



Operation: Unify

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: The thrilling conclusion to the Wayside Ranch series, Connor's long-awaited second chance.

Connor wants to hold on to Lacy, but knows he has to let her go if he hopes to ever have her marry him again.

After ten years of living as a divorced couple and seeing all of his men get their second chances, Connor is praying for his own. When Lacy says she needs time on her own, his knee-jerk reaction is to ask her to stay. Despite his fear she will never return, he lets her go.

Unfortunately, danger follows her when she tries to help a friend leave an abusive relationship. She has a target on her back and Connor is too far away to help her.

Lacy knows that Connor will never trust that she loves him until he deals with the pain of his mother leaving.

She knows she has to leave and then return to him to show him that she will never do to him what he fears. Trouble is, her friend's husband wants to make sure Lacy never sees anyone ever again.

She is torn between losing the chance to prove her love for Connor and asking him to come for her. She can't bear to leave him again, it's now or never, but can she handle a killer alone?

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Chapter One

The television had acted as Lacy's best friend for the last week, even though she usually hated the thing. Any other time in her life, she would've gone to Connor and told him what was going on in her mind and heart. He'd tease her, give her a hug, and the world would be a little closer to right again.

When she'd been held against her will in Cheyenne at the home of a human trafficker, the Holy Spirit had plainly told her she still loved Connor and she had to try to get him back, but the only way to make him realize he actually needed her and loved her, was to walk away.

More specifically, she had to walk away in order to return. His mother had left and never showed him a stitch of love from that point on. When he'd retired from the military after ten years of service and the darkness in his soul couldn't be quenched, he'd divorced her because he been sure he'd done what she would've wanted anyway, only the way he'd done it, he didn't have to face her walking away. Teddy had known that and insisted she stay. He'd even gone so far as to say that she would stay, or Connor could go.

Now, years later, he still hadn't healed. The only way to make him see that she wouldn't treat him like his mom and leave for good, was to go and then return. She had to show him that people who love you, really love you, come back. Even when his father had left the month before to do his own second chance mission, Connor had struggled with feeling abandoned and didn't know how to express himself. He'd been argumentative and distant in dealing with his hurt. He needed to learn forgiveness and love, and she was the one God had chosen to help him.

She'd promised to fulfill her duties and train Ferd to take her place, but with Christmas a week away, she wasn't sure where she would go if Connor didn't do as the Lord said he would. Humans still had free will and she was lying in the bed she'd made. She'd told Connor, under no circumstances was he to try to win her back. They were done. They'd had their chance. Now she regretted saying those things. Hindsight was clearly 20/20.

She closed her eyes and let the noise of the television drown out her thoughts for a minute. Her phone beeped, startling her from her distraction. She'd only told Connor that day that she was going to train Ferd and possibly leave after that. Why would he be calling her already?

"Hello?" She waited to hear what his mood would be from the sound of his voice.

"Hey. I can't stop thinking about what you said. You know that I have trouble with leaving. Is there anything I can do to make you want to stay?"

She didn't want to leave in the first place. Her head screamed the words, love me. But that wasn't enough. He'd loved her before and still divorced her. Even now, she knew he loved her, even if he wouldn't admit it out loud. The trouble was, he didn't believe his love was enough to cover his mistakes. He truly thought any small issue between them would result in her leaving as his mom had, and worse, hating him for it. He would keep feeling that way to combat his feeling of inadequacy. At least he'd let her stay after the divorce.

That had been the first clue that he hadn't really stopped loving her.

"Honestly, I need some time away. Don't you think it's time we actually separated for a while?"

He went silent for the space of a few breaths. "Is there someone else or are you

looking for someone else?”

Connor was good at hiding his hurt, it often came out sounding like anger or bitingly abrasive humor, but after being together for so many years, she knew the difference.

“No, Connor. It might surprise you to know I don’t know exactly what I want. That’s why I need to go and find out what is outside Wayside. I want to see what I can experience from life.”

“I see. Getting kidnapped and helping people heal from the worst victimization outside of murder isn’t enough out of life?” The edge to his voice was razor sharp, letting her know she’d cut him.

“Connor, stop.” She wasn’t going to let him prod her into staying. She’d known this was coming. He wasn’t manipulating as some would think because he would stop when she told him to. He was hurting. He loved her and was sure she’d never return. She was also sure that if he didn’t experience healing, and know without question that she would return, he’d never love her fully. Staying with him no matter what happened hadn’t taught him, so she had to leave and then return to let him see she wasn’t going to treat him like his mother had. She was different.

“Connor, I’ll be here through Christmas and probably into the new year. Training Ferd will take time.”

“You assume I want Ferd to do your job.” His defensiveness sprung to life.

“Is there someone else you had in mind?” She waited, knowing there wasn’t anyone else who could except for Gloria, who was too busy caring for Teddy after his gunshot wound. The only one who’d come close was Erica, Cole’s wife. She’d helped Lacy for a short time, but didn’t want the job now.

“No, but if I hired someone . . .”

“If you hired someone, I would have to wait to leave. I see through you, Connor.” She smiled, despite the pain that pierced her heart. She didn’t want to leave him. She didn’t want to hurt Connor and this would absolutely hurt him for a while.

“Would that really be so bad? You don’t want to be driving all over Wyoming in the weather around here in January, do you?” The sharpness to Connor’s voice told her he wasn’t looking for the answer to that particular question, but it would tell him what he wanted to know in other ways.

“Who said anything about staying in Wyoming?” She bit her lip. Even she didn’t know where she was supposed to go, only that she needed to be gone for a while.

“I see. So, there is no chance of getting you to stay. Will you be coming back?”

Here was the question the most difficult to answer. She fully intended to return, but would he believe that? His mother had never told him she would return, and she never had. But she couldn’t gut him and leave him with no hope, nor would she lie to him to prove a point. “Connor, this isn’t a permanent goodbye. I think deep down you know that.”

He sighed. “This is just so out of left field. If there was something I was supposed to have seen or done before you were taken, I’m sorry. If I missed a birthday or anniversary, or something, I’m sorry.”

Connor didn’t do desperation, but his words were coming mighty close. “Connor, you didn’t do anything wrong. This isn’t about you or anything you did or didn’t do. I need some time away.” And he needed her to go, even though he would disagree.

“Are you taking anyone with you?”

She bit her lip. Connor saw the evil in the world every single day. Going alone wasn't a recipe for disaster, women traveled alone all the time, but of course he would worry.

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“I hadn’t planned on it. I don’t have any friends outside of those here at Wayside, and they’re all married now.” She was the only outlier. Other than Victoria, all the other women were married or engaged, but Victoria was needed at Wayside, and she didn’t live on the ranch.

“I’ll be praying for your safety.”

“I’d like that.” And she knew she could count on him to do what he said he would. “I won’t be a stranger, either. You’ll hear from me. I’m not leaving to get away from you. You’re still my closest friend in the world, Connor. That won’t change.”

“Good. You know how I feel about change.” He laughed without any humor.

That was true, but he’d rather face the change of divorce than deal with change coming from anyone else. “I’m aware. I’ll keep you posted on Ferd’s progress.”

“Sounds good. Please tell me this isn’t some secret mission to get me to know my half-sister better.”

She laughed. “Guilty, but I think you’d get there on your own soon enough. You aren’t one to hold things against people when they have no control over them.”

“Thanks for that. I’m sure I’ll get used to the idea, but I’ve kept my brothers away for so long that I didn’t think I had room for siblings anymore. I suppose at some point, she’ll want to meet them too. Then I’ll have to face everything.”

“That’s true. Christmas Eve might be good. You could have them come over for a

few hours. Scheduled. Tell them what's up so they actually come." She bit her lip, hoping she hadn't pushed too hard.

"It's a good idea. I'm just hesitant. I guess if I'm going to, I'd better decide today though, Christmas is almost here."

"It is." And this would be the first Christmas since Connor was deployed that she would feel separated from him, even though he might still be in the same room.

Lacy stared at the phone for a full minute after hanging up with Connor. Was this the right thing to do? The words refiner's fire floated through her thoughts. There was no way that a refiner's fire wouldn't melt away the impurities. The process couldn't be pleasant. She had to walk this path that might cause Connor some pain now so he wouldn't have to hurt as badly later.

In the process, she would certainly get burned too.

Her phone rang once again, startling her. The phone never rang and all of a sudden it wasn't leaving her alone. "Connor, what's up?"

"Huh?" a semi-familiar voice said. "Who's Connor?"

"Who is this?" Lacy's heart took up a fast rhythm.

"I don't blame you for not remembering. It's been years. Look, Lacy, this is Melinda, from church."

Melinda. Lacy hadn't heard that name in almost a decade. "You haven't been to church in a long time."

"You're the only friend from back then who still has the same phone number. Look,

I'm in danger. I married a man I shouldn't have, and I can't get out. He won't let me leave. I need you to get help for me. Please. I'm sending you a pin to my location, then I have to delete all of this off the phone, so he doesn't know. Please, please help me." The line went silent.

In the next instant, a text came through with a location, two states away in New Mexico. Who could she call who would believe her? Lacy pressed the saved phone number for Ferd. In two rings, the young woman answered. "Lacy?"

"Yeah, hey . . ." Where to begin? "We have a lot of work to do to get you up to speed." Her mind whirled with ways to help Melinda. She could call the police in town, but if they did a well-check, would that make the situation worse?

"Yeah, I've been looking at the files in your office that you told me to. What you do is kind of a lot. Does Connor know about everything you do around here?"

Lacy laughed. "Not hardly, and I don't want him to. Do you think you can handle the job? He told me we could hire someone else if you don't want to do it."

"Yeah, I'm sure he said it that way." Ferd's voice went completely deadpan. "I'm not sure why he sees me as some kind of threat. I'm not."

"You're just too much like him for him to deny you are who you say you are. It would be great if he could just accept you, but he isn't that kind of guy." And she was about to drop Ferd into the lion's den. "I need to leave town quicker than I thought. Like, tonight."

"What?" The word was so loud Lacy had to pull the phone from her ear.

"Yeah, I just got a call. An emergency. I have to go." She stood up to start packing.

“Um, I don’t know how I’m going to do what you do. I guess I’m glad it’s right before Christmas and no one new will be coming for quite some time.”

Currently, Wayside was full and tending to those who were already living there. Most of their immediate needs had been met. If there was ever a time she could go freely, it was now.

“You know you can call me with any questions. I’m only a phone call away.” She tossed a few pairs of jeans in her bag, then closed her eyes. Was New Mexico warm at Christmastime? She had no idea.

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“Thanks for warning me. If I’d gone to the cabin office tomorrow and you hadn’t been there, I would’ve freaked. This is just so sudden.”

“I like to prevent all things freak.” Lacy laughed and grabbed a few tees from a drawer.

“How long will you be gone?”

That was a good question. Truthfully, she should be able to go, watch the house of the address Melinda had given her until she found proof something weird was going on, take that to the police and let them do the hard stuff. A week. Tops.

“I’ll be back soon enough. I’m sure. Hopefully between Christmas and New Years if not before.”

“Good. Connor has been putting presents on the sofa in the living room for a week and I’m excited to be included this year. I was hoping you’d be there. I guess I’ll have to put up the tree.”

She wanted to be there too. Hopefully, a week would be enough to convince him that not only had she left, but that she was willingly returning. Then, she could tell him that she’d never stopped loving him. She picked up her wedding ring off her dresser. She still wore it most days. For this trip, she’d leave it home though. He had to feel the separation and seeing that ring would do it.

“I’ll talk to you soon. You can do this, Ferd.”

“Thanks, Lacy. I’ll be praying for you and whoever needs you so urgently.”

“Thank you.” She hung up the phone and bowed her head.

“Lord, I need you to comfort Connor this next week. Let him feel Your presence. Fill him with the assurance that I’ll return and that I want a relationship with him. Help him heal, Lord.”

She checked the temperatures in New Mexico and snorted. They probably thought it was cold there. She’d be fine with her flannel shirts and her leather jacket for cold days, if those happened. At the door, she paused, thinking about Connor and how she should tell him. They’d talked less than twenty minutes before, and she’d told him she wouldn’t be leaving until after the new year started. Things had changed so quickly.

She pressed his image in her phone, and it rang only once before he picked up. “Lacy? What’s up?”

“I just got a call from Melinda, from church. She needs my help for a few days. I’m headed to New Mexico. I’ve already let Ferd know.”

“You called Ferd before me?” His question was like ice water down her back. She’d always called him first. What was wrong with her?

“It wasn’t an intentional slight. I had just finished talking to you when Melinda called. So, I didn’t call you right back. I called Ferd because she is going to be doing my job.”

“If you’re sure she can.”

“I am.” Lacy unlocked her car door from up in her room then headed down to put her

bag in the back seat. “Look, I’ll be as fast as I can, but I don’t know when I’ll be returning.”

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know.”

She desperately wanted to tell him that she loved him. She forgave him for divorcing her and forcing her to live through that pain. She forgave him for making her remain only a friend when she would’ve gladly been so much more. And she was sorry for building the wall of distrust between them because she was hurt.

“I’ll keep in touch.”

He remained silent for a minute. “Good. I want to know you make it there and that everything is okay. I’ll be worried about you. If anything happens, you know you can call me.”

She smiled at the fact that he’d said pretty much what she’d said to Ferd, and it was calming knowing he was there, maybe hours away, but he would answer. “Thanks. I won’t make you worry.”

“Too late for that.” He snorted. “Just do what you need to do and come back here, where you belong.”

Words clogged her throat. This was the man she loved with all her heart. The big teddy bear of a man who was both cuddly and protective. “I will. I promise.”

Chapter Two

Connor headed to his office and unlocked the door. He’d stopped by the upstairs window and noted Lacy’s little red car was already gone. Since she rarely left the ranch, the missing vehicle was obvious. So was the pain in his chest.

She hadn't sent him a text yet that morning, meaning she was either already in trouble or wasn't to her destination yet. Where could she be going that would take her all night? He pushed open the office door and headed to his desk. Ordinarily, he wanted it open to welcome anyone in. Now, he wanted to close it, blocking out everyone and all the questions sure to arise. Questions he had no answers for. Questions people would ask him because he knew Lacy best.

Ferd leaned against his doorjamb and tilted her head to the side. "I know you usually ignore me, but never quite that bad. I was sitting right in the living room and even said 'hello'." Her brows rose in question.

Ferd looked far too much like him for him to ever deny that she was his half-sister. Even some of her mannerisms were like his, which had been a strange experience. His father's genes must have been strong because, to his eyes, she didn't look at all like Gloria.

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“Sorry. I was distracted.”

“By Lacy leaving?” she asked as she came into his office and sat on the chair closest to his desk, the one Lacy would usually sit in every morning.

“What makes you think that?”

Ferd snorted. “Connor, you’re as easy to read as a children’s book. You care about her. A lot. You look at her differently than you do everyone else.” Ferd shrugged a shoulder. “She told me she was coming back, hopefully soon, so you shouldn’t worry.”

He scrubbed his face and released a sigh, the rough hair on the lower half scraping against his palms. He hadn’t had the energy to shave that morning after a sleepless night waiting for Lacy to send him word she was alright. “You’re perceptive.”

“That’s what Lacy told me. That’s why she thought I would do well in her job. I’m not sure why she wants to give it up though.”

He wasn’t sure either. Lacy loved helping the victims who came to Wayside, and she’d never once indicated that she wanted to leave until the night before. “I didn’t realize she did.”

“Maybe she thinks I want to take over or something. Just so you know, I don’t. I love what you do here, and I would never jeopardize it. I want to help, and I’ll do whatever you and Lacy want me to, but I’m not here because I was left half of it. I’m here because my mom is here, and I want to learn more about my father . . . and my

brother.”

She’d had so much more time to process all of this than he’d had. Dad had told him just after Thanksgiving that he’d had a one-time fling with a woman who worked at the ranch twenty years before. That one night had brought Ferd. He’d also learned more about his mother than he was ready to process.

Maybe there was a good reason she’d never returned. Maybe she thought he would hate her or that he would side with Dad. He’d tried to reach out to Mom on multiple occasions, but she’d never responded. She’d never even told him so much as, ‘leave me alone’. That would’ve made life easier. At least then he could stop thinking about what he could’ve done differently. After her death, it was too late to get answers.

“I want to get to know you, too. I’m just still so . . .” the words wouldn’t come.

“Yeah, it’s not easy to process. I thought my dad was dead. I never knew he was a few hours south of me this whole time.” Her glance dashed to the side, and she ducked her head, hiding her emotions.

“I’m sorry. I’m sure that was hard.” He knew it was hard. Having a mom he knew about who had lived just an hour away who wouldn’t talk to him was tough. Knowing now that Ferd could’ve had help this whole time, but being denied because of lies had to sting.

Ferd looked around at his office and he was suddenly struck by how much he had, just in that one room. “I don’t think you have any idea what I went through, but thanks.” She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “Lacy had to leave so abruptly that I have no idea what to do. I know where she hides the key to her office cabin, but no clue what I should be doing in there other than looking at the files to get an idea of her job.”

He braced his hands against the desk and wondered if part of Lacy's need to hurry was to force him into talking to Ferd. If he had his way, he'd do this slowly, on his own time. Without Lacy here as a buffer, he had to face the sister who'd arrived a month before and he still didn't know.

"Let me go over there with you and give you a run down. She does a lot. There will be things I don't think of until they go undone. I know that, and I'm not going to blame you for that. She is the literal glue that holds this place together."

Ferd stood and turned from him. "Great. That's not terrifying or anything. I'm trying to fill the shoes of someone who the boss loves, who does everything, and holds the place together. What could possibly go wrong?"

He laughed because she'd just encapsulated his own feelings in one long sentence. "I think you'll do just fine. Plus, it's the week before Christmas. Lacy has already done all the gift shopping for the guests. They will be arriving this week. She always marks them as gifts, then puts a note to them inside so she remembers who is supposed to get each one."

"That's smart. I would order them and then sit there looking at them when they arrived thinking . . . who was that for again?" Ferd laughed.

"That would be me, too." He held the front door open for her and then braced against the wind as they headed for Lacy's office.

"Why did she want to be out here? There has to be office space in there for her." Ferd motioned behind her toward the main house.

"There isn't," he quickly answered. Though he recalled her hinting at one point about wanting to be in the lodge. "She prefers to be closer to the guests. She could even move to one of the bigger cabins now that all my men have moved over to the

Homestead for housing.”

“Except Brendon.” Lacy ducked her head against the wind.

