team, I'd prefer them over Edwyn.”

Sam glanced at her with an out-of-character wide eyed look. “You don't want Edwyn?”

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She slowly shook her head. “Between what I perceived as your abandonment at church and his glares, I was super uncomfortable. I’ve already talked to you about that and know that you didn’t really abandon me. But Edwyn . . . I simply can’t get along with him. We’re too different. He’s a rule follower, gruff, loud . . .”

“And you used to be the girl who loved a party, bent the rules—but not because you thought you were outside of them—and generally lived to see others and yourself happy.”

Kelly tucked her chin to hide her face. That had been what she was like then. Not so much now. Though he was right, she had been a rule bender. Maybe that’s part of the reason her grandmother had thought she was such a bad girl. Grandma would’ve gotten along wonderfully with Edwyn. “That was a long time ago. Now that you say all that though, I can see why Edwyn doesn’t like me. I’m forcing Connor to rethink his rules.”

Sam made a dismissive gesture. “Don’t put that on your shoulders. That was a long time coming. Brendon has been pushing for years for Connor to change those. It’s not that he disagrees with the ideas. No one welcomes lying or spouting profanity. But if we’re going to profess Christ, even a little, in what we do then using a paraphrased version of something from the Bible is like saying the original isn’t good enough.”

“So, the rules would’ve been in contention anyway?” She hoped so. It seemed like everything about her had caused upheaval at Wayside. Between her former relationship with Sam breaking one of Connor’s big rules and the drone activity slipping past their security, she was a lesson in what Wayside needed to change.

Sam picked up his phone and used his thumbs to type out a text, then she heard the swoosh as he sent it. “It would’ve come to a head sooner or later. If you have anything you need to do before we leave, you should do it. He won’t tell us not to go, so you can get ready if you need to. I’m going to take Zeus back to the kennels.”

She gripped her knees, then reached for her new companion. “Can’t we take him along? Please? Maybe instead of Edwyn.”

Zeus, as if he knew exactly what she was asking, looked right at Sam and whined. Kelly scratched him behind the ear. “Good boy.”

Sam laughed, bringing a little light to her, just a single beam she could feel deep inside. Laughter was like medicine to her torn and abused soul. She tried to laugh with him but couldn’t remember how and gave up after a second. The voice inside her head that sounded like her grandmother snarled at her. You sound fake. Just like everything about you. You can’t even laugh right.

“I don’t think I’ve heard you laugh in years.” Sam stood and came over to her, then rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I hope I get to hear it more.” He whistled for Zeus. “We can take him along, but he still needs to go outside first. There’s nowhere to get off the road easily if he would need to get out of the truck before we get there. He also won’t be allowed in the bank, so we’ll have to lock him in the truck.”

She wished he could, but he wasn’t really her support animal in any other sense than that he was helping her feel human again. He wasn’t trained for that purpose, so he could be a risk to other dogs who were trained. “Are you okay with that?”

“He will be fine in the truck for a little visit, but let’s plan to go to a wide-open park area after the bank so he can run a little. That will make the trip worth it for him. Not that he won’t love a ride, anyway.”

That one word, ‘ride’ made the huge dog not only get up but start acting like a puppy. Kelly wanted to laugh at his wild antics as he lunged forward, his long legs splaying out in front of him, then popping back to his feet. He gave a deep “woof”, then ran for her door.

“I guess that settles it. I’ll get ready and meet you outside.”

As soon as the door closed, leaving her without the two who made her feel safe, she felt watched once again. She’d already checked the room for cameras and there hadn’t been any, but after living under scrutiny for years, she couldn’t shake the feeling that her every move was on camera and being relayed to Nathan in some way.

Kelly shook her arms and hands to physically shake away the feeling, but it didn’t help. After using the bathroom and brushing her hair, she grabbed her small, almost empty purse and headed outside. Her new driver’s license had finally arrived the day before, so for the firsttime in years, she had real identification with the right name on it. Praise God, she was who she said she was again.

Sam waited on her porch while Zeus sniffed around her yard. “Ready?” He pushed away from the wall and waited for her to answer.

“I am. I hope we can get this fixed. With him on my account, I’ll never be able to make money again. He’ll take it all. He promised to pay me . . .” She knew the promise was most likely a lie, but she needed that money to start over.

The ride in the truck was more enjoyable than she’d thought it would be. Zeus sat at her feet with his nose pressed to the window, gently fogging up the lower half. The thing she enjoyed the most though was that there was nothing about the ride that reminded her of her past. Like riding the horse, it was blessedly free of memories and open to feelings that were outside of her norm.

She opened the window slightly to clear the fog and the blast of cold air hit her in the face. She blinked away the sudden tears from the cold. "I keep forgetting how freezing cold it really is here."

Sam snorted as he adjusted the country station on the radio. "After a while, it becomes second nature. Cold is just cold, warm is just warm. The only thing that's semi constant here is the wind. It blows right off the mountains and just keeps rolling all the way to Nebraska."

Funny how her world had felt so small for so long and Sam thought in terms of whole states. "Do you travel a lot?" She needed the distraction of conversation that had nothing to do with the purpose of their trip. That made her nervous enough.

"I do. Connor allows me to go look at dogs who are about to be euthanized in shelters. I'd like to save more than I do, but in order to work for Wayside, they have to meet certain criteria. Unfortunately, the abused ones rarely fit." His voice lowered slightly. "I wish I could do more."

Saving abused animals. She could picture Sam doing that and loving it. He was so calm and patient. Sam was like the Sam from the Lord of the Rings, about as opposite from the usual hero as possible, yet that made him all the more her hero. He'd rescued her, just like she'd hoped for originally. If they hadn't had the relationship they'd had then, she would have no one at Wayside to trust now.

"The fact that you care at all and save some says a lot." She said the words nearly without thinking. When had she started giving compliments again?

"Thanks." He grinned. "I do my best. I understand Connor's worries. We always have to consider the guests and their safety. I'll be glad though when Haven, the ranch next door, is finished and we can move in. I plan to put a kennel over there too so the dogs who are in danger and don't fit at Wayside have somewhere to go. I still

can't save them all, but what else can I spend my money on?"

True, he didn't have a family or wife. His lodging and meals were completely paid for. "You've been saving for quite some time?" He had the opposite problem she had.

"Yes. I don't know why, though. I have no one to inherit what I've saved. I'll never have to buy a house. After I'm too old to work at Wayside, I guess I'll rent an apartment because Connor doesn't have any kids to give the ranch to. When he retires, Wayside is done."

She'd heard from the people at the halfway house that human trafficking was on the rise and bigger than it's ever been in documented human history. The thought that even one place that benefited those who got out would disappear at some point in the future left a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Could he sell it?"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe, but to who? Who could he trust completely?"

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Anyone could look at it as a way to find out secrets, not do what the ranch was intended to do. “That’s sad.”

“Let’s hope Jesus comes back before that happens. Not only because it would be sad, but because I don’t think I could survive a tiny apartment with no dogs or the freedom to ride my horse whenever I want.” He laughed as he pulled into a spot in front of a small nondescript brick building. It looked like it had been there since the 1800s, which gave the feeling of resiliency Kelly needed, even though she doubted the bank had been in that location for that long.

Sam lowered both windows about an inch, then locked the doors as they got out. Zeus didn’t want to stay in the truck when, clearly, the fun was being with them, but after Sam gave a quick whistle, he settled on the seat.

“He’s such a good dog,” Kelly said. “ I wonder if he would take to training to be a support dog?”

“Are you asking if you can have him as a service animal?” Sam raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe, though it doesn’t matter because I don’t have the money anyway. Plus, being without him right now so he could go through training would be hard. I’m really connected to him.” Even now, her heart raced at leaving him in the truck. She wanted so badly to keep him at her side.

Sam took her hand and settled it on his bicep, then opened the front door for her. The motion was so second-nature, he probably didn’t even realize he was doing it but with it, she suddenly felt at peace once again. No one there could hurt her. Sam was

at her side.

He led her over to a woman at a desk just a few feet from the door. “Good morning. I was wondering if we could speak to an account specialist?” Sam asked.

“Absolutely. Do you have an account with us?” The woman glanced between the two of them.

“Yes,” Kelly answered slowly, then tugged her purse off her shoulder. The action felt like she’d been forced to release Sam. She dug out her wallet and tentatively handed her the new license.

The woman typed up something in her computer, glancing back to Kelly every few seconds. She handed the card back to Kelly with a fake smile. “Mr. Andrews will see you shortly. You can wait in that seating area over there.” She pointed to a small circle of three leather chairs near the center of the small bank.

“Thanks,” Sam answered for her and led Kelly over to the chairs. He waited for her to choose a seat, then chose one next to her. “I wouldn’t think it would be more than a minute.”

Kelly snorted. “Probably not. My account is empty. They were probably looking at me like that because they thought you were Nathan. He completely emptied my account of every cent shortly after he added himself to it.”

Sam flinched. “Hopefully we can fix that.”

Mr. Andrews left his office and came to get them. Welcome to West Central Savings and Loan. Please call me Don. What can I do for you folks today?”

Folks. What a weird word. Oddly, it made her feel old. “I have some questions about

my account.”

“Then I’m just the guy to talk to. Right this way.” He led them back to his office, which was a glass wall with a sliding door, then motioned for them to sit in the two plastic chairs opposite his desk. They looked uncomfortable, and she found her assessment to be true as soon as she settled into one.

“Now, what kind of questions do you have for me today? I took the liberty of looking up your account before I went to get you and your account is currently in suspension because it’s been empty for a few years.”

She nodded, gathering her thoughts. Defending herself didn’t come naturally. It never had. “I found myself in an uncomfortable situation a few years ago. A man who . . . was close to me . . . took advantage of me and added himself to my account without my permission.”

Don’s brow furrowed. “I beg your pardon? We don’t just add people to accounts. There are signatures and proof that need to take place.”

“He stole my driver’s license and had someone else come in who looked similar enough to me to get away with it. They signed the documents, and he was added to my account. You can look at your screen. When I called into my local bank a few days ago, they even told me that he was the one who emptied the account.”

Don didn’t seem nearly as friendly as he pounded the keys, then gripped his mouse, clicking with so much force it made her shrink back. What had she done wrong? “I’m not blaming you. I’m telling you what happened. My question is, can I get him off my account?”

He abandoned the screen and turned back to her. “What would be the point of keeping that account? It’s empty and I can’t simply take your word for it and remove

him. Why don't we start a new account for you? It's only twenty-five dollars and we could do that while you're here today."

Twenty-five dollars could've just as well been a million. She had nothing to her name. Not even a penny. "I can't do that."

"Then I can't really help you today. I'm sorry."

Chapter Seventeen

Kelly leaned against the truck window the whole way home. No amount of cold noses to the palm by Zeus was going to bring her out of it. No bank account. No way to get one without a job. No way to get a job in the situation she was in. No wonder Nathan found it so easy to manipulate her. She had no other option but failure.

The moment Sam pulled back into the Wayside parking lot, she reached for the door. When he parked, she dashed outside.

"Kelly? Where are you going?" He'd tried to get her to talk about her thoughts and feelings on the ride home, but she couldn't admit how completely down this made her. Her life shouldn't hinge on twenty-five dollars, but it felt like it did. She resisted the urge to think about the times one of her clients would intentionally give her a tip knowing Nathan hated that, would take it, and would accuse her of keeping some back even if she didn't. That client would always come back to her the next day to see the damage one of Nathan's men would do to her face because of it. Asking him not to would only mean he'd give her a bigger tip the next time, ensuring a more severe punishment.

Nathan didn't trust her word because he couldn't see honesty in anyone.

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“I just need a walk,” she called over her shoulder.

“Take Zeus with you.” He sent the big dog after her.

Though she loved the dog, she just wanted to be alone with her nagging awful thoughts. No one was going to convince her she wasn’t worthless today. The way the lady at the bank had looked at her and the way the bank account manager had assumed she was lying only added fuel to the fire.

This world seemed created to keep people down, no matter how badly they wanted to get out. Rules meant to protect people were used to keep those who had been violated from seeking relief. Nathan was a liar who’d stolen her money, enslaved her by promising to pay her and never doing so, then refusing to let her go once she’d left. Those were simple, basic human rights and yet she felt like she wasn’t worthy of them because of rules.

Kelly wandered along the inside of the fence, close enough to the barn so she wasn’t out of sight but far enough where no one but the horses and Zeus would bother her. Zeus stayed within a few feet just far enough away to give her space. To the casual observer, he probably looked thoroughly engrossed in the smells all around him, but she knew him well enough after the last few days that she could see he was like a coiled spring, ready to pounce into action. He wasn’t merely sniffing the grass. He was sniffing for strange scents that might harm her.

Since Nathan had continually asked her to go to the east side of the fence, she headed west, deeper onto Wayside land instead of near the edge. Random poles along the fence line were longer than others, and camouflage trail cameras were mounted on

them. She frowned up at one. They weren't exactly hidden. If anyone wanted to get onto the property, they could clearly avoid those.

Curiosity got the better of her and she followed the fence. Her mind needed something else to think about outside of her current troubles, and Wayside was safe. Connor had told her so. Sam had even told her she was welcome to walk all over the grounds as long as she told someone she was going, which she had.

After a few hundred yards or so, the fence headed into a sparse patch of trees and the cameras seemed to disappear. She stood near the fence and searched, but found nothing hidden in the branches or on the trunk. Was she merely blind to where they were hidden or was this a break in their security? Sam had told her Dominic was a security and technology expert, so that seemed unlikely. Yet, where could they be?

Oddly, she didn't feel eyes on her out here like she felt in her room. She sat by the fence and took a deep breath, letting the frigid ground work its chill through her clothes, reminding her she could still feel. She was a person who mattered because she had feelings. Maybe she wasn't to the point of hopes and dreams yet, but it was a start. Baby steps.

She closed her eyes for a moment and leaned back against the fencepost as flurries hit her cheeks and forehead. She shivered, realizing she hadn't dressed for snow. The ride in the truck had been warm and she'd only worn a bulky sweatshirt. "Zeus?" Where had he gone and how long ago had he left? She couldn't remember seeing him for a while, but her mind had been focused on other things.

"Zeus?"

Snow came down faster, and she couldn't see more than a few feet away from her. She berated herself for not taking the cellphone Connor had offered her the second day she was here. He'd told her it wasn't a phone with a plan, so no one would know

it was hers except him, Lacy, Edwyn, and Sam. No one else could reach her. But she'd refused. She hated phones and wanted nothing to do with them.

Now, if she had it, she could call Sam and ask if Zeus had returned without her. She couldn't leave him alone out in a blizzard, but her sweatshirt was already wet after just a few minutes, and she had a long walk back to her cabin.

"Zeus!" she forced her voice to yell, and her throat protested. "Where are you?"

She remembered Sam had said if she blew her whistle three blasts, he would come from anywhere on the ranch. She'd thought wearing the little whistle was annoying, since it was always cold against her skin under her shirts, but she dug it out and quickly blew three blasts that she could barely hear through the wind and driving snow.

"I need you to come, right now," her voice shook, and tears clouded her already limited vision. "I can't leave you out here." But if she didn't go soon, she'd freeze. Zeus hadn't left her side since Sam had told him to watch her. What had made him roam now?

She clung to the fence, calling for him and searching through the blinding white. Something caught around her ankle, and she went down hard on her knees. Her hands scraped on a large rock near a fencepost.

He hadn't come. "Zeus?" her voice sounded weak, and she realized she was absolutely exhausted. She needed to get home and rest. Get warm. Dry. "Sam . . ." No one would find her out there. She hadn't told anyone exactly where she was going. "Help me."

With all her reserves, she tugged herself back to her feet through the chattering of her teeth. She could do this. She was stronger than this. Living through the worst

humanity could throw at her had made her strong enough to last through a blizzard. She'd get home, tell Sam, and he'd know exactly what to do. He would know how to bring Zeus back.

She tried blowing on the whistle one more time and heard a bark far off. "Zeus!" she called, risking herself by staying where she was. If the dog was following the sound of her whistle, she couldn't keep moving. "Where are you?" she whispered; her words barely understandable through her shuddering jaw.

After a minute, Zeus bounded toward her, covered in snow and carrying something in his mouth. "What have you got there?" She reached down and he gave a soft growl.

Kelly backed away, not sure what else she could do. "That's not for me, huh? Well, we'd better get back to Sam. You can show him."

Zeus pressed on like he knew she had to stick to the fence, and Kelly followed until she was soaked to the skin and her muscles screamed for a break. The wind ate at her energy and resiliency. Soon, just taking another step became so painful tears streamed down her face. "Zeus, I can't. Go get Sam, boy. Go get Sam." She fell to her knees and her face hit the ground. Even the sharp cold wasn't enough to give her the energy to get up. Hopefully, Sam could get there quickly. Her eyes closed and her mind blocked the cold.

Sam looked at his phone for the third time in twenty minutes. Where was Kelly? She should've come back the moment it started snowing. He went outside and blew on his whistle to bring all the dogs to him that weren't in the kennels.

Max huffed toward him from around the barn, balls of snow already clinging to his long tail, but he didn't seem to be bothered by the sudden blizzard. Sam waited to see if Zeus would respond to his call. In some ways, he hoped the dog didn't. He should stay with Kelly. But if he didn't, Sam would have no way to track where Kelly had

gone.

He rushed to the house and through the maze of halls that lead to the security station near the back of the large house. It was intentionally confusing to find, so anyone breaking in would have a hard time getting to whoever was manning the cameras. Dominic sat at a desk with about twenty screens in front of him.

“Dominic, I need to know where Kelly is right now.”

He turned and gave a nod. “Thought you’d be here. I last saw her around the west grove in pasture one. That camera is well-hidden, though I think she was looking for it right before it started to snow.”

“Is she still there?” That grove was over a mile away, though he could get there faster with a horse.

“No, I saw her walking along the fence back toward the barn, but the snow got so thick I couldn’t follow her anymore. Plus, she seemed to be really clinging to the fence and the last few sightings I had of her were justbarely the top of her gray hood. Are you telling me she didn’t return? I was about to call you to make sure she got back okay.”

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“She didn’t. I need to find someone to help me find her.”

Dominic nodded. “Brendon mentioned that Dee is interested in helping as much as she can around here. After what happened to her, fighting is a big goal of hers.”

Dee had been taking self-defense courses after she’d been kidnapped and violently attacked and drugged. She was also the perfect choice because she was a nurse, though she hadn’t returned to work after the incident. “Perfect. I’ll find her.”

Though he had to be fast.

Sam headed back down the winding hall, already scrolling for Brendon’s number in his phone. As soon as he saw it, he pressed the number. Avoiding a detour down Brendon’s hall would save time if he could manage it.

“Sam, what can I do for you?” Brendon asked, his usual calm self.

“Is Dee around? Kelly is missing. There’s a blizzard outside. She went missing on the cameras.” He kept his statements short and packed with information as he made his way back toward the kitchen.

“She’s here. I’ll have her get on some cold weather gear and meet you in the living room.”

“Thanks.” Sam hung up as he picked up his pace to a jog. He might get there before Dee, but he also had to grab outdoor gear thicker than what he’d worn to the lodge. Lacy met him just outside the kitchen.

“Sam, where’s the fire?”

“Kelly’s missing.” He didn’t even slow down.

“What? What can I do?” Lacy called.

He whipped around and kept moving backward. “Go to her cabin and turn up the heat. Find some heated blankets. She was chilled when she first got here, but then was too hot. I regulated it for her, but it’ll be too chilly in there if she’s been out in this.”

He went back to his task. This was his fault. He should’ve gone with her. He hadn’t wanted to smother her because that would be bad for her, but the fact was, he’d move heaven and earth for that girl. He’d assumed that feeling had changed, but he’d just buried it. Now it reared like an untamed horse. He’d find Kelly, no question about it.

Dee jogged from the hallway and met him, already in a thick ski parka and wool hat. She commonly wore hats after she’d been assaulted because they held her short hair partially over her face to cover the deep scars. No one talked about it, because Dee was incredibly sensitive about what had been done to her. Brendon had assured her he didn’t want her to have plastic surgery for his sake. If she wanted it after she was fully healed, he’d support whatever she decided.

Sam could understand why she wouldn’t want a reminder of what she’d been through every time she looked in the mirror. Dee pulled the hat down tighter over her head and looked away from his eyes. “Do I need my medical equipment?”

“I hope not, but as long as it won’t freeze, you might want to have it. I can get us there by horse. I’m just worried that with this snow coming down as fast as it is that I could end up accidentally stepping on her.”

A sharp bark from just outside had Sam running for the door. He swung it open and Zeus, covered in snow, stood outside. He had something at his feet that he must have dropped in order to bark. Sam picked up the glove, but he didn't recognize it. He'd have one of his dogs try to track it later, since it was a man's glove, and that was troubling. "Do you know where Kelly is, boy?"

Zeus yipped quickly and raced off the step.

"Thank the Good Lord," Dee said as she tried to plow her way through the quickly accumulating snow. "Looks like we're going to get about a foot. That's what I get for not looking at the forecast. It's been threatening this for days. I didn't think it would ever come."

Sam gave her a nod, but other than being a complete nuisance and danger, the weather didn't interest him in the slightest. "Do you have everything you need because I don't think Zeus is waiting. I'm so glad he's a breed that's used to cold weather."

"True. Let's just worry about getting her back to the lodge or her cabin. I'll assess her where it's not freezing." Her teeth already chattered in the cold, and he could feel the temperature dropping. Kelly hadn't been wearing a coat when she ran off, and he'd assumed she would go to her cabin after she got cold. Apparently, she hadn't.