“Yes, because he’d already made his living quarters wheelchair accessible and moving would be hard. He decided to stay. I didn’t force anyone to move.” Connor dug the key ring for the cabins from his jacket pocket and unlocked the office.

The moment he opened the door, Lacy’s scent met his nose, and his chest ached all over again. He prayed she’d make it to her destination safely and that she’d remember to text him.

Ferd moved behind the desk and touched the phone lightly. “No messages. That’s a good start.”

He nodded, unable to find his voice for a second. His phone sounded like three gunshots, and he dove for it, knowing that was the sound he’d programmed for Lacy. Ferd’s eyes widened, and she stared at him as he answered the call.

“Connor.”

Her voice sounded tired, but she was clearly alive and well. “Morning. I just arrived and found a hotel that let me check in early. I’m going to catch a few Zs before I meet with Melinda.” She yawned.

“I don’t really understand the urgency. You could’ve slept in your own bed last night, gotten up early and had a clear head to drive.” He closed his eyes, remembering he didn’t have the right to be protective of her right now. She didn’t want that from him.

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“Connor, I’m safe. I’m here. Let me sleep for a few hours and I’ll let you know what I find. With a little grace from God, I’ll be back on the road in a day or two.”

“Ferd is here. Is there anything you want her to do while you’re gone?” He glanced up at his sister.

“Just put up the Christmas trees, wrap the gifts that should be coming, and check my emails. I have a book of logins in my right, locked drawer. It’s purple. I lock that drawer and log out of everything when I leave every day. I also set my preferences to forget everything, so I have to manually login every single day.”

Ferd gave the thumbs up, and he realized she could hear every word, despite the fact that he wasn’t on speaker phone.

“Thanks. Get some sleep.” He closed his eyes for a second. “Be safe.” It was the closest thing to ‘I love you’ Lacy would allow.

“I will. Talk to you soon.” She hung up the call.

“Emails will be the hardest part, but, like you said, it’s the week before Christmas.” Ferd looked around the office as if she might be worried there was something she was missing.

“Lacy usually welcomes guests, shows them to their cabins, makes sure their luggage is waiting for them, and finds anything for guests they need, like clothes, winter coats, whatever. But there won’t be any new guests until one of the current people graduate.”

She smiled. "I like that. You don't call it 'becoming well' but graduation. That makes it sound more achievable." She raised the side of her mouth.

"Exactly." His mood immediately improved after hearing from Lacy. She was safely in a hotel room somewhere, getting some sleep. She'd check in with her friend and then she'd come home. Hopefully by Christmas.

His mind fired off an idea and he went with it. "Hey, I was just thinking . . ." Christmas meant a good time for Ferd to meet her other brothers, if they were up for it. He'd almost forgotten. "I can try to get my three brothers to come for Christmas to meet you. Dad would probably want to see them too. Between introducing you and Dad getting shot, I would think that would be enough to bring them to Wayside."

Her brows furrowed. "They haven't come before?"

He almost hated that Lacy had been right. Forcing him to talk to her was exactly what he'd needed to do in the situation. There was literally nothing wrong with Ferd. She wasn't the typical young person he saw when he went into town, stuck in their phone and oblivious to the world. She had a head on her shoulders and made good observations.

"We had a falling out after Mom left. I don't think they knew about your mom, but they felt the breakup was Dad's fault and didn't talk to him after that. Since I was still relatively young and I didn't want to switch schools, I stayed. Plus, Wayside was all I'd ever known. I never dreamed Mom would give up on me and then die before I had a chance to find out why."

Ferd closed her eyes and frowned, then turned away. "That's really sad. I'm thankful I got the chance to say what I needed to in order to get my heart straight. You won't get that chance."

“Yeah.” He wanted to end the conversation now, right here. “Anyway, I’ll call my oldest brother today and see if he’ll come. You never know.”

She gave him a weak smile. “Nope, you never know.”

Lacy pressed the bottom of her phone to turn off the alarm and it didn’t stop. That’s when she realized it was the ringtone. She pressed to answer. “Hello?”

“I don’t know who you are, but you’d better leave my wife alone,” a male voice threatened.

“Excuse me?” Lacy’s sleep blurred brain didn’t recognize the voice.

“I checked Melinda’s phone, like I always do. She’d deleted this number, but I found it anyway. Who are you?”

He’d searched her phone? A heaviness pulled on her. Lord, help me know what to say to diffuse this situation. “I’m so sorry. I’m just an old friend. I’m sure you can tell from the number that I’m nowhere near you. There’s nothing to worry about from me. She just called to say hello and see how I was doing. She knew I’d worry about her since I hadn’t heard from her in so long. I’m glad she did because I was about to go to the police and file a missing person’s report.” Lacy bit her lip, hoping that hadn’t been too far. Maybe he would be thankful Melinda had thought to call if he thought that was the case.

“She’s fine. We’re living our best life over here. No need to call back. She is happy with me.”

Bravado surged and she was too tired to be having this conversation. “You have a strange way of showing it. My husband doesn’t search my phone and call numbers he doesn’t recognize. That seems kind of unhealthy to me.”

“Oh, and you’re a shrink now? You going to tell me how to live my life and how to treat my wife?” he screamed an expletive at her and the line went dead.

Lacy jumped out of bed and yanked on her jeans from the night before. She’d been so tired when she’d arrived that she hadn’t unpacked, instead sleeping in her tee. She whipped her hair up into a messy bun without combing it and grabbed her keys and the card to her room and raced out the front door.

She pulled up her phone and found the address Melinda had sent to her. It was still about ten minutes away. Melinda’s husband might be smart enough to look up what had been deleted on her phone, but there was nothing he could do about information that had already been sent.

She raced through the small New Mexico town into a little neighborhood where all the houses had peeling paint and dogs roamed the streets. Two kids played hoops on a bent metal bar tacked above a garage door. The hoop had a permanent crook in one side, and she wondered if the ball would actually go through it at all.

A few blocks in, she found the address and parked her car two driveways away, then got out, leaving her car unlocked. She didn’t want to have to fight to open the vehicle if she had to make a hasty get away. Her small pistol rested on her hip, hidden under her loose flannel, but she hoped she wouldn’t have to use it.

A muffled scream came from inside the house. A man sitting across the street on his porch with a cigar dangling from his mouth didn’t seem to notice at all. Were they used to hearing Melinda scream like that? Her chest heaved as she rushed up the weedy front walk and knocked on the front door.

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A man in an auto service shirt with the name Tod embroidered on the front opened the door. "What do you want?"

She blinked, rapidly trying to think of something only Melinda would know, not her husband. "I'm with the Christian Mission Foundation and I was sent to find the local mission housing, with the church. They gave me the wrong address and I'm lost. Do you know where it is?" She tried to smile, but knew it faltered.

"Do I look like I know where a mission house is?" He glared at her.

Melinda gently pushed him to the side. "I can show you." Her left eye was badly bruised, and she kept her head down.

"You ain't going anywhere until we finish talking." He pushed her back.

"I'm done talking for now." She evaded him and stepped outside. Her feet were bare despite the 40-degree temperature, and she tugged a threadbare sweater closed tightly around her thin frame.

"Is it nearby or could you ride with and show me? I'd bring you right back. I would even be willing to buy breakfast for both of you, if you would be so kind." She tried to sound genuine, but Tod's glare left her shaken.

Teddy was bigger than that guy thought he was, and she'd never been scared of him. Not even when he'd come back from his time in the service with darkness in his heart and internal thoughts he refused to share.

“If she goes, I go too.” He stepped outside.

“Sorry, my husband won’t let me have men I don’t know in my car. She’ll show me where it is, we’ll get some food, and I’ll have her right back. Thank you.” She started rushing for her car and heard Melinda right on her heels.

“Go, go, go, he’s following,” Melinda muttered.

“You, stop right there!” Tod yelled.

The man across the street finally took notice and stood up, watching them closely. Melinda followed Lacy right to her red car and dove into the passenger side, then locked the door. Lacy did the same, shoved the key into the ignition and the moment the car responded, she raced away almost hitting Melinda’s husband as he threw himself toward the hood of her car.

“He’s going to call the police and say that you kidnapped me. He always lies.” Melinda covered her face in her hands. “You were my last hope of escape. Over the last few months, he’s been beating me up, then he’ll cut himself. He calls the police to report that I tried to kill him, and he tells them he used self-defense to keep me away. He claims that I refuse to leave the house even though he’s asked me to. The police never make me leave. I wish they would. I wish I could.”

Lacy shook her head and glanced in her rearview mirror, glad there wasn’t anyone following. “Why would he do that?”

She took a deep breath, but her voice remained quiet. “To give himself an alibi. He plans to kill me and make it look like self-defense. I have to get out of here and go into hiding. If I stay, I’m dead. It’s taken me a long time to realize that I need to get out or I’m done for.”

Lacy swallowed the bile in her throat. “Would it help if we called the police first? Could we talk to someone who specializes in this sort of thing? Someone has to believe you.”

Melinda heaved an exasperated sigh. “You don’t understand. Until about a week ago, I was convinced that he loved me. I really thought that after every incident, when he said he loved me and he’d never do it again, he was telling the truth. He’d get better. He’d do better. I wanted to believe him. I see happy people all the time. Why couldn’t that be us?”

Because the man Melinda had chosen had lied to her. He wasn’t the man he’d purported to be before she agreed to marry him. “You aren’t alone. I’ll help you get out of this. The first thing you need to do is to believe with everything in you that his actions against you are more truthful than the words he says. One hundred percent of the time. Can you do that?” Lacy finally breathed a sigh as she turned out of the neighborhood and back onto a busier street.

Melinda nodded as Lacy turned the heat on as high as it would go. She’d like to take Melinda back to her hotel room and then casually take Melinda back to Wayside with her husband none the wiser, but that would only make the problem worse. The police had no idea he’d been playing them. They’d file a missing person’s report and Lacy could find herself in trouble.

“First things first, you need something to wear and some food. Then, we’ll go talk to the Police. I want them to document what he did to you and why. I’ll tell them he had no injuries when I came to the door. In fact, he was able-bodied enough to try to jump on my car.”

Hopefully, that would give them enough pause to question the other reports. They needed to start a paper trail to confirm Melinda was in danger. Her life depended on it.

Chapter Three

After helping Ferd get settled in what Connor hoped was her temporary office, he headed back to his own. He situated himself behind his desk and opened an old book he'd had in his drawer since he'd taken over this office from his father. It was probably the one thing that hadn't changed in ten years. An old address book.

He flipped to the letter K and saw all three of his brother's names in there. All of them had cell phone numbers listed, ones they'd had before they walked away from Dad. If they hadn't changed, he could still reach them. If they had, he knew where they lived. He'd just chosen to give them the space they seemed to want.

Paul was the oldest. At age forty, he was probably the most likely to come. Maybe all of them had changed. There was no way to know until he made the call. He pressed the numbers on his phone, suddenly saddened by the fact that he didn't have his own brothers programmed into his long list of contacts.

"Hello?" Paul's voice came over the phone, not the slightest bit apprehensive.

"Paul, this is Connor."

He snorted. "I still know the phone prefix for Piper's Ridge. I figured it was you or Dad. Is there something you need?"

He'd always tried to be direct, but in this case, direct would seem like he was going for shock value and that wasn't the case. "There are a few things that have happened around here that I think you, Kevin, and Hunter need to know about."

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“Oh, is this about dad’s affair?” He went silent for one breath before he plowed on. “I can see it is. Look, I don’t want to meet anyone. Dad showed his true colors when he cheated on Mom. It was pretty clear that you didn’t think so.”

“You knew?” How had he been the only one kept in the dark?

“Yeah. Mom told us before she left. That’s why we all left with her. Don’t tell me you didn’t know.” Paul’s voice suddenly sounded a lot less sure.

“I didn’t. I was still in high school when all of this happened. I came home and Mom was gone. Dad didn’t tell me anything. I only found out about three weeks ago.”

“You’re serious?”

“Completely.” Had his mother died thinking that he’d chosen Dad over her? He would’ve loved to have had a relationship with both of them.

“I’m sorry, man. We’ve always thought you sided with Dad. That you thought his sleeping around was okay.”

Connor swallowed hard and leaned his head against the back of his office chair. At least he’d chosen to close the door this time. This was a conversation no one else needed to hear. “I didn’t. I chose to stay because I was still in school, and I had no reason to doubt Dad. I don’t know if this changes anything at all, but it only happened once, and he was very sorry about it. He told me he knew it was wrong. Mom hadn’t loved him for a long time, but Gloria did. After a while, he wasn’t able to fight how he felt. That doesn’t make it right, though.”

“Why didn’t you reach out to us before now?” Accusation filled Paul’s tone.

“Because I tried calling Mom multiple times and she wouldn’t answer. She never returned my calls. I didn’t get the chance to say anything to her.” Connor scrubbed his hand down his face, hoping his life would be steady again soon. This rollercoaster of emotions was for the birds.

“I’m sorry, Connor. I didn’t realize. All three of us tried to make sure Mom still felt loved after she left. It’s odd. She never grieved the loss of Dad, but you . . .”

He couldn’t hear this. Not when he couldn’t change the past. “Then why didn’t she return my calls? She left me.” Abandoned him. That still hurt.

“I don’t know. Maybe she was worried you’d try to gloss things over about Dad? I can’t answer that.”

Connor swallowed hard and focused on what had to be said. He didn’t want to have any more conversations about Mom when they weren’t face-to-face. “Look, I called to tell you that Dad got shot about a week ago. He’s doing okay, but we’ve found someone to replace him in security here at Wayside. He is now married to Gloria . . . and his daughter is here too.”

“What did you just say?” Paul’s voice went quiet.

“We have a half-sister.”

“And what did you hope I would do with this information? Should I welcome her into the family? Should I pretend that all the awful things I saw happen to Mom never happened?”

“Keep in mind that Ferd had no choice in the matter. She is innocent in all this.”

Connor realized he was coming her defense naturally.

“I suppose that’s true,” Paul grumbled.

“Look, I’m having a small Christmas get-together with Dad, Gloria, Ferd, and I hope all three of you. Bring your spouses. You can meet your sister. She is twenty, I think, and has a good head on her shoulders.”

“I don’t know that my wife will want to come. Things aren’t good between us. When are you planning this?” Connor heard him sigh.

“I’m sorry. Things aren’t great with me relationship-wise either. I’m divorced.”

“I’m probably headed that way without a miracle. Just so you know, Kevin and Hunter are in the same boat. Who knew that growing up in a house where our parents never talked would make us into horrible spouses?” He laughed without any humor. “At least we tried.”

“Yeah,” Connor muttered. Had he tried? Or had he simply given up before Lacy had a chance to hurt him? Every day she’d stayed after the divorce had surprised him. When she’d stayed at his side through all the infections after he was shot, he was shocked. She didn’t have to do that.

But she had.

“I was thinking Christmas Day. Since most everyone does their holiday on Christmas Eve nowadays, that day is usually open.”

“Yeah, Paula’s family celebrates on Christmas Eve, so we’ll have that day free. You sure you want to do this?”

“I promised Ferd I would. If it would be easier for you to agree without Dad or Gloria there, I could try to do that, but I know Dad would like to see all of you. Do you have kids?”

Paul was silent and when he spoke again, there was a harshness to his voice that Connor couldn't name. “No. Kevin has one and Hunter has one, but we have no kids.”

He wasn't sure if he should say he was sorry or not. That seemed like a landmine, and he wasn't ready to make this conversation any more stressful than it already was. “Come on over around two. We'll sit and talk for a while, then have an early supper.”

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“Sounds good. Thanks for reaching out. Do you want me to call the others for you?”

In a way, he wanted to talk to them all, but he’d purposely called Paul first as the oldest, knowing the other two were more likely to follow if Paul agreed. “I’d appreciate that.”

“Is this your cell phone?”

“Yes. Texting is fine.” In fact, he’d prefer it.

“Good. I’ll let you know what the others say. It might be a hard sell. Sorry or not, Dad broke up our family.”

Connor swallowed the urge to defend Dad. They only knew Mom’s side of the story, just like he only knew Dad’s. It was natural for them to believe the best of Mom, but the truth was, both parties had messed up. “I hope they’ll want to at least meet Ferd.”

“Does she look like a Kincade?”

“Yes, she looks a lot like me.” Connor snorted. She more than looked like him, she had the Kincade stubborn streak too.

“So, this isn’t someone trying to take what used to be our part of the inheritance?”

“Are you bothered that you gave it up?” Connor had always wondered why they’d done that.

“No. Wayside reminds me too much of dirty, hard work that was never good enough. It reminds me of the line between the barn which was Dad’s domain, and the house that was Mom’s. I can’t ever see myself going there often. I’ll come for this, but that’s it. No amount of money is ever going to make Wayside welcoming for us.”

Connor swallowed hard. He’d thought he was the only brother hurt by all that had been done. In some ways, his brothers had been hurt much more. “It’ll be good to see you. Thanks for taking my call.”

“Yup. Talk to you soon.” He hung up without saying anything else.

Lacy followed Melinda’s directions to the police station despite her insistence that they wouldn’t be helpful. The police had already decided she was trouble, and nothing could be said or done to change that. The building was two-story and stucco, giving off a distinctly 70s vibe.

Melinda sat in the car even after Lacy had turned off the engine. She glanced over her shoulder and Lacy briefly wondered if that was a habit.

“I was watching the whole time. We weren’t followed.”

“Only because he was too drunk to find his keys.” Melinda took a deep breath. “I hid them in the cabinet with the water glasses. He won’t look there until morning when he goes for his morning huge glass of water to get rid of his headache.”

Lacy thanked God that, while Connor had various other issues after his time in the military, drinking wasn’t one of them. “Will he still call the police?”

“Depends on what he did to himself in the moments after I left. Maybe he was too far gone to remember his plan. I guess I can hope.” She ducked her head, and Lacy saw the distinct form in the shape of a hand across Melinda’s face.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner.” It was still morning. How in the world was he already that drunk?

“It’s fine. Just another Monday in paradise.” She opened her door and stood, then leaned against the back door as she closed it.

Lacy got out and came around. For some reason, even though Melinda was out of that house, she was sure this was only the beginning of what she needed to do. The hope that she could come, report the issue to the police and let them handle it, looked less and less likely as the minutes passed.

“I don’t think you realize how many times I’ve tried this. I’ve told them what actually happens in that house. It’s like they don’t hear me. I applied for a restraining order and was denied on the basis that there was no apparent threat, and I could leave his residence at any time. Since I don’t have my own place, I couldn’t restrain him from his own rental.”

“It’s not like a spouse is likely to have another house. That seems like a terrible loophole.” Lacy could believe the justice system didn’t necessarily have a good plan in place for domestic issues.

Melinda shook her head and swiped her hair behind her ears, then shivered in the cold. “There have been very few times in the last few years where I haven’t felt like the deck was stacked against me. I feel like I can’t do anything to make my life better. You were my last hope.” She headed in her bare feet toward the front door.

Lacy rushed ahead to hold the door, then waited with her along the wall where they were told to. Lacy slipped her boots off her feet and handed them to Melinda. She’d still have her socks and then Melinda wouldn’t have to walk around on the concrete floor in bare feet.

As soon as Melinda slipped them on, a deputy came out and led them to a small room. The deputy seemed young. Then again, lots of people had started to seem young once Lacy had passed the age of thirty. Whereas, five years ago, she'd fit into the category of 'young', she now was in this weird in-between of feeling not young, but not old.

"I'm Officer Bakersfield. Please have a seat." He glanced at Lacy's feet but said nothing.

"Thank you." Lacy took over, deciding she would first tell him what had happened to her, then Melinda could back her up. That way, they couldn't say Lacy had developed the story while Melinda was telling her side.

"I went to this address about ten minutes ago." She opened her phone and flipped it to show the officer. "While there, the man living there made threatening remarks and even jumped on the hood of my car when I tried to leave. I think he left a dent."

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The officer raised a brow. Melinda took a deep breath. “I asked her to come. He’s been angry with me lately and I was frightened. He doesn’t let me leave the house without him, which is why I’m still in yesterday’s clothes and I’m wearing her boots.” She pointed her thumb at Lacy.

Lacy laid a hand on Melinda’s arm. “Show him your cheek.”

Melinda brushed her hair back behind her ear. “He also grabbed my wrists.” She pushed each of her sleeves up, one at a time, showing red marks above her hands.

“Let me get a form and a camara so we can document this.” Officer Bakersfield stood and headed out of the room.

“Have they ever documented this kind of thing before?” Lacy watched the door, wanting to keep her questions between her and Melinda.

“No. Only his. The wounds he gave himself but said I did.”

The officer returned and took photos of her bruises and wrote down her statement. “Do you have anywhere you can stay while we look into this?” He tapped the paper with his finger.

“My aunt lives twenty minutes from here. I don’t have her number though.” Melinda again ducked her head.

Lacy gave him her cell number and promised to get her to her aunt’s house. As soon as they were outside, Lacy took a deep breath. “Let’s go find some clothes and shoes

for you, plus a coat. Then, you can tell me how to get to your aunt's."

Melinda gave a curt nod. "Okay. I don't have any money though."

Lacy hadn't expected her to pay anyway. "I didn't figure you did. Is there a thrift store around here? Those are usually my favorite places to shop."

"I haven't shopped in a long time. I think there's one on First Avenue, as you head out of town."

"Great. Then we don't have to go out of our way." She clicked the fob to unlock her car and both of them got inside.

Forty minutes later, Melinda had two outfits, plus necessities, and boots with a coat. She seemed to have relaxed slightly, and Lacy was ready to get her somewhere she could sleep for a bit. As soon as they got in the car, Melinda directed her to the nearest highway. Before long, they were in another tiny town in rural New Mexico.

"Auntie Joy moved here to be close to me, but I was never allowed to have her over and I couldn't go see her."

"Oh! I remember Joy. She moved about a year after you did." Lacy hadn't realized Joy had followed Melinda south.

"Yeah, I just hope she's home. I kept her address in my memory, not written down. So, hopefully, he never knew exactly where to find her. If he did, he'd try to con her out of money or threaten her. He never had any money. Up until he got the job at the car repair place, he couldn't keep a job."

Lacy looked up and down the street where each house had plenty of room between them. There were bird baths and flower beds that were now brown with the cooler

temperatures. She followed Melinda to the front door and waited as she knocked.

Down the street, an engine started. Out of habit, and because Connor had taught her to always be situationally aware, Lacy looked for the vehicle but couldn't find it. No one came to the door and Melinda knocked again.

The more seconds passed without a response from Joy, tension coiled in Lacy's neck. From down the street, the car that had started slowly turned onto the street and headed toward them.

"No. No, no, no." Melinda pounded on the door. "That's his car."

"Let's go around back." Lacy tugged on Melinda's arm and they both took off before the car could get close.

Melinda cupped her hands together and looked in a window that seemed to be a sitting room or sunroom. There was no sign of Joy inside.

"Melinda, you're sure she still lives here?"

She nodded quickly. "She came to my house one evening and talked to me. I had to explain to her that she couldn't come, even when Tod was gone. She told me she would be here for me if I ever needed her. I was too afraid to have her come and face Tod when I realized what he was doing. She's old. Frail. He wouldn't think twice about hurting her."

"Look." Lacy pointed to a sliding door. "If that's open, we can duck inside."

"Good idea. If she's asleep, she won't mind." Melinda ran over, jiggled the pull and the door slid open.

“Aunt Joy?” Melinda called.

Lacy wanted to check the bedroom before Melinda could. If Aunt Joy had fallen asleep last night and simply not woken up, this would turn from a bad day to a lot worse for Melinda. She could at least save her from that discovery.

The soft sound of water running met her ears as she approached the bathroom. Maybe Aunt Joy was in the shower and hadn’t heard the knocking. She went further down the hall to find the bathroom door open.

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Her breath lodged in her throat and Melinda screamed behind her. “Aunt Joy! No!” She tried to push past Lacy, but Lacy held her in place.

“Don’t touch anything. They’ll need to fingerprint the scene. Let’s call the police.”

Chapter Four

Had it only been one day? Connor scrubbed his face with both hands, feeling the weight of missing Lacy’s presence for his evening routine. To be real, his whole day had been upended from his first drink of coffee to heading up the stairs for the evening. The house wasn’t right without her.

He looked at his phone. She hadn’t called since that morning, letting him know she’d arrived in New Mexico. Would she miss their evening chats or was she so consumed by what she was doing that she wouldn’t miss him at all?

She was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. That wasn’t the question. But he wished she’d asked him to come with her. Having more than one set of eyes on a problem was often the way to fix it.

He punched in a quick text, wishing her a good night and hoping she had a good day. He wasn’t usually so aware of every word he said to her. They’d lived in the same house, though in separate rooms, for so long he felt like he knew her inside and out. Yet this had thrown him for a loop. She’d needed time away from him. Did his text sound too clingy? Would she roll her eyes at him?

He closed his phone before sending the text and set it aside. His couch was empty,

except for the blanket Lacy used to cover her feet while they talked at night. She wasn't one to watch television, since the only thing that interested her were crime documentaries and she got enough of that in real life to satisfy her.

Everywhere he looked in his suite reminded him of her, except, oddly, his bed. That had been empty for ten years. Empty since he'd returned from the military, so changed he couldn't accept love from a woman too good for him. Even before they were divorced, he'd had her move to her own room.

She hadn't cried in front of him, but he'd heard it through the wall. Muffled sobs confirmed the fact that he'd hurt her even when he'd tried to save her. What kind of man did that? What kind of monster hurt the woman he loved?

A text came through on his phone and he pounced on it like teenager, then stopped himself. This was not okay. He couldn't make Lacy an addiction. That wasn't any better than pushing her away.

Hey, Connor. It's been a really long day. Things are crazy here. I'll be here longer than I thought.

He stared at the phone and his jaw hardened so tight his teeth throbbed. What wasn't she saying? Something was going on behind the scenes because that text practically screamed something had happened that she didn't want to tell him about.

He deleted the text from before and typed out a new one.

Are you okay?

He waited, holding the phone, needing to see an answer. After a minute, he swiped out of the text app and pressed the phone icon just as a text came through. He raked his hands through his hair. When she was here, life was easy. He didn't have to think

about her safety or where she was, who she was with, if something was happening.

I don't want you to worry about me. I'm handling it.

"Ach!" He pressed her number to call her. She had to know that her vague texts were making this worse.

The phone rang four times before going to voicemail. He listened to her message as he paced the floor.

"Lacy Kincade, I need you to call me back. I don't know if you intended to make me worry or if you're so tired that you didn't think about how those texts would come across. Sometimes texts are the worst." He sighed, looking for the right words. How did he tell her that he needed to know everything was alright so he didn't stay up all night worrying about her?

"Look, just call me so I can hear in your voice that everything is fine. I've always been able to tell what's going on with you just by hearing you. Okay? That's all I'm asking for. I know you need time, space, whatever, I'm trying to give that to you, but . . ." The phone beeped. He'd run out of message space.

Had he sounded possessive? Frantic? Well, if he did, she'd get the hint that he cared. What was so wrong with caring? He collapsed onto the sofa and let his head fall back against the cushion. The trouble with that was she'd clearly said no, and he would always take no for an answer.

"Lord, I blew it. I know I did. When I asked her for a divorce, I thought I was saving her. Protecting her. I've never wanted to hurt her. I've only wanted the very best for that woman. She is my heart. I don't have one outside of her."

He closed his eyes, hoping the phone would ring. What was wrong? Why wasn't she

calling him back?

A text came through on his phone and he lifted it.

Connor, big trouble. Meet me in your office.

A note from Brendon was the last thing he wanted to see tonight. He shoved his phone in his pocket and headed downstairs. Brendon waited for him at the foot of the stairs.

“I just got a call. There was an attempted jail break tonight. Viceroy didn’t escape, but his people are clearly on the move.”

“Now?” Why now? Why not when he wasn’t already worried about Lacy. At least she was all the way down south in New Mexico, far away from the jail that was housing Viceroy before his trial.

“They don’t have much time left. He’s scheduled for his first court appearance January fifteenth. Three weeks.”

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Connor tugged his phone from his pocket and scrolled until he found Nadine's number. She wouldn't be asleep yet, but she was in charge of security and would want to know this development.

"Hey," he said as soon as she answered. "We need to raise our alert status. Someone tried to break Viceroy out of jail."

Nadine was silent for a moment, but he heard her typing.

"Are you still at work?" He glanced at his watch.

"No, sir. I'm at home, but I bring my laptop for occasions like this." The phone was muffled for a moment, and he heard her talking to Edwyn, "It's fine."

She clicked some more then took a deep breath. "I just did a rapid scan of the cameras and there is nothing moving. We're lucky it's winter and the snow makes checking easy."

"I trust you. Thanks for looking." He hung up the phone.

"You're not going to sleep tonight, are you?" Brendon frowned at him.

"Probably not, but not for the reasons you think." Why was everyone else getting ahold of him and not Lacy?

"This isn't enough to keep you up?" He rolled his wheelchair closer. "What's going on?"

The last thing he needed was Brendon thinking he was having some kind of episode. Of all the guys, he'd kept his issues to himself as much as possible. Brendon was there for the others. Connor had to keep up the appearance of being the strongest. He couldn't do that if his men didn't believe he was capable in every way.

"Nothing."

"If you can't sleep, take that allergy stuff. It will help you."

"I don't want to be helped, but thanks." In fact, he wanted to stay up in case Lacy called. What if she needed him? Then again, what could he do from hours and hours away?

Brendon held up his hands. "Okay, but I can't help you if you don't talk to me. I've been able to figure out a few things just by living here for a decade, but my boss should be the first one who makes sure he doesn't need my services before anyone else."

Connor snorted. "That's how I know you're trying to get one over on me. You know as well as I do that we're equals here." He'd done that on purpose. While he was the owner and signed all the checks, Brendon managed at the same level as Connor.

"Speaking of that." Brendon glanced down the hall and then around the banister to the living room. "Now that Ferd is here and she owns as much as you do, my position should probably be evaluated. I doubt she knows about my interest, and I don't want to come between family. This doesn't have to get discussed tonight, but soon."

Leave it to Brendon to be more on top of issues that could cause stress than he was. "Sure. We'll talk at some point in the near future. Thanks for letting me know about the threat." He headed up a few steps toward his room. "Night."

Brendon waved even as his brows dipped together in thought. “Night.”

Yellow police tapeboxed Lacy in the house. She watched Melinda clutch her middle as an officer talked to her. She knew, without a doubt, the detective would see her as guilty when what Melinda was doing was masking her grief. She hadn’t been allowed to feel anything for so long that masking was a defense mechanism.

Finally, the officer finished but asked her not to leave yet. Melinda came over and though Lacy wasn’t typically a hugger, she took Melinda in her arms to let her know she wasn’t leaving. After the fear of running from Tod, then finding her aunt, Melinda looked exhausted.

“They think I did it. Relatives are always at the top of the list. Discovering us here in the house makes us look guilty. He said we were breaking and entering.” Melinda looked at her feet and swiped her hair behind her ear, her voice was calm, but her quivering fingers gave her away. She was barely hanging on to her emotions.

“I told them your husband was right outside. The one who had threatened me earlier by jumping on my car. The one who hit you and we documented it. I told him we were afraid, and your aunt would want us to come inside.”

“I can’t believe she’s gone.” Melinda pressed her lips together and her jaw trembled.

“It’s okay to cry about this.” Lacy touched her arm.

Melinda shied away from the contact. “I don’t cry. It doesn’t do any good anyway.” She looked away. “They aren’t letting me leave and I just want to get out of here. All I can see is her lying on the floor in that awful position. I just want to leave.” Her voice rose higher and higher until it broke.

Lacy brought her over to the living room and sat her down on a sofa bedecked in a

huge flower pattern. Though it had to be thirty years old, the fabric looked like it was rarely sat on.

“Wait here.” Lacy held up her pointer finger letting her know she wouldn’t take an argument. Lacy was taking over.

She headed for the kitchen and asked the evidence technician if she could get a glass of water. She’d expected dust to cover everything, but that was probably just for TV drama, and old ones at that. They hadn’t used any in the kitchen and she hoped that meant they were focusing on the bathroom.

“No, but I’ve got a coke out in the van. I’ll grab one for you.” He stopped at the door, took off his booties, and headed outside.

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A moment later, he returned, put new booties on, and handed her a Diet Pepsi. She chuckled, since she'd been expecting an actual Coke, but this was a part of the country where 'coke' just meant carbonated. Since she never traveled, she hadn't thought about it.

She took the can to Melinda, opened it for her, and handed it over. "I'll talk with one of the officers and see if we can leave if I tell him where we'll be. We could even have an officer follow us if that would make them trust us more."

Melinda shrugged a shoulder as she took a drink from the can. "Whatever. I'll be surprised if they don't arrest me. It's not the first time they've threatened to. Honestly, I'm just waiting for the day they follow through. At least then I won't have to go home for a few days."

Lacy hated the fact that her friend had the same lost, hopeless sound to her voice that some of the woman who came to Wayside had. It was all abuse in one form or another. She went over to the officer who had asked her questions and waited until he was finished talking. He turned and waited for her to ask what she wanted.

"I was wondering when it would be okay for me to take Melinda out of this situation? I can get a hotel room nearby, but being here is starting to really affect her."

He glanced around her to where Melinda sat then met her eyes again. "I get the feeling there is a lot more to this story than we're getting."

"You'd be right. She's a victim of abuse. Abuse that has been turned on its head to look like she was the perpetrator instead of the victim. Look how she is acting and

instead of using the preconceived vision of someone who is guilty, see her as the victim and tell me her actions don't line up." Lacy crossed her arms in mild challenge. She didn't want to make the man angry, but someone had to see the truth.

"Where will you be?" He wiped all emotion from his face.

If she went all the way back to her other hotel room, they would be in the next town over. That would put them closer to Melinda's ex, but farther from Aunt Joy's house. She gave him the name of her hotel. "Is that all right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, go ahead. I'll let everyone know they can find you there if we need anything. If you go to a different hotel, please let us know since Melinda has no phone or other way to reach her."

Lacy nodded. "I also gave your investigator my number. I'll be with her for a while." When that would be over, she wasn't sure. Unfortunately for both of them, it didn't look like she'd be able to leave soon.

When both women were outside, Lacy took a deep breath. Odd that simple yellow tape could feel like a prison. "We'll go back to my hotel. You can rest there."

Melinda took a deep breath and slowly bowed her head. "I'm sorry for getting you wrapped up in all this. I can't believe you've only been here one day, and you've been attacked and seen a murdered woman. This has to end. I just don't think it will end well for me."

Lacy stopped her before she could reach for the car door. "Hey. Don't say that. I'm here." She looked at her phone. They'd been inside that house for hours and at some point, Connor had called her. She hadn't even heard it ring.

"First, before we go to the hotel, we need food. What's open 24 hours?" Her stomach

rumbled at the idea of eating. Had she even eaten that day? Everything was a blur and the hour was late.

“Denny’s is always open.” She shrugged. “I’m not really hungry.”

She couldn’t blame her friend. The only issue with Denny’s was they couldn’t do drive through. Instead of hunting up the nearest place on her phone, she headed toward the hotel, hoping to see a drive through that was still open. The sooner she could get Melinda somewhere safe and comfortable, the better.

A taco place loomed in the distance, lights clearly still on. She dashed through the drive through then headed for the hotel. As soon as they were safely inside with doors locked and a door alarm mounted under it, she finally took a deep breath.

It was almost 1A.M., but she wanted to call Connor and make sure nothing had happened to make him call her. After his dad, Teddy, was shot, there was no telling what could’ve made him reach out.

She sat at the table and unwrapped a taco, then waited for him to pick up.

“Hello.” His tired voice came over the phone like a balm to her weary soul.

“Hey. Sorry I missed your call.”

“Did you listen to my message?” he asked.

“No, I just wanted to call you back as soon as I could.”

“You don’t have to listen to it. I was worried about you. It sounds like there’s more going on than you wanted to talk about.”

She glanced up at Melinda, who sat across the table from her, poking at a taco of her own. She had yet to take a bite.

“Yup, that would be the case.” She focused back on her food so Melinda wouldn’t think she was talking about her.

“Can you go somewhere so we can talk? I can tell you’re holding back.”

She took a deep breath. As much as she wanted to tell Connor everything that had happened, he was hours away and there was nothing he could do besides worry and pray. “Just pray for me and Melinda. There’s kind of a mess here.”

“You’re not helping ease my mind, babe.”

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She chuckled because he'd just told her without telling her that he still cared. He'd used endearments for her all the time before he'd left. They'd been her version of a dream married couple. Especially since her own childhood with divorced parents was a mess. "I'm good. The moment I'm not good, you'll be the first to know. Sleep well."