"Kelly!" he called, hoping she would hear him. Even if she couldn't respond, she would know he was looking for her.

At least it was still early in the day, and they had at least another two hours of light. If they'd stayed at the park longer, this would be a twilight search. He mentally shook his head. No, it wouldn't. She wouldn't have gone if it had been snowing already. He needed to be better, do better. Kelly was under the mistaken impression that no one cared, because he'd been told he couldn't show her any care. As of today, that ended.

Zeus barked two quick yips and Sam took off at a run toward the dog. He heard Dee behind him, but he had no intention of waiting on her. Chivalry went out the window when a life was in danger. “Kelly?”

Zeus nosed the ground near the fence, right under a camera. Sam waved to let Dominic know that he’d found the right spot, then went right to work moving the snow that was on top of Kelly.

She was soaked so completely that her light gray sweatshirt was dark. Her jeans were thoroughly soaked through. “Kelly,” he mumbled her name. “I’m here. We’ll get you home.” He shrugged off his huge coat and wrapped her up in it. The coat would trap the dampness against her skin, but he wasn’t about to take off any of her wet clothes while they were still outside.

“Dee, Lacy probably left Kelly’s cabin light on. Can you run back and make sure everything is ready the way you need it? Maybe she could make sure Kelly has something warm to drink? I’ll carry her as fast as I can, but you’ll be faster than me without anything to carry.”

Dee gave him a thumbs-up as she turned and ran back toward the houses. Dee had been a runner and was getting back into running as she healed, but the snow would slow anyone down. He was grateful that she would be able to do what he’d asked, because Kelly would need immediate heat and probably whatever help Dee could offer.

“We’ll get you back home, where you belong . . . with me.” He wasn’t going to take no for an answer anymore. He would protect her by being at her side. No one was going to get to her again. She would never feel worthless again if he had anything to say about it.

Chapter Eighteen

Kelly's eyelids felt very heavy, but the warm blanket surrounding her was like heaven. She slowly opened her eyes to find herself in her own bedroom, with candles strategically placed around on the tables and dresser, a plug-in heater off to the side and directed at her made her feel so sleepy she wanted to drift right back off to sleep. A woman she didn't recognize perched on a stool nearby.

"Hello. I'm Dee. I'm Brendon Ruse's wife, and I'm also a nurse. You scared us pretty bad tonight."

How she managed to say all that with a smile was beyond Kelly. She could barely smile to introduce herself. As Dee leaned forward and reached for Kelly's wrist, pink slashes of scars became apparent across Dee's face. She must have shown some surprise, because Dee immediately backed away. "Sorry. I should've warned you." She turned to the side so her face was in shadow.

Could this woman have been trafficked too? "I thought I was the only one? If Brendon already married someone who was a victim, why are they so worried about Sam?"

Dee looked confused for a moment and covered both of her cheeks with her hands. "I wasn't trafficked. Just assaulted." She took a deep breath. "But you're proving that Brendon was right the whole time. For that, I'm grateful." Dee brought her smile back but didn't lean into the light. "Can I check your pulse and your pupils? I didn't want to leave you alone, because I was afraid of how much pain you'd be in when you came around. I don't want you to be embarrassed."

Oddly, she hadn't even realized she had no clothes on under all the blankets until Dee had mentioned how she might feel. "Is Sam here?" She tugged the blanket closer to her chin.

Dee nodded and stood, keeping her face turned toward the shadow. "There are clothes folded on that stool in front of the heater so they'll be warm. I've been slowly bringing your temperature to normal since we brought you back. You're very blessed. I was surprised that you weren't showing more symptoms of frostbite, especially with hypothermia."

"It wasn't that cold until the snow hit me and the flakes were big and wet." Kelly leaned forward and realized she had many layers of blankets on. Dee nodded, giving Kelly the impression to stay where she was for just a moment until she left. As soon as Dee slipped through the narrow crack of the door, Kelly finally got out from under the weight of the blankets.

Outside, the sun had already set. It had been light when she'd left for her walk that early afternoon, though her memory was spotty. She looked at her wrist, only then remembering she'd given her watch to Sam. If she knew him, he'd destroyed it. He was all that was good. He didn't cling to evil things in the hope that they would be good.

Which meant he wouldn't cling to her either.

She tip-toed quietly across the room and tugged on the loose-fitting sweatpants Dee had left for her. The plug-in heater looked older than the hills but was pumping out an impressive amount of warmth. The cabins were probably very old and retrofitted for everything modern. Sometimes modern and old didn't fit so well together. Her sweatshirt was equally warm, but the outfit left her feeling slouchy and sleepy.

She made her way out to her living room to find that Dee had left, and Sam was the

only one still there with her. He immediately stood and rubbed his hands down the sides of his thighs like he'd be sweating. Now that she thought about it, the room was really warm. "Gracious, we need a fan in here."

He laughed softly. "Dee set the temperature; I just lived with it." He went to the thermostat on the wall that controlled all the baseboards in the small cabin, though she'd never quite gotten the hang of making it work right.

"There, back to normal. It stopped snowing about an hour ago and we now have over a foot of heavy, wet snow on the ground. Since you've never lived here in the winter, I wanted to warn you that one of the guys will be coming around at about 4 A.M. to shovel all the front steps of the cabins. Since we never know when people will come, we do all the front steps. It's easier to remove snow as it happens than to wait until there are feet of it to clear. It can get loud though, so, fair warning."

There was Sam, thinking ahead for her comfort again. "Thank you."

"Are you all right? I can camp out on your sofa tonight if that would make you feel safer."

Light had no business with the dark. Wasn't that something that preacher had said on Sunday? Don't hide your candle under a bushel, that's not where it goes. Something like that. All she knew was that her own self and her own soul were as dark as they could get and maybe she belonged under that bushel. "I'm fine."

Sam grinned and ducked his chin. He was adorable when he did that. "Fine, huh?" He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I suspect that's Kelly-speak for 'I don't want to tell you what I'm feeling because it's complicated and I'm scared.'"

She crossed her arms tightly over her chest, slightly indignant. How dare he understand her better than herself? That wasn't even fair. "So? Maybe I don't want to

drag you into the black hole that is my existence. I guess I'm healing though, because even a few months ago, if the same thing had happened, I'd have cursed you for saving me."

His face went from joking to serious instantly. "First, it wouldn't have happened because he wasn't about to let you free. Second, I would've mourned as soon as I found out."

Would he? He hadn't been happy to see her at all when she'd arrived.

Sam shook his head. "I can see you're surprised. I would've been, too. So, I'm glad you're here to give me the chance to sort through the feelings I didn't realize I still had."

Feelings? She'd felt the pulse between them, but she'd assumed that was because he was the only one she could trust. "I don't know that I'll ever be in a place where I can face those kinds of feelings again."

"I don't expect you to. But I want you to know that there are people who care about you. There are people who think you're worth fighting for. You are worthy. You matter. Your past is your past and no matter how much you've convinced yourself that you did this, you didn't. It was a trick. A lie. He manipulated you. I won't believe anything else. Let us help you heal. You may never be the same Kelly you were. That's okay. Be the new Kelly who knows Jesus and has let Him work a healing." Sam reached out to her, his hand low like he was reaching for a child.

He had to have known that shoving his hand into her space would make her recoil, but she truly felt welcome to touch him and there was no force behind it, mental or physical. It was a symbol of welcome to become something she never thought she'd be again: innocent.

Kelly reached out and took Sam's hand. Invisible sparks surged up her arms to her chest and she let herself feel them, though they were terrifying. "I shouldn't be near you, Sam. I'm going to pull you into my darkness and I don't want that."

"You won't. I'm stronger than that. Why don't you let me help you walk out of the darkness and back into the light?"

Good boys did not go for bad girls. Grandma's words were absolute. Yet Sam still offered her the invitation. Didn't that prove she could be wrong, at least sometimes? "I want to."

"Then make that choice. Work on healing. Nathan can't get you here. He can't track you anymore. The fear is gone."

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Mentioning Nathan by name brought back all the feelings, all the dread and fear. She yanked her hand away and turned. “You don’t know that. There’s no way you can say that with any truthfulness. He’s out there. Until he’s behind bars or dead, he’ll still be out there making life a living hell for hundreds of girls. And that’s only those under him. There are so many more like him. This world will never be rid of the stain.”

Sam stepped closer to her and peeled her hands from around her, gently shook them to encourage her to release the tension in her arms, then looked into her eyes. “It starts with one, Kelly. You’re that one. We are here to help one woman at a time and if we can only help one, then it’s worth it.”

He was supposed to be helping her heal, but all she wanted to do was run. She didn’t deserve this place. Someone else did. Someone who was ready to shed the sin and allow the good to replace it should take her precious spot. But if she was going to leave, she had one chance to say goodbye. One chance to make him understand how she felt, even if she didn’t.

Kelly dove toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her fingers in his thick hair. She kissed him like she used to, not like she was forced to. The feeling was so different, so exciting, so terrifying. She ended the kiss as quickly as she started it, leaving him looking shocked.

“You need to go. I need some time alone.”

He slowly nodded, clearly speechless. “I’ll . . . send Zeus.” He headed for the door and finally found his voice. “Are you sure you don’t want me to sleep on your couch?”

“No. I need to be alone.” Because even after that kiss, she needed to plan her escape.

An hour later, with Zeus at her side and a pack on her back full of one pair of clothes, some jerky, and some food for the dog, she set out toward the fence. Nathan wouldn't be there after the snow, but that had to be the spot closest to the road. Once she crossed that fence, she would no longer be on Wayside land. Her footprints wouldn't matter, since someone would see her on their cameras. Once she hit a road, she'd hitch a ride to Cheyenne. There, she could find a homeless shelter and try to start over.

She could do this. Alone.

Kelly tugged on the hem of the coat Lacy had let her use. It wasn't hers, but she didn't have her own yet. Taking it felt like stealing. Especially since Lacy had said she'd exchange it once they had one to give her. But they wouldn't want her to freeze either.

“Just another thing to add to my list of bad things.” She headed in the direction of what she assumed was the road. Going up the driveway would make sure someone noticed her right away, since there were cameras all up and down the length of it.

Hopefully, there would be some traffic along the road she hoped was there that wasn't someone from Wayside. That's all she would need was to get picked up and brought right back to where she'd begun.

Zeus whined at her side as he looked at their tracks behind them. “If you don't want to go with me, you don't have to.” Though she hoped he did. Facing the unknown was easier with a huge dog at her side.

He seemed to harrumph at her audacity as he walked, now looking forward. The dog had more personality than some people she'd known. She heard the hum of an engine

somewhere close by and she rushed forward to catch the path of the headlights. Then she would know right where the road was.

Her feet were soaked through her tennis shoes, and the jeans she'd changed into were wet up to the knees. She would have to catch a ride soon. At least the car or truck would be warm. The knife in her pocket that she'd taken from her cabin junk drawer would help protect her in case they got too friendly and got around Zeus.

When she reached the small gravel road, all she could see were distant taillights. If Dominic or someone else was watching the cameras, they'd be after her soon. While they said she wasn't a prisoner there, she was still fairly sure they wouldn't allow her to hitchhike wherever she wanted to go, either.

Glancing down at herself, she realized belatedly that the black coat and dark jeans had probably helped her hide in the trees, but if she wanted someone to stop and pick her up, she'd have to find a way to make herself visible. Did she dare take off her coat and bag?

Another engine rumbled in the distance and Kelly's heart raced. If she stood in the middle of the road, they could definitely see her. Then again, they could just as well hit her and keep going. No one would ever know.

When he neared where she stood alongside the road, she started waving both arms as she took a few steps out onto the road. Yelling was too much noise, and they probably wouldn't hear her, anyway. The truck rumbled past, then slammed on its brakes. Kelly prayed that it wasn't anyone from Wayside or Nathan as its lights flashed white, letting her know he was going to reverse.

Slowly, he backed up, then rolled down his window. "Everything okay?"

He wasn't anyone she recognized, and Kelly breathed a sigh of relief. "My dog and I

need a ride toward Cheyenne. You headed that way?"

He was older than her, perhaps in his early fifties, and looked friendly enough. He frowned deeply. "I ain't never picked up a hitchhiker in my life, but you look enough like my daughter that you're probably okay. Your dog has to stay on the floor, though."

He hadn't gone anywhere near the seat in Sam's pickup, so she was pretty sure Zeus would happily do as he was told. She went around the back of the truck, shrugging off her backpack as she went. She heard the truck's locks open and climbed inside the heated cab, then called Zeus to jump up to the floor.

Even as she closed the door, her heart ached. She might never see Sam again. That was for his good. He wanted to help her and that was noble, but her brokenness wasn't going to ever heal. He would end up caring for her while he nursed her back to some state of 'better' than she was before. She wasn't even sure what that would look like or if it was possible. Then he would get hurt when she was never able to fully care for him in return.

That wasn't fair. Life wasn't fair.

"Why are you headed to Cheyenne?" the older man asked quietly as they headed down the road.

"I'm Kelly, by the way," she evaded most of his question. "I need a place where there are a lot of people."

He nodded slowly as if he understood her confusing words. "I'm John Willis Sr., though my son John Jr. is more well known around Piper's Ridge. Pleased to meet you. I couldn't help but notice you were right next to Wayside Ranch. Was that by happenstance?"

If she said she'd heard of it, he might want to take her back there. If she said she'd been hitching before, he would ask why she had snow all over her. There was no good answer.

"I got dropped off on another gravel road. Not sure which one. I'd been walking for quite a while when I made it to the place you found me, and you came along almost right away." This guy was a witness. As soon as she reached Cheyenne, she'd have to hide. If he knew the guys from Wayside, he might ask them if they knew the hitchhiker he'd picked up.

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“Huh, that so? It snowed pretty hard earlier. So hard that there weren’t many people on the road at all. Were you out in that?”

She snorted because she had been, but couldn’t tell him that. Especially because, other than below her knees, she was dry now. “Nope, we pulled over when it started to snow but when it cleared, he asked me to get out.” She was a terrible liar. This wasn’t going to get her anywhere. The less she said, the better off she’d be.

“That was pretty terrible of him. Glad you’re okay. If you’d managed to find Wayside while you were walking, you would’ve found a good place to start over. They’re good folks. Want me to bring you back there? You did say you wanted a fresh start.”

She shook her head while trying to keep her cool. “No, that’s okay. It would be pretty hard for me to find a job way out here and they might not take my dog.” She scratched Zeus behind the ears as he looked back and forth between the two like he was following the conversation.

The older man’s brow rose. “Your dog looks familiar, but I’ll grant you that a lot of dogs look similar.”

Zeus whined at her feet and laid his head on her knee. Don’t you dare give me away. We’re supposed to be a team. She hoped her thoughts were conveyed through her eyes, since she couldn’t say them aloud. Maybe bringing him along had been a bad idea.

“You are headed to Cheyenne though, right?” She risked looking at him.

“That was my plan. My daughter lives there and she got her little car stuck in the driveway. I’ve got no time for these little housing developments where they do everything for you, but they do it on their time. They called and threatened to have her car towed if she didn’t move it by 4 A.M. She called me, so upset. Who is going to come out this late after a storm and pull her out of her driveway?”

“Her dad?” Kelly said, reminded of her own father. Her parents had loved her, but they’d let her be just who she wanted to be, mostly avoiding giving her much in the way of instruction. ‘Feral’ is what one teacher had called her. Maybe they were right.

The man snorted. “Yup, even if I’m an hour away, she can still count on her dad.”

Tears clogged Kelly’s throat and she wished her dad was still there to help her now.

Chapter Nineteen

Banging on Sam’s door roused him much earlier than he’d expected. Sleeping hadn’t come easy for him since Kelly had blown away all forms of thought with her kiss the night before. He wasn’t usually one to let things go to his head, but he’d forgotten what kissing her was like.

He whipped his tee-shirt over his head and tugged it down his torso as he went for the front door. Connor waited outside, his breath puffing in huge clouds in the overhead lights. “Sam, get dressed. We’ve got some tracking to do.”

Sam scrubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Tracking? What . . . or who?” A dense rock took shape in his stomach. Had Kelly kissed him to distract him? Had she planned all along to go with Nathan, anyway? She’d tried to convince him last night that she wasn’t worth the effort. Hadn’t he gotten through to her?

“Kelly disappeared. Cole went to her cabin about twenty minutes ago to shovel and

noticed the lights were still on. He assumed she was awake, so he wanted to warn her that he'd be making noise right outside. When he knocked, there was no answer. He took a chance and used his key to get in, since Zeus was supposed to be with her, and he couldn't even hear the dog when he knocked."

How had she gotten past the cameras? "She took Zeus, right?" At least if she'd left, Zeus would protect her as best he could.

"Yes. It appears that she packed a light bag, took the dog, and headed off through the pasture. Without my dad here and after the snow, Dominic set the camera to alert him if there were more than two images taken in the span of five seconds. She was moving fast enough that she didn't trip any one camera more than once, but we can see exactly where she went."

He didn't need the cameras to know. "She went toward the new fence, didn't she?" Sam wanted to punch the wall, but that wasn't how he ever dealt with anger. He always kept his feelings completely under control. Losing his temper wouldn't solve the problem.

"She did. She didn't even try to hide her tracks." Connor gestured back inside. "Unless you're planning to go in that, you'd best get dressed."

Sam headed back inside and Connor followed, closing the door behind him. "Was Zeus our best tracker?"

Sam flinched inwardly. Honestly, Zeus was the best tracker, but they had other options. Max had been a bomb sniffer, but he could pick up other scents too. Max had tried to follow the scent of the glove Zeus had found the night before and had come up empty. There had been too much snow covering everything. That didn't stop him from assuming it was Nathen or whoever Nathen had stationed near Wayside to fly those drones.

“Let’s not worry about dogs yet. She left us a trail. If she got into a car with someone, that’ll be the trouble. Where in the world could she go?” He didn’t even want to speak his fears out loud.

Connor saved him the trouble. “Nathan was texting her for days, asking her to go right there. The only way I’ll believe that he has nothing to do with this is if we make it to that fence and there’s only her prints and Zeus’s. Otherwise, I’m going to assume she found some way to contact Nathan. She was convinced that he was going to pay her, according to Brendon. She was convinced that if she finished what she promised, he’d do as he said.”

Sam buttoned a thick flannel shirt over his tee, then shrugged on a wool vest. He had some thick bibs he used for hunting that would keep him dry and warm if they were outside for a while, which was a definite possibility.

“Maybe I was wrong to lighten up on the rules. I should’ve left them in place and kept Edwyn as her wrangler even though she wasn’t happy with him.”

Sam whipped around. “Are you saying this is my fault? I didn’t do anything. I was trying to get through to her just last night to convince her how important she was as a human being. You know, the things we do for all of our clients.”

Though letting a guest kiss him had never happened. None had ever wanted to that he knew about. With the possible exception of Rebecca who’d admitted to him that she’d had a crush on him, but she’d known it wasn’t reciprocated. That was one of the reasons he hadn’t fought when Connor had suggested Junior take over as Rebecca’s wrangler. Helping her without noticing Rebecca’s attraction had become difficult, and he didn’t want to hurt her.

“Sam, I’m just trying to make sense of why she would do this. The rules have always protected our guests.”

Yet Brendon had always disagreed with them. “I don’t think this has anything to do with the rules, and I’m beginning to agree with Brendon. They’ve become a crutch for you. Or maybe blinders. Even the Ten Commandments don’t mean anything if you haven’t got Jesus. They’re just rules without a true guide if you don’t have the One True God.”

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Connor whipped his hat off and swiped his hand through his hair. He looked like he'd aged a few years in the last few months. Taking on all that they had was hard on him. "I don't know, Sam. We have a history."

"Just because you've done something for a long time doesn't mean it's right or that things shouldn't change. Either way, right now is not the time. How long ago did she leave?"

"The timestamp on the last picture before she left the property said 10:38."

It had been later in the evening, probably 10 P.M. when he'd sent Zeus to her cabin. "She must have packed the bag while I was still there or while she was waiting for Zeus. She made very good time through the snow. There aren't many cars on these roads at that time of night."

Connor nodded but said nothing. Words weren't needed. Someone wouldn't usually strike out on foot in the middle of nowhere unless they were fairly sure they had a ride close by. Sam tugged his hat down over his ears and followed Connor outside, locking his door behind him.

Edwyn met them just off Sam's porch. "Do you want horses?"

"I want to be on the ground where I can see footprints," Sam said. "If you both want to ride, that's fine. But stay off the tracks."

"We'll walk," Connor answered. "Edwyn, stay by your phone and if I call in backup, be ready to respond. Bring Dominic with you. He's a great tracker."

Edwyn nodded his agreement and headed back toward the house. Sam fell into step beside Connor as they made their way to the gate leading into the pasture. It was clear Kelly had gone over with Zeus. There was a path through the snow, one weaving dog and one person who didn't lift their feet high enough and ended up essentially plowing a track.

"That's unfortunate. If there were footprints, it would be easy to see just who we're following easily. Like that, it will be harder to tell if one pair of tracks becomes two."

"The tracks are still there. Let's check out her shoe pattern and follow it as far as it goes," Connor said, pulling a long flashlight from a loop near the hip of his jeans. He clicked it twice and a bright light illuminated the path. "Here we go." He climbed over the fence and waited for Sam to do the same.

If he hadn't been distracted by her the night before, would she have been able to leave? He should've stayed in her room after what she'd been through in the storm. But she was also very private now and he hadn't wanted to destroy the fragile progress he'd thought he'd made. So much for that.

The path was clear since the snow was fresh, and they trudged all the way to the fence. The area that was new was still very clearly different from the older portion. Her tracks led right to, and over, the fence. There were no other prints around other than Zeus's.

"She didn't meet up with anyone," Connor muttered. "I'm rarely wrong, but I'm glad that was the case this time."

Sam was too, in some ways. Though this now produced a bigger problem. If she wasn't with Nathan, who had her? Where could she have gone? Sam climbed over the fence and continued on the path. The trees grew thicker along that side all the way to the road, but Kelly's footprints stayed on the right direction, as if she'd known

where to go.

He came all the way to the gravel road and stopped. In the mud, frozen in place, were two large dog footprints. “Connor, look.” He pointed at the ground, then crouched to get a better look. Were there any tennis shoe impressions nearby?

“Is that Zeus?” Connor lowered down next to him. “There.” Connor pointed a few feet away. “She must have stepped out into the road, then backed up. Maybe a vehicle drove by her, then came back?”

Sam nodded. “We’d better call Nixon and see if anyone called in a hitchhiker sighting last night. I’m not sure where this leaves us, though. Kelly has no living relatives. She never got along with her grandmother who only lived until she was fifteen. Her parents were in their late fifties when she was born. Her grandmother was in her nineties when she passed. Both of her parents didn’t live long after she passed.”

“Then that isn’t worth tracking down. Did she have any friends other than the one we heard about?” Connor asked.

She’d had tons of acquaintances when they were together, but he doubted she still knew them. “None that she could trust anymore.”

“Well, then we’ve just hit a dead end.”

Three sharp pops exploded from the vehicle behind them. Kelly screamed and leaned forward, clutching Zeus as close as she could. Perspective hit her hard and fast. Sam would be more sad about losing her than the dog. For so long, she’d believed the opposite.

“Sam!”

Zeus whined, pressing his cold nose to her ear. John swerved one way, then back again. “They’re shooting at us!” He glanced down at her for a moment.

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have left.” She squeezed her eyes shut. She’d known Nathan was in the area, but how had he known she was there in that truck? Unless . . .

Kelly sat up a few inches and looked at Zeus. Was he the link? Had someone gotten to Zeus when he was out working with the guys and put something on him? She checked his ears which seemed like the only likely place to hide anything, but they were clear. Running her hand around the inside of his collar, she found a small white disc. It had been stuck to the inside of his collar, completely hidden.

“That’s an air tag. I’ve seen people talking about them on social media. Why would someone put that on your dog?” John swerved again. “I’ve got to find a way to lose this guy behind me or we’re both in trouble.”

Kelly rolled down the window an inch and threw the disc out. If they could get away, she wasn’t going to lead them right back to her. John accelerated so fast that Kelly had to grip the door or fall. Leaning in a seat wasn’t an easy way to travel. “Are they still there?”

“Not for long. Hold on. I hope it’s not icy.” With that, he whipped off the highway, their tail end swerving from side to side while he reacted to correct them. “They missed the exit,” he chuckled nervously. “Good thing I had a friend who was training to be a cop while I was going to school to be a vet. I was the only one between the two of us with a truck. In order to practice, we had an agreement that he would teach me their driving techniques. I haven’t done that in twenty years.”

She slowly rose and leaned against the seat. His hands were shaking where he gripped the wheel. “We’d better hide. There’s no one on the highway so if we get back on that way, they’ll find us.”

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He pulled over and killed the lights, then grabbed his phone. “I’ll google up an alternate route while you tell me who Sam is, ‘cause I know it’s not the dog’s name and it’s not my name.” He gave her a gentle smile. “Seems to me that people call for those they care about in moments they think all is lost.”

She should’ve called for Jesus. Guilt hit her. Why hadn’t her first thought been Jesus? See. Bad girl. Kelly closed her eyes. “He’s the guy I loved once.”

“Once?” the man asked. “Not still?”

She couldn’t call what she felt love because love was deep and full. What she felt was so unsure. “Once. He loved me, too I didn’t think about it until right now, but I selfishly blamed him for the trouble I was in, even though I never told him about that trouble. I wanted him to be my rescuer, to see what I wasn’t saying, to know that everything had fallen apart.”

“But he didn’t see it?” he asked.

“No. He thought I chose other men over him. And I had myself convinced that I didn’t, that I did what I had to do, but I always would’ve put Sam first. But I didn’t, did I? I was the one in the wrong. I was the one who chose to do what I thought I had to, and I was so ashamed that I couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t tell him then. I still can’t.” Because shame was a disease that spread as fast as cancer.

“Would Sam forgive you?”

“I don’t know that he should.” She swiped her nose since she had no tissues. “I don’t

deserve it.”

“None of us deserve it. Ever. Asking for it is all that makes us even slightly worthy of it because it means we know we’ve done something wrong. But even that is a stretch. If you do something to hurt another person, even unintentionally, then you don’t ever—technically—deserve forgiveness. But I would say that’s the very thing that makes forgiveness so powerful.”

“You’re about to go all religious on me, aren’t you?” She gripped her hands together and held tight. It wasn’t that she disliked hearing about Jesus; just that she felt stupid for being her age and not knowing anything.

“Not religious. Faithful. Jesus will forgive you for making that decision if you come to him with a heart that’s sorry, which it sounds like you are. Ask Sam if he’ll do the same and let Jesus work on his heart. You’re so young to be dealing with something that has hurt you so deeply.”

He couldn’t possibly understand, but she didn’t want him to know the half of it. “I’ve been through a lot.”

He took a deep breath. “I’ve found a way to Cheyenne by taking backroads,, but you’ll forgive me for saying that I don’t feel safe bringing you with me to my daughter’s house. Can I take you to the police station? They’ll let you call Sam, and he can come get you.”

“You can drop me off there.” As soon as he did, she’d walk to wherever she wanted to go or ask a policeman for a ride. But she wasn’t calling Sam. He’d have even more to forgive now than he did before.

John didn’t know who she was or what she’d done. He wouldn’t think Sam could forgive her if he knew. Not to mention it wasn’t just Sam. She had to forgive herself

now that she understood completely what her choice had meant, and she couldn't. How could she have thought she had no other choices? Even if Nathan had told her that, she should've questioned his logic. She should've known better. She'd let him manipulate her completely.

John started the engine once again and they rumbled down the road, letting his navigation system plot the way. With every car they saw, both of them would look at the other and wait to see a reaction.

"I didn't catch what kind of car it was, but it was a sedan. Light colored, but that's all I could tell you. High speed and bullets are a good way to obliterate my memory, apparently."

Kelly sighed. "I didn't even look. I was too busy hiding."

"At least it won't take Sam long to get to you."

Kelly's neck tensed. "How do you know?" She'd told him she'd hitchhiked. He couldn't know which Sam she was talking about. If he did, he'd tell Sam where to find her.

John flinched as he looked over at her. "I've never been a good liar. I told you I went to vet school. You mentioned Sam and you were right next to Wayside Ranch. That dog, even though you haven't used his name, is Zeus. I'd know him anywhere. My son, John Jr., is his vet and I've helped him with that dog."

The traitor dog yipped up at the vet and nuzzled his knee.

"I knew it. Good boy." He reached over and scratched Zeus's ear.

"You can't tell him." Her voice wouldn't be calm, no matter how hard she tried. "I

need to get away.” She reached for the door.

John grabbed her arm gently and Zeus growled.

“You’d best not touch me. He won’t allow it.” Kelly tugged her arm away, though the man didn’t frighten her.

He held up his hand between them and looked at Zeus. “I won’t touch her again.” He glanced back at her. “Give Sam a chance. He doesn’t do things for recognition or for any reason other than that he either enjoys them or he feels they should be done, and they are the right thing to do. If Sam doesn’t feel it’s the right thing to do, you won’t get him to do it. If you were at Wayside and he was trying to help you, then he wants to help you. He’s not doing it because he was told to, but because he believes in what he’s doing.”

She swallowed hard, wanting to believe Sam would accept her. She wanted to believe all those things he’d said the night before. But those words had come before she’d felt comfortable enough to bare her soul for him. And she might never get comfortable enough to do that. Where would that leave them then?

“I’ll think about it.”

He gripped the steering wheel in both hands with a sigh. “That’s all I can ask.”

Chapter Twenty

As soon as they could go into town and find businesses open, Connor and Sam got into Connor's pickup and headed to Piper's Ridge. Sam wanted to have hope. He was supposed to be rooted in hope. Yet nothing that came to his mind brought him anything close.

"I don't expect to learn much in town, but we have to try," Connor said. "I called Nixon right away to let him know. He said he'd be looking, but he hadn't heard anything strange. At least, not yet. You know he'll call if he sees or hears anything."

Sam stared out the window of the pickup, willing some clue to be out there. Why would she run off? Though, he knew many people going through the Wayside program had times where the healing was too hard and they wanted to escape. At that point, Brendon would pull back a little on their sessions and the wranglers would take over with just therapeutic rides until the guest was ready to move on. Too much change was scary for anyone, but for this particular set of people, change was terrifying.

He had to have frightened her. He'd gone too far in trying to convince her that she mattered when she was so stuck in her own mental cement. Just like cement, it would take a lot of work to break through it, and getting it off would be painful. But the freedom afterward . . . That's the hope the men of Wayside lived on. There was a feeling of accomplishment when one of their guests laughed for the first time, for real, not just a recognition that they were supposed to laugh in that moment and fake it so they didn't stand out. The difference between the two was amazing to see.

Trauma had a way of rewiring the brain and it was up to them to help the client get it back as close to 'normal' as they could. He shifted his thoughts back to Connor. "Dominic couldn't come?"

"Wasn't enough room in the truck and I thought the folks of Piper's Ridge might be a little intimidated by a guy dressed in all black tactical gear. Not to mention he's not from around here."

Sam snorted. That was putting it mildly. Piper's Ridge was a tiny town in the southeastern corner of Wyoming, about an hour away from Cheyenne. They were predominantly Caucasian with a couple Hispanic families that had been there for a few generations. Since the town was so small and really didn't offer much to get people to move there, the demographics hadn't changed since they'd started collecting them. Dominic would've stood out in every way possible.

"I don't think people would've been mean, but they would hesitate to talk to him, which isn't what we want today. Plus, he's a pro at planning and tracking. If Nixon calls me with anything that needs to happen right away, I can trust Dominic to take the reins, and he'll do the job even better than I could."

Sam nodded, but kept watch out the window. Since Connor was the best boss he'd had, the compliment for Dominic held a lot of weight. "I'm glad he's here. We wouldn't have caught that drone on the cameras without him."

"Speaking of that, he looked through all the other footage from the last week. It made sense that if Nathan had easily driven onto the property, plus flew two drones in, he may have tried other methods first. He had."

Sam clenched his jaw and waited for Connor to tell him what else Nathan had done.

"He must have had some tip that she was coming here because when he looked back

at the old files, he found the same car driving by here daily with Colorado license plates. Two days after she arrived, a figure—we can't even tell if they were a man or a woman—met Zeus at the fence near the gate. They saw Zeus was hesitant, but offered some type of treat. They did something with his head that looked like scratching, then let him go. It was shortly after you had Zeus stay with Kelly when he wasn't working."

"You think someone put a tracker on one of my dogs?" Fury built inside him. He'd given her the dog to protect her, but he hadn't checked it for a tracking device. "That would explain how he knew everything. Not only did he track her with that watch, he had a backup in case she didn't take the bait. He tracked the dog."

"Yup, seems that way. Dominic already ordered a device for us that will alert us to those kinds of devices, but he already said that it doesn't always pick them up. A manual check is still better."

"Except when you have no idea one has been placed." How had they missed someone coming to the fence?

"What was the video like?"

"He showed me stills he took from the video. The person is in all black and in the trees. The camera is far off enough that without zooming in, the dog just seems to be looking over the fence. I had to really squint to even see that someone was there. This Nathan is a pro, or he knows a pro."

"We already knew that. He's connected to Evie." Who was the biggest lead they had, even though she hadn't said a word to anyone about who she worked with and was awaiting trial. Since she'd pled not guilty, there was no confession. Yet.

"What if he's connected to someone even bigger?"

“We keep hoping to get Viceroy, but it won’t happen. I thought we’d get close when Scarlet was here, then with Trace, but that just proved that Viceroy is as slippery as an eel. He’ll never be caught.” Sam hated to sound depressed, but to continually have hope when it was dashed every time was a hard pill to swallow.

“He will be caught. Maybe not this side of earth, but he’ll face judgement for what he’s done.” Connor turned into the small gas station in Piper’s Ridge.

“That’s comfort for us, but what about the people who come to us who aren’t from one of Viceroy’s groups? Or someone who doesn’t believe?” There had to be a way for those people to get justice, too

“Then we keep working harder. Ali has just finished her training. She’s been working with Eric on building up her strength so she can go into the belly of the beast. She wants to go undercover. That has to stay between you and me. Eric hasn’t told anyone, and having his wife want something so dangerous is a tough pill to swallow.”

“Except he told you.” Sam surmised.

“And Brendon, because Eric’s not taking it well in private. He’s really worried that she could get hurt or killed. He doesn’t want to see what could happen to her, but he wants to support her. He’s used to keeping what he feels to himself, but this is really hard on him.”

“I can see why.” Sam got out of the truck and headed for the gas station. Veterinarian John Willis was there with his father, John Sr., and Sam waved. “Morning.”

“Sam, you’re just the man I was looking for. We were about to head out to Wayside to talk to you.”

“Oh, I’m a little busy right now. Can you call me and we can set something up? All

the horses and dogs are fine out at Wayside.” He couldn’t think of any other reason the two vets would want to meet with him.

“This is about Kelly.”

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No one was supposed to even know her name. He stopped in his tracks and turned toward them. “What did you say?”

“Kelly and Zeus,” John Jr. said. “Dad helped them last night.”

Sam headed toward them. “We should take this talk where other ears can’t hear.” He wasn’t so sure Nathan was alone. If he wasn’t, he might have men stationed around to listen for clues as to where Kelly could be.

“Come over to my truck. I’ve got a bullet hole in my tailgate after last night’s fun.”

Sam willed his knees not to buckle. They’d been shot at by Nathan? That upped the stakes by more than double. “What happened?”

John Sr. pointed to the back of his pickup. “It could only have been the power of God that saved us. That little hunk of metal isn’t enough to stop a bullet, but it never came through to the other side. I can hear it rattle around in there when I open and close the tailgate.”

“How did you find her?” Sam felt the large hole in the metal and thanked God for protecting all of them.

“I saw her out hitchhiking and couldn’t leave her there. It was dark and late, and she looked to be about the same age as my daughter, Maggy. I didn’t think I’d be in for the ride of my life by picking her up. Thought I was being more of a good Samaritan.”

Connor joined them and leaned against the pickup. “You were. Think of what they would’ve done to her if they had picked her up instead of you.”

Both Johns nodded. “I hadn’t really thought of that. I just didn’t want her to stand there in the dark and cold.” He tugged a white handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his nose. “I had to go help pull my daughter out of her driveway in the dead of night. Funny how God just works timing. She didn’t wait by the side of that road more than a minute before I drove by. I took her to the police station in Cheyenne because I didn’t think it was safe to leave her off anywhere else.”

“Then that’s where we’re headed. Thank you, John.” Connor clasped the old man’s hand and gave it a shake. “You look like you could use a rest.”

“I’m not used to being up all night anymore.” He laughed. “Especially racing up off ramps at high speeds. Gets the blood pumping, though.”

“Thank you again. You saved her.” Sam took his turn shaking the man’s hand. They waved their good-byes and headed for Connor’s truck.

As soon as both were inside, Connor sighed. “I think we both know there’s no way she’s still at the police station, but it will be a good place to start.”

Sam couldn’t agree more. He pointed for the exit to let Connor know he was all-in and they took off. Cheyenne was an hour away and Kelly already had a seven-hour lead on them.

Wind bit at Kelly’s face as she tugged the collar on her coat high over her nose. She blinked rapidly, but the wind made them water and stole her breath if she tried to let the coat hang loose. In this part of town, she recognized a few things. When had she been in Cheyenne other than to visit the bank with Sam? Nathan had moved her around some, but kept her mostly in Denver. If only she’d known then that she was

only an hour away from Sam.

She gave her thoughts a shake. What good would that have done except to make her want what she couldn't have? The back of her neck prickled as she walked toward the motel a police officer had told her about. She dug in her pocket and tugged out the little card, reminding her that they'd taken her knife before she entered. It was still cold against her fingers. The card was good for three nights' stay at the Over Easy Inn, a dubious name if she'd ever heard one. At least the cop had cared enough to ask her if she had anywhere to stay and this inn allowed dogs.

Zeus nudged her leg. She'd come to realize over the past few hours that his nudge was a signal he needed to get off the path and somewhere he could do his business. At least he didn't just run off on her. The problem was, she had no baggies for waste disposal, and they were walking down a sidewalk in a busy area of Cheyenne. Where could they go and be inconspicuous?

She took him down a side street toward a residential area and let him wander to a tree. Luckily, he didn't leave anything behind that she had to feel guilty about. That wouldn't be the case for long though, so she needed to find a means to clean up after him if she was going to keep him. She couldn't keep being a bad girl. Time to take responsibility. Be a woman who did things on her own. This is what she should've done years ago instead of believing Nathan's lies.

She whistled for Zeus, and he came back to her right away. A long dark car pulled by slowly on the main road where they'd been walking. While expensive cars weren't abnormal, this one made her empty stomach clench. It was familiar for some reason.

She headed for the road, curious to see if it pulled off anywhere that she might see who owned it. Much to her surprise, it pulled into the inn where she'd been planning to stay. The extended car hung to the back of the narrow lot, away from the long row of rooms in the one-story building.

Kelly kept walking, hoping to get close enough to see anything she could about the driver or passengers. Since her coat was still pulled over her face, no one would ever recognize her. Nor would anyone expect her to be in Cheyenne if they did think they recognized her. She was safe, yet that didn't stop her heart from racing wildly. There was only one way she could know anyone with a car like that. Her mind had to be remembering something from her time working for Nathan.

The memory came back like a slap in the face. Nathan had blindfolded her on the way. She'd ridden in a car for a little over an hour until they'd gotten to their destination. He'd put a hat on her, then told her to close her eyes, that he'd slap the memory right out of her head if she dared open them. Then he'd taken off the blindfold and put on a pair of sunglasses that had the lenses completely blocked. It was like wearing another blindfold curved around her head.

He'd helped her out of the car and taken her to one of the rooms, but she'd only seen the ground and the floor of the room through the little slit where she could see between her cheek and the glasses. Almost nothing. He'd taken her into one of the rooms and she'd met with an older man there, but Nathan had told her she was to keep her eyes closed at all times. If she looked at the man's face, he'd kill her. If she wanted to die, this was the way to do it.

Even though she'd been terrified the whole time, so much so she barely remembered what the man did, she had peeked at his face from under the blindfold he'd put on her after he'd removed her sunglasses. That face was burned into her memory for good. Nicolas Viceroy was not a man easily forgotten.

Kelly wandered over to a bench as if she took a walk in this part of town every day. She wasn't good at lying, but she wanted to see who was there. Was this Nathan again? Was this why Nathan was in the area, not really for her? She'd known even then that Viceroy was some kind of boss to Nathan, even though Nathan had always made himself seem like he was the one in complete control.

She didn't have to wait long before the driver of the expensive car got out and went to room number 13. He knocked twice and the door opened slightly. A woman poked her head from the room. She was dressed in a skirt suit, with full makeup and hair done to perfection. There was no way she was part of this . . . was she? Women who were trafficked all looked different, but this didn't fit the mold. She had too much freedom, too much power, too much authority.

Kelly waited, trying not to look obvious, yet wishing she was close enough to hear them speaking. A moment later, the woman opened the door wider and held it for a man she would never forget. The wind and cold didn't seem to bother him in the slightest as he strode to the car. Nicolas Viceroy apparently didn't feel the cold. Maybe he didn't feel anything.

Kelly shivered, and Zeus pressed his cold nose to her palm, reminding her she wasn't there anymore. She was here and she had at least some control. Nicolas looked over at her, and his gaze stalled. He stared, then pointed toward her.

Had he recognized her, or was he telling them to get her? She would not be stuck with that man again. "Zeus, we need to get out of here." She stood quickly and raced for the sidewalk.

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Zeus clung to her side but kept glancing behind them. He didn't growl, which gave her hope that they weren't following her, but she dared not look back. If she did, they'd see her whole face. If he was a man who remembered everything like Nathan said, he would remember her.

Viceroy remembers details. All the details. Don't look at him or you will die.

She realized then the error she'd made. It wasn't that he recognized her with her face half covered. He'd recognized that she'd looked at him and could probably describe him. He wouldn't just let her go. The rev of an engine behind her made her heart stagger, then race. The police station was at least a mile away. It had taken her more than twenty minutes to walk that far. There was no way she could run and make it.

She glanced behind her as the car pulled onto the road, following her. She picked up her pace but didn't want to start running and draw attention to herself. No one would help her anyway, and she'd just make herself easier to spot.

She dashed down the same side street she'd gone up a few minutes before because all the houses had been fifties style ranch homes that might be full of friendly older people willing to help her for a few minutes, just like the older man who had helped her with the phone number to her bank.

The first driveway was empty so she skipped it, wanting to be sure that when she knocked, someone would answer. The car pulled to a stop in front of the house as she reached the door and knocked, trying to sound friendly and not desperate.

"Come on, answer the door." Kelly knocked again as Zeus growled a warning.

Kelly reached for him just as he yelped and shrank back. “Call off the dog or I’ll shoot him.” A woman’s voice came from behind her. “If you think I’m not serious, try me.”