"I might be able to now. Just so you know, someone attempted to break Viceroy out of jail before his trial. They've increased his security, and we've increased ours. I know you planned to testify, so part of me is really glad no one knows where you are. Keep it that way."

She bit her lip. Her only way of paying for the hotel was with her credit card which was traceable. She was probably safe this far south, but Connor wouldn't have warned her if it wasn't justified. "I'll keep my eyes open. Thanks for letting me know."

She stalled for a moment, wanting to say that she loved him. She would be home soon. She wanted him back. But it was too soon for that. "Miss you." That was as close as she could come to the truth.

"Miss you, too."

Chapter Five

Dad strode into Connor's office and took a seat across the desk from him. Connor looked up from his laptop and gave him his full attention, since he hadn't come to the lodge in over a week.

“Dad, you doing okay?”

“No. I’m not. I heard from Ferd that Lacy is gone.” His brows dove down in the center, clearly angry at being the last to know.

His dad had always been a big guy. Connor had come by his broad shoulders and large build honestly, both through biology and hard work. Now, his father looked stooped. His limp from polio more pronounced.

“It was her choice. I didn’t do anything to make her go. You can’t blame me for this.” He held up his hands in surrender. He’d never figured out why his father had sided with Lacy in the divorce. After the fact, he’d been glad his father had, but at the time it had been infuriating.

“She didn’t say a word to me,” he grumbled.

“It was a quick thing. A friend in New Mexico needed help. Lacy wanted to be the one to do it. That’s all there is to the story.” Even though he knew there was more. Lacy had said as much but couldn’t tell him what was really happening.

“Why didn’t she take you along?” He raised his chin and narrowed his eyes.

“Maybe because she also told me she needed some time away from the ranch.”

“And you?” he questioned.

Connor sighed. He couldn’t lie to his dad. “Yeah. And that part I don’t understand. Since I got shot almost a year ago now, I thought we were getting closer, but every time I mentioned the second chance missions, she would shut me down. She has never wanted to get back together.”

“But you want that?” Dad sounded surprised.

“Yeah. I realized it almost right away, but she told me flat-out to forget it.” He looked for the right words and decided honesty was better than delicacy. “Something changed with her when she was kidnapped. She came back different. Distant. If I’m honest though, it was even before that. She’s never kept anything from me, and she kept Nadine’s plan from me.”

“That is strange. Did you do anything to bring that on? That distrust.”

Connor had thought about that long and hard and had come up blank. “Besides divorcing her? No. And why would something we did ten years ago suddenly matter now?”

“Because every single man here is working on their pasts? Maybe?” Dad chuckled. “I won’t claim to know what women think. Goodness knows I’ve messed up when I try. But if I had to guess, I’d say that she was having second thoughts about the relationship you had, but she’s scared of history repeating itself. You were the one who wanted the separation. Not her.”

Lacy hadn’t seen the divorce coming. Dad hadn’t either. But why tell him that under no circumstances was he to try for his own second chance mission when she was feeling the opposite?

“If that’s true, why keep pushing me away?” Dad wasn’t one he’d ever gone to for relationship advice, but he’d been the one to keep Lacy there, so maybe talking to him was better than mulling it over himself.

“Because whatever caused the divorce is still there. She can’t forgive what you won’t tell her was wrong. That’s asking for trouble.”

Admit what had happened? Admit that how his mother treated him had given him issues? That made him weak. “I can’t do that. And it doesn’t matter, the reason isn’t valid anymore.” Mostly. Lacy had always come back, but this sudden need to be away got to him much worse than he’d thought it would.

“Is it?” Dad questioned.

“Sure. Why?”

“She’s been gone for two nights, I hear, and you didn’t tell me. You just stewed about it. Meaning you’re looking for meaning instead of just living like she will come back soon. That tells me whatever is wrong, is still wrong.”

Blast him and his ability to read Connor like the back of a cereal box. “She said she was coming back so I didn’t think it was that important to call you right up and tell you. Even though she’s your favorite child.”

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Dad laughed, breaking the tension in the room. “She’s my favorite daughter-in-law, that’s for sure. Then again, I’ve never met the others.”

There, an opportunity to change the subject. “I spoke to Paul yesterday.”

Dad tilted his head in confusion. “You did? Why?”

“Paul, Kevin, and Hunter haven’t met Ferd. I figured they should, and she should get to meet them. I knew it was more likely the others would come if I could get Paul to agree. He said he’d talk to them. The plan is for them to come Christmas Day.”

“Oh, I suppose I should go shopping.” He stood slowly and leaned on the arm of the chair. “They’ll need gifts.”

“They won’t. This is just a reintroduction. A chance to clear the air and meet Ferd. Let’s keep it light. It will be awkward anyway with Gloria since they knew about Gloria this whole time.”

Dad sucked in a deep breath. “I wouldn’t have expected that. I guess that explains why we didn’t hear from them all this time. I’m sorry, Connor.”

The hurt of his brothers had dulled a long time ago. “They made their choice. So did I.” Or his mother had. She’d chosen to leave him behind and never tell him the truth. He still wasn’t sure what he’d done to deserve that.

“It will be good to see them, but I won’t dare hope that this will lead to anything more.”

“I think that’s a good idea. If they want to keep meeting or talking, we can. It’s been so long though.” His cellphone vibrated on his desk.

“That’s Lacy. I’ll let you talk with her. Let me know if there’s anything else I need to do.” He waved as he slowly made his way out of the room and closed his door.

Connor pressed the phone button and immediately put her on speaker so he could hear her better. “Lacy.”

“Hey.” Her voice was quiet, like she was whispering. “I know it’s really early, but this was the only time I could talk to you without disturbing Melinda.”

“You know I’m an early riser. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Melinda’s husband is a real piece of work. He’s trying to convince the cops that she’s abusing him, but I’ll give you one guess who was actually doing it. She thinks his plan was to murder her and make it look like self-defense because he has these documented domestic dispute visits. The police barely believed her when I told her to file a report. That’s not the worst though.”

“There’s more?” Domestic violence was terrifying because often the people who fell victim to it believed they somehow deserved to stay. They clung to the hope that things would improve.

“Yeah. We were going to go to her Aunt Joy’s house to stay with her until Melinda could get on her feet. When we got there, Aunt Joy was dead. Murdered. I saw him drive down the street before we went in.”

Connor held in a groan. This was exactly what he didn’t want her getting into. Especially without him there. “Lacy, do not get in the middle of a domestic. Seriously. If you have to, get her out of there. Come here to wait it out.”

“I can’t. The police have decided she’s a suspect since we had to break into her aunt’s house to get away from her husband Tod. If we leave now, she looks like she’s skipping town. Just pray for me. I think we’ll be okay as long as we stay here at this hotel. Oh, I wanted to tell you. I had to use my credit card on the room. Do you think Viceroy’s men could put a trace on my credit cards? Should I be worried?”

He raked his hands through his hair. He would not sit by and let her possibly put herself in double danger if he could do something about it. “Send me the hotel information. I’ll pay for the room with our business account. It has a higher level of security.”

“Okay, I’ll do that. Thanks, Connor.”

“You’re welcome and, Lacy?”

He heard her slight intake of breath as she grinned. “Yeah?”

“I care about you. If you find yourself in need, call me. I’ll be there as fast as I can.” And he meant it. He’d book a flight or drive as fast as he could, but he’d get there.

“Thank you. I know. You’ve never let me down.”

She hung up the phone and he was left wondering why, if that was true, she needed time away from him?

Lacy stared at her phone, letting a feeling of peace wash over her. Connor missed her but asking him to come and be at her side would ruin what she was trying to accomplish. How would he ever see her as the woman who would always return to him, no matter what, if she asked him to come after her?

She could handle this. Melinda was safely away from her husband in a hotel. No one

except the police knew where she was. If Tod filed a missing person's report, they wouldn't start looking for at least twenty-four hours because Melinda was an adult, which gave Lacy some time to figure things out.

She braced herself before taking a sip of the coffee she'd gotten from the lobby of the hotel when she'd forced herself to wake by 4 A.M. so she could talk to Connor without Melinda hearing. Melinda already had a heightened sense of guilt and Lacy wanted to avoid making her feel any more than she already did.

A man in dark pants and polo shirt approached where she sat on a sofa in a small alcove at the end of the hallway. A vending machine filled with snacks and another with beverages glowed a few feet away. He glanced at the offerings, then sat on the opposite end of the sofa.

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Even though there was nothing outwardly scary about the man other than that he seemed really young to her, Lacy felt her heart beat faster and her palms tingled in apprehension.

“Pretty early, huh?” he said glancing at her then quickly looking away.

“Yeah, didn’t expect anyone else to be out here.” There was nothing odd about him. He was clean, not overly muscled, and other than his shifty eyes gave off no warning signs. Yet her chest was tight. Mentally, she was convinced he could have singled her out because she was alone.

Lacy stood and looked down the hall. Because of the hour, everything seemed dim and there wasn’t anyone else around. If she went into her room to get away from this guy, he’d know which room she was in.

“Have you been to the sauna? It’s really nice here,” he said to her back.

She tensed. Who would ask about a sauna with someone they don’t know? “I haven’t used it. Um, see you around.” She didn’t want to be rude in case her weirdo-meter was off-plumb, but she wanted nothing more than to get away.

“I’m sure you will,” he said as he stood and headed for the vending machine again.

Lacy strode to the lobby, her long legs eating the distance between her and the creepy guy. She found the front desk empty. Why wasn’t anyone around? From the corner of her eye, she saw the man heading toward her. She clenched her fists, ready to react if he did anything to her.

“Do you need something?” he asked her.

He wasn't wearing the logo shirt that the hotel staff wore, so why did he keep following her? “I just need a toothbrush.” Yes, it was a lie, but she couldn't exactly tell this guy he was giving her the creeps. Having literally anyone else around was better than being alone.

“Oh, that's easy.” He went behind the desk and riffled through a few baskets of items. After a few seconds, he pulled up two toothbrushes in clear plastic like her dentist used to offer.

“Blue or Green?” He laughed.

“Blue,” she said hesitantly.

He handed it to her. “They are complimentary.”

“Do you work here?” She crossed her arms, tucking the unnecessary brush under her arm.

“Yeah. I always work this shift because I can usually sit here and read without much happening. I heard you talking at the end of the hall and thought I'd be nice. Sorry I scared you.” He shrugged. “I didn't mean to.”

Lacy took a deep breath and tried to settle her racing heart. “I'm sorry. Yesterday was a very long day and my radar was up. I was on the lookout for trouble.” She handed him the toothbrush. “I was just worried about being alone with a guy I didn't know.”

“Understandable.” He took the brush back and tossed it into the basket. “I can be . . . odd, or so I'm told, but I promise I'm harmless.”

The interaction was making her feel worse the longer she stood there. Having intuition wasn't bad, it just wasn't always right. "I'm sorry." She wasn't sure what else to say so she waved and headed back to her room.

Inside, Melinda slept in the bed furthest from the door with the blankets wrapped tightly around her and her hands tucked under her chin. She'd cocooned herself deep under the covers even though the room was barely cool.

Making sure she made as little noise as possible, Lacy dug her laptop out of her bag and headed for the desk in the corner. She sat it on the edge so she could angle her computer away from Melinda and give her more time to sleep without the glaring light in her eyes. Looking at her yesterday, with dark circles deep under her eyes, Lacy was pretty sure a long time had passed since Melinda had a good sleep.

She pulled up a search engine and typed in Tod McFarland. He had no social media to speak of, which wasn't surprising. Lots of people flaunted their evil deeds like they were something to be proud of, but many still kept their secrets firmly hidden.

If Melinda was right and her husband was attempting to kill her and make it look like self-defense, he had to leave no doubt or evidence for the police to find. Social media could easily be used against someone.

She looked up the address where Melinda lived and found out the home was a rental and owned by a firm. That, too, was not surprising, though she wondered if they'd bothered to check the state of the home recently. It had the look of being inhabited by the same people for a long time, and that those people didn't care very much about it.

Melinda shifted in her sleep, then awoke, sitting straight up. "Where am I?" Her voice was less than a whisper, more like a squeak.

"You're in a hotel room with me and you're safe." At least for now she was. There

was no telling what the day would bring.

“Lacy.” Melinda closed her eyes. “I just had the worst dream. I was being chased in the streets by Tod and no one would help me. They all looked away. Then I realized that’s my life.”

“I’ll help you as much as I can. We started that yesterday by putting a dent in his armor of defense. If he is the aggressor, and we know he is, then what he does can’t be self-defense.”

“And you think that one little report will help? He has made many claims with them over the last few months that make him look innocent.” She brushed through her tangled hair with her fingers. “I don’t want to go to prison, but part of me wonders if it would be better than what I’ve been living with.”

“That’s ‘no way out’ thinking. We need to find you some hope, my friend.” Lacy opened her email and typed up a quick note to Connor, letting him know exactly where she was and how he could reach her, just in case anything happened to her phone.

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“What are we going to do today? I mean, after I shower.” She laughed as she whipped the covers off.

“I’d like to talk to that cop again. We could take him out for a cup of coffee and tell him what you suspect. Even if he can’t do anything, it will be on record that you’re afraid of Tod and what he could be planning.”

“Or it will look like I’m creating my own alibi.” Melinda took a labored breath and let it out. “Sorry, Tod told me this was how it would play out. He’s so paranoid that he won’t even get a phone because he’s sure they would be listening to him and proving him wrong. I wonder if we’ll ever beat him at this game.”

“I don’t want to beat him. I want him arrested for what he’s done to you.” Lacy turned to look fully at Melinda. “How many days a week have you had to cover up bruises so you could go outside?”

Melinda looked away and that was answer enough.

“That’s not right, Melinda. That’s not what life is supposed to be like. I know this kind of thing happens slowly until you’re convinced you can’t leave, but you can. It’s not God’s will that you stay in a place where you could die.”

“How do you know? I thought I loved him. I thought he was a good guy.” She took two steps toward the bathroom, then stopped. “He told me time and again that I’d never do better.”

“And right now, would you choose anyone else?”

Melinda snorted. “Never. I don’t want to be married ever again.”

“Exactly. He wanted you to feel worthless. Even knowing you’d never want to impress anyone else, he still used that against you.”

“I don’t want to feel dumb for this.”

Lacy stood and gently laid a hand on Melinda’s shoulder. “I can say with certainty that you’re not dumb. You were mentally abused and that led to physical abuse. Now, we just need to get you out of it and far, far away from Tod McFarland.”

Chapter Six

Connor read the email for a third time to make sure he hadn’t missed anything, then he entered the address of the hotel into Google to see how far away Lacy really was. Hours. He’d have to drive hours to help her if she found herself in a terrible situation and she wasn’t close to any airports.

Part of him wanted to race off and be there at her side even without her asking him to. What would it hurt to be there? Then again, she’d indicated that her friend was in an abusive relationship. Having him around might make Melinda feel stressed and she’d be stressed enough.

Edwyn came in and laid a few printed pages on his desk. “That’s the report on the land you asked me to do. Taxes will go up this year because of the acquisition of the Homestead. In the spring, we’ll be able to check the fences over there, what’s left of them.”

His dad had been a cattle man up until Connor had wanted to start Wayside as a place for healing. Dad had gone along with it, but he’d always missed seeing the cows grazing and going to auctions. That was part of Connor’s childhood that he couldn’t

get back as long as Wayside had the purpose it did.

“And will there be room for cattle?” Connor glanced at the pages, only skimming quickly over the numbers.

“Yes. Not the size herd your father had. It’s a smaller place. Probably closer to a farm than a ranch. Most of the buildings were burned down in the fire, but I got the impression they did more farming than husbandry.” Edwyn frowned. “Nadine was up late into the night, worried about Viceroy. She’s not a worrier. What can we do to take some of this stress off her plate?”

“I knew she’d be worried since she offered to testify against him. She might even be in danger. We’re keeping an eye on our perimeter.” He was concerned with everyone’s safety, but Lacy was his top priority.

“Any other news from the jail?” Edwyn pushed further back in his chair.

“No, it’s been quiet for the last twenty-four hours. But if they hoped to have the element of surprise, that makes sense. Security will be higher for a little while until they let it go back to normal.”

“I know, but they don’t have much time. What about the others who were arrested?”

There were many underlings arrested over the last year in connection with Viceroy. All but his wife Ramona were now dead. That left the list of people able to testify against him perilously small. That also meant those who could testify were in grave danger.

“There’s only Ramona and she has refused to testify. They even got to Evie. They found her hanging in her cell from a cord made of her jumpsuit.”

Edwyn's brow rose. "And let me guess, the security cameras went down right before it happened?"

Connor couldn't laugh, that was too morbid, but Edwyn was right. "It didn't come back on until ten minutes after they found her. Are you shocked?"

Edwyn relaxed his face until it was completely emotionless. "This is my shocked face."

Finally, Connor laughed. "Look, if you need to take Nadine and go somewhere she feels protected, then you should. It could be somewhere other than here, it's fine. I get it. We'll manage. Dad can come back and work security for a little while. Moira might want to get out, too. Her son didn't want to testify about what happened to him, but if he changed his mind, he could be in danger. They might consider him a danger anyway. Evie had sworn to silence. She hardly spoke to anyone, and they still got to her."

"It makes me wonder if they were trying to rescue him or kill him. What if he wasn't the top dog?" Edwyn took a deep breath. "Maybe I'm just worried this will never be over, but I can't help thinking this is a demon with more than one head."

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“You could be right. If he knows names above him, his life is in danger. I guess I just always thought of him at the top because that’s what Scarlet said, and she was in the inner circle. But she was also little more than a slave to him. Why would he tell her that he was less than the best?”

“He wouldn’t. He had no reason to. Just like Kelly thought Nathen was at the top, but it turned out he was barely a lacky. She wasn’t in a position to know any more.” Edwyn hung his head. “Do you ever get the feeling like there’s too much evil? Like we’ll never be able to do enough to combat it? Nadine doesn’t want to ever have children after what she’s seen. Why bring children into a dark world?”

After divorcing Lacy, that was one thing he could speak on. He wished he’d been able to have a child. That had been a dream of hers and he’d taken that from her because of his own fears. “Children bring light. They are accepting and easily believe in things that are good. Less children means more darkness. That said, I wouldn’t want her to become pregnant when she doesn’t want to be.”

“I’ll have to settle for her cat for now.” Edwyn laughed. “Maybe after the trial she’ll feel safe again.” He paused for a moment and tilted his head in thought. “I think she’ll want to stay here because she likes to do battle from a security point of view, but I’ll let you know if she changes her mind.”