“Zeus, down.” She wasn’t sure if it would work or not. She’d never asked the dog to back off. That wasn’t his job.

Zeus glanced at her and lowered his head like he might lunge at the woman.

“Turn around slowly and come with me,” the woman said. “Viceroy is very unhappy that you thought he wouldn’t remember you, Kelly. And Nathan has been pestering him for help for over a week. Leave it to me to get done in a few minutes what he couldn’t do with all the resources we gave him.” She laughed as she waved her gun toward the car. “Let’s go. You don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Kelly reached for her pocket, her knife was her last chance. The woman took aim at the center of Kelly’s chest. “Drop whatever that is. Right now.”

Her fingers froze around the handle. It was a pocketknife and she’d never get it open in time. Not before a bullet. But now the woman knew she had something in her pocket.

“Now,” the woman’s tone gave no room for discussion.

Kelly slowly pulled the knife from her pocket, only then noticing the Wayside logo on the handle. She slowly bent to let it fall without a clatter and whispered to Zeus, “Go. Find Sam,” and prayed the woman didn’t hear.

Zeus rushed off down the street, leaving Kelly to deal with her fate, alone.

Chapter Twenty-One

The police station was busy, and the shift had changed between the time Kelly had been there and when Sam arrived with Connor. The officer they spoke to was nice, understanding what they needed and why they were looking for Kelly. His hands were tied though. Without being able to prove they were related or needed to know anything about her, there was little the officers could do.

Sam left the building feeling defeated. Cheyenne was the biggest city in Wyoming, with plenty of places to hide for someone who wanted to stay hidden. He headed for Connor's truck as someone called his name. He turned around as an officer jogged toward him.

"I heard you asking about that woman who came in last night." He stopped and glanced behind him. "I can't guarantee she's there because that place is as seedy as they come, but we get gift cards for the Over Easy Inn that we can give out to people who are homeless if it's after the shelters are closed for the night. We don't usually share that information, but I thought you'd want to know."

Connor looked at his watch. "It's almost ten. If we hurry, we might make it there before checkout."

"The gift cards are good for three days, but I can't imagine choosing to stay there more than one unless you had to. They offer rooms by the hour." The cop flinched. "It really is a place you would only go if you have nowhere else."

Sam nodded. "Thanks for letting us know. It narrows down the possibilities some." They continued walking to Connor's truck and got in. "Even the name sounds awful. Why are places like this allowed to stay open? Everyone knows that places like that aren't used by anyone but people who don't ever want to be seen."

Connor turned the key, starting the engine. "I know. Getting motels like that shut down would be a good start." He pulled out onto the road.

Sam glanced at everyone walking down the sidewalk. Within a few minutes, they pulled into the parking lot of the inn. Just looking at it made Sam's skin crawl. "She stayed here?"

"We won't know until we go to the front desk and ask. Though, it's better here than on her own on the street. There's only so much Zeus can do."

At the mention of his name, a dog barked and ran over from a bench on one end of the lot. He barked again, finally reaching Sam. Sam took hold of the dog's collar and looked at the little metal ID hanging from it, but he knew the dog without the confirmation. "Zeus, where's Kelly?" This had to mean Kelly was here, but why was Zeus outside, running around?

"The sign says it's pet-friendly and even though I don't know Kelly well, I don't think she would've just let Zeus run around outside alone." Connor slowly looked over the lot. "Something doesn't feel right here."

Sam headed for the office, needing answers. If Kelly was in a room, he'd need to know which one. If she wasn't here, he wanted to see any cameras they had because the only reason Zeus would've come to this place without Kelly was if he'd been here before.

He went inside and the dim interior left him blinking, trying to see anything inside the small room.

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“Can I help you, cowboy?” A woman who had to be about his age sauntered from behind the counter. “You looking for someone specific, or will anyroomdo?”

The way she said room made his skin crawl. This motel was a front for something much more sinister than he’d thought. Did the police have any idea what went on here when they gave away gift cards to this place, or did The Over Easy motel give them gift cards to use in order to prey on the vulnerable?

“I’m looking for a woman named Kelly Chambers. She may have used a different name to check in, but she’s about five foot six, maybe a hundred-twenty pounds. Her hair is blondish, but closer to brown, and she’s wearing a great big coat. Oh, and she would’ve had a big dog with her.”

The woman’s smile only made it to half her face. “Nope, sorry sugar. Would you like to try one of our other rooms?”

Connor stepped forward. “He’s not here for a room, he’s looking for someone specific. If you don’t help, we’ll call the police to encourage you to help.”

The woman threw back her head and laughed. “That’s funny. The cops don’t come here. It’s like we don’t exist. They drive right on by, and the owner is happy to stay in business.” She shrugged. “If you’re not looking for a room, you’ll have to leave. I have work to do.” She plumped her lips into a full pout. “But if you’re interested, I could be convinced to go on break a little early.”

Sam and Connor headed back outside. Sam rubbed his hands down the front of his pants. “Feels like I need a shower and I didn’t even touch anything.”

Connor nodded and patted his thigh to call Zeus over. “But she hadn’t seen Kelly, so we’re back at square one.”

“Not quite. We know Kelly had to have been here. We know this place is seedy and at least peripherally in the sex trade. Nathan was after Kelly last night and shot at John Sr’s truck. So, it’s possible she’s still here.”

“Are you suggesting we just wait and see who leaves? Knock on doors?” Connor asked.

“Waiting is what I had in mind, and calling Nixon to find out why they don’t close this place down. How influential would someone have to be to make a police force that seems otherwise good to turn a blind eye?” Sam hated things that were unfair or went against what was right.

“We both know that it may not be the police. It might be judges or even city government. If people get released without consequences anytime the police make an arrest, it isn’t long until the police stop doing it. There are other places that need them. Places where their actions will have a good result.” Connor opened his truck door and patted the seat to invite Zeus inside.

Zeus piled in. Only then did Sam realize he was shivering. How long had the dog been out in the cold? He was used to the weather, but they’d left before midnight, ten hours before. That was a long time to be outside for a dog who was used to having a warm bed at night.

Connor grabbed his phone and turned it on speaker. He hit a few numbers, and it started ringing. Nixon picked up on the third ring.

“Hello, Connor. I still haven’t heard anything.”

“Tell me about the Over Easy Inn, in Cheyenne. Why is it still open? This place is barely a cover for what they’re doing. The woman in the office practically threw herself at Sam.”

Nixon snorted. “That place is owned by a senator. Not a state senator, but a federal government senator.”

“Oh.” Connor said with enough sarcasm to fill the cab. “You’re saying it stays because he has more power than sense and he likes money.”

“You got it.” Nixon went silent. “Please don’t tell me Kelly is there.”

“Can’t prove if she is or isn’t. The woman in the office says she wasn’t here but we found Zeus outside. I know he wouldn’t have come here unless he’d been here,” Sam said.

Officer Blake was silent for a minute. “Zeus was a tracker, right? Have you thought about asking the dog to take you to her?”

It was a long shot. Zeus would normally need something to scent first before he could find her, but he had to ask. Sam ruffled Zeus’s ears. “I’m sorry, boy. I’ll let you warm up real soon, but I need you right now and more importantly, Kelly needs you. Bring me to Kelly.”

He opened his door and Zeus launched out, racing down the sidewalk.

Kelly gripped the thick metal collar around her neck and tugged on it, but it didn’t loosen that time just like it hadn’t loosened any other time she’d pulled at it. She shivered on the floor in what might have been a warehouse of some sort, she wasn’t sure. All she knew was that it was cold, she was sore, and she regretted leaving Wayside.

Why did every decision she made for herself have to lead to pain? Was she destined to live a terrible life because she couldn't make good choices? Her grandmother would've told her that was absolutely the case. Get smart, girl. If you don't wise up, the world will wise you up. Funny how she couldn't recall a single kind thing the woman had said.

The door across the room swung open with a loud bang, and the woman who'd caught her came in. She reached down and gripped Kelly's collar, yanking her to her feet. She pressed in close to Kelly's face, forcing her to look away and enveloping her in sickly sweet perfume. "If you're going to run away like a dog, we'll treat you like a dog."

She shoved Kelly to her knees. "The first thing you're going to tell me is how you got away. Then, you're going to go in and talk to Viceroy. You'll tell him everything he wants to know. You'll do whatever he tells you to do. Then you'll kneel in front of him, and he'll put a bullet in your head. You will do all those things because you owe us."

This was it. She would die before Sam could find her. She would never have the chance to tell him she was sorry. So sorry for not placing her trust in him or telling him what was going on. Odd how shame and guilt had made her keep doing things that caused more shame and guilt.

The woman tugged her back to her feet and out of the room. They walked toward a corner of the large open building. The concrete floors had frost over them, and Kelly tried hard not to slip on the damp surface in her socks since the woman had taken her shoes. The woman didn't seem to have any issue in her high heels.

Lord, you've got minutes to work a miracle if you're going to save me. I don't have any more time than that.

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Kelly went through a door and Viceroy sat in a thick, velvet padded chair. Everything in the room was tailored to his comfort, despite the fact that the rest of the building appeared to be falling down.

“Get over here,” Nathan said from a far corner of the room. She hadn’t even noticed he was there, though he appeared to be even more beat up than she was.

Kelly took a few steps closer but wanted to stay out of striking distance. If she had to die, she didn’t want to get beaten first. She stopped and took a deep breath. “What do you want me to tell you?”

Viceroy was on his feet in a split second and slapped her before she knew what he’d planned. Her only consolation was that her metal collar had left a long gash on the side of his hand. His blood splattered down the front of her shirt.

“Don’t you dare speak without being spoken to, garbage.” Viceroy sat back in his seat and held out his injured hand. The woman immediately came forward and tended to him.

“Now, you will tell me exactly how you escaped. Leave nothing out. If you had help, I want names.”

Kelly swallowed hard. The company that had helped her wasn’t a secret. Their mission was on their website. Telling Viceroy wouldn’t do anything because FREE International didn’t hide who they were or what theyintended to do. But would he hurt those who worked there? They’d helped her like no one else, and if her life was over anyway, why risk all the people who worked for FREE?

“I’m afraid it’s a pretty boring story. Nathan let me out of my room to visit with Jasmine as he did once a week. Instead of going to her room, I decided I was done and left.”

“You decided?” Viceroy laughed. “What compelled you to think you could grow a brain?”

Heat blazed up her neck. This was the same treatment she’d endured for years, but now she knew there was life out there, life with Sam at Wayside where they cared if she ate or took a walk. Not in the sense that she wasn’t allowed to, but in the sense that they cared where she was.

“I’ve had one for some time.” She’d just forgotten to use it.

“Perhaps it’s time to end that nonsense.” Viceroy pulled out a long black pistol and laid it on the arm of his chair. “Now that you understand that hell is your destination, why don’t you try the truth? Let’s start with that big trailer you went into right after you snuck outside?”

Hopeless. There were too many houses and no one in sight. Sam followed Zeus up a slight hill to a residential area past the first house. The neighborhood was full of the same four houses in various colors, and the same people had probably lived in them for decades.

Zeus ran up to the front door of the second house on the right, whined then sat. Sam looked at the door and had doubts. There was no way Kelly was in there, but just like the inn, Zeus wouldn’t have gone there without having been there before.

Connor strode up the walkway. “This isn’t your typical trafficking neighborhood.” He rolled his eyes. “I think this is a bust.”

An old man opened the door behind Zeus and glanced at Sam and Connor. “Can I help you with something?”

Sam took a deep breath. “I know this is going to sound strange, but I’m looking for a missing woman. She was in this neighborhood with this dog earlier today. Is there any chance you saw her?”

The old man bit his lip, looked back into the house, then tiptoed outside. “My wife told me not to get involved because she was scared this morning.”

Sam nodded, leading him a few more steps away from the door. He didn’t want the wife to get wind that her husband was doing something she wouldn’t want him to, or they’d lose the only possible witness to whatever happened to Kelly. “Tell me what happened.”

“I was making a late breakfast. I’m retired, so I can stay in bed a little late if I want to. Well, as I was about to dig into my eggs, someone starts knocking on the door and it’s strange. Like they’re pounding, but it’s rapid like a regular knock. I got to the window and there was this girl out there. She was wearing a huge coat and backpack. She had a dog with her, just like that one.”

Sam swallowed hard, bile burning his throat. “What then?”

“I had only pulled up one of my little blinds to see what was going on as this really sharply dressed woman strode up the walk carrying a gun. I didn’t want to get in her way, but she kind of looked like the police. I thought maybe the girl was under arrest. She looked homeless, but that dog looked too nice for her to be homeless. Anyway, the police or FBI lady, whoever she was, she took the girl right off my porch and the dog went running. They didn’t go after him, so I hoped the dog was okay. I see now that he is.” He rocked on his feet. “That’s all I know. Oh, and this.” He pulled something from the pocket of his robe.

Connor took a deep breath. “That’s from Wayside.” He took the knife from the man’s hand. “Did you happen to see the vehicle they got into? Was it a car, truck, van, SUV?”

“It was a limo. That’s the only thing that didn’t sit right with my theory.” The older man grinned and pulled his house coat closer around himself then looked up and down the street like someone might hear him. “I don’t know any cops or feds that ride around in limos, picking up vagrants.” He chuckled. “I guess the government has more money than even I thought.”

The old man thought this was a joke. Sam massaged the tense spot between his eyes. “She wasn’t a vagrant. She was a victim. Did you see which direction they went?”

The man’s brows dipped. “Victim?” He sucked in a huge breath. “I witnessed a kidnapping?” He clutched his chest. “My wife isn’t going to believe this.”

Connor gripped the older man’s arm. “Did you see where they went?”

He pointed down the street. “They have to turn at some point. It’s a dead end. I didn’t watch them though. I’m sorry.” He flinched. “I can’t believe it.”

Sam couldn’t believe it either. Another dead end.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:38 am

Sam opened Connor's pickup truck door and waited for Zeus to jump in, then climbed in after him. As soon as Connor got in, his phone rang.

"Hello?" He turned the speakerphone on.

"This is Nixon. I've sent Edwyn to help you and Sam. You'll need backup, and I don't have jurisdiction there. I've also called the police in Cheyenne to see if they've spotted anything on traffic cameras that's out of the ordinary. Any vehicles in places they don't belong. They got a hit almost right away, especially when I told them the car may have come from that inn you mentioned."

Sam wanted to hope. Could this be the break they were hoping for? Would Kelly still be alive? These types didn't mess around when they'd been cheated. "Okay, where do we go?"

"There's a warehouse on the west end of town. I'll text the address. Edwyn will be headed right there. The car they saw going to that abandoned warehouse was a limo. Not the kind of vehicle people usually take and park out in dangerous neighborhoods."

"Does Cheyenne have dangerous neighborhoods?" Connor frowned. "Seems pretty quiet to me."

Nixon snorted. "Every time you mention Cheyenne we either end up at a crime scene or getting shot at, so I can only assume you're joking."

"I'm not very good at humor," Connor deadpanned. "I'll be waiting for the text. What

do we need to know going in?”

“The pictures from the traffic camera only show one male driving, but I would assume there are multiple people in the back. I wouldn’t even take a guess at how many.”

“Thanks for the help.” Connor hung up the phone and bowed his head. Connor didn’t pray out loud, but Sam knew that was exactly what he was doing.

Sam took the moment to do the same and, as he said his mental Amen, Nixon’s text came through. Connor opened it and had his phone pull up driving directions. Within seconds, they had a route.

“Let’s go get this guy. I don’t know if it’s just that people are getting more brazen about trafficking, feeling they’re entitled to take advantage of people, or if we’re just so immune to caring that they aren’t hiding it anymore, but it feels like we can’t just let people heal. We have to actively protect them. It’s all new territory.” He shifted the truck into reverse and backed it out of the spot.

“Shouldn’t there be a great big limo sitting outside if they’re here?” Sam looked at his watch as they pulled into the parking lot. “Did the police get here before us? We couldn’t possibly be too late. Could we?”

Connor shook his head. “I don’t see police tape for a crime scene.” He glanced at his phone. “Maybe he sent us the wrong address. Could there be more than one abandoned warehouse?”

They got out of the truck and closed the doors quietly. Sitting in the vast, cracked parking lot left Sam feeling exposed. If anyone was inside, they would know they weren’t alone. There was no element of surprise. “I don’t feel right about this. She isn’t here. I don’t think she ever was here.”

Zeus sniffed the ground, and reality dawned. “The snow. It’s undisturbed. They couldn’t have been here.” He pointed all around them. There are no tracks in this lot. If they are in this building, then there’s another way to get to it.”

Connor jumped back in the pickup and Sam followed. He quickly turned the truck around and headed further down the road. “It’s hard to see if that’s a different building or the same one.” Connor pointed into the trees surrounding the aging buildings.

“I think it’s the same. Look, there’s someone plowing that lot. Odd, since that warehouse looked completely abandoned. Is that person clearing the lot because they’re paid to cover the tracks of anyone who might be using it?” Sam asked.

“Good question. Let’s check it out. Message Edwyn and tell him there’s a change of plans.”

Sam whipped out his phone and typed up the fastest text of his life as Connor pulled into the lot. A large loader pushed snow in great swaths to a center pile near a tall security light. He seemed oblivious to Connor’s truck and just kept plowing.

“Connor, there’s the car.” He pointed to a car port near the front of the building. This was obviously the side that had, at one time, been the reception area of the business. They both headed for the front door. Sam looked for cameras outside the building, but nothing looked like one.

“It’s going to be locked, isn’t it?” Sam sighed. “Where are the police? They should’ve been here before now. Nixon said he sent over the information.” Sam looked at his watch and wished it wasn’t the two of them against unknown odds.

“If Edwyn just left, he’s at least forty-five minutes from here. We can’t wait. If they’ve had her this long, we don’t know what could’ve happened.” Connor tugged

on the door, surprised when it opened.

As soon as they passed the entry, they heard a gong noise pulse through the building, alerting whoever was there that someone had just come through the front door.

“So much for our element of surprise . . .” Connor ducked toward a nearby door.

Zeus followed, and Sam took up the tail end. The sound of rushing feet headed toward their location was a big motivation. Connor pointed the direction he was headed a few steps before he would take the turn, so they didn’t have to speak. Sam kept up, but this didn’t feel right. Where would they keep Kelly in a building like this? It made no sense. What would they want from her? She was a victim, not anyone who knew anything about the way the operation was run.

Unless . . . Sam gripped Connor and pulled him into a room. He closed the door and held his hand to his lips for quiet. Zeus held his position, barely even breathing. No one made a sound. One set of footfalls passed the door on the other side. Sam held his breath when the person on the other side shook the knob but didn’t turn it.

After they’d passed and a few minutes had gone by, Sam risked speaking quietly. “They wouldn’t expend so many resources on Kelly if she didn’t know something. She must have seen someone and not realized who she saw, or she had to know something that she didn’t realize was big. Very big.”

“Viceroy big?” Connor asked.

“I don’t know. You were just saying in the truck how things have changed. So many of our guests aren’t really free even after they escape and come to stay with us. Their traffickers come to find them now. Well, in all those cases, it was because the victim knew something. What could Kelly know?”

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Connor turned away, scrubbing his face and letting out a sigh. “You’re right. And Nathan isn’t big enough. We were even able to find him in the criminal justice system. He’s not as big as Evie, whose persona was almost completely made up.”

“Well, she couldn’t have known Evie. I still don’t understand how someone like Nathan who lived and worked an hour away is connected to Wyoming, but he came here to get her and seemed to know his way around pretty well,” Connor said.

“We’ve always wondered how far these webs spread. I think it’s way further than we thought. Maybe they are all a little interconnected. Like one big crime syndicate?” Sam offered.

“No way to know, but I think you’re onto something, which means we’d better be very careful. We’ll be up against people who know how to kill and have no trouble doing it.”

“Police, everyone out!” A loud voice called from somewhere in the building.

“Was that a warning to run or a warning to standdown?” Connor opened the door and looked up and down the hall.

Running footsteps faded away two gunshots echoed around the building. “They’re getting away.” Connor took off at a run, and Zeus quickly caught up and overtook him. Sam chased after, praying they found Kelly left behind.

An officer jumped out from behind a stack of old boxes. “Freeze! Hands up.”

“We were sent by officer Nixon Blake of Piper’s Ridge,” Connor said clearly as he raised his hands.

“Any weapons on you?” He asked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t go into a situation like this unarmed. There’s one on my hip and a knife at my ankle.”

“You?” the officer asked Sam.

“Just my gun on my hip,” he said, staring at the wide-open bay door. “They got away. Didn’t they?”

“Barely. But we’ve got a car in pursuit.” He patted down both of them then asked for their IDs.

Connor and Sam dug them out, and the officer handed them back right away. “Why didn’t you both wait until we got here? They were ready for us because you tipped them off that they were in danger. I could arrest you both for obstruction.”

Sam whipped off his hat and ran his hand through his hair, losing his patience. “We were trying to save Kelly’s life. I hope this doesn’t put her in even more danger.”

Kelly lay on the floor of the limo, her hands tied tightly behind her back and the metal collar digging into her shoulder. The car's driver didn’t seem in a rush, nomatter how fast they’d run from the building when the security alarm activated.

Nicolas had seemed surprised that anyone would find them, and it was the first time she’d ever witnessed anything but smug superiority on his face. Now, he spoke in hushed tones with the woman who’d caught Kelly and Nathan. The woman’s name was Ramona Butters, and Kelly was more terrified of her than the men. With men,

she knew what to expect. With this woman, she seemed evil to her very core.