“Sounds good.” He glanced at his phone and felt a pang of disappointment when there wasn’t another message from Lacy.

“When is she coming back?”

Connor laid down his phone. “Who?”

Edwyn snorted. “Lacy. Who else would have you so distracted that you would look at your phone during a meeting?”

“Sorry. She’s found herself in a situation. She says she can handle it and has promised that she’ll let me know if she needs my help, but that doesn’t stop me from worrying. Especially when she’s so far away. I can’t just drop everything and get to her within an hour.”

“That’s a tough spot to be in. You’re needed in two places. Wayside only ran well while you were in the hospital so long because Lacy checked in daily by phone.”

“And you were and are a good foreman that I can trust.” He’d already thanked Edwyn for doing that job.

“Except we both know that my main interest is in the animals. I don’t have the same intuition you have with people. I almost lost Kelly when she came. She still shies away from me. I guess what I’m saying is, Lacy will be back. We need you here. There’s a full roster of guests right now, meaning you can’t up and leave.”

“I may need to.”

“Is Ferd ready to do your job?” Edwyn looked him straight in the eyes. “Because she seemed mighty convinced she couldn’t even do Lacy’s.”

“No, not even close.”

“Might be time to make sure she does. Like I said, we’re full with guests and now Viceroy’s team is active either trying to get him loose or kill him. Those two things are enough to make more work than you could normally handle. Add distraction in

and we're in trouble."

"I won't let this distract me."

"You already did." Edwyn pointed at his hand.

Even though he'd already assured himself that there were no other messages, he had already picked up his phone again without consciously thinking about it.

"I . . ."

"You've got it bad." Edwyn laughed.

"I have for years. That won't help me right now. I know Dad is still recovering, but I'll have to make sure he can take over at a moment's notice. I can't leave Lacy there if she needs me."

Edwyn stood. "Sounds like you've made your decision. I just hope it doesn't come back to bite you." He left the office.

His phone lay on the desk, but he hadn't released it yet. Even though he usually didn't use his phone, today, he didn't want to get too far away from it. Edwyn was right, he had to make sure everything was in order in case he had to leave. He didn't want to get held up having to make those arrangements at the last minute.

He picked up his desk phone and called his dad.

"Morning," Dad said as soon as he picked up.

"How are you feeling?" Connor asked, getting right to the matter.

“Finer than frog hair. I figured you’d be calling. I’ll be over there in a half hour.”

The room phonerang as Melinda pulled her chair out to eat the continental breakfast Lacy had brought to the room. Lacy hesitated for a moment before picking it up.

“Hello?”

“Where is she?” a growly voice came over the line.

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“Who?” She hadn’t said her name, and she wasn’t going to give away their location so easily, though whoever was on the line had to know the hotel name.

“My wife. Melinda. The one you kidnapped yesterday. I’ve already called the police.”

Her mind tried to work fast. How had he found them? “Your wife is an adult. She can leave whenever she chooses to. The police already knew where she was because we filed a report yesterday.”

“You did what?” he yelled. “Melinda has no business going into the police station. They all think she’s a lunatic there anyway. You couldn’t do anything to me.” His topics bounced around faster than a rubber ball.

“We filed a report. Against you. For all the bruises and for jumping on my car. You threatened me. I needed to make sure the police knew what you said and did.”

“It doesn’t matter. One report isn’t going to cover months of reports from me.”

“You can leave her alone now. She’s gone, not your concern anymore.” Though the longer she talked to him, the less she believed that.

“You think you know everything, but you don’t. She is my wife. Until we’re divorced, she will always be tied to me, and I won’t grant a divorce.”

“Why not? It’s not like you love each other.” Frustration made her say what she hadn’t wanted to.

“How do you know? You came out of nowhere and claimed to have all the answers for Melinda. I’ve cared for her for years. Where were you when she was grieving for her miscarriages? Where were you when her local friends walked away? You weren’t here. No one was except me.”

Melinda hung her head, and Lacy knew she could hear all that was being said. She headed for the other side of the room. “I don’t live here in town.”

He snorted. “I’m aware. I did some digging last night by looking up the area where Melinda came from. It didn’t take long to find you in an old church registry, Lacy Kincade.”

Somehow, having him know her name made the situation more terrifying.

“Oh, you’re speechless? That’s interesting.”

Someone knocked on the door. “Knock, knock. Is anyone home.”

Melinda burst into tears and slid down her chair and under the table. Lacy hung up the phone and quickly slammed the deadbolt home. She had relied on the door lock when she’d come back from gathering breakfast. The hotel had felt safe, far away from Tod and the police. Now, she wished the police were closer.

“Go away. You’re not welcome here,” she yelled out the door, hoping it would disturb someone nearby.

“Call the front desk,” Melinda whispered. “They’ll come.”

She wasn’t sure that was the best idea. If she were the one sitting at the desk, would she want to face an angry man? They probably didn’t get paid enough to deal with dangerous situations.

“Do you really want to make him angrier?” Lacy headed for the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth to thread through the loop lock at the top of the door.

“Open the door.” He banged on the other side.

Lacy bit her lip and looked at the phone. She called the police first and told them what was going on, that they were barricaded in the hotel room, trying to keep Tod out. Then, she called the front desk.

The voice from that morning answered, “How can I help you?”

“This is Lacy in room 310. There’s a man pounding on our door and telling us to open up. We don’t want him in here.”

The man went silent for a moment. “Is this part of the bad day you talked about this morning? The one that made you scared of me?”

He wasn’t going to help her, was he? The dread seeped into her shoulders as Tod pounded on the door again.

Someone in a nearby room yelled, “Quiet down, it’s six in the morning!”

“Shut up! This doesn’t concern you!” Tod sounded like he was leaning against the door.

“Please,” Lacy whispered into the phone. “I’ve already called the police. They’re on their way. Just tell them the room number.”

He banged on the door again.

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“I’m going to pound this door down if you don’t come out of there.” His voice had gone quiet and steady. Somehow, that was even more threatening.

Lacy lowered herself to the floor where Melinda sat with her knees curled up to her chest. She’d wrapped her arms around her legs in a protective shell. “Melinda? You okay? He can’t get in here. We’ll be okay.”

A wire fished under the door, bobbing toward the door handle. Lacy crawled toward it. “Oh no you will not,” she whispered and yanked on the thin wire with a loop on the end.

She heard something hit the door on the other side and a grunt of pain. He jerked the wire from her hands. “Are you still there?” she asked the man at the front desk.

“Yes, I’m trying to get a hold of the police to see when they’ll be here. It’s a small station and they don’t always know when they can come.” She heard him tapping on the computer.

“Thank you, I hope they hurry.”

She heard him hang up another phone. “Hold on for just a minute, okay? I mean it. Don’t open the door. Stay by the window. If he tries to get in again, just stay back.”

She wasn’t sure what he had planned but she hung up the phone and gathered Melinda from under the table.

“How is standing over here going to save us? I don’t understand.” Melinda hung so

tightly to Lacy's hand that it reminded her of when Connor was in the hospital, fighting for his life, fighting to hold onto her.

"I don't know. I just do what I'm told."

A moment later, the fire alarm went off and the sound of water hitting the walls filled the room. Tod screamed on the other side of the door. Lacy waited, sure that a little water wasn't going to stop him. Then the sound of the fire trucks blasted.

A light knock on their door came and the man from the front desk's calm voice said, "You can come out now. He's gone."

Lacy rushed to the door and opened it. The man who'd scared her so badly just a few hours before now stood in the hall with an umbrella. He grinned. "My boss is going to flip when he finds out his brother pulled the fire alarm."

"Oh, no." Had he gotten himself fired and caused so much damage for them?

Melinda rested a hand on Lacy's shoulder. "He means Tod, his brother owns this hotel. I was sure when he came to the door that he would have a master key card and be able to get into any room. I figured, as soon as we heard him, I was done for. Since the room was in your name and there's nowhere else to go, I might be okay."

The water stopped spraying and ran in rivulets down the wall. The man from the front desk closed his umbrella and shook it off. "He does and he would have except I had an eye on the cameras, and I kept switching the code to your room as he would try to use his card. Then he tried brute force. I know him. I know he's a rotten drunk and I knew you were in this room." He nodded toward Lacy.

"Thank you for not holding my rudeness against me. I don't know what we would've done."

“You would’ve only had seconds to prepare. The lock makes that click sound as it disengages. That would’ve been your only warning. So, where are you both going now? They’ll have to clear out this hotel until they can figure out what caused the fire alarm to go off. It’ll take a few days to do the water cleanup too.”

Lacy looked at Melinda since she was from the area. “How in the world did I manage to pick a hotel owned by your husband’s brother?” If she’d known, she would’ve chosen another one.

“If you want to avoid hotels and stay off grid, so to speak, my dad owns one of those houses that he rents out by the day. It’s an Air BnB or something.”

Lacy got excited for a few seconds, then reality hit. “It’s the week before Christmas, there is no way his house isn’t rented out. I don’t know where we’re going to stay. I would take you home with me if it weren’t out of state.”

“Let me call my dad. Oh, I’m Randy, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

Lacy looked outside the room at the grumbling hotel patrons rushing to the empty front desk to check out after the fire alarm. The morning would’ve been so much worse if she hadn’t gone through a few minutes of discomfort to meet Randy. “I’m Lacy, and it’s nice to meet you, too.”

Chapter Seven

The front desk at the hotel where Lacy was supposed to be wasn’t answering phone calls. Connor pressed his screen to dial once again, hitting the phone a little harder than necessary.

“Tell me again why you don’t just get in your truck and go?” Dad chuckled. “You’re not doing anyone any good if you’re sitting here worried and focused on that phone.”

He'd considered it a half-dozen times. "But I can't do that. It will tell her I don't trust her. What good is trying to get her to trust me enough to come back if I show her that I don't, even if that's not what I mean." He'd been rolling the cons around in his head for hours.

"Connor, she's known you longer than she hasn't known you. Trust isn't the issue." His dad massaged his sore knee.

"Then why did she need time to herself? She needed time away, that's what she said. There was no, 'do you want to come with me'? It was clearly, 'I need time away from you,' and running after her seems pretty desperate."

Maybe he was desperate. Maybe he was one of those guys who just couldn't get his head on straight in the morning until the woman he loved was doing well. He'd always thought he wasn't the kind of guy who needed to prove anything, but the last few weeks, her silence was testing him.

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“Connor, I think if you search through your history, you’ll find that it’s not that kind of trust that made her go. She needed time because you divorced her for something she never did. It was preemptive. You and I both know that. You thought she’d be like your mom. I think we both know deep down she’s not. I wouldn’t have made the rule I did if I didn’t believe that.”

The rule that Lacy was more welcome to stay at Wayside than Connor. “And why wouldn’t I believe that? What other guide did I have? She said she loved me, and she turned her back on me. What kind of woman does that to her son?” He hadn’t even meant to talk about this with anyone but having Lacy gone and potentially in danger had forced him to think about everything in his life, including his mistakes.

“The kind that isn’t like Lacy,” Dad said quietly. “Look, I loved your mother when we first married. I still cared about her when I made the wrong choice with Gloria. Even if she had mentally left our relationship by then, I had no right to do what I did. I blame myself for the fact that you had to finish growing up without a mother. But at the end of the day, she’s the one who chose to stay away. She never let me apologize and never let you in after you stayed with me. I never kept you from her and I darned sure never told her she couldn’t see you.”

“I know. Even though you both didn’t do much together, I always felt that family was important.”

Dad squeezed his knee, then let it go. Clearly, the weather was bothering him. “Family was and is important, which is another reason why I think you should go. You know as well as I do that a signed piece of paper doesn’t make you a family any more than a signed paper makes you not family anymore. Maybe it does legally but to

the heart, it means nothing.”

Lacy had felt like family even when she had no designation. Their friendship went far deeper than a qualification. “I want to go but something is telling me that I need to wait until she asks me. If I jump in headfirst and stick my nose into this business, she’ll be mad. I don’t know how I know. I just do.”

“If the Holy Spirit is telling you to wait, then you’d better wait. I’ll be here whenever you need me to do your job. I’m not as good as you and I don’t have near the energy you do, but I can keep these people safe. Nadine is good at what she does, too. We can handle this for a few days.”

“What about Christmas?” That, too, had been a thorn in his side. Every time he thought about leaving, he’d remember that he’d invited his brothers for Christmas Day. If he wasn’t around for that, they may never come back. They might see his invitation as a slap in the face, just another taunt.

“If push comes to shove, I’ll handle that too. They may hate the idea, but it’s important that they meet Ferd. She’s a good kid and deserves to know her family.”

“She’s not a kid, Dad.” Connor laughed.

“I never got to know her as a child. To me, you’re all kids.” He stood and hobbled toward the door. “I need to go do some of my therapy. This weather is getting to me. Might be the last winter I spend up here. Arizona is looking mighty nice the longer I put up with this.”

He hadn’t told his father yet about his plan to bring cattle back to Wayside Ranch. Especially now that they’d have more pastureland. “Would you still want to leave if you could look out your window and see cattle grazing?”

“I’m too old for that.” Dad scratched his forehead. “But I have to admit, it would be nice. Nothing more calming than watching cattle forage as the sun comes up. Might even be good for some of the people living here.”

He’d thought about that, too. “Means I’ll have to hire a few more people. My men have enough work without adding cattle to the mix.”

Dad nodded and scrunched his lips, furrowing his chin. “I’d be around to help you hire the right people. Might be good for me. One last way to give back.”

Connor didn’t like the fact that his dad was now sounding like he was planning the end of his life. He hadn’t ever talked like that before getting shot. “You have your trust set up. You’re set. Don’t worry about death’s door until you’re standing in front of it.”

“If you don’t think about it, you’ll miss important things, thinking you can always do them tomorrow. At some point, you’ll run out of tomorrows.” Teddy plopped his cowboy hat back on his head. “Keep me posted on your plans. I don’t want to find out by surprise like I did when Lacy left.”

“You got it.” Meaning he’d have to make a decision soon.

As soon as his dad left, he picked up his phone and typed out a text instead of calling the hotel number. He’d wanted to go that route in case they weren’t in the room. If he called during the middle of something, he might interrupt her at an important time. But if the front desk didn’t pick up, then he couldn’t even get transferred to her room.

Hey, I was trying to reach you at your hotel. I think you picked a dud. They aren’t answering.

Hopefully, framing his question in humor wouldn’t make her think he was stalking

her. A reply popped up quickly.

We ended up having to leave the hotel early this morning, just a few hours after I talked to you. Melinda's husband came to the hotel and threatened us. We're fine. We're staying at a private house, and he doesn't know where we are.

Connor swallowed back the urge to rush to his truck, jump in, and drive as fast as he could to come get her. Instead, he tried to think clearly and type out a coherent response.

This is getting a little out of hand. Do you need me?

He hated having to ask that question. No woman he'd ever met was as independent as Lacy. She'd had to be. She loved him and he could be cold and belligerent, but she usually gave back just what he gave to her. They'd always been good that way.

No. I can handle it. We're safely moved now and I'm trying to talk Melinda into taking a hot bath and resting. She is so stressed out after this morning.

He wanted to call. This was a conversation he wanted to have with her not with a phone, but if she wanted to talk to him, she'd call. She'd wanted a little time and space. He had to honor that.

Sounds like you have it handled. I just worry about you.

He set his phone down and bent his head. Lord, You know where Lacy is and what she's facing. Much better than I do. Instead of rushing in and doing what I think is right, I'm praying that You step in and do what You think is right. Not my will. I love her, Lord, You know that. Please, bring her back to me.

His phone buzzed with another message.

I love you, too.

He stared at the message. Had he said he loved her? She hadn't wanted to hear that for so long. Every time he'd hinted at it when his men had done their second chance missions, she'd shut him down. Looking back, he'd only said he worried about her. Was that the same thing to her?

Love you, too.

He hit send. If he was going to have a text to hold on to, she needed one to match.

Lacy waited on the sofa for Melinda to finish in the shower. From the couch in the living room, she could see most of the house, making it a great vantage point to feel secure. Randy sat at the counter a few feet away, eating a breakfast he'd found in the freezer and microwaved.

He finished the last bite and looked up at her. "Thanks for letting me hang out for a minute. I didn't want to go home early. If I did, Dad would wonder why. He's always wondering about me." He shrugged like it wasn't important, but his eyes said it was.

"After this morning, I'm in no hurry to be alone." Lacy glanced out the sliding glass door that led to a fenced back yard. At least that part of the house looked safe. The rest of it was just like any other house with multiple entry points and windows all over. Far too many things for her to watch.

"I don't blame you." He wiped his hands on a kitchen towel, then quickly washed the fork he'd used and put it back in the drawer.

“Will you get blamed for the fire alarm? I don’t want you to get in trouble for us. If there’s a fine, I should pay it.” She wasn’t made of money, but she doubted a twenty-something year old guy who lived with his parents did either.

“I won’t. There are no cameras behind the desk and Melinda’s husband happened to be right in front of a camera. I had to turn the lock off to your room and cut all the cameras for a few seconds before forcing the alarm. That way, it would be plausible that Tod did it. Especially since our fire alarms are coded to unlock all the doors. If he wanted to get in, that was a sure way to do it.”

Lacy tried not to wring her hands when she realized how close she’d come to being attacked. If Tod had known that the doors opened, he would’ve easily gotten inside the moment the alarm went off.

“What if he would’ve known that and just flung open the door?”

“That’s why I told you to stand back by the window. He would’ve been forced to go all the way into the room, giving me a second to get to you. Pretty smart, huh?” He grinned.

“Yeah, it sure worked. Will you still have a job after they clean up any water damage?” She heard the shower shut off in the nearby bathroom. Melinda would be done soon.

“I’m sure I will. He has trouble keeping employees because he’s not a great boss. I’m in college for coding. I take classes online. When I sit there all night, it gives me time to listen to lectures or do homework.”

Great idea, getting paid to do homework. “Sounds like the perfect plan.”

“It would be if my boss wasn’t who he is. If you think Tod is bad, you don’t ever

want to meet his brother. He has anger issues, times ten.” Randy hid a yawn behind his hand. “If you both are settled, I’ll head home. Dad said he didn’t have anyone booked in this house until New Years, so you can stay for a while. Maybe as long as you need, depending on how long that is.”

Randy seemed to have a similar issue to some of the clients back home. They talked a lot when they got nervous. Sometimes it helped, other times it just made them embarrassed.

“I wish I knew how long I needed to stay, but I’m not sure. Thank you for checking with him. Moving around isn’t fun. We’ll probably be here most of the time.”