Ramona mumbled, "I need to be home and check on my son," she said. "He'll need his transfusion soon."

Viceroy answered, "Your son is weak. I'm not willing to continue this process if there will be no end. Figure out what he needs and be done with it."

"Our son needs a heart and a liver. Without both, he'll die. Soon."

Kelly heard the worry in her voice. How could a mother agree to do such awful things? It made no sense. A woman who'd birthed a son shouldn't be capable of agreeing to what Kelly had been through. Kelly squeezed her eyes shut tight against the waves of nausea attacking her gut. She hadn't eaten since noon the day before and, though she wasn't sure what time it was, she could tell it was nearing the twenty-four-hour mark. Not that she wanted to eat anything anyone in the car might offer her.

"You've had multiple opportunities to find appropriate donors. I even commissioned a doctor willing to do the operation. You stopped it."

She huffed. "Because the doctor you found didn't speak any English and I had no way of communicating with him. How could I be sure he knew what he was doing?"

Viceroy snorted. "Your lack of trust is interesting. Vigo, drop Ramona off here. I have no need of her assistance anymore."

"What? You're just going to drop me off?" Ramona clutched the door. "I need to get home. I'm not even near my car or anywhere close to anything. Don't do this to me. I've been loyal to you."

He hit a button to unlock the doors. “Then be glad I didn’t just shoot you.”

The car pulled to a stop. The driver got out and when Ramona didn’t leave quickly enough, Nicolas put his foot to her rear and shoved her. She tumbled out onto the gravel alongside a highway that seemed remote with snow as far as Kelly could see.

Viceroy laughed. “Woman, you may think you hold something over my head because of our son but I have more children than I will ever know or care about. Be glad I didn’t take your phone, too”

The driver closed the door and they drove off. Kelly slowly moved away from Nathan and Nicolas’s feet by inches. They’d ignored her presence for quite a while, but she couldn’t expect that for long. Now that the woman who’d dominated the conversation was gone, the two left didn’t speak.

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After what felt like a long time, the car slowed, then turned. Nathan lifted her from the floor, and she groaned as she saw the apartment complex she'd left months ago in the FREE International trailer.

The arrival of whoever had showed up at the warehouse had saved her life in that moment, but had they condemned her to a life of slavery all over again?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sam stared out the window of Edwyn's car, glad that he'd been resigned to the back seat. He wasn't as sure as Connor was about where they were going, but he wasn't the boss. Connor had decided to head for Denver after the police had checked highway cameras and found a limo matching the description of the car that escaped headed south of Cheyenne.

Sam was pretty sure there was a lot more south of Cheyenne than Denver, but Connor agreed that these types followed a pattern. They would go where they felt comfortable. For Nathan, that was Denver.

"Are we going to meet up with any of the local human trafficking task forces to see if they know where she might be?" If Connor was right, they should be able to find the few places where Nathan was comfortable and find out quickly if Kelly was there. Nothing was ever done in a vacuum and tips were the best way of finding missing persons.

"There's a group I'm trying to reach, FREE International. I don't know if they can help us, though. They are out of Las Vegas, but the site says they travel all over. It's a

long shot, but aside from government agencies, this group comes up first when I search.” Connor scrolled on his phone. “That’s where I’ll start.”

Nothing about this felt right. He wasn’t even sure Kelly was still alive. For the first time in his life, he felt completely out of control. His usual easy-going nature took a back seat along with him and he only wanted to do what would get results. The quicker the better.

Zeus nudged his hand from his spot on the seat next to him. Sam scratched the dog behind the ears. “It’s okay, boy. I know you did everything you could.” He’d already picked a dart out of the dog’s neck that he hadn’t noticed before. Someone had shot it at the dog, but he didn’t know what impact it had on Zeus, since whatever drug had been in the dart had worn off by the time Sam had found Zeus.

The dog inched closer and whined. If there was one thing Sam had learned about this particular dog it was that he didn’t take well to what he considered failure. Zeus hadn’t done his job. He’d let Kelly get taken. It didn’t matter that Sam didn’t blame him. Zeus would be morose until they got Kelly back.

“Maybe she’s right. Maybe you would make a good service dog. You have the mind for it, the temperament for it, and you have the drive. I just don’t know if I want to give you up.” Zeus might not hold his heart like Bubbles did, but that was only because Bubbles was nearly useless as far as ranch dogs and Bubbles played with Pete, Cole’s son, which made him a favorite.

“Would you like that? Would you like to train to help Kelly?”

Zeus perked up and his ears turned like he was focused on Sam.

“What are you thinking about back there?” Connor asked. “Isn’t having a dog trained to be a service animal kind of expensive?”

It was, and Kelly had no money to her name. She'd even commented that she would love to do it, but there was no way to find a job and she couldn't get her account back with no money. "What else do I have to spend my savings on?" And if he couldn't ever show Kelly love any other way, he could do it this way. He could give her something that would help her heal and protect her when he couldn't be there. Obviously, it wasn't perfect. Zeus hadn't been able to keep Kelly out of the hands of her captors, but once Kelly came back, he wanted to make sure she stayed this time.

"I suppose you have a point. There's only so many dogs you can rescue. I can't fault you for wanting to do something for her."

Edwyn snorted. "I guess we're just throwing everything out the window on this one, huh? Should I assume that we're just going to start wedding planning on the way home? Are we pushing this any further?"

"Your concerns are noted, Edwyn," Connor glanced over at him. "Sending a dog out for training that will take months and is very expensive isn't offering marriage. Sam never said he was doing this with any romantic intent. He's the closest she has to family right now. Her parents and grandparents are all dead. I wasn't able to find a single aunt or uncle for her. We would normally have someone go live with their family after they've been with us, but she has nowhere to go."

"Except with Sam." He snorted again. "How convenient. I wonder what she'll choose."

Sam tried not to let Edwyn's words get to him, but that was impossible. He cared about Kelly and what had happened to her, where she was, and what was going on with her. He couldn't deny that. She'd already told him she might never be able to love him in return. He wasn't sure how he was going to live with that, but he would if he had to. At least he wasn't going to see her fall for someone else along the way. She didn't think she could love anyone.

“I’m not sure why you’re so concerned that we aren’t following the rules with Kelly. I am already completely aware that our chances are somewhere between slim and none.” The only sign of hope he had was that she’d said she was sorry. Before she’d kissed him, most likely to distract him or maybe to say goodbye, she’d told him she was sorry. That was enough.

On the outskirts of Denver, Edwyn pulled into a hotel. He and Connor went inside to rent a few rooms and verify the place was dog friendly while Sam took Zeus for a short walk. Denver, even though it was only about an hour and a half from where they’d started, felt much warmer.

Zeus ran off a little pent-up energy in the end of the parking lot while Sam waited to hear back from Connor. A few minutes later, Connor came up to his side.

“Edwyn is already in the room. I asked him to let me come get you alone.”

Sam snorted, knowing it wasn’t for his benefit that Edwyn wasn’t there. “And?”

“He has a point, but I don’t know what to tell you. You seem to be doing everything right so far. I don’t want you to feel like I don’t trust you. I already told you I do. But, if anything goes south, you need to be okay reaching out for help. Maybe not help from Edwyn, but someone.”

“Thanks.” It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Edwyn. He liked the foreman most of the time and his insight was invaluable when it came to the ranch. This was the only time they’d gotten on each other’s nerves. “I just hope that his unwillingness to let this be is just his need to follow rules and not any feelings for Kelly. I’m not about to let anyone else near her.”

Connor laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. “That’s not it, and I think you know that. He’s nervous. I’ve only just reached Nadine, but she won’t return any message from

me. I think he's nervous that his second chance could be even harder than this one."

"You don't think Nadine was a victim, do you?" Sam hoped not. Just knowing that he might someday learn just what Kelly had been through was terrifying. He wanted to see victims on the upswing, not reliving the past. But if Kelly was the woman he wanted to know better than any other, she couldn't just shut that part of herself off, and he didn't want her to.

"No, but I do get the feeling that she knows a lot about cyber security. More than the average person." He gave Sam a weighted look that conveyed trouble.

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Sam whistled and Zeus immediately returned. “Well, I guess if she comes to Wayside, we can use her help with security when the Guardians have to go back to Minnesota.”

Connor nodded as they headed for the hotel. “I hope she’s the good side of security, but that’s not the feeling I got when I was digging around for her.”

Nathan strode toward Kelly, a chain slowly swinging from one hand. One of his men had immediately met them at the door and taken her to the basement. She could hear the sounds of scuffles from other rooms. Odd that she knew it was people, not rats, near her.

He’d done his worst, told her to sit on the concrete slab in the corner and wait for Nathan. Odd too that she would’ve blocked the pain before, but now couldn’t. Maybe hope wasn’t all good because now she knew what was right outside the door to this apartment building. She knew what life was like without chains, degrading expectations, mental and physical abuse.

Grandma’s voice came back to her, loud and clear, echoing loudly in her head in the dark room. I told you so. Tears gathered, but she blinked them away. Yet again, her choice had led her to this place. She tilted her face up as far as the collar would allow. “Are you there?” she whispered. “I can’t even tell anymore.” One tear managed its way past her defenses.

Nathan slammed a chain on the floor, making her jump. He knew she hated any loud noises. “Well, what have we here?” He shoved the chain onto the loop at the back of her neck, forcing her to pull on the front of it or risk choking.

He laughed at her struggle. “Don’t worry. You won’t have to put up with this for long. Viceroy’s plan was delayed because of interference, but you haven’t got much time left. You’ve seen his face. Do you think he’d let you live after that?”

“So did Ramona. And you,” she choked out, momentarily forgetting that she shouldn’t say anything.

“Ms. Butters isn’t going anywhere. She is Nicholas’s thirdwife. The child is his, not that he cares about it. She forgot her place, but she’ll be back begging to shelter under his wing as soon as she gets here. It’s a long walk.” He laughed. “We’re all expendable. Some more than others.” He caressed along her jaw. “Too bad you had to leave. I had your money all ready for you. You were almost done with your term.”

She yanked her face away even as her jaw collided with the collar. “That’s a lie. It was all a lie. You never saved a penny for me. You stole everything I had, then took everything I was. You made me feel like I had no choice.”

His smile was as cold as the arctic. “I was only preparing you for this moment where you’d exhausted all your choices. You won’t even get the choice to breathe. In two hours, Viceroy will be done with his meeting. I’m to bring you up to him, then.”

Kelly closed her eyes and listened to Nathan’s footfalls as he left her tiny cement enclosure. She’d heard about that place but hadn’t wanted to believe it.

“Kelly?” a small voice came from outside her door. “Is that you?”

Kelly lifted the chain around her neck and tried walking toward the door. “Yes, who’s there?”

“It’s Anna. Remember me?”

Fresh tears poured down Kelly's cheeks. "Yes, of course. What are you doing down here? I was told you were dead." The one who'd brought her to faith had been alive this whole time?

"I lost count of how many days I've been down here. Nathan accused me of leading an escape. He decided this would be a worse punishment for me than anything else he could do. He's right. If I died, I'd see Jesus and that would be a reward, but he knows I won't do that. So, I keep praying for Jesus to take me home."

"Are you locked in?" What if there was a way out for both of them? Could she finally repay the goodness Anna had brought into her life? She'd supplied the hope that had literally saved her.

"Yes. I'm right across the hall from you. I can see your door through my food slot. Can you get to your door?" Anna asked.

"No, my chain can't reach that far." And she only had two hours to figure out how she was going to get out of this and try to save Anna, too "Are you all right?"

Anna chuckled. "I'm as all right as I can be. Faith tested day after day sometimes doesn't get stronger. Sometimes, I'm only hanging on by a thread."

Kelly sat on the floor with her chain stretched as far as she could, holding the weight up in her hands to take the pressure off her neck. Kelly didn't know what to say to the friend who had so much more faith than her but was still struggling. Who wouldn't struggle in this dungeon of torment? "Maybe that's just a human thing. Maybe we never learn to fully accept our lives because this isn't really our lives," she chattered, not knowing what else to say.

Anna snorted. "I know you're right. This isn't my home. I'm to a point where I'm not even looking to hear, 'well done, my good and faithful servant', but 'my child, your

chains are gone.’”

“I wish I was in there with you.” Kelly swallowed a sob that wouldn’t make the situation better. Nicolas Viceroy would revel in her weakness and tears.

“I haven’t seen a single true human in months. It would be a joy to see you.”

Kelly let Anna’s words sink in. She’d always known that Nathan and the men who used her didn’t see her as human, but she wasn’t the one with the major flaw. They were. Anna was right, they were less than human. Not her. Lord, we deserve life. If I’m not meant to live after today, so be it. But please find a way to save the people in this building who need it.

She glanced down at the spot where the watch used to be on her wrist and flinched. That watch brought her back to this place. It had allowed Nathan a door into her life when he shouldn’t have had one. Now she only had two hours to live and no way to tell when her time was up because the watch was gone.

“Anna, pray with me?” Kelly whispered.

“You know it,” Anna answered.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:38 am

Three men and a dog had no business in one tiny room except for that was all the hotel had. Sam had argued that there had to be more hotels in Denver, but Connor had said he was in communication with someone at FREE International and he'd told them the name of that hotel.

Zeus looked at the door and whined, his large eyes shifting from the door to Sam and back again.

"You don't have to go out, you're just nervous." He sat on the bed and turned on the TV, scrolling until he found a nature channel for Zeus. The poor dog had been either in a car on duty for a whole day. He'd managed to get Edwyn to go to a store and get dog food, so at least Zeus could eat.

The dog sat on the floor at his side, but he didn't miss the dog's harrumphs as he settled in. Connor picked up his phone on the second ring, "Connor."

Sam tried not to listen in. The conversation could be private. Then again, he could be talking to someone about how and when they would go after Nathan Klein in the hopes of finding Kelly.

"Yes. Understood," Connor said. "We'll be there in ten minutes." He pressed the screen of his phone to end the call then set it on the small table in the corner of the room. "Okay, it's go time."

"Go? Where?" Sam barely kept his frustration under control. "Even if we know Nathan is back here, we don't know that Kelly was with him."

“We do. Remember I called right away when we got in the car to head for Denver? Well, FREE has contacts in Denver. They’ve done big searches here and have friends on the police force and in the FBI. They were able to verify that not only did Nathan arrive back at the apartment complex he manages, but there was a man and a woman with him.”

“A woman. That doesn’t mean it was Kelly.” He wanted to hope that it wasn’t. He wanted her to be anywhere but back with her captor.

“We have no other leads. The police are going to meet us there in ten minutes.”

“And will someone from FREE be there?” Sam glanced at Zeus. Having him there would lead them to Kelly and might even help them in a pinch but if he was aggressive, like he was before Sam trained him, he could lose his chance to become a service animal. As it was, Sam would already have to have compelling evidence that Zeus was completely reformed.

“No, the local contact will be, but he’s only a friend of FREE International.”

Sam whistled for Zeus. He’d take the chance, so he didn’t have to face regret later, wishing the dog had been there. Zeus could go where others couldn’t and he was still looking for a way to make it up to Sam.

Edwyn handed Connor the keys, and they all piled into the car. Connor pulled up the directions on his phone and they took off within seconds. “Police will be there. We may not be able to do much, but I hope they’ll allow us to see Kelly.”

Sam resisted the urge to be negative. He still wasn’t certain Kelly was there. He still couldn’t understand why she would walk away again. Why choose Nathan’s lies over him? He had tried to be truthful with her about everything. Nathan had done nothing but lie. Where was the security?

“A known enemy is easier to overcome than a stranger. We know how these guys operate. The hope is to arrest Nathan and any offenders on the premises. We’ll save all we can,” Connor mumbled. “So, go into this with your eyes wide open.”

A known enemy is easier to overcome than a stranger. Connor hadn’t meant to, but he’d answered Sam’s concerns. Nathan was an enemy, but Kelly knew how to live with him. She’d constantly felt uncomfortable at Wayside because she didn’t know what to do. Church had been the cherry on top, forcing her to want to run. He’d been as welcoming as he possibly could, but that didn’t change the fact that he was not as known to her as Nathan.

“Let’s get her out of there.” He headed for the door with Zeus at his side. There was still no way to be certain she was even there, but he wouldn’t know until they checked, either. “What else did they say?” Connor had been on the phone for a minute, so they had to have given him more information than that.

“Not much. We need to rely on the police or risk having them complain that procedures weren’t followed. We don’t want these people to get off on a technicality.”

That meant he wasn’t going in there for a rescue, but that also meant that people inside would be safer. At least, that was the hope. No one ever knew for sure how an invasion was going to go down. Sam laid his hand on Zeus’s back and prayed that Kelly and anyone else they found would be alright. He prayed that they would take Nathan down without having to draw a single gun. The people in there didn’t need that kind of fear.

Connor pulled into the parking lot of a ratty-looking apartment complex. It was five stories tall with cracked windows and chipped tan stucco. The dark vanity shutters had seen better days, and the roof shingles had curled like aged paper.

“Isn’t this place . . . charming?” Edwyn didn’t usually turn to sarcasm, but the scene warranted it.

Three squad cars sat parked in the street along with a black large SUV. “Looks like they’re already here.” Connor unbuckled and opened his door. “Not sure if they’ll let us close since we asked for the help or if we’ll have to stay back.”

There were no police lines up yet, if they would put any up. Three women in their twenties stood by the front door, looking unsure about what they should do. None of them were Kelly.

“I want to go in,” Sam said, holding Zeus’s lead. He tugged against the hold with his nose to the ground. “Is she in there, boy?”

Zeus halted and his whole body went rigid. In the next instant, he lunged, breaking free of Sam’s grip. He raced inside the open front door. Sam raced after him, but a uniformed officer stopped him at the door.

“You have a reason to go in here?”

Sam pointed toward the dog running up the stairs. “That’s my dog, but I don’t live here. I was the guy who called in the request for help.”

The officer raised an eyebrow. In the next instant, Zeus’s barking and growling had the officer racing for the stairs. Sam didn’t wait for the invitation he knew wouldn’t come. Zeus had to have found Kelly, but what would he find when he got there?

Kelly stood in the corner with her back exposed to the room. This kind of shaming was meant to keep people in line, but she’d long ago lost her ability to feel anything. She’d been standing there for what felt like hours, alone, waiting for Nicolas Viceroy.

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That was meant to keep her wondering and worried, too. Little did they know that for the two hours she'd spent downstairs with Anna, they'd both prayed for either deliverance or peace. One or the other. If God spoke only in absolutes, then she was about to die because she felt a peace like she'd never known before. They couldn't hurt her. God had her.

The sound of loud barks made her jump. No one in the apartment had dogs. Nathan wouldn't allow pets, especially ones that could turn against him. She turned, only then realizing Nathan had left at some point and she was alone in the room.

With tentative steps, she tip-toed her way to the other side of the room and shrugged on what was left of her flannel shirt, holding it shut in the center since the buttons had been torn off in the removal. The barking grew louder and was now coupled with growling.

Nathan's voice screamed, "It's that demon dog of Kelly's! I thought Ramona took care of it?"

Viceroy answered, "Forget about it. Get out of here, now."

Her door slammed open, and Nathan stood there. "I won't fail again. He'll kill me if I let you go." He gripped her arm and thrust her toward the door.

"I'm not going." If Zeus was here, then so was Sam. She knew it right down to her bones.

"You think you have a choice?" He cuffed her over the head.

Kelly fought against the stars swirling in front of her eyes. If she resisted now, Sam would have time to find her. “No!”

Zeus barked and the unmistakable sounds of a running animal filled the room. “Let me go and you’ll have time to get away. Fixate on me and you’re going to jail.” She planted her feet, sure that if Zeus came through that door, he wasn’t going to let Nathan anywhere near her.

Nathan shoved her toward the door. “Get moving.”

Zeus barreled through the open doorway and knocked Nathan to the ground. Zeus didn’t stop growling and snapping, his teeth mere inches from Nathan’s face. Kelly had never seen the dog act that way, but she was hesitant to call him off. Nathan would probably shoot Zeus if he was able to get some control.

“Denver police! Hands where I can see them!” An officer stepped into the room, gun raised and aimed at Nathan.

Kelly raised her hands to be safe, and squealed as Sam rushed in right behind the officer.

“Zeus, hold,” Sam said, then gave a low whistle. Zeus backed off, but he didn’t take his eyes off Nathan, a low growl rumbled from his throat and his hackled made him appear huge. Nathan wasn’t going anywhere while Zeus had him in sight.

“That’s a good dog. Have you thought about having him trained?” the officer asked as he cuffed Nathan.

Sam looked at Kelly and gave a sigh. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

It was over. Kelly’s lip trembled, and she didn’t hold it back this time. Before she

could go to Sam and get comfort though, she had to tell the officer about Anna. “I have a friend locked in a cage downstairs. Her name is Anna, and she needs to be freed.”

The officer gave her a nod. “We’ll be going through this place and letting everyone know that the owner has been arrested. They are now free to leave if they wish to.”

“What about those that are too young to make that choice?” Kelly swallowed back the bile in her throat. She’d turned a blind eye to their plight when there was no hope, but now she would stand up for every last person there.

“Nicolas Viceroy was here. He ran about two minutes ago,” she told them.

Sam’s eyes focused on her. “You know his first name?”

She nodded. “He was here. He’d planned to kill me twice today. It was interrupted both times.”

Sam took a deep breath. In that moment, he looked as if he’d welcome a hug, so she didn’t ask. She stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around him.

“Ah, Kelly. I’m so sorry.” He rested his chin on her head and held her close.