“Great. Well, if you need anything you can call me at the number I gave you. Not sure I’d be much help if I can’t control the weather though.” He laughed.

“Making it rain was perfect. Thank you again.”

Though she didn’t particularly like Randy, she could see he was already turning into a decent man. Whatever set off her weirdo alarm that morning had been completely wrong.

Randy paused at the door. “They hang out at the Pretty Pint uptown in the evenings. You might want to stay away from that block any time after five in the evening. They know everyone who drinks there. It’s like one of those old man clubs. I hear all about it when my boss comes in stinking of alcohol and wanting to talk about all the things he did that evening, things he can’t tell his wife. Anyway, since there are a bunch of restaurants over there too, I thought I’d mention it.”

Lacy swallowed hard. What kind of family had Melinda married into? “Thanks for the heads up.”

As soon as Randy left, she got up and locked the door. Melinda emerged from the bathroom scrunching her wet hair in a towel.

“That felt amazing. Your turn?” She looked pointedly at Lacy with eyes that said she’d better not argue.

While she would love a shower, she was worried about leaving Melinda alone without anyone to watch the doors or windows. “Are you sure? I could wait until this evening or even until Randy comes back to see if we need anything. He promised he would.”

Melinda snorted. “It feels strange to have met him today and he is already nicer than anyone else we’ve talked to. How did he know you?”

“Long story.” And not one she wanted to relate again.

“Okay.” Melinda glanced at the fridge. “Anything in there?”

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“Randy said there were a few frozen meals. He had one of them before he left. We can go shopping later, but I think we should drive out of town to do that. I don’t care if we need to go an hour out of the way, I’m not going to be looking over my shoulder every few minutes as I try to buy food.”

Melinda nodded her approval of the plan. “I know of a little mom and pop store about an hour from here. They don’t have a huge selection, but I like that you can hear the door open and close because of the bell above it and I like that the shelves are short enough that if you stand on tiptoe, you can see everyone in the store.”

What kind of life would she have to live to make her think that way and not even realize it was defensive? That was exactly the kind of place they needed, but it sickened her to think that Melinda had lived that way for years. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Seriously, I’m not saying you need a shower, but it’s okay if you want to go take one. You look tired and it will help. I’ll be fine. I’ve lived this long, so another twenty minutes won’t be an issue.”

The pull of the hot water and letting the last two days go down the drain was more than Lacy could stand. “Fine, but I’ll be quick.”

“I’ll have a few of these frozen lunches made by the time you get out, then we’ll plan how we’ll get food and what we’ll need to do so we can leave. Now that my aunt is gone, I have no reason to stay here.”

“Except you’re a suspect for the time being. We can’t leave until they arrest someone for the crime and clear you to go. We didn’t touch anything but the door, so they

won't find our prints anywhere. They have to clear you, but I don't want to leave before we get the okay."

"I know. I also know that he'll tell the police that my aunt and I were estranged and hadn't spoken in years. He won't tell them it's because he told me there would be severe consequences if I spoke to her, only that we were estranged so there must be bad blood there. He's made it so easy for himself to frame me for everything."

"Only because he made it so you can't fight back. We'll win this. The truth will set you free." She just had to keep believing that.

Lacy headed for the bedroom she'd decided to use while they were staying there and gathered a change of clothes and a towel from the rack in the closet. Randy had told her there was also a washer and drier in the house that they could use, making the house a better long-term option than a hotel. If only she could relax for even a second.

She headed into the bathroom, locked the door, and turned on the vent fan. Within a few minutes of turning on the hot water, steam covered the mirror and hung in a mist near the ceiling. She got in and closed the curtain. The shampoo left in there was better than the stuff she used at home, and she poured a liberal amount into her hand and lathered her entire head, letting the fragrance and the soft bubbles sooth her frayed nerves.

A soft creak stalled her, and she froze. Was that the door? Hadn't she locked it. "Hello?" she said quietly in case she'd heard something that didn't exist, and her mind was playing tricks on her again.

She heard slight shuffling just outside the shower curtain and the stuttered groan of writing on the mirror. "Hello?" The pitch of her own voice betrayed her sudden fear. She was trapped in a shower with someone on the other side of the flimsy plastic.

There was no way she was going to open that curtain. She heard the door of the bathroom close, and Lacy whipped the stiff plastic out of the way. In streaky letters on the mirror in front of her read the words, I've got her. You're next.

Chapter Eight

Connor rushed to fish his phone from his pocket as he sat down to lunch. Without a word of hello to his men in the cafeteria that was more of a large dining room, he stuck the phone to his head. "Connor."

"I need you," Lacy's voice shook like she was crying.

"I'm on my way. Pin your location and send me a text. Don't go anywhere or leave until I get there. Lock all the doors." He headed for the area to dump his full tray.

Lacy interrupted him. "He got her. He somehow got in here when I went to take a shower. I don't know how he knew or how he got in. There doesn't seem to be a forced entry. She wouldn't have let him in, would she?" Now Lacy sounded frantic, the sound devastated his nerves.

"I don't know. Lacy, you know as well as I do that women who have been abused never feel like they have full control, and they don't learn how to take it back for a long time. We don't know what he said. I wonder how he found you so quickly though. Is it possible he was following you? You told me he jumped on your car. You have a WY license plate, so that makes you pretty easy to spot."

"I suppose you're right. Should I park my car somewhere and rent one?"

He wanted to be there and pull her to his chest and tell her he'd protect her. He wanted to tell her everything would be fine. Instead, he was hours away and feeling more helpless than a newborn calf. "No. Stay right where you are. Lock the doors.

Don't let anyone in. Not anyone. You don't know who to trust. Understand?"

She made a smallum-humnoise of agreement. "What about Randy? He helped me twice today."

Who was Randy? Why was this Randy helping his wife? "And he could be the reason you were found so quickly. Like I said, don't open the door for anyone but me."

"Okay. Hurry."

He glanced down the line and handed his full tray to Junior who was waiting his turn with his wife, Gabby. They were about to have their first child. "I need to go. No time to eat. Edwyn and Teddy are in charge."

Junior stalled him for a second. "Is your dad healed enough to do the work? If not, I'll help him without saying that I am."

"Thanks. Keep an eye on him. He's not above doing more than he should because he feels he has to. I'll check in soon."

He headed straight for his room and threw a few items into a duffle bag, then slung it over his shoulder. As he jogged down the stairs, Dad met him at the foot. "Edwyn sent me a text. He said he heard you talking to Lacy on the phone, and it sounded serious."

"I'll have to thank him later for listening in." But that was for another day. "Lacy needs me. She's in trouble."

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“Then you’d better go. I just finished talking to Brendon. You should know that within the last hour, someone broke Viceroy out of jail. The men who did it were heavily armed, and it happened during a routine transfer to bring him closer to the court where he was supposed to stand trial.”

“So, I need to leave, and Viceroy is loose. Half the people here are supposed to testify against him, giving him a huge motive to kill everyone here. Now I have to choose whose needs I meet and whose I don’t.” He gripped his bag tightly and felt the draw to Lacy pulling him toward the door.

Teddy shook his head. “Not true. All your men here are capable. We’ve fought this guy before.” Teddy rubbed his shoulder where he’d been shot. “And some of us even have a little bit of payback that is due.”

Connor wasn’t going to tell him that paybacks weren’t really Christian, his father knew that. Protecting those around him was though. “I trust you. It’s just that this is my home, and I don’t like that I’m leaving all of you to protect my home.”

Dad gripped his shoulder. “When God created man’s hierarchy, the home wasn’t part of it. Protect your wife. She is your family.”

“But I told her she wasn’t my wife anymore.” Yet he wanted more than anything to bring her back to Wayside and ask her to never leave his side again.

“Have you ever treated her like she was anything but your wife?” Dad asked.

“Except for our divorce, no.” Other than the intimate relationship that came with

marriage, they still acted much the same as when they were married. He'd even joked for a long time that they were better friends than lovers, but that was more to staunch the pain in his chest from needing his wife, the woman he loved, and knowing it was his own fault she wasn't his wife anymore.

"Then don't start treating her like she isn't now. Go. The ranch will still be here when you return. Nadine is the best security force you could hire. Your men are capable and willing to protect this place and the people here."

He nodded, knowing what his father said was true. There were none better than the crew at Wayside. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I know." Dad clapped him on the shoulder one more time.

Each of the guys came over and gripped his hand, giving him a man hug and encouragement to bring Lacy home. There was nothing more that he wanted to do.

Lacy paced back and forth in the living room. She had left the message on the bathroom mirror and had called the police. She'd told them that Melina's husband couldn't be trusted and that he wanted to kill her. She was sure that message was left by him.

The officers who'd come to collect her statement hadn't seemed convinced. One of them even told her that the issue was 'a domestic' and they tried to stay as far away from those as possible. If Melinda went with her husband, that wasn't a kidnapping.

The undercurrent of disbelief had her raging, but so did the threat against her. He'd threatened her too and that didn't seem to matter to the police. Both of them had shrugged off the threat as actually being against the wife, which somehow made it okay in their eyes. They'd been in the house for thirty minutes before she was left alone again.

Now, she had to wait. Hours. There was no way Connor could get there quickly. Even driving like a complete maniac would take him most of a day. She turned toward the back side of the house to pace in the other direction when someone knocked on the front door.

Even knowing Connor couldn't possibly get there that fast, she ran to check who it was through the peep hole. Randy stood just outside with his hands shoved in his pockets. His jeans were so oversized that they hung halfway down his hips, showing a wide stripe of his boxers between the top of his jeans and his shirt. This was not the kind of guy she usually allowed into her life.

She had gone outside and pulled her car into the garage while the police had been there. That was the only thing she'd done against what Connor had said, but she'd figured it was safe while they were in the house.

Randy knocked again and she held her breath. If she didn't answer, he might think she was gone and then she wouldn't have to tell him she couldn't let him in after he'd helped her. Even though Connor was right, there was reason to hold off on trusting him, telling him she couldn't trust him felt very uncomfortable after the way they met.

He lumbered down the front steps, looking over his shoulder at the front of the house. A few seconds later, she heard the garage door opening. Lacy held her breath. He would know now that she was there and hadn't answered the door. Her ears waited for any sound to indicate what he was doing in the garage. There hadn't been anything in there when she'd pulled her car in.

The door handle jiggled, and she held in a scream. Why was he trying to get in? A second later, the distinct sound of a key sliding into the lock forced her back a few steps. What could she do now? If she left the house, Connor couldn't find her. If she stayed, she might be in danger.

Randy opened the door and looked up at her. He seemed as surprised as she was as his eyes widened. “You didn’t answer the door.”

“You came in a locked house.” She turned the accusation back at him.

“My dad owns it,” he countered.

“But I’m renting it. You can’t just come in when someone is here.” Her lungs needed air, but her breathing didn’t seem to work no matter how hard she tried to suck in a stable breath.

“Where’s Melinda?”

“How did you know she wasn’t here?” She could have been napping in the other room. Was he the real kidnapper? She’d assumed Tod had done it, but was he innocent?

“You just can’t stop thinking I’m out to get you.” He closed the door, sighed, and headed for the sofa, flopped down onto the end furthest from her and leaned his head back, then covered his face with his hands. “Look, my dad is friends with my boss. That’s how I got the job at the hotel. I heard my dad talking about Tod’s wife and how she was out of line to run away. I assumed that meant something happened, so I came back here to check on you as soon as it was safe. I couldn’t just walk out the second I heard, or my dad would know I know what’s going on.”

“How did Tod know we were here? Did he have a key? We had barely gotten comfortable when he showed up and took her. Did your dad say something and why didn’t you tell me that your dad was connected to the man we were trying to avoid? That seems like a pretty big thing to keep from me.” She started pacing again.

“I didn’t want you to turn me down. Where else could you go? There’s only one other

hotel within an hour and it's infested with bed bugs. You'll get a room, because everyone local knows to avoid it, but you'll wish you hadn't. Since Melinda's name wasn't on the booking, I thought it was safe."

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Lacy collapsed into an overstuffed chair, unable to keep up the pacing any longer. She'd been awake for hours and the lack of sleep with the adrenaline crash was getting to her. "I appreciate your help, but can you see this from my perspective? I was trying to keep my friend safe and now she's back in the same predicament as when I got here. Worse, maybe, because now he knows she wants to leave. She probably had to endure worse than she usually does because I took her away. He'll be ready for anything I try to get her back out."

He shook his head slowly and frowned at her. "I didn't try to do anything to hurt you or her. I wanted to help." He shrugged a shoulder. "Guess I messed that up too."

"What do you mean? Do you feel like you're always messing up?" He'd said something similar before.

"Dad thinks I'm pretty useless. I didn't go to college right out of high school. I took a gap year to save money so I wouldn't have to take out so many loans. Well, with the online school, I have enough to pay for tuition as long as I keep working while I'm taking classes. I won't have much saved when I'm done, but I'll be qualified to earn more than I do at the front desk of a hotel. At least, I hope so. Dad doesn't think online college is real, so he thinks I'm getting scammed too. He keeps asking when I'll get my Kracker Jack degree."

"That's horrible." Her parents had never encouraged getting a degree, though at the time she hadn't wanted one. "I think it's great that you're planning to do this in a way that you won't have debt when you get out of school. It's really responsible."

"Thanks." He frowned slightly. "I'm sorry Melinda is back with him. Anything I can

do?”

She snorted. While he had absolutely helped her so far, his help could also lead her to a worse situation. He was too close to the source of her worry. “I don’t think so. I’ve called in the cavalry, and he’ll be here in a few hours.”

Randy’s eyebrows rose. “The cavalry, huh? That’s pretty big.”

“Connor is big. I’m hoping that having him here will scare Tod into letting Melinda go.” Though she doubted it would be that easy. More than likely, he’d be afraid, but twist the facts to make Connor look like the aggressor. Because Connor was an outsider, the police would probably believe Tod.

Randy gave her a doubtful look. “I hope you have more of a plan than that, ‘cause I don’t think it’ll work.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Now that you’ve checked in on me, was there anything else you needed?” Connor had told her to keep everyone out and she didn’t want to explain to him that Randy was naive and harmless. He’d probably played a few too many computer games instead of having people interactions, which made him really good at formulating the plan with the sprinkler system, but hadn’t thought ahead when it came to staying at this house.

“No. I wanted to check on you and I didn’t have anything else to do until my shift, if I even have a shift. I already slept some.” He glanced at the fridge. “Mind if I grab a drink?”

As much as she wanted him to go quickly, being alone while she thought about every possible issue that could crop up had made her more than a little jumpy. “Go ahead. I just don’t want you to be here when Connor gets here. I don’t think he’d like that you’re here.”

Randy snorted. “One of those guys, huh?” He tugged open the fridge and pulled out an energy drink.

“What do you mean?” She’d never considered that a guy who was protective might be seen in a bad light.

“They aren’t much different from Tod, at least in feelings. They act like they own you and tell you where you can and can’t go. They treat you like property, which is why they are so protective. They don’t think you’re capable of doing anything.” He cracked open the can and took a long drink.

Lacy took a deep breath and thought about her words. This was a young man who had to have seen some relationships like that for him to have that mindset. “Connor couldn’t be less like that if he tried. He is protective, but not because I’m his. We’re actually divorced. He just loves me and doesn’t want to see me get hurt. As far as doing exactly what he says, that too, is a huge no. He didn’t want me to come here, but he wasn’t going to stop me. No one but God owns me.”

He seemed surprised by her last comment. “What do you mean that God owns you? He’s just air. There’s nothing that proves He exists.”

She was far too frazzled to have a coherent conversation about God with someone who didn’t believe. “There are lots of things that prove He exists and has always existed. If you want something scholarly to prove it, there are thousands of non-religious texts that prove the accuracy of the Bible. As far as how does God own me, because I have given my life to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is within me. That means I was bought with the blood of Jesus. I know that might sound confusing, but it’s the easiest way to put it.”

His brow furrowed as he took another long drink from the can. He glanced away. “I don’t even know where to start with that, so I won’t say anything. It just sounds

weird.”

To someone who hadn't grown up in the church, she was sure it did. “Anyway, I just want you to know Connor is nowhere near similar to Melinda's husband. He's the opposite. Where Tod wouldn't cross the road to help Melinda, Connor would cross a continent for me.” Even if he'd asked her for a divorce.

“Then why are you divorced? If he loves you so much, that makes no sense.” Randy finished his comment and took another drink. She got the feeling he wasn't as thirsty as he was looking for a way to give himself time to process what she said.

“I know. It really doesn't. It was a time of a lot of stress in our lives. We're older now and working on fixing what was broken when he got out of the military. And before you jump on the military, it wasn't that. He had family issues.”

Randy chuckled. “Saw that accusation coming, did you?”

“You don't seem like the type to be pro-military, though I've recently found that my gauge for determining what people are supposed to be like can be wrong.”

He laughed, acknowledging her mistake about him. “Yeah, but I'm not an easy one to read. I'm not pro-military, but I'm not against it either. I just didn't want to be a part of it. I could tell you that I'd never make a good soldier so having to sign up for the draft was stressful. I'm glad your cavalry is coming, though, and I'm glad I was wrong about judging him too.”

“It's easy to do.” She bit her lip as she looked at her phone. If only Connor were already there.

Chapter Nine

Dark covered the sky blending to barely a thread of pink glow at the horizon. Soon, Connor would have to really concentrate on the road. He'd already seen elk and deer as he'd headed closer to the address Lacy had given him.

His brain, ever the taskmaster, created lists of things to remember when he reached town. He'd need to get gas right away so he could take Lacy wherever she might need to go without having to force her to stop and sit in his truck alone while he pumped gas. She'd also been sitting at the house all day alone, meaning he should bring some food.

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A thump hitting the side of his truck pulled him from his mental list. He glanced in the rearview mirror, but there wasn't anything in the road. Before he could slow to pull over, a loud rattling let him know he'd blown a tire. Not just a hole, he'd creamed it.

He pulled as far to the side as he could and turned on his emergency flashers. Hopefully, he could change the tire quickly and get back on the road. As it was, he would get there late. Now, he'd be even later. Lacy would worry.

Instead of jumping out, thinking he could power his way through, he called her.

"Hey," she said, her voice calmer now.

"Hey, sorry I'm not there. I've been going as fast as I can, but I just hit a rock or something and I have to change a tire."

"In the dark?" Her voice pitched higher.

"Yeah. Won't be the first time and probably not the last. I wanted to let you know that I'm going to take a little longer than expected."

"Okay, take care. I don't want you to get hurt because of me."

Was that a touch of resignation in her tone? "If I get hurt it's not because of you. It's because some fool decided it was okay to treat his wife like garbage. It's not okay. Never okay."

“Thank you, Connor.”

He wasn't sure why she was thanking him, but he'd leave it at that. “I'll be there as soon as I can.”

“I know,” she answered quietly. “I'll be here but the door will be locked.”

“Good. Keep it that way.” He said his goodbye and hung up then turned on the flashlight on his phone.

Seeing the tire was a little shocking. He'd only seen tires do that when they were bald. His had been fairly new, but the tread had turn to confetti. There was no saving it. He'd worried that was the case when he heard the noise, but seeing was believing.

The spare was full sized because he didn't believe in weak spare tires. After managing to get it out from the undercarriage, he got the truck jacked up and removed the flat tire. Behind him, something rustled in the brush.

His fingers were only just starting to get cool. New Mexico's version of cold took longer to hit him than a person native to the area since Wyoming was so much colder that time of year. He took the flashlight and swept the area behind him. Even knowing the sound was probably an animal didn't give much reassurance. New Mexico had bears in the northern areas.

He moved slowly, taking his time to look over the ground and deciding if each scrub bush and weedy area was safe. When he found nothing, he turned back to the tire. The longer he was out there, the more likely that something he didn't want to deal with would come up behind him.

One of the lug nuts dropped into the dirt at his feet and he fought back the urge to curse. He hadn't done that in years. Why was he suddenly dealing with all these

things he'd overcome as a young adult?

Carefully, he stepped back once and glanced around by his feet. The nut had landed and rolled just slightly under the truck. While he trusted his jack to hold up the truck, he didn't like the idea of reaching under it while it was up. He finished putting the other nuts on loosely, then lowered the truck to the ground before reaching for the one that had fallen.

As he did so, he heard a grunt behind him that sounded very bear-like. Then came the curious snuffling sound. He quickly turned the lug nut and tightened each one, tossed the wrench in the floor of the pickup and, instead of going around, he climbed in from that side. He was safer inside the pickup than out of it.

The bear made its way onto the road right in front of his truck and stood up in the beams of the headlights, then swiped its paws in front of its face like the glow hurt his eyes. He had no idea if the bear was a boar or sow, but that didn't matter if it decided to climb on his truck.

He waited, watching what the bear might do. He didn't want to try to drive around it and risk having the bear get hurt or swipe at his truck. "Come on, bear, keep going," he muttered as he turned on the engine.

The noise made the bear fall back onto all fours then it moseyed across the road and down the other ditch. Connor took a second to breathe, then pulled back out onto the road. He'd heard rumors that the highway patrol in New Mexico was known for giving tickets to anyone going even a hair over the speed limit, but out on deserted roads, he felt safe pushing his truck faster than normal.

The GPS on his phone said he had another thirty-five minutes to go. He felt a heaviness on his shoulders. "Lord, I know that's my cue to pray. Whatever the reason, I give it to You. If it's Lacy, since I was thinking about her, I pray that You

protect her and give me the strength to protect her once I get there.”

He pushed the accelerator a little harder and watched the road ahead, hoping he didn't encounter any more wildlife. The faster he could get there, the better. His need to see Lacy and make sure she was alright was no longer quenched by just hearing her voice. He wanted to hold her close. He needed to feel her arms around his waist and her head resting against his chest.

The minutes dragged by until he made it to town, drove quickly through a drive through and headed for the address she'd given him. He pulled off the road and stared at an old Oldsmobile parked in the driveway. Lacy didn't drive a car like that so who was with Lacy, and did she realize she wasn't alone?

He flung open his door and quickly closed it, reaching for his gun that almost never left his side. He made it halfway up the walk before Lacy whipped open the door and raced toward him. He'd barely holstered his gun before she jumped into his arms.

He held her tight, relishing the feel of her. Even though they'd been friends for a long time, this part of their relationship had been missing since the divorce. She'd kissed him on the temple a few times when he'd healed in the hospital, but nothing like this.

He never wanted to let her go. At least, until he saw the man standing in the door that she'd left open.

Lacy felt tension coil in Connor. He gripped her tighter for a moment as he lifted her off her feet and settled her back down behind him, shielding her from the door. In a split-second, he released her and whipped around.

“Who are you?”

Randy quickly put his hands up. “I’m Randy. My dad owns this house. I’ve been trying to help Lacy keep watch for you. I didn’t want to leave her all alone. Don’t shoot me, man.”

Connor hesitated for a moment and Lacy gripped his arm, tugging it down. “He’s okay. He’s helped me a few times. Randy told me he feels terrible about what happened to Melinda. I need to get her back.” She let all her thoughts pour out now that she had someone near her who felt completely safe.

“Get her back? That’s not our job, hun. We need to gather all your stuff, report this to the police if you haven’t yet, and go home.”

“I’m not leaving her, Connor.” She’d been praying for Melinda all afternoon. Hopefully, Tod hadn’t done anything permanent. He’d wanted to get rid of Melinda pretty soon though and now that Lacy was here, he had to act quickly or risk losing his chance.

“Lacy, you know better than that. This is for the police.” This needed to go inside before they woke up neighbors and people started talking. He put his arm around Lacy and led her to the door.

Randy moved back out of the way and headed to the nearest recliner. He plopped down on it and flipped the footrest up. “So, what are we going to do?”

“Nothing,” Connor said as he watched Lacy take a seat.

“Connor, you can’t say that. You wouldn’t let this slide if she was one of our guests. This would eat at you until you went after her. You know you would.” Connor had to do something. If he’d simply come to whisk her away to safety, then he could turn around and go back. That wasn’t what she needed.

Lacy sat next to Connor on the sofa, and he handed her a bag from a takeout taco place.

“I’m also really good friends with the police force near Wayside. This is totally different. I don’t have any right to get involved here. If I go to jail because I’ve gone vigilante, what good does that do for Melinda?”

He had a point, but she couldn’t ignore the fact that the police were doing nothing to save her friend’s life. “He’ll kill her. Then he plans to make it look like self-defense. He’s already made it look like she has been the attacker all this time.” Why wasn’t he even trying to understand?

He rested his large hand over hers. “It’s not that I don’t believe you. I do. I’m just not sure what I can do besides save her from impending harm. If we take her physically from his house, that’s kidnapping. He could claim that we took her against her will.”

“I’m just asking for you to take me over there. He might listen to you. He treats me as less than dirt, but maybe he’ll listen to you.” She suspected he thought more of men than women, not only based on how he treated her and his wife, but even how he’d treated the female officers according to Melinda.

“We can try tomorrow morning. Eat now and we’ll talk about what we can do. Have you heard from her at all?” Connor asked.

“No. But last time she contacted me, she thought she’d deleted the information from her phone, but he still knew. Contacting me was a risk. I doubt he’ll let her anywhere

near a phone now. I don't know that we have until tomorrow." She couldn't even look in the bag of food, no matter how hungry she'd been a half hour before.

Connor looked over at Randy. "What's your plan?"

He shrugged. "I'm usually at work now, but I can't because the hotel is closed until they can clean up the water. Cal, my boss, sent me a text a few hours ago that said he'd been to look at the damage and it would probably take 48 hours once they got the right clean-up team to come. That could take a week. He's really angry. He told me Tod claimed he didn't trip the alarm, so now he wants an investigation into who pulled it."

Lacy set the bag aside. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked for your help, but I was so terrified he would get through that door. I didn't have any way to protect either of us."

Connor frowned as he looked at her. "Might be time for you to start carrying again."

Her insides squeezed at the thought. "I have my pistol with me. Maybe I would have the nerve if I had to act. I don't know. I don't want to be in that position. The only time I've come close is when Viceroy's team attacked Wayside. Even then, I spent most of my time herding people to safety. I let the guys do the defense."

He clasped her hand. "I would rather that you have something between you and someone wanting to harm you. It's one thing to wish you had protection, but you don't have it and another to choose not to use it because you can't. Having a choice in that situation makes a difference."

He wanted her to be able to protect herself so that in case he wasn't there, she was still covered. "I couldn't have used it at the hotel, even though I had it. There was a room right across the hall from me and one on either side. There would be no safe

way to protect myself that wouldn't put others in grave danger."

"You make a good point." Randy looked at Connor as if to ask permission to speak.

Connor nodded and Randy continued. "In this case, Tod and his brother are narcissists. They would assume Lacy and Melinda don't know how to use a gun well enough to protect themselves, meaning they would have no fear of the gun. So, that would put Lacy in the position of being more likely to have to shoot than in a normal situation."

Lacy chuckled. "I thought you were going into computer programing, not psychology, but that was pretty perceptive."

He snorted. "Thanks. I'm pretty familiar with narcissists, unfortunately. I know their M.O. and Tod is spiraling because he knows he's losing control of the situation. We need to get her out of there."

"So you agree with Lacy?" Connor asked.

She hoped that didn't pit Connor against Randy. She'd been worried Randy's presence would be a burr in Connor's skin. Just the fact that he was a man helping Lacy was enough to make him want to send Randy away, but siding with Lacy would probably tip the scale.

"I do. But I know the situation better than either of you because I've seen and heard what Tod says. He and his brother come to the hotel late at night and sit in the lobby to talk. They never realize how loud they are because they're drunk or don't care. Tod has never come right out and said he wants to kill Melinda, but he's said enough that I knew she was in danger. Not just from him, but from his brother."

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Lacy felt a chill run down her arms. The stakes had just doubled. She'd assumed the only real danger was Tod, but if his brother was as connected to Melinda, they had more to worry about. "Does he own other properties? Or, what is the connection?" Those places were possibilities for either of them to take Melinda that they might think would be safe from Lacy.

"Yeah, he's kind of a real estate king in the area. He's buys up homes and turns some of them into rentals. Some of them are flipped if he has the money to hire people to fix them. He owns probably forty percent of the rental property in the city, which is how he knows my dad. My dad owns about three." Randy took a deep breath. "Working for him is really good for me. His wages are good. That's how I'm able to pay for school. I might not like or agree with the guy, but my bank account likes him."

"If there are that many, then there's no way we could look at them all. This might be a small town, but there are a lot more than a hundred homes, which means there are more than forty properties," Connor said.

"I hadn't considered that." Lacy suddenly felt like a failure. She'd come all this way to help her friend, and she'd failed.

"Lacy is still in danger. Tod threatened her." Randy stared at Connor, and it felt to Lacy like a challenge.

No one stood up to Connor in her life, except her. She was the only one who routinely stepped on the poor man's toes, and she suspected it was because he let her.

"And if I take her back home, she won't be in danger anymore," Connor answered.

“But I see your point. I may not care deeply for Melinda like I do for Lacy, but I can’t let her die just because I want to protect my wife.”

His wife. The word warmed something deep inside her. He hadn’t called her that in a long time.

“Don’t ask me to say sorry for that. I can’t do it and be honest,” He looked her directly in the eyes.

Her chest felt full. “I didn’t ask you to.” She kept her voice as strong as she could.

Connor waited for her to say more. When she didn’t, he continued. “Okay. I see where you’re coming from. We’ll talk about what we can do, but let’s eat first. Deal?”

She couldn’t help the grin that spread over her face. “Deal. Thank you, Connor.”

“Don’t thank me yet. The hardest part is yet to come.”

Chapter Ten

The little bed and breakfast rental house was laid out well for visibility, but that didn’t leave Connor feeling any better about staying there. Whoever was after Lacy, assuming it was Melinda’s husband, knew where she was while they were there.

Lacy hid a yawn behind her hand. “So, the plan is to go there early in the morning and make a stink until he let her go. That’s legal. We aren’t going in his house.” She frowned slightly. “I’m just not clear on what we’ll do if he won’t let her near the door.”

“That’s when we call the police,” Randy said, drumming his fingers on the table. He

was the only one of the three of them that looked wide awake. “Though, I don’t think we’ll have to. He’s just like his brother, and he doesn’t get up until at least ten in the morning. We were told to never call him, under any circumstances, between the hours of three in the morning and ten.”

Somehow, that knowledge made Connor like him even less. “We’ll pray that he’s fast asleep and she is able to answer the door. That’s a big ask, but we serve a big God.”

Randy looked away and took a deep breath. “Since I’m the one who’s used to staying up, I’ll sit out here and keep an eye on things. I’m not familiar with weapons unless they are on computer, but I’m good at making noise if I need to. All I ask is that I have somewhere I can close the blinds and crash around seven in the morning.”

“How many rooms are there in this place?” Connor glanced over at the small love seats in the living room. They were great for making the area look bigger than it was, but trying to shimmy his six-foot-five frame into that tiny space was going to be an issue.

“Just one and my dad intentionally got furniture for the living room that people can’t sleep on. He wanted couples or singles to rent this place, not people with kids and not groups. That way, less stuff gets damaged. I guess the only good thing is the bed is huge.”

Lacy looked at him with an apologetic glance. “Look, we were married. It’s not a big deal. Randy has offered to watch. You take the side closest to the door because I know you’ll want to get up first if he sees anything.”

“You know it.” He automatically touched the weapon at his side. “I don’t like the idea of leaving someone unarmed to watch the door though.”

“Like I told Lacy, the nighttime is probably the safest time. Tod and Cal will be out

drinking with their group of friends like they do every night. It's the daytime that we're in the most danger. So, knowing that, get your sleep now so you can handle whatever comes at us tomorrow."

Connor looked between Lacy and Randy. Lacy seemed to agree with his assessment, and she would know better because she'd already dealt with this guy for two days. He stood and Lacy led him to the bedroom. His mind fired in a million directions. Sleeping next to Lacy would be a temptation. He hadn't given her more than a hug in so long and his arms longed to hold her again.

Lacy flicked on the light and blinked sleepily in the bright overhead light. "Sorry, that was a lot harsher than I expected." She blocked it with her hand then headed for a small lamp at the bedside. The moment she turned it on, he turned off the big light.

"Thanks." Lacy wrapped her arms around her stomach. "I know this shouldn't make me nervous, but it's been a long time."

He nodded. "It has. What would make you the most comfortable?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. This isn't something I thought about when I asked you to come. It literally never crossed my mind." She bit her lip. "We're probably just fine getting ready for bed and going to sleep like we do every other night, right?" Her eyes met his and they were full of questions.

He wondered what she would ask him if she felt she could. Then he wondered why she thought she couldn't. "What is it, hon?" He opened his arms slightly and she stepped into them.

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“I don’t know. I’m nervous. There’s so much going on in my head and I feel like I’ve failed.”

He pulled back slightly and cupped both of her cheeks in his hands. “Never. You haven’t failed anything. You thought you were safe to let her be out of your sight for a minute to take a shower.”

She closed her eyes. “That’s not what I meant, but thank you.” She took his hands from her cheeks and held them loosely at her side. “I’m glad that after I left, you were still willing to come.”

“I told you I would.” He thought he’d been clear about that. What he wasn’t sure about were all these strange signals from Lacy. He’d always been good at reading her. She was easy to understand. Now, she wasn’t. She’d needed time away from him. Then she’d called him to come and help her not 48 hours later. She hadn’t balked when he’d called her his wife, yet she was clearly worried about sleeping near him. What should he believe?

“Still. I think it’s important to thank you.” She took a step back and let his hands fall. “I’m going to use the bathroom and get ready, then you can. Okay?” Her glance dodged to the other door in the room that he assumed was the en suite.

“Sounds fine. I’ll probably sleep in my jeans just in case I have to get up quickly.” And so there was more than a few layers between them.

She nodded and pressed her lips together. He suddenly wished he could press his to them and make her forget about the danger to her life and to her friend’s life for just a

minute. Okay, maybe more than a minute.

She unzipped her bag, and he noted that everything inside was haphazardly thrown in. That was unlike her, but they'd had to leave the hotel quickly that morning. The moment she closed the door, he headed for the living room to grab his duffle. While in the military, he'd learned how to pack light and live on only what he needed. This trip was no different.

When Lacy came out of the bathroom, she wore her typical flannel pjs with her long hair up in a messy bun. He'd seen her ready for bed for years, since they usually sat together with the TV on at night, though he was usually the only one to watch. She often had her nose in a book.

Lacy fluffed the pillow on the side of the bed furthest from the door, but she still looked nervous. He glanced around the room to assess what he could do to make her more comfortable. A large TV hung on the wall opposite the bed. He grabbed the remote off the nightstand and turned it on quietly. "There, now it's just like home." He smiled, hoping she would relax.

"Right. Just like home." She pulled back the bedding and climbed in, then yawned again. "Are you going to stay up for a while?"

"Not sure." That completely depended on her. He wasn't likely to fall asleep at all if she was restless next to him.

He hurried through brushing his teeth and changing into a clean tee, then headed for bed. Lacy was curled on her side, her head tucked almost under the covers. She looked so serene there and absolutely beautiful to him. He sat on the bed and heard her sigh deeply.

Shutting off the lamp, he let the glow of the television give him the light he needed to

get the blankets settled. As soon as he was comfortable enough, he shut the television off. Lacy's breathing was even and deep. She was sleeping. He leaned over and kissed the top of her head.

In that instant, her eyes flew open, he could see them even in the dark, framed by her pale skin. "I know I shouldn't ask this, but would you hold me? When I close my eyes, I still see the dripping letters of the writing on the mirror." She shivered.

He motioned for her to roll over, just like they used to. She did so, then slid back to the center of the bed. He slipped his hand along her waist and splayed his fingers over her belly. She was warm and soft. She smelled exactly as he remembered, and he finally relaxed. This was what he was made for. He wanted to protect and hold his wife, if only she would let him.

Warmth spread down Lacy's back where Connor laid flush next to her. Where his hand wrapped around her, flutters filled her belly. Those hadn't happened in a long time. Maybe in some ways, she was blessed. How many women got to feel that way about the man they married more than just at first? While she'd never wish separation on anyone, the giddiness of falling again was something she was sure she'd never feel a second time.

While she'd waited for Connor to arrive, the hours had felt like days. The only positive had been that Randy was there. If he hadn't been, she'd have had nothing to do but pace and worry. She may have even tried to go after Melinda on her own, because there was no telling if she was even still alive.

Connor hadn't understood what she'd meant when she'd said she'd failed, but she she'd really meant it in two ways. She hadn't kept Melinda safe, and she'd failed to stay away from Connor long enough for him to know she would return. While he was acting like he cared, that was exactly the problem. They hadn't dealt with the fact that he still wouldn't trust her with his heart. If she couldn't have the good, bad, and the

ugly of Connor, she wasn't willing to think about a second chance. They had to do it right this time or not at all.