“Why are you sorry? I’m the one who left. I’m the one who made this mess. I’m just a bad girl.” And she always would be, at least to some extent.

“No, you’re not. You never were. You were too trusting, and you thought everyone cared about you as much as you cared for them, but that doesn’t make you bad. Everyone makes bad decisions.”

She shook her head and pulled back from him so she could look him in the eyes.

“Sam, thank you for forgiving me, but I deserve it. I may have left to save you from me, but it wasn’t noble, I still chose this. Again.”

He gently touched her cheek, and she flinched at the pain. Her face had to look terrible, so why did Sam look at her like she was a precious jewel?

“Would you choose to come back here now, after this?” he asked.

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She pulled on the collar, wishing she'd been able to have that taken off before the officer had taken Nathan away. "No. I thought I could handle myself. I didn't leave with the intent of going back to Nathan. That just happened. I wanted to go so I didn't ruin your life. I don't want you to care about me, Sam."

He pulled her back into his arms and held her gently. "Too late."

Her tears surprised her as they coursed down her face. Sam cared. She knew it for certain. But would she ever have the capacity to love him? She cared about him enough to leave him for his own good, but could she care for him in person?

"Let's find a key for this." He touched the collar and ran his finger along her jaw. "I'm glad Zeus made it in here before I did."

She shivered at the idea that she might have seen aside of Sam that he never let anyone see, the side of him that would die to protect those he cared about. "I get it now. I'm so sorry, Sam. I didn't get it until this instant. It wasn't just about the fact that you saw me with another man. I didn't allow you to protect me by telling you what was going on."

He nodded slowly. "You didn't trust me. Trust and love go hand in hand. I would've gone to the end of the world and back again for you, but I didn't know."

"Can you forgive me?" Suddenly, all that mattered to her was hearing that Sam wanted to still have her in his life, that she was forgiven, and they could start fresh.

"Of course. Can you forgive me for leaving? For not questioning what I saw that day?"

For believing the worst of you when I knew better?"

She couldn't nod her head anymore; the metal was just too heavy. "I forgive you."

An officer appeared in the doorway. "I think this might be the key to that." He used the key to point at her collar. "Can I try it? It worked on your friend's handcuffs downstairs."

"Anna?" She stepped forward and the chain pulled her back. She choked, reaching for the heavy collar.

Sam caught her and kept her from falling, while the officer stuck the key in the lock and twisted. The metal circle opened and fell to the floor, blessedly behind her and not on her feet. Sam shrugged out of his coat and wrapped it around her, then zipped it closed. "Let's go home."

The officer shook his head. "Sorry, folks. Kelly here is a witness, and I'm going to need to get a statement. She should also go to the hospital and get examined. I'm sorry. I know you've been through a lot, and this is just another invasion. You can refuse it if you want, but it limits our evidence."

Kelly's chest tightened. More invasions. Would she ever be able to say no without feeling like she was either letting people down or risking her life? "I'll do it, but I want Sam with me."

He took her hand. "I'll be here. You don't ever have to worry about being alone again."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sam slowly walked down the hallway, trying not to stare at anyone as he took

through the crowd that had gathered. People were crying, children huddled in corners, and no one spoke. Two officers stood near the open front door, trying to process people so they could leave, but no one seemed to want to talk.

Kelly tensed at his side as a woman in a suit came in carrying her high heeled shoes. He glanced over at the woman as Kelly moved behind him. Immediately, he stood his ground to protect her. There was something about the woman that made his blood run cold, but he couldn't say what it was. All he knew for certain was that she didn't appear to belong there.

One of the officers spoke to her, "Unless you live here, you're going to have to leave."

"I own this place." She snorted.

"Then we have a few questions for you," the officer said.

She waved him off as if he were of no consequence. "I'll see you in my office. Just give me a moment to grab some shoes. I just had to walk for over an hour to get here."

He hadn't noticed how cold she looked until then. Even tough people got frostbite. Who was this woman? He watched her head to a back room. The officer who had spoken to her continued to talk with the woman he'd originally been speaking to before the woman walked in.

"Who is she?" Sam asked quietly.

"Ramona Butters, one of Viceroy's wives," Kelly's voice squeaked slightly.

One of his wives? The man had multiple? He shuffled Kelly toward the door. As he reached for the handle, someone called out Kelly's name.

Kelly turned as a young woman ran toward her. The woman's wrists were raw and she wore little more than a tee-shirt. "Kelly, we're free. Praise God, we're free!" She wrapped Kelly in a hug.

He'd expected her to back away since Kelly hadn't ever looked comfortable with touch in the short time she'd been at Wayside. With this woman, Kelly held her close as tears poured down her face. "I didn't think it was possible. I was sure I was dead. The peace was real, Anna. It was real."

Anna stroked Kelly's hair and cried along with her. "It was. I felt it, too"

A team of paramedics came in, saw Kelly and Anna right away and shunted them both toward the door. "Ronald, I've got these two. Come talk to them in the back of number four."

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“Got it.” The officer wrote down a note, then went back to what he was doing.

Everyone seemed to have forgotten the woman who’d come in dressed in a suit limping from broken heels. Viceroy’s wife. Where had he heard the name Ramona Butters before? If only Connor had followed him in, he could ask. As far as he could tell, Connor and Edwyn hadn’t been allowed inside, and he wasn’t going to leave until he looked for this Ramona, Viceroy, and Nathan since he seemed as slippery as an eel.

Sam whistled for Zeus and made sure no one was watching him as he headed for Ramona’s office. Was she really the owner or had she made that up to get out of talking to the police right away? Unless a woman did something that immediately made her suspicious, officers often gave them the benefit of the doubt. He hoped she wasn’t behind the door plotting murder.

He gripped Zeus’s collar, then slowly opened the door. Inside, there was a closet that led to a stairway, but the room was empty. Sam dug into his jacket pocket for his keychain flashlight, flicked it on, and dove into the dark staircase.

Zeus stayed at his side instead of running ahead. While the dog’s eyes were probably better than his, Sam was glad for the stability of the dog. He couldn’t hear anything except the sound of his own footsteps. Ramona had to have escaped through this exit, but where would it lead and what would he find when he got there?

He pushed forward, taking a few steps, then waiting to see if he could hear anything. His light only penetrated a few feet into the darkness. If that woman had gone ahead of him, she had to be out of the narrow staircase by already since there was no way to

navigate it without light and he didn't see anything but pitch black ahead.

The stairs ended and the floor leveled out. His head brushed the ceiling and cobwebs clung to his hair. He brushed them away quickly and pressed ahead. Zeussniffed the air but kept mostly silent. He seemed to know this wasn't the time to bark or run.

Soft voices ahead made Sam stop so he could hear what they said. "Nathan was taken. He must have been too focused on the girl. I told him to leave her behind back in Wyoming. I knew where she was and could've easily gotten to her once we were sure we weren't followed," a man said.

"You think I care? You left me on the side of the highway to walk. I should've left you for the police," the woman answered.

He heard the distinct sound of a hard slap echo down the hall and then a whimper.

"Don't ever talk to me like that. You have the unfortunate belief that you're an equal with me and you never will be. If you don't start remembering your place, I'll put you in the grave."

"Y-yes, sir," the woman didn't sound nearly as sophisticated now.

"Get in the car. Now. It won't be long before they realize you aren't back there."

"Do you even care that I made it here in time?"

Sam didn't feel the need to listen to their arguing and it would allow him to get closer without notice. If Ramona was Viceroy's wife, then the man she was talking to had to be Viceroy. He was within a few yards of the man they'd been chasing for almost a year. Always one step behind.

Sam reached the door and felt for his gun. It was at his side, but would the environment on the other side of the door be conducive to using it? He had to assume it would be too dark and it would be dangerous. There was no way to know if any victims were held down there. Too light and he'd be seen right away. A gun wouldn't help him in that scenario. He might have the element of surprise, but it wasn't like he could shoot them. That would be nothing short of murder.

He tested the knob, and it turned quietly in his hand. Zeus lowered slightly, ready to spring. A car engine started and took off. Sam whipped open the door in time to see a distant garage door opening and lights speeding out of it. A stench hit him square in the gut and he retched before he could get a handle on what was happening.

He flashed his light around him, and horror choked him. Kelly had told him that women would disappear in the night, never to be seen again. Now, he knew where they went. There was no way to follow Ramona and Viceroy, but he could get the cops to send someone from the coroner down there. What he'd found would keep them busy for a long time.

Kelly let the EMT check her over and put butterfly tape on her wounds to her cheek. He asked her if she would please consider submitting a kit once they got to the hospital, if for no other reason than to help the police convict the people responsible for all of this.

She didn't want to. That didn't mean she wouldn't, but she didn't want to. Anna reached over and squeezed her hand. "We can do this."

Her words made her think of Sam. He'd said he wouldn't leave her, but she hadn't seen him for at least fifteen minutes. As soon as the paramedic had gathered her and Anna toward the ambulance, Sam had disappeared.

"You okay?" Anna reached over and held out her hand.

Kelly squeezed it in return, but touching anyone had become too emotional and she let her go right away. “Sam was here. He came for me but then was just gone. I don’t understand. He wasn’t any part of this and has no reason to hide from me or the police, so where did he go?”

Connor peered from behind one of the back doors of the ambulance. “Can we come over and say hello?”

Kelly waved them over. “Have you seen Sam? He’s missing.”

Connor looked surprised. “I thought he was in there with you. I saw people coming out finally and didn’t see him, so I thought to check the ambulances. So, he’s not here either?” Connor stood taller, glancing around at the other vehicles nearby.

One of the officers yelled, “That woman that came in is missing. There’s no one in that room where she went and there seems to be an escape route from that room. A man just came up from there after following her and says we need to call in the MEO.”

Kelly closed her eyes tightly. MEO meant Medical Examiners Office. Someone had died down there. Was it Sam? “Please,” she choked on the word. “Go make sure he wasn’t talking about Sam.”

Connor nodded. “I’ll make sure he’s all right. You just stay with these folks. Go to the hospital if you need. We’ll meet you there. Everything will be all right. Okay?”

The slight disconnect in his voice did more to shatter her hope than her own thoughts. Could Sam be dead? Viceroy would’ve shot him without a second thought. Ramona might not usually use guns, but she would kill him without question. Had she survived just to be alone?

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“Kelly . . . pray about it.” Anna touched her arm. “All that worrying won’t do you any good. It will only give you an ulcer.”

An EMT came out of the back of the ambulance. “She’s right. I’m done with what I can do out here. Both of you really need to have more fluids. I’d like a doctor to take a look at that laceration on your collar bone, and?—,”

Kelly interrupted him. “I know, the kit has to be performed there at the hospital. Can you blame us for not wanting to go? When we were here, we were trained exactly what to say to any medical professional so that no one ever knew what was going on. We both know that you’ll do your kit and nothing will happen. Nathan and Nicolas won’t ever see the inside of a jail cell. It’s just not fair.”

Her emotions were getting to her. She had to calm down and breathe until she found out if Sam was all right.

Edwyn came back, looking sheepish. “Hey, sorry. I know you really wanted to see Sam. He’s being detained right now because of what he found in the basement garage. He’s having to answer for why he went down there without any police. I don’t think they’ll take him to jail, but that’s where he is.”

She breathed a sigh of relief that he wasn’t dead somewhere and that Viceroy must not have known he was down there. “So, he can’t come back?”

Anna gave her an encouraging look. “He’ll be here when he can. He’ll have to answer questions, then he’ll come over and find you. Don’t worry.”

Except there was a very real possibility that she'd have to go to the hospital without him because he'd gone after people instead of coming with her. He'd literally said he wouldn't leave her side, then did. Kelly bit her lip. "I know. I just wanted him here now. I don't like being here. I'm scared. I hurt all over." Her hands trembled and she grasped them together so no one would notice.

The EMT came over and casually checked her pulse again. "Heart rate is spiking." He glanced down at her, then over to his partner.

"Both of these two need to go in, anyway. Are you with either of them?" He directed the question at Edwyn.

"No, sorry. Kelly is a friend." He took a step back. "Can I ask which hospital so we can see Kelly after she's been checked over?"

The EMT frowned. "Due to the nature of this call, I can't give you that information. I can't stop you from ambulance chasing, but I can't hand you information."

Edwyn held up his hands. He wouldn't force anyone to break rules, even if it meant his life would be easier. "Kelly, just keep on keeping on. We'll find you. You won't be alone for long. Okay?"

She nodded quickly, still feeling overwhelmed by too many emotions to speak. The EMT came around and pushed her gurney into position, then slid her in place. Anna followed, her gurney close enough for Kelly to reach out and touch it.

One of the EMTs stayed in the back with them. He was perched on a built-in metal cabinet behind them. Riding facing backward without the ability to see anything left her even more disoriented than the stress. "I'm sleepy." And she desperately wanted a shower to scrub the last 24 hours away.

“The nurses will have a bed waiting for you as soon as you’re finished being looked at. They all know that you won’t start getting better until they’re done doing what has to be done.”

Kelly snorted. She’d never felt like clinics or hospitals were great places to heal. Whenever she’d been to one, she’d had to lie. Nothing in her chart from the last few years was the truth. She suspected that they knew what was going on, but couldn’t do anything. Accusing people of human trafficking with little to no proof didn’t do anyone good. If they were right but couldn’t prove it, life could end up much worse for her than if they’d kept their mouths shut.

A few minutes later, they pulled into the ER dock. The door swung open and both Kelly and Anna were wheeled into the emergency department. Kelly braced herself by going into what she called her blank space, the part of her mind where no one and nothing could enter. She was alone there. Unfortunately, there also weren’t comfy chairs or light, but at least she could block out most of what was happening around her.

Once they finished and got her into a room, she closed her eyes as the nurse brought out a warm blanket from the warmer and tucked it in around her. “Can I shower? Is that allowed?” She felt filthy, and the bedding was all white and pristine.

The nurse screwed up her lips in thought. “You can, but your blood sugars were really low, your blood pressures were really low, and you’re wobbly. I understand why you want a shower, but I recommend you wait until you’re fully stable.”

“Is there a seat in the shower?” she pressed.

“I can get a stool for you. If that’s a compromise that will work, then I’ll do that for you.”

Kelly closed her eyes, imagining the hot water washing away everything, hopefully even her memories, of the last day. “Please. And I know there’s a call button in there. I won’t get too far from it.”

The nurse smiled. “Thanks. That makes my job easier.” She left the room and the silence soon felt heavy around Kelly. She needed to do things. Everyone had talked about nothing but her healing the last few weeks, but that seemed even further away now. What Nathan and Nicolas had done to her would leave scars far deeper than those on her skin.

The nurse came back a few minutes later and Kelly had drifted into a semi-dream state where she felt heavy and sleepy, her eyes were closed, and moving was difficult.

“I’ve left the chair for you,” the nurse whispered.

Those words, giving her the go-ahead to shower, gave her the energy she needed to get out from under the heated blanket and semi-comfortable bed. She stripped off the hospital gown and turned the water as hot as she could stand, then inched it up a notch more.

Steam poured from the shower as Kelly stepped inside. Meticulously, she lathered her hair and left the shampoo in for maximum effect while she washed her body from her face down to her toes. Then, she rinsed her hair and did the same with the conditioner, leaving it for five minutes as she let the heat of the shower penetrate down to her bones.

When she pulled back the curtain and the cool room air hit her, dizziness threatened for a moment, and she gripped the sides of the stool to keep upright. Once her head stopped swimming, she fished her arms back through the sleeves of the gown and tied it in the back. She wished they’d left her with a robe or a spare gown she could wrap around herself the other way. After what she’d been through in that room waiting to

die, having her back exposed was a painful reminder.

After about a half hour, the same nice nurse came in and pulled two things from her pocket and laid them on the tray next to the computer, out of Kelly's reach. "The doctor prescribed some sleep assistance for you. Though you look sleepy enough as it is, I can't go against his orders. You'll feel heavy for a little bit, then you'll drift off. I'll be here when you wake up. Is there anything you want us to tell visitors if they come?"

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Kelly slowly nodded her head. “If Sam comes, tell him . . . thank you.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sam and Zeus climbed into the back of Edwyn’s car one more time. Edwyn took the driver’s position, and Connor sat in front of him. Even though it was chilly, Sam cracked the window open for some fresh air. The scent of death wouldn’t leave his nose, and he couldn’t wait to find a shower.

“I’m assuming we’re staying here another night?” he asked Connor.

Connor answered, “We’re going to drop you off at a hotel where you can stay until Kelly is released. Edwyn will drive me to a car rental place so I can get some wheels for you while you’re here. Take your time. She may need a few days.”

“Thanks.” Sam laid his hand on Zeus’s head, then scratched behind his ears. As much as he was Sam’s favorite, Zeus had chosen Kelly. He couldn’t really blame the dog. Kelly was cuter by far.

Edwyn pulled into a nicer hotel than they’d stayed in the night before. “This hotel doesn’t take dogs, so we’ll be taking Zeus with us. He was a very good boy and I’ll be sure to give him something special when we get home,” said Connor.

“Thanks for that.” Though Sam could already tell Zeus felt vindicated. He’d done his duty and could now rest. He was, even now, sleeping on Sam’s feet.

Edwyn pulled into a spot and turned off the car. Connor glanced back at Sam. “I’m

going to go inside and get your room. I'll be back out with the key."

Sam scratched Zeus's head, then gently moved it over so he could get out without accidentally kicking the dog. Zeus was so exhausted he barely noticed. Edwyn came around the car and offered his hand to Sam. "Hey, I'm sorry we've been at odds the last few weeks. We've never been this way before, and I don't want to be again. I'm sorry for letting the rules get to me. I'm sorry for not putting our friendship above my own righteousness."

Sam shrugged. "Trying to be righteous isn't a bad thing. But thank you. I hope you trust me now."

"I do. I know you'll do what it takes to take care of her and to make sure that she heals." Edwyn leaned against the trunk of his car.

Sam bit his lip. He hated asking Lacy to do more work. She was already putting in more than full-time hours. Then again, they all were. "When you take Zeus home, could you ask Lacy to look into the closest place to have Zeus trained to be a service dog? A real service dog that can help Kelly in case she has anxiety attacks or whatever other things Brendon thinks might be helpful? I'll pay for it."

Edwyn's brow rose. "I guess I can't say anything. We've gone out of our way to get wheelchairs for guests who've needed them, glasses for those who have needed them, and even dietary special foods for those who need them. Who am I to say no to a service dog? But you know that it will cost a lot, right?"

Sam thought back to the day in the truck with Kelly after they'd visited the bank. She'd been so defeated that she'd refused to string more than two words together on the ride home and she'd gotten stuck in a blizzard later because she was so distracted. She needed to feel secure and taken care of. This was the first step in letting her know that his protection was more than brawn, which he honestly didn't have that much of,

but brains and a bank account, too. He wasn't rich, but he'd saved what he had. Now, the rainy day was here, and he looked forward to putting his savings to good use.

"Here," Edwyn said as he shoved a piece of paper toward Sam.

Sam looked at the scrawled address on the slip of paper. "What's this?"

"I asked one of the officers if they could tell me where they'd taken Kelly because the EMTs wouldn't tell me. I totally get why they didn't. I had to give them every piece of identification I had on me to prove that they all matched and I was who I said I was. Then they gave me the information. There is no guarantee you'll get in to see her because you're not family. But at least you know where she is."

Sam tucked the important slip of paper in his back pocket for safekeeping. "Thank you. I was going to start calling hospitals as soon as I got in my room. You just saved me a lot of time."

"You're welcome. Take care, man. I hope you're back at Wayside soon."

"Thanks. Oh, and Edwyn, if I'm gone for more than two days after Lacy finds a place, tell her I give her permission to use my account and get the process started. She has my bank information. I want this started because I know it will take time."

Edwyn nodded. "Consider it done. You can count on me."

Sam turned and headed toward the hotel. There were few people on the earth that he trusted more than Edwyn.

Edwyn led Zeus back to the kennels after his warm reception at home. Everything out there was as it should be. Someone had taken over the duties of feeding and watering the dogs. They looked happy and Max, the golden retriever, was particularly happy to

see Zeus home.

After opening the door and making sure the latch was secured once again, he headed for his cabin. So much had changed in the last day that he was exhausted, and home didn't even feel quite right. His attention was on high-alert, and he couldn't rest or calm down.

He put a kettle on the stove and flipped the burner to high. When he was anxious as a kid, mom would make him tea that helped him relax. It was the only tea he drank anymore. He waited for the whistle, pronouncing the water hot enough to steep his tea. Once he'd put a loaded helping of honey in the water, he dunked the tea bag and headed to his room to change.

His life and calling were definitely on the fringe at Wayside. He rarely had guests of his own because his job outside of the work they did with victims of human trafficking kept him busy all the time. The last few weeks, he'd noticed a definite lack in his training, and that didn't sit well. He didn't want people coming to Wayside then having to switch wranglers because they weren't comfortable with him.

He tugged a printout from his pocket. Lacey had given it to him when he'd arrived at home. He'd gone ahead and called her as soon as Sam had asked him to, while he was waiting for Connor to return to the car. So, Lacy had taken that hour and found the few relatively close dog trainers. He cringed at the expense, but that was for intense training.

The biggest issue was, Sam could spend all that money and still not have a working dog. There were no guarantees Zeus would take to the program. What if Sam spent upwards of \$30,000 and Zeus came back just as he was before?

He grabbed his mug and sat down at his table, flipped open his laptop and turned it on. It whirred to life, but instead of his screensaver the screen went black. Green

letters appeared at the top.

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Was wondering when you'd open your computer.

He stared at the screen. Had he been hacked? Obviously. But why and who? And why would they talk to him?

He typed out a reply,

Are you a Nigerian prince, wanting to give me your fortune?

The person replied,

Nice try. Tell your boss to back off and leave me alone. It actually kind of hurts that he got ahold of me and not you. I guess you still can't think of anyone but yourself.

He stared at the screen and his chest tightened. He consciously took a deep breath and a sip of tea that was far hotter than he thought it would be.

This is Nadine, isn't it?

A pause, and then:

My name isn't your concern. You don't want me in your life anymore. Trust me on this one. As you can see, I can hack into your computer.

It isn't even that hard. I will break any and all security you have around that ranch in Wyoming that for some reason isn't on Google. Yeah, I can put it there, too. So, leave me alone.

Edwyn glanced around him. Was it possible she could see him? The security of Wayside was too important to risk for a chance to see Nadine again. No matter how sorry he was about what had happened.

I'll tell him to back off. Nadine, I know it's probably too little, too late, but I'm sorry. I know you feel like I turned my back on you. I wasn't allowed to see you. It wasn't my choice.

The cursor flashed at him, blinking over and over. Was Nadine gone? Had she abandoned their little chat that she'd illegally created?

Couldn't? Or wouldn't? Because continuing to see me would've bent the rules about enlisted persons cavorting with senior officers. No one had to know. But you had to tell them.

You couldn't bend a rule for a little while until I could get transferred. No. Instead you let your superior know that you had feelings for someone directly under you. You ruined my military career. You chose them. I had to leave, but I found my way. Now, when people want things done, they come to me. No one can escape me if I want to find them.

Edwyn's thoughts raced. If Nadine could use that very same talent for good, she could work for any of the alphabet agencies. If she was that good, they would pay her a lot of money. But he got the feeling she wasn't good.

Nadine, are you doing illegal things?

His computer shut down almost instantly.

He stared at the screen, eyes wide, nowhere near tired. "I'm going to need a second cup of tea," he mumbled.

Kelly grabbed the remote to turn on the TV when someone knocked on her open door. “Delivery!” the nurse said with a cheery smile.

“For me?” Who would send her anything? For a brief moment, she worried about Nathan. He’d called himself her boyfriend at Wayside to try to get the guys there to believe him. “Who are they from?”

The nurse set them on a shelf across the room. “The card says ‘from Sam, I’m letting you get better for a little while before I try to come see you. Thinking of you.’ Aww, he’s a keeper. Where would you like these?” The nurse spoke without pausing at all.

“Um, how about there, by the window?” Plants needed light, even if they were cut, right? She had no idea. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d been given cut flowers or any other gift. “That looks good. They brighten up the room.” But not as much as if he had come himself.

“It’s good that he understands you need a day. So often, people come and visit before you’ve had a chance to rest and then you take longer to heal. But just so you have comfort, we are limiting your guests. And absolutely no guests if you’re asleep. I heard from the doctor that you were taken from that raid of that apartment yesterday. So sad. But they rescued sixteen women and arrested one trafficker.”

“Only sixteen?” There had been so many more people in that apartment.

“That’s what I was told. Sixteen is still a great thing. Congratulations.” The nurse patted her arm above the IV they’d put in after her shower. She’d begged them to wait until she was clean, and they’d begrudgingly agreed, though it could’ve been that she’d finally put her foot down and threatened to tear them out if they put them in.

“Your friend, Anna, who came in with you is right across the hall. She’s doing a little

bit better and asked if she could come over to visit you. Would that be all right?" She pressed a few buttons on the IV drip machine.

"That's fine. We're good friends." Even saying that felt odd. She'd never thought she'd be able to call Anna her friend. She'd been told Anna was dead. And if what she'd gleaned from listening to the mumbles of the EMS team, Anna might not have had much longer.

"Did you hear anything about the ME going to that apartment?"

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The nurse sat down and lowered her voice. “They’re talking about it all over the radio. Over twenty bodies were found in that basement in varying states of decay. If you’re into the creepy stuff, it really sets your mind going.”

She didn’t need to be into the creepy stuff. She’d lived a life of constant fear that she would disappear. Just because she knew now where people had disappeared too, didn’t make the situation any easier. “Yeah, gets your heart racing.”

The nurse chuckled and finished what she was doing, then headed for the door. She paused for a second. “I’ll let Anna know she can come over.”

Kelly gently scratched the spot next to the tape holding the IV, knowing that she couldn’t really make the feeling any better, but doing something helped mentally. She went back to scrolling the TV as Anna came in. She was in a hospital gown and robe. After washing her hair, she now looked much different than she had the day before, though still almost skeletal.

“Didn’t they feed you at all?” Kelly indicated the chair near her bed so Anna could sit.

“They sent food down occasionally. It was usually prepackaged stuff, like breakfast bars or toaster pastries. Just lots of sugar and no substance. I ate it because I didn’t want to starve.”

“Doesn’t look like they did a good job of preventing that. What are your plans after we get out of here?” She hoped Anna had somewhere to go. If not, maybe Conner would allow her to come to Wayside.

“I’m actually from overseas. My parents were missionaries near India. I don’t know if they’re still there, or here . . . They could be anywhere by now. I don’t even know which churches were supporting us to contact and ask. One of the officers was going to put my information into a nationwide missing person’s database, but I may not be on it since I went missing in India, and they would have no reason to believe I’d come back to the states.”

Kelly swallowed. Homeless. But now she understood where Anna had gotten her steadfast faith. She’d grown up with it. “I don’t know what happened to get you all the way over the ocean and halfway across the North American continent, but I’m so glad you ended up near me,” Kelly said. “Without you, I don’t know where I’d be.”

Anna looked far away for a second. “I love my family and miss them, but I’m worried that I may never be reunited with them. I guess I’ll have to see what God has in store for me.”

“If God could answer our prayer in the dungeon, he will answer our prayer in a hospital.” Though Kelly wasn’t at all sure if that was how prayer worked or not. One thing was for certain: when she got out of the hospital, she wanted to learn more about Jesus and the faith that had saved her life.

“You’re right. I’m just worried because I don’t have a place to go, and they are talking about discharging me as soon as tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Kelly said slowly. That didn’t leave her much time. “I’ll call Connor and see if you can come with me to Wayside Ranch. It’s a place where victims can go to heal. The only drawback is that you might get Edwyn as a wrangler and he’s a little loud.”

Anna snorted. “After being in that basement for five months, noise doesn’t bother me. I craved sound. Any sound. People, voices, the scurry of tiny feet. I needed to know I

wasn't the only one down there."

Kelly nodded, already feeling like Wayside was perfect for Anna. With the dogs and the horses, it was peaceful but rarely silent. She would love the dogs, whistles, the sound of the wind blowing, and even the men joking. If she had to be honest, she missed all of that, too

"I hope you can come. It would be really good to have another friend there. More than just Sam."

Anna grinned. "Yes, Sam. Is he the one you told me about that night? The one you loved and prayed for a chance to see again?"

Had she done that? She remembered calling on the name of Jesus that night, but she'd been in so much pain that little else made its way to the surface. She very well could've prayed for the chance to see Sam again. And if so, God worked even when she didn't remember asking for His help.

"He's a good man, Anna. I don't deserve a man like him."

Anna wove her fingers through Kelly's. "Oh, dear one, you do. That's the very best discovery. You absolutely do."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After a few days in the hospital, Kelly and Sam traveled to the same halfway house where Kelly had lived for three months before she came to Wayside. Now, Anna would be joining her on the trip out to the ranch.

Sam seemed uncomfortable, unsure of what to say or do with Anna. She seemed to be more of an issue for him than Kelly had been, which made her feel a little better

about everything. Even after all the mistakes they'd made, he'd still felt something. If he hadn't, he would've treated her just like everyone else.

Sam went inside with her and Becky, the housing coordinator, came out and smiled. "Kelly, so good to see you again."

She nodded, still unable to allow herself to get too close to people. Even the doctors who'd had to check her in the hospital had left notes in her chart not to wake her from a hard sleep with touch, or she might try to punch them. She didn't want to. Her reactions were embarrassing, but that's where her mind was now.

Anna came down carrying a bag very similar to the one Kelly had. It reminded her that she didn't need it anymore and someone else might get better use of it. She'd send it back to them when she got home. The thought brought a smile, at least on the inside. She wasn't quite to the point of allowing anyone else to know how she felt yet.

Sam took over the conversation, chatting with Becky about what they did at the ranch and going over the minimal paperwork. Before long, Anna was headed out to the car with them for the trip back to the ranch. She'd seen Sam almost every day and he'd helped her pass the time as much as he could, but she couldn't wait to see Zeus. She craved his bristly fur against her face.

Sam turned on the radio quietly and the little bit of sound allowed her to relax into a lull in the passenger seat. Before long, Sam had pulled into a car rental place. He smiled at her. "Sorry, I wish I didn't have to rouse you, but here's where we leave the car. Lacy is waiting in that red car right over there." He pointed across the lot. "Why don't you take Anna over and introduce her, so you aren't standing outside in the cold."

At least they'd given Anna a coat. Kelly still had Sam's after he'd wrapped it around

her. That was the only piece of clothing she still had from that day. Sam had gone out to buy everything she'd needed for an outfit to ride home. He'd purchased clothes that were soft, comfortable, and roomy. Not what a guy normally would've chosen, but they made her feel good in her skin.

“Anna, you ready?” she asked.

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“You said this is a Christian place, right?” Anna asked.

“You will hear about faith there, but it isn’t required. Why?” Was Anna wavering in her beliefs?

“My parents would approve.” She smiled. “I’m sure this is the right place to be. I’ll be found here.”

Kelly and Anna had been talking daily, discussing faith and what it meant to believe. In just a few days, Kelly had learned more than she had in the months prior. She now knew what it meant to pray and be forgiven. There was more to faith than being saved in a moment of terror. Now she wanted to know more. Her soul seemed to thirst for more than she could give it.

Anna followed Kelly over to Lacy’s car. Lacy got out and opened the trunk, welcoming both of them with a big smile. “Kelly, so glad to see you. You must be Anna.” She gently took Anna’s bag and put it in the trunk. “Is there anything you’ll need out of there before you get to your cabin?” She touched the trunk and waited for Anna’s answer.

“No, there’s not much in there to begin with.” Anna laughed nervously.

“We’ll tackle that once we get to Wayside. I’ve put Anna in the cabin next to yours, Kelly.” She opened the back door for them.

Both Kelly and Anna climbed into the back. “Is Zeus okay?” Kelly hadn’t asked Sam because he’d been there. He probably didn’t know. Lacy had been at Wayside, she’d

probably seen Zeus daily.

“I haven’t seen him in a while. I’m sure he’s just fine, though. He’s a good boy.”

Kelly’s heart sank. “He’s the best. Is something wrong that you haven’t seen him?”

Lacy looked in the rearview mirror at her with friendly eyes. “I don’t work in the kennels or out in the yard much. So, unless he was out there when I walk to my cabin for work, I wouldn’t see him.”

Something about the way she said that felt off, like it wasn’t completely true. Kelly hadn’t known Lacy for long, but she seemed like an honest person. She couldn’t really judge, since she’d spent so much of her life living a lie.

Sam got into the car, interrupting the conversation. He closed the door and gave a few papers to Lacy, then buckled in. “Let’s get home. I’m sure you’re ready for some rest and relaxation.”

Anna nodded quickly. “I also want to know what happened. Was Nathan arrested? Is he still in jail? What about the others that Kelly mentioned?”

Sam’s face went hard instantly. “It’s probably a good idea not to talk about those other anywhere but in sessions with Brendon. Right now, those two are still on the loose. Nathan is in custody. He’s in lockdown, but we know how this works. He won’t live long enough to testify.”

Anna flinched. “Will they ask us to testify?”

Lacy cut a glance at Sam that clearly told him to watch his words. He took a deep breath. “I don’t know. We haven’t been told what will happen. If they subpoena you, then you’ll have to.”

Kelly had no desire to recount what had happened to her. Hopefully, the statement she'd already given and the various evidence she'd given would be enough from her. She was ready to be done with the entire mess. If Nathan didn't make it to trial, well, neither would all the people he had stored in the basement.

"I was told only sixteen people were rescued and Anna and I were two of them." Kelly moved the seat belt away from her neck, so it didn't rub against her scar.

Sam nodded. "I know. But I've heard from the FREE International representative that it's common. There are always some who can't admit they are stuck or who believe their captor can't possibly be as bad as some. I don't know if they're brainwashed, or what happens."

"I do," Anna choked. "Nathan wasn't the only one to have a hand in that property. He wasn't even the one to control all those girls. The others knew that if they left and their pimp found out, they might die. There's no way Wayside could take all of them and neither could the halfway house. Where would they go? They had to choose what they knew over what they thought would be a sure death."

Lacy sighed. "And this is why we need to rid the world of this stain."

In under a half hour, Lacy pulled into the Wayside driveway. The rolling hills immediately soothed Kelly. Even though Nathan had found her there, it felt like home. Secure. Safe. Sam had made sure of that. Nathan wouldn't get to her anymore. She reached over to Anna and threaded their fingers together, despite the immediate discomfort. "Anna, Welcome home."

Sam found himself in the barn again, this time taking a curry brush to Bella so Kelly could ride later. Being home after a few days in a hotel was wonderful. His bed had felt more comfortable than ever. Helping matters was the fact that Kelly was also back and safe. He'd worried the entire time she was in the hospital.

With Nathan behind bars, would she finally have some breathing room? Could she finally start moving forward instead of constantly having to look back? Viceroy was still out there and clearly so was Ramona. After talking with Connor about her, he'd been reminded that she was the nurse who had kidnapped and murdered children to keep her own son alive. At least Kelly probably wasn't one of her targets, though she was also the one who tortured Dee and left her permanently scarred.

This duo needed to be taken down, but he was hesitant to even suggest Kelly be the one to do it. According to her, though, she'd seen his face. There weren't many living people who would be willing to turn on him. Kelly might be the only one. Doing that would force her to relive the most horrible moments of her life. Even asking her to do that felt like too much.

At least he wasn't the one who would have to ask her, but he'd support her no matter what she chose. As he slowly ran the metal brush over the horse's side, he realized that loving Kelly from this moment forward would look different for him than for most couples. She might never show affection in public. She might never be able to show affection at all. She could, but he had to go into this expecting the worst so that any progress she made was a total joy, a hurdle overcome, a win for them both.

Kelly peeked around the end of the stall, her shy eyes capturing his attention immediately. "Hey, how are you this morning?" He hoped she'd slept well the night before.

"Good. I'm looking forward to my first Thanksgiving where I have something to be thankful for. Even at home, growing up, I never looked at it as a day to reflect on what I had. It was just a day to eat a lot and watch a parade on TV."

"If you're looking for a little tradition, I'm sure Connor wouldn't mind if we turned it on." He motioned for her to come over.

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Some of the guests had said that learning to groom the horses had been a supremely calming exercise. Some of them even wanted to do it daily. The sound, the motion, the calming effect it had on the horse, were all positive things and helped to relax the guest.

Sam gave her the brush, then covered her hand with his and put just enough pressure on the wide brush, showing her how to proceed. He backed off the moment she had the motion and pressure because he knew she still felt uncomfortable with touch, though she hadn't tensed and pulled away as he'd worried she would.

"This has to be too rough for brushing under her belly or down her legs and she has mud on her legs." Kelly stopped brushing and put her hand through the leather strap on the back.

"You're absolutely right. The metal combs would hurt in those areas. I've used a stiffer cloth, a long-handled dish washing brush—if the horse has a big girth and I can't reach very well, and I've also used a plastic comb made for the job. All of them work, some better than others."

"I'm nervous about bending down to do her legs. What if she pushes me over?" Kelly gave him a nervous glance.

It was far too close in that stall. When he'd been the only one grooming, there had been plenty of room. Now, he felt like he was right on top of Kelly and there was nowhere to go to give her more space.

"You don't have to. I'll do that for now." He took a step back and his spine met the

feed bucket hanging in the corner.

“Sam, did I do something wrong?” She took the brush off and laid it on the top rail of the stall. “You don’t want to be near me, haven’t talked to me very much, and you even got rid of Zeus.” She blinked rapidly, then turned away from him.

Sam let her get out of the stall then stopped her with words to avoid touching her. “Kelly, I want to be near you, but I’m trying to make you as comfortable as possible. Zeus isn’t gone permanently. He’ll be back, and better than ever. I promise. I’m sorry you miss him, but you’ll be glad for it when he returns.”

He’d heard from the training school where Zeus had gone just the day before, missing Kelly by mere hours. Zeus had gone through the screening process and had been deemed fit for the class. That had been a load off Sam’s mind. Now, he wasn’t sure what to tell Kelly. There was still a chance Zeus would come back without passing. If he didn’t, Kelly might feel guilty for the money and for what Zeus had to go through, even if neither of them were bothered. Kelly took on guilt like some people put on sweatshirts, and he didn’t want that.

“Still, I miss him.” She swiped at her nose. “Sam, I know that you and I maybe won’t ever have a typical relationship, but I want to start over. I want all the old baggage to go away. Can we forget about the miscommunication and the lies by omission and just start fresh?”

Sam gently turned her around, releasing her immediately. “Kelly, you’re forgiven. The past is the past. But I don’t want to forget it.” He touched the red wax ring on his finger. “That was the best time of my life. When I want to think about moments of happiness, those are what I draw from. We can move forward, and we don’t have to ever think about the mistakes, but let’s never forget the good things.”

Kelly blinked back tears and slowly, tentatively, stepped forward and awkwardly

wrapped her arms around him. He felt the moment she relaxed into the hug and that's when he returned it, sure that he wouldn't scare her or make her uncomfortable. This was going to be a tightrope walk, but maybe this was why he'd been trained. For such a time as this.

She nestled in close, and her voice was difficult to hear, muffled in his layers of coat, vest, and flannel. "For a long time, I convinced myself that my life, as it was, was normal. That I couldn't expect anything else. This is so different, so far beyond what I'd allowed myself to believe. I never thought freedom was an option."

"It is. And we'll do everything in our power to make sure you never have to worry about being there again. Nathan is still behind bars in Cheyenne."

"I know you didn't want to talk about Viceroy, but I need to know if he's still free." Kelly pulled away but stayed close to him.

"They have some leads, but he vanished. They don't even know what car he was in, because I couldn't see what kind of car it was. I was overwhelmed with the stench down there and I didn't have my wits about me enough to try to memorize the plate. It may have been too far away, anyway. I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "Nothing to be sorry for. If you hadn't followed them, no one would know both of them had gotten away together."

Sam turned away, trying to keep a fresh thought to himself. Ramona had mentioned to Dee where her son was staying during the torture. If police could find that place, maybe they'd find Ramona and Viceroy? Unless the boy had died at some point, then that would be an unfortunate dead end. He couldn't bring himself to wish death on the poor child, even if his genes were a mix of two of the most evil people he'd ever known.

“What is it?” Kelly asked. “You’re avoiding me again.”

He turned back to her. “Not intentionally. I had a thought and was worried you might take my excitement the wrong way.”

She reached for his hands tentatively. As soon as he threaded his fingers in hers, she stepped toward him, tilted her head up, and gave him the softest brush of her lips across his. The touch was so brief, so soft, it was like a feather. But it was progress. A fresh start. He’d take it.

“I won’t. I hope your thought leads to something. I don’t want you to be afraid to share with me. If anything is too much, I’ll tell you. We have to trust each other and that is the first step, the bridge from the place we are to the place we want to be.” She stepped back one step. “Unless I’m completely way off base and you don’t want to start anything with me.” She turned a deep shade of red. “I assumed. Oh, no. I’m sorry.”

He gathered her close and kissed the top of her head. “You assumed correctly. If I have to share what’s on my mind, you do, too. No more guessing. No trying to read each other, because you won’t be able to read anything but negative things from body cues for a while. I want to start over, Kelly. I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want that.”

She tilted her face up and kissed his chin, even with two days of growth, then laughed. “That was rougher than I was expecting.”

Her laugh made his heart soar. Her honesty and ability to say what she felt made it even lighter. “Maybe I need to shave.”

She kissed him again. “Maybe, but then again, maybe you don’t.”

For a minute, holding her was like old times, and he knew exactly why Connor had started these missions. He didn't regret his past anymore. He'd finally had the integrity to do the right thing.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Victoria had set up the dining room in the main house with one long table along the side, then a small selection of individual tables for people who didn't want to sit with everyone else. Sometimes groups could mean pressure. Sam stood on a ladder leaning against the fireplace while he hung swags of fabric Lacy called bunting, whatever that was. Lacy kept telling him to move it to the right until he felt like he was going to tip the whole thing over.

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“That’s going to have to be centered enough or I’ll have to move over.” He gripped the side of the heavy stone chimney.

She laughed. “Naw, go back to the left about two inches and you’re good.”

Sam affixed it with double-sided tape, then slowly climbed down. He’d been watching for Kelly to appear, but she hadn’t come yet. She had talked to him a few times about how excited she was to join in the Thanksgiving festivities, but that didn’t mean she’d want to bethere all day. Too much time with people still wore her out.

Anna sat along the wall with her feet curled under her and her nose in a Bible Lacy had gotten for her. The woman was bookish, almost to the point of avoiding people to be in a book. He couldn’t blame her. While she’d known the dangers of being a missionary, that couldn’t ever really prepare a person for going through what she had. She and Edwyn seemed to be getting along so far, and she’d even gone for her first ride the day before.

He wandered over the buffet, still clear of any food outside of a tray of meat and cheeses, and one with pickles and various olives. He wasn’t interested in sampling at the moment. His mind was on Victoria. She was always there for the guys, acting motherly even though she was younger than most of them.

“Vicky, how are things going?” He grinned, knowing she’d take the bait.

“You know I hate that name.” She gave him a fake scowl. “And I’m wishing Teddy was here. He did more heavy lifting in this kitchen than I realized. I guess I’d hoped

he would be back by now.”

Connor didn't talk about his dad much, and mentioning Teddy often made Connor terse so no one knew anything. “Have you heard when he's coming back? His trip seemed sudden.”

Victoria snorted as she mixed a huge bowl of salad greens. “Sudden. You could say that. He didn't even tell me he was going. I found out the day he didn't show up to help me. Now, mind you, he didn't have to. He's not technically on my staff. But when a man is in here helping literally every day, you get used to his presence and start counting on him.” She huffed, whipping open the huge refrigerator and shoving the bowl back inside.

“I'm sorry. Anything I can do?” Not that he was any good in the kitchen, but Teddy probably hadn't been at first either.

“No. I'm fine. It's just that . . . I thought we were better friends than that. And before you get your thoughts turning to the romantic, that man is old enough to be my father. That's not it at all. I just like having him around. He's a good soul and I'm worried about him. What if his leg goes stiff from the polio and he's somewhere he can't rest? What if something happened to him and no one knows because he didn't tell anyone where he was going?” She sighed. “I'm worried. End of story.”

He slowly nodded. “We all are.”

Connor came in holding his phone in front of his face like he was in the middle of a phone call on speakerphone. Odd, since he usually wanted privacy for that sort of thing. Sam gave him a wide berth so he didn't feel like Sam was eavesdropping, but he couldn't miss Connor's loud part of the conversation.

“You're still up north? What are you doing there? It's Thanksgiving. Why aren't you

home?”

The voice on the other end sounded like Teddy, but different, too. What was the older man up to? Sam waited until Connor hung up and jabbed the phone in his shirt pocket.

“Hey, what was that all about?” Sam asked.

“Dad. He won’t say why he’s gone. Just that he still needs time. He’s not secretive, so this is driving me crazy. What could he possibly be doing hundreds of miles away that is so important that he can’t come home for his second favorite holiday?” Connor swiped his sleeve across his brow.

“Is he doing something for Wayside, or maybe for the Haven?” Lacy asked as she joined them. “I know you planned on opening up The Haven next month, in time for Christmas.”

Connor shook his head. “No. He would’ve told me. Since his health isn’t great, he turned all ranch business over to me when I started Wayside. He’s happy about The Haven, but doesn’t plan to live there. It’s for families and he feels he’s not a family. This is just not like him.”

Sam didn’t know Teddy as well as some of the other men, because Teddy didn’t like coming to the kennels. If his leg went stiff on him, walking was difficult. Even though he’d never stepped on one of the dogs, he still worried that he might, so he avoided the place completely.

“Well, we can sit here wondering and worrying or we can do what we should’ve done from the beginning and let me call him.” Lacy grinned. “He’s never kept a secret from me. I don’t think he can.”

“Well, you could’ve chimed right in when I was on the phone with him,” Connor said with more anger than he usually showed when Lacy was around, proving just how wound up he was about his dad.

Lacy laid a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, I know you’re worried, but I have no right to step on your toes or stick my nose into your private call, even if it was on speakerphone. But if you want me to call him and try to find out what’s going on. Just ask.”

Sam backed away from what suddenly felt like a private moment. Lacy always knew just what to say to calm down a rare sighting of Connor’s agitated side. He was nothing like what he’d been at first, which wouldn’t have been good for human trafficking victims. In fact, the very idea would’ve been bad. It was Lacy that had shown him how to be empathetic. Sam prayed she would open her heart back up to Connor like she did for the people who came to stay here.

“Hey,” Kelly’s voice behind made him grin as he turned around.

“Hey, good to see you. Want to help set up?” He wasn’t sure if she’d want to be a part of that or not.

Edwyn came in just after her and waved to Sam. “Hey, Sam and Connor, can I talk to you for a second?”

Sam glanced at Edwyn and back to Kelly. He knew which person he’d rather be with. She giggled for a mere second before she tilted her head toward Edwyn. “Go. I’ll sit by Anna for a minute and see what she’s studying. I’ll help when you’re done.”

She wanted to help, to participate. She was doing great, and he was elated. The moment he joined Edwyn though, his elation died. “What’s wrong?”

Edwyn glanced between the two of them and lowered his voice. “I know Dominic and Spenser left while Kelly was in the hospital since the risk was neutralized, but there’s a new danger and we could use their expertise.”

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“What is it?” Connor crossed his arms and frowned.

“Nadine. She contacted me about a week ago and told me to tell you to back off in contacting her. She doesn’t want to be found. Her message said that she would hack into Wayside security and destroy it.”

Connor just stared at him. “So, why didn’t you tell me?”

Edwyn ducked his head. “I didn’t think she’d really follow through. Nadine was as smart as they come, but not a criminal. At least, she wasn’t then.”

“What are you saying?” Sam didn’t want to believe that this threat could rip down the peace he’d only just found.

“She’s not playing,” Edwyn said. “I just checked with Brendon who was watching the cameras this morning. He said that one third of our cameras are out and a cryptic message came up on his screen. It said, ‘I told you to leave me alone.’”

“Well, I can leave her alone now, but what can we do about the security breach? I can’t just call in the Guardians every time we have an issue. I wish we had an experienced tech person here all the time.”

“Maybe you should just hire them.” Sam snorted, knowing that as much as Connor liked and admired the other team, they wouldn’t mesh well for long.

“I can’t do that. Dominic mentioned they were needed back home, anyway. So, either I hire someone now or we figure this out. In the meantime, I’m sorry Edwyn. Your

mission is on hold.”

Edwyn visibly swallowed. “I figured as much. I told her I was sorry. It didn’t matter. She just wants anonymity. I guess I can’t blame her. How did you find her?”

Connor shrugged. “I didn’t. Lacy did. She finally had to resort to searching the dark web. Not a place anyone wants to go.”

Kelly watched Sam’s body language as he spoke to Connor and Edwyn. He was very different with them than he was with her. When he spoke to her, he was relaxed, mostly. Though when he tried to visibly hold back, that made her feel a tension she hated. It was like waiting for a touch that never came.

Anna turned the page in her Bible, the onionskin paper making a sound that was so different from every other book.

“Is this how your family would’ve celebrated?” Kelly asked, trying not to interrupt her in the middle of a sentence.

Anna glanced around her. “Yes, and no. My parents didn’t decorate. They would gather all the resources they could and invite as many people over as possible. They would explain what thankfulness was, and then they would lead with a prayer of thanks. Everyone around the table would offer one thing they were thankful for.”

Kelly leaned into her friend for a moment, bumping her shoulder. “And if you were there, part of their prayer today, what would you be thankful for?” Though she was listening to Anna, she watched Sam, waiting for him to finish.

“I’d be thankful that I’m still alive.”

Kelly grinned, totally understanding. “I’m not sure if I’d be more thankful for that or

for the chance to talk to Sam again.”

Sam turned away from Connor and headed back to her. Kelly glanced at Anna and Anna laughed. “Go, I can see you want to talk to him. I’ll see you at supper.” She shooed her away with one hand while she found her place at the top of the new page with the other.

Kelly took a deep breath and met Sam halfway across the room. Each time they talked was a little easier than the time before. Each time, her mind was a little quicker to calm down. She couldn’t wait for the day when seeing him wouldn’t cause a tailspin of emotions. Or rather, when all the emotions were immediately positive.

Sam glanced around the room like he was hiding a secret. “Hey, come talk to me over in the hall.” He drew her out of the loud room and toward the hall where Connor and Brendon’s offices were. Everything was quiet and peaceful since the majority of the people at Wayside were in the dining room, helping to prepare for supper.

He grinned at her and took her hands in his. “You look great.”

His attention made her chest flutter. The feeling was so strange after blocking emotions for so long. “Thank you. I’m almost starting to feel great again. At least, sometimes. I’m a work in progress.”

“We all are.” He drew her close and kissed her forehead.

Every kiss he’d given her had been gentle, and never on the lips. He seemed to prefer the top of her head or her forehead. In her heart, she knew that he was letting her take the reins in the relationship. She would set the pace. That was wonderful in the sense that she needed to go slow, but awful in the sense that she wanted him to choose to kiss her. He would at some point, that much she knew.

She ran her thumb along the red wax ring. “I can’t believe you still have that. I made it from the thick wax that covers those tiny rounds of cheese. It’s kind of silly.”

He released her hands and twisted the ring around on his finger. “I don’t think it’s silly. It shows you listened to me, that you cared. I hope you don’t think this is silly.” He drew a box out of his pocket. “Now, don’t get your worry up. This isn’t what it looks like.”

Her breath caught in her lungs at the sight of the little velvet box. Rings came in boxes like that. Could he really be wanting to take that step now?

“This is the ring I got you ten years ago. It’s small and, honestly, cheap compared to what I would buy now. So,” he took a deep breath, “would you accept this ring as a promise that I will stand by you? No matter how long this takes. You’ve got me until you don’t want me anymore.”

Words escaped her as she looked at the diamond ring with a small, round center stone and waves of gold surrounding it to look like a flower. It was delicate and beautiful, better than she could’ve imagined. Her voice cracked. “That will never happen. I want to be with you always. It’s just . . .”

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He waited, letting her find her words if she wanted to. When she didn't continue, he said, "I know. It's hard. Sometimes it feels impossible." He turned the box over and in delicate white writing it said, Phil. 4:12.

"What does that mean?" She reached for the box so she could put on the ring. Accepting wasn't a question. Whether it was merely a promise for now or a promise for always, it meant the same to her.

"It's a verse in the Bible. It says I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

"All things." Her voice choked again.

"All things," Sam repeated.

She tilted her face up and rose on her toes. This time, he met her, and she relaxed into him. This kiss held slightly more promise in it than those before, making her heart skitter around like rabbit.

He ended the kiss quickly, but held her close. "We should get back soon and help. This year, I have a lot to be thankful for."

Anna hadn't asked her outright if she had anything she personally would feel thankful for, though she'd told her, anyway. Now, she could add one more thing to her list.

“How soon is too soon?” Kelly gripped the arms of Brendon’s chair facing his desk. The man managed to somehow be this really strong guy, but still completely non-threatening. At first, she hadn’t been sure she’d be able to spill all her thoughts and all her garbage to a guy. Especially a guy who didn’t, at first glance, look like he’d understand. Now, she wanted to sit there and talk to him. The more she did, the more she understood what needed to happen for her future.

“Too soon for what?” Brendon tilted his head to the side.

He did that whenever he knew what she was thinking but wanted her to put her thoughts into words. The more she did that, the more she examined how she actually felt. It was strange. She would say his help was invaluable in the very same breath that she would say that she’d come to the healing she had by herself. While she was nowhere near fully healed, might never be, she saw the gaps in her own life now. He’d led her to them and let her bridge them on her own terms.

“Too soon to fall in love again. I mean, not fall. I don’t know that I ever really stopped loving him. I think my love for Sam got me through until I found Christ. When Anna told me about salvation, that made me hold onto a thread of hope. Sam isn’t my savior, and he never will be, but I never stopped loving him.”

Brendon gave a slight and rare smile. “Sounds pretty astute to me. I would just say to take it slow. Don’t rush anything. If you start to feel stressed or pressured, even if that pressure is only on your side, slow down. Sam won’t rush you.”

She relaxed into the seat and rested her head against the back of the chair. “I know. He told me that he would be fine living just the way we are for the rest of our lives, if that’s what is the best for me. How could I not love a man willing to do that?”

Brendon scribbled something in his ever-present paper notes. “No one is forcing you to love, Kelly. I know you were just expressing how much you care but it is, and

always will be, your choice. You should get up every morning and choose to love that one person. There will be days when it's hard. Sam will leave his socks on the floor, or he won't make the coffee quite right or . . . whatever, and things like that can build up. That's when we choose to love, we talk about what is bugging us, then we either decide those things are too much and we look for counseling or we let them go and look at the things that are good and positive about the one we love. But there will always be that choice."

Kelly ran her thumb over the bumpy surface of the flower promise ring. He'd promised to make her his first choice every day. Vows in front of people or not, he was going to stick by her. Sam was a man of his word. If he said he would choose her every day, he would. Could she say the same?

"I would choose him. I've never met a man like him who made me believe I was worth something. I didn't have to try with him or be someone I'm not. I didn't have to flirt to get his attention or to keep it. He was steady and secure. He made me feel like the best Kelly Chambers was what he saw. Which is why when he saw me with someone else, it broke his vision of me."

He'd never expressly told her that, but in her counseling, she'd come to realize that fact. No one should be put on a pedestal. Now, Sam knew not to do that with her or anyone else. She'd forced him into a hard lesson, just like he'd made her realize that people can't read your mind. If she didn't tell him what was wrong, he couldn't be expected to know.

"You have a good head on your shoulders, Kelly. You're strong and I think you'll get to the other side. Sometimes, it just takes wanting it. You have to believe it for yourself before anyone else believes in you."

Kelly closed her eyes and remembered that Sam had said the same thing about Zeus. No one had believed Zeus could be a good dog, that he was worth saving. They'd

wanted to put him down as a bad dog. But Sam had noticed something no one else did and that something had saved Zeus.

“I’m not a bad girl,” she whispered, only realizing after she’d said it that the words had actually come from her mouth.

“No, you’re not,” Brendon confirmed. “Why do you say that?”

“My grandmother told me. Over and over, I was a bad girl. Nothing I did was ever good enough. Or I tried too hard to get attention. I don’t think I ever pleased her, so I tried to please everyone else because I wanted to be loved so badly. I don’t know why her opinion mattered so much. Probably because she was the only one who had a strong opinion about me. My parents were older, and they just didn’t care if I was in sports or got an A in every class.”

“So, you assigned the greatest importance to the one you actually had to prove yourself to,” Brendon said.

“I suppose. Maybe I liked a challenge? I don’t know. I just know that when she died, I didn’t feel a sadness that she was gone. I won’t even talk about the guilt that brought up. I only felt bad that I would never be able to earn her approval. My chance was gone.”

Kelly finally raised her head, realizing that she’d avoided looking at Brendon that whole time. He reached forward and laid both hands on his desk.

“I want you to know that people who seek the approval of others have a lot of difficulty achieving it. She could’ve lived for years longer and you may still never have found what you were looking for.”

She nodded. “I know. There was no pleasing her. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t feel

it. That I didn't try."

"People can be hard, but it's because we're human. We fail. A lot. I want you to work on actively turning around any thoughts you have of your grandmother. If a memory comes forward that threatens to chop your feelings, I want you to do something to divert your mind. Eat a sour candy. Chew on an ice cube. Wash your hands in hot water, but not hot enough to burn, obviously. Anything that will give a physical response for you to focus on instead of those memories. They have no business in the here and now."

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She'd never heard of any therapy like that before. Maybe it would finally let her grandmother stay in the grave. "Thank you. I'll try that." She reached for the bowl of sour lemon candies Brendon had added to his desk after she'd asked for something other than chocolate. "Now is as good a time as any."

Brendon laughed. "I think you're right."

She stood and thanked him for his time then headed out into the cold day. In the two days since Thanksgiving, the temperature had dropped even more, and winter seemed to be there in every sense but on the calendar. On her way to the barn, she noticed a light on in Sam's cabin.

He should've been out in the barn, so she headed over to see why he was there. She knocked twice, but there was no answer.

"Sam? Are you home?" She tested his door, and it was open.

Kelly bit her lip as she pushed the door open. She'd spent a little time in there, but not much. Sam's cabin still felt too personal, like she was entering his space, and she wasn't quite ready for that yet.

"Sam?"

The silence in the cabin made her worried. Was there something wrong? Had Viceroy been angry and come after Sam? Nathan had said Viceroy would kill anyone who'd seen his face, though clearly that threat wasn't meant for his inner circle.

“Sam?” Her voice trembled. “Please answer.”

Her steps faltered on the way down the short hall to the one bedroom in the cabin. His was the same as hers, so she knew just where the room had to be. His bedroom door was slightly ajar and she touched it without looking inside.

With a small shove, she opened the door.

His bed was made and everything was neat as a pin. He had a spare pair of boots lined up in front of his nightstand like slippers. She grinned at the sight, imagining Sam changing into his ‘comfy boots’ when he came home after a long day.

A slip of paper laid on his nightstand and was the only thing that stood out as out of place in the room. She held her breath as she took the few steps into the room. The paper was a printed receipt from Expert Services Dog Training, for \$35,000.

“Oh, Sam.” She covered her mouth. He’d told her that he had nothing to spend his money on, but that didn’t make seeing the receipt any easier. He’d spent so much.

“I didn’t mean for you to see that,” Sam said from behind her.

She jumped. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to look at something I wasn’t supposed to.” Now she’d ruined everything. How would he trust her if she went snooping in his room?

Immediate regret twisted her insides. He had a right to do things that she didn’t know about. They weren’t anything yet. Not really.

“Kelly, it’s okay. I just didn’t want to hurt you in case Zeus came back unsuccessful. But I’ve gotten a good report. He’s doing really well.”

Sam held back, wishing he could pull back the statement that had obviously caused her more grief than he'd intended. Words were arrows and even more when hearts were tender.

"I knew you wanted him as a real support animal, one who'd been trained to help you. The closest I could get with their normal training was PTSD. So, that's the course Zeus is going through. He'll have to work with a handler for a while. I wish it didn't take so long, but he'll be back soon."

Kelly still didn't speak, and Sam tried to remember all the things he'd learned about how to deal with emotional situations. He absolutely didn't want to shame Kelly for having no resources to have the dog trained herself. Maybe he'd overstepped his bounds. "I should've asked you."

Kelly shook her head and laid her hand over his heart. "I can't fault you for a gift I asked for. I'm just . . . shocked. That was a lot of money. I don't want you to think that anything I do is trying to compensate for this gift. It's funny that something so generous actually makes our—whatever we're in—more difficult."

He certainly hadn't wanted that. He'd hoped she would be happy with it, which was another reason he hadn't told her. Let her feel the joy without expressly knowing the cost. "That's why I didn't want that receipt hanging between us. I did, however, agree to be honest. So, you could look at that as keeping things from you. Now you know. I sent Zeus away to get specialized training so he could be the dog you need. I didn't do it for points or a way to get closer to you. I did it because it was the right thing to do, and because I could." Man, that didn't sound romantic at all. Which would mean Edwyn would be happy with the way he'd put it.

Kelly chuckled. "A gift that's worth the same as a car. Yeah, I can totally forget that. Sam, you are so unlike anyone else."

“I hope that’s a good thing.” Suddenly, he wasn’t so sure.

“It is. A very good thing.” She reached up on her tiptoes and gave him a quick peck on the mouth. “And I give you permission to kiss me once in a while.”

Yikes. That would be a tough call. He’d have to read a bunch of cues before he risked that, but he’d listen and be attentive. “I’m glad to hear it.” He took the opportunity just then to return the kiss. “Connor asked me to come up to the house for something urgent but not dangerous. Want to join me?”

He was pretty sure guests weren’t invited to Connor’s meeting, but he had invited the wives of the other men. In his mind, Kelly was the only woman he’d ever consider marrying making her his plus one.

They made their way over to the ranch as a steady stream of guys entered the building along with their wives. Dee strode in and he saw her duck down toward Brendon’s office instead of Connor’s.

Connor’s office was completely packed with people, making Kelly instantly grip his hand tighter. He led her through the group to two seats that were still open. Connor looked around the room. “We’re just waiting on Brendon and Dee.”

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Edwyn leaned against the wall in the back and pushed away from it. “I had an idea.”

Connor’s brow shot up. “There’s no way you could know what this meeting is about. How could you have an idea?”

Edwyn waved away the concern, quieting everyone in the room. Edwyn never challenged Connor. “You were worried about Nadine breaking into our security. What if we played to her ego and told her that what she did proved we have weaknesses? We could ask her to come work for us to fix them.”

Everyone turned to Connor to see what he would think. The silence created a chord of tension in the room and Sam wished he’d let Kelly stay in his cabin.

“You think she would go for that? Isn’t that a huge risk to the people who are here? She knocked our security system out without hardly trying.”

Edwyn’s cheeks flushed slightly. “She’s brilliant, but not evil. She’d probably also love the chance to hurt me back. I wouldn’t doubt that the way I handled our relationship is the reason she does what she does.”

Connor frowned as Brendon rolled his wheelchair into the room with Dee at his side. “Sorry we’re late.”

Connor sat behind his desk and sighed. He looked over at Lacy and his attention held onto her for a while, like he needed her support. “I’ve been hit with a pretty big surprise this morning. One that might forever change Wayside.”

Sam reached over and held Kelly's hand. He wasn't about to keep secrets from her, but he hoped this wouldn't be a notice that Wayside was closing. "What's going on?"

"First, an update on Nathan. He's still in jail, awaiting trial on charges of human trafficking, entrapment, kidnapping, and murder. Viceroy and Ramona haven't been seen since they escaped in Denver, but we're sure they're still out there." He scrubbed at his face, then pressed his temples.

"I don't know how to say this without just coming out and saying it. Dad called me today and let me know that I have a half-sister, and because of the way dad worded the agreement when he gave it to me, she owns half of Wayside Ranch."

Kelly squealed as Sam gripped her hand. He let it go immediately, but that didn't help his immediate feeling of dread and loss. Someone no one knew would now be able to access the privileged information at Wayside and unless they both agreed to continue, could spell the end for the ranch.