Connor shifted in his sleep and his hand moved to her hip, possessively heavy. When they'd first married, they'd slept right next to each other. That had partly been due to the fact that they'd only been able to afford a full-sized bed. With Connor taking most of the real-estate, they'd had to sleep close, or she'd have had to find somewhere else.

This bed was more than spacious enough for both of them, but she'd wanted him near her. He'd probably taken her hesitation as actual nerves, but it had been because this was what her heart wanted. She wanted Connor as her husband again. Not her boss. Not her coworker. Not even just as her friend.

She wanted him as her husband.

A noise from outside their room made Connor immediately tense. He'd always been a light sleeper, but she'd forgotten how light. "I'll go check that out, stay here," he whispered right behind her ear, sending warm breath over her cheek and making her shiver slightly.

He squeezed her hip as he got up and tucked her back in to keep her warm. It didn't matter, the blankets weren't nearly as warm as her bear of an ex-husband. Lacy kept as still as possible and listened for any noise from the other room. Connor had closed the door, probably for her safety and privacy but she wished she could hear.

Muffled voices carried down the short hall to her, but she couldn't make out what was said. Outside, darkness still cloaked the window. Exhaustion weighed her down. Now that Connor wasn't there to keep her heart pattering a little too fast to sleep, she let her thoughts wander. A moment later, the door opened again.

"What happened?"

“Randy was playing an online game with a few friends. He’s still watching the door, but he was talking. He certainly is sure that nothing will happen. I’m not so certain. Will it bother you if I stay up and keep my own eyes on the door?”

She hated that he was going to end up being awake all night, but if Connor suggested it, he wouldn’t be able to sleep feeling like he should be doing something. “If you feel you need to, then you should.”

He lifted one side of his mouth, not quite hidden in his short beard and mustache. She’d always liked it when he kept his facial hair trimmed so it didn’t aggravate her skin. But she couldn’t imagine him ever shaving his face completely clean. “Good. Get some sleep. I’ll wake you in the morning.” He came around and made sure her blankets were pulled up enough to keep her warm.

Connor’s presence was so welcome, she wanted to follow him out to the living room, but he wouldn’t be able to watch like he would want to with her there talking to him. She still needed to sleep after getting up early to call him.

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There was so much they had to do the next day, and she was a big part of it. At least she no longer had to do everything on her own. Once Melinda was safe, she'd have to think of a new way to show Connor that she could be trusted with his heart. She just wasn't sure how.

Connor quietly closed the door and prayed Lacy got some sleep. He'd had the feeling that she hadn't gotten any while he'd been there. He'd hoped his presence would be calming. Instead, he'd done the opposite.

In the living room, Randy sat on the sofa. The soft glow of his phone gave his face an eerie green tint. He headed for the window and glanced through the wooden blinds. Out on the street, nothing moved. All the neighbors had security lights, leaving wide arcs at the front of their homes. Dogs didn't bark. Cars didn't drive by. He glanced at his watch, and it read 3 A.M., a full hour until Tod headed home and the perfect time for him to make poor decisions.

Randy clicked his phone and tossed it to the other end of the love seat. "See anything?"

Connor shook his head. Though he was only about fifteen years older than Randy, that could just as well be a lifetime. Randy was far different from him. He wasn't military. He hadn't started a family. He was still young enough to be in college.

"What do you hope to achieve by befriending my wife?" He glanced at the younger man.

"You mean your ex-wife, right? I don't hope anything. I saw a way to help her and

help myself. If I helped her, I could get a few days off, paid. She's nice and I'd like to see her friend in a safe place. I know Tod is like my boss and that makes him too bad to ignore. I can't imagine being married to someone like him."

"So, you're not completely altruistic, but mainly you want to help." He filled in the blanks.

"Yeah. I also wouldn't mind if this leads me somewhere else. I live at home because I have to, but I don't want to anymore. Since I go to college online, I can live anywhere that has internet. I was adopted, so I don't know if I have family anywhere else."

He wasn't right for Wayside. There were necessary skills his men had to have, and Randy didn't possess those. There was always helping in the kitchen, but with Randy's microwave skills he probably wouldn't want that job. "What were you hoping would happen?"

Randy took a deep breath as he stared at the window, then squinted. "Friendship. That's what I hoped for. I thought, maybe, if I made myself available, I could have friendship with someone who wasn't online. My friends from school all moved away. When I saw Lacy sitting out in the hallway at the hotel, there was something about her that said she was nice and that I should be kind to her. I'm not attracted to her, in case you're worried."

Connor couldn't help snorting. Randy wasn't the type of guy Lacy would be attracted to, but at least he didn't have to have that conversation. "I'm not going to give you false hope. I run a ranch where people come to heal from some very bad things. My guys are all trained to do their jobs."

"Do you have internet there?" Randy asked with sarcasm dripping from his barely over-teen voice.

“Yes, we do. Why?”

Randy finally met his eyes. “Because if I can prove to you that I can be trusted, you might let me come with you. I’ll clean bathrooms if you want me to, but I’ve got to get out of this place. I’m so tired of feeling trapped.”

He could relate. Maybe not to his feelings about his family, since his own father had always been supportive, but feeling stuck. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thanks.” Randy squinted again and lifted one of the blinds.

A car drove by outside slowly and lowered its window.

“Do you recognize that car?” Connor asked.

“No. I’ve never seen Tod’s car. I’ve only seen him in the hotel.”

Something about that car made him instantly tense. What were they doing? He reached for his gun.

“Connor, duck!” Randy dove to the side as the living room glass shattered.

Lacy’s scream echoed down the hall.

Chapter Eleven

Lacy heard the shot and the breaking glass simultaneously. She dove off the bed as the window to her right slid open with a screech like someone was prying it with a tool. Lacy crawled toward the door, staying low, and hoping she wouldn’t be seen.

Connor whipped open the door, almost hitting her, and flooding the area in light. His

gaze searched the bed as his mouth dropped open. “Lacy?”

She’d never heard him sound so scared.

“I’m here,” she said from the floor.

He reached down and helped her up even as he aimed his gun at the window. “Show yourself,” he commanded.

Lacy wasn’t one to hide behind Connor in most cases, but this was one where she wasn’t taking any chances. She let him shuffle her behind his body, giving him full access to the room and whoever was breaking into it.

The movement at the window immediately stopped.

Randy called from the living room. “You might want to come out here.”

Connor paused, waiting for the person on the other side of the window to make a move.

“Connor?” Randy’s voice had become urgent.

He took her hand and led her out to the living room. Randy pointed outside and Lacy rushed to the window as Connor yelled at her not to. Something inside her wouldn’t let her stop. A lump lay in the middle of the front yard. One that looked suspiciously like a person. “No . . .” It couldn’t be. Her heart constricted as she headed for the door.

Connor’s arms wrapped around her in the next instant, holding her tightly and preventing her from leaving.

“Let me go! I have to see if that’s Melinda. I have to know.” Tears welled in her throat, choking her words.

“I know. Let me call an ambulance. He’s going to try to pin this on you. Do not play into his hand. I don’t know what he hopes to gain by this, but it’s obvious he’s obsessed with seeing her dead. I’m not letting him get to you, too. He will not lay a hand on you. Ever.”

His arms squeezed tighter for a moment, lifting her fully off the floor. “Please. Just

stay in here until we can call help for her. This feels like a trap.”

She didn’t want to admit he was right. If that was Melinda and she was still alive, she might need immediate help. Sitting safely inside was like saying Lacy was more valuable. “It’s not fair.”

“I know, hun. I know.” He held her as he gave Randy a nod. Since there was still the possibility someone could come in the bedroom window, she knew him well enough to know he wasn’t going to let a phone call distract him. Especially when there was someone else around who could do the calling.

“I’m on it.” Randy dug his phone out of his baggy jeans and pressed in the number.

Her heart split in two, half remaining there in Connor’s arms and half wanting to help her friend.

“I want you to stay right here, between the living room and kitchen, far away from all the windows. I’m going outside to see if our little intruder left clues behind or is still there for me to follow. Do not come after me. Understand?”

She blindly nodded, wanting to stay with him but understanding why he wouldn’t want to have his attention divided. In the next instant, he kissed her for a second then was gone. She gripped the counter to steady herself.

Where had that come from? She’d kissed his cheek when he’d been healing from his gunshot wound, but she was fairly sure he hadn’t realized she’d done it. He’d kissed her like the last ten years hadn’t happened.

Randy’s voice made it through the fog in her brain. “Yes, we’ll be right here inside. We’re not sure if the intruder is still out there. There are three of us here, myself, Lacy and Connor Kincade.”

Connor had told her to wait right there, not to move. She couldn't go to the window and watch for the ambulance because whoever had shot out the front window could still be sitting out there. There was no way to know if the bullet had been from a pistol or a high-powered rifle, at least, not without finding the bullet.

She glanced around the area from where she stood and noticed a dark hole in the wall right above the television. Carefully, she shifted her weight to look around the wall that led back to the bedroom. Between her bedroom and the kitchen was a bathroom where she'd showered earlier. Was the bullet stuck in the wall or had it penetrated further into the house?

Randy was busy talking and Connor was nowhere to be seen so she quickly shuffled to the bathroom and turned on the light. A few inches from the top of the tub surround, the plastic bulged out in a nub. The bullet had finally lost enough velocity in the plastic tub surround. Whoever shot at them had to have been using a pistol.

Sirens screamed from down the street and Lacy left the bathroom, ready to tell the police when they got there that she knew where the bullet had ended up. Randy hung up the phone and looked at her. "I hope she's alive."

She knew from his tone that he was doubtful. "I do too. If she's not, I will stay and fight. She never would've killed her aunt, and I was with her the whole time, so she couldn't have." There had to be a motive, greater than abuse. Women were often the victims of domestic violence because their spouse was controlling, but this went beyond that.

"Has Cal ever mentioned anything to you about Melinda?" She angled her body so she could watch the EMTs working on Melinda even as Randy answered her.

"They had both talked about an insurance payout, but they made it sound like it was property, like a house, that was going to burn."

“A friction fire?” She’d heard her parents joke about people doing that when interest rates on homes were too high to pay mortgage payments. Home owners would take out two insurance policies, pay as long as they could, then a ‘fire’ would burn the house down. They had said it was the friction of two insurance policies rubbing together.

His brow went up. “You know about those, huh? I assumed so. They’ve been talking to insurance guys on and off for the past year.”

Connor came down the hallway as he holstered his gun. “I looked all over. Our guy was gone before I got outside.”

“Ambulance is here and so are the police.” Randy pointed at the window.

Lacy looked to Connor, and he nodded, then followed her outside. She kept telling herself that they wouldn’t be working so hard on Melinda if there was no hope. The two men and one woman on the team were surrounding Melinda, whose face was ashen and her body lifeless.

Lacy wanted to cry. Why would anyone do this? An officer approached her, and she recognized Officer Bakersfield from when they’d made the report the day before.

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“Ma’am, can I ask you a few questions?”

“Will I need a lawyer?” She didn’t want to hurt Melinda by saying something that could be twisted.

“You probably don’t need one.”

Which meant she absolutely needed one. “I want Connor with me.”

“Is he an attorney?” the officer asked.

“No, but he knows the system better than anyone I know. We can stand right here, I’ve got nothing to hide.”

He nodded and took out some paper. “Do you know of anyone who wanted to harm Melinda McFarland?”

“The only one she told me about was her husband, Tod. Though his brother may be part of it too. Tod threatened me when I arrived in town, so he is capable.”

The officer jotted down a few things. “And where were you for the last twenty-four hours?”

She squinted at him in the dark, trying to read his expression. “I was here for the last fifteen or so hours. Before that, I was at the hotel with Melinda. We saw you after that though.”

He nodded as if he remembered her. “How well do you know Melinda?”

“We weren’t in contact for years. After she married, she left town, and no one heard from her. Before that, we were very good friends since we attended the same small-town church and were close to the same age.”

He wrote down more information. “Is there anyone else locally who might have more information about her?”

“Her aunt would have, if someone hadn’t murdered her.” How convenient. The more Lacy thought about it, the more she was sure the insurance policy Randy had mentioned was a life insurance policy on Melinda. That was the only way all of this made sense. It explained why they’d targeted her right away. Lacy was trying to take away their get rich quick scheme.

“If you’re looking for a motive, you might want to look into insurance policies taken out by Tod or Cal McFarland with them as beneficiaries.”

The slam of the ambulance door made her jump, and she watched as the driver quickly climbed in and drove off with sirens screaming. Lord, please let her be okay. She turned back to the officer. “Is there anything else you need from me? I want to go to the hospital so I can be there when she wakes up.”

He sighed and frowned at the same time. “If she wakes up. It didn’t look good.”

Connor drove the quiet group to the hospital after the police had told him where to find it. Randy had called his father to come and board up the front window. He’d been angry at Randy over the phone for waking him and even less happy about the task. Connor had made sure they left before he could arrive. That stress was the last thing Lacy needed right now.

She sat tucked between him and Randy in the truck as they drove down quiet streets. She hadn't said much of anything since they'd finished talking to the police. He couldn't blame her. The cop hadn't given her much hope. He'd wanted to remind her that no one was there to give her that, she needed to look to God.

He parked the truck and Lacy waited while Randy climbed down, then got out on the passenger side. She waited for him while he came around the front, then took her hand. The report Randy had made to the ambulance and what she'd said to the officer would help establish an alibi. One Tod would have difficulty disputing.

The Emergency Department waiting room was the only one open at that hour. The rest of the hospital seemed dim and even more unwelcoming than usual. No one was in the halls and only one person sat at the registration desks in the front.

After spending a month in the hospital, even the smell of the building made his stomach churn. What was it about that particular disinfectant that made every single hospital smell the same? He sat in a chair next to Lacy and took out his phone. If they were safe anywhere, it was there.

Lacy sat staring at the door to the Emergency Department as though she could make the door open with news just by thinking about it. He leaned closer to her, letting her know he was there. She would be too jumpy for any contact to make her feel better. Lacy would want to be able to stand and walk around. If he offered to hold her hand, she'd just get up soon anyway.

"I hope we get word soon." She glanced at Connor. "The waiting is awful."

She'd told the front desk that they were here to see Melinda, so hopefully they would come out with news when they had any. Just as he suspected, Lacy stood and paced back and forth in the waiting room. Her anxiousness seemed to have no effect on Randy, which was proof that he'd told the truth about his feelings for Lacy. There

was nothing growing between them, even from his side.

A doctor came out of the locked door, pulling her mask down as she did. She looked at all three of them, then turned to Lacy. “Why don’t you have a seat, and I can tell you what’s going on with your friend, at least what I can.”

Lacy sat and this time, Connor threaded his fingers through hers as a show of support. “What can you tell us?”

The doctor sat on the edge of the chair and took a moment to look each of them in the eyes. “I can tell you that she is touch and go right now. She has a pretty serious head injury, and she has only been stable for a short time. She is still critical. The issue I have is that she has a health directive on file from a little over a year ago and it states no resuscitation. We hadn’t looked at that before we started working.”

Lacy shook her head slowly. “That doesn’t sound like her at all.”

Connor hated to look at it from a victim’s perspective, but he had to. “It’s possible she did if she knew that it was a way out of her situation.”

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Lacy shook her head harder. “No, you don’t understand. Melinda wouldn’t have asked me to drive all the way down here to save her life if she was looking to die.” She frantically looked from the doctor to Connor.

“I believe you. I just wonder if something didn’t change between a year ago and now.”

Lacy firmed her jaw. “Her husband has been taking out insurance policies. I think you should compare her signature on the health directive to her other signatures before you follow it.”

“Health directives are still fairly new and the only time we follow them without checking with family is if it is signed in front of a notary. I just wanted you to know what was happening. We’ll keep working on getting her stable, then she’ll move to a hospital room.”

“Her husband has threatened her. How safe is she in the hospital?” Lacy scooted to the edge of her seat.

“Unfortunately, unless we have some documentation that says he can’t be admitted in to see her, we have to let him. If you can come up with a restraining order or something like it, then the hospital can work with you. I’ve got to get back now. I doubt she’ll be in her room for a while. If you want to stay, you can. If you want to leave your number with the front desk, they’ll contact you when she is moved.”

He didn’t want to usher Lacy out before she had a chance to see her friend, but staying in the hospital for hours would be uncomfortable at best. Then again, with the

window blown out of her rental and Melinda's husband knowing she was there made it pretty lousy for resting and keeping safe. The town was small, Tod had probably found them by looking for any vehicle with

WY plates.

Lacy looked around the waiting room, then back to him. "I don't know where else to go. There's only the one hotel in town and it's closed until they get it cleaned up. We can't stay at Randy's dad's rental." She bit her lip. "This is turning into a lot more than I bargained for, but I can't abandon Melinda now."

"No, you can't, and neither can I." Because if he did, Lacy would question his willingness to do what was hard for the rest of their lives. When this was over, he wanted her to know that he was with her no matter what. Things that were important to her were important to him. He wouldn't let his own worries get in between them like he had the first time.

"What should we do? I want to be here, but . . ." Her voice trailed off as she looked around at the room around them. Her nose wrinkled. "I'm not fussy, but staying here for hours isn't optimal."

Randy stood and clicked the side of his phone to turn off the screen. "I've got a friend or two who would let us stay with them until you can get Melinda. I'm guessing you'll leave town as soon as the police say you can?"

Lacy nodded her head even as Connor shook his. "We can't." He hadn't told her the danger at Wayside. No matter how much he missed it, he couldn't add another person for his team to protect at the ranch.

"Why? Because of Viceroy?" Lacy's voice went up an octave.

“Yes, he got free which means you would be in even bigger danger there, plus Melinda would need protection from a completely separate threat. I can’t spread my team that thin.”

Lacy hung her head. “Then we need a home base. Somewhere we can stay for a while.”

Connor pulled Lacy into his arms, then looked to Randy. “I’m sorry about your dad’s rental. If there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

Randy brushed off the comment. “He has insurance, and he charges a lot for the house, enough that he has the money for a window and to fix the wall. He’ll be mad at me for letting people stay there who would bring trouble, but that’s all that will happen.”

Connor didn’t know the area, so trying to pull a solution out of thin air was impossible.

Randy snapped his fingers. “I have an idea. What about Melinda’s aunt’s house? It was cleared and Tod would never expect you to go back there because she wasn’t related to you. It will give you a place to rest and check in with your team back home and we can wait to hear from the hospital.”

Lacy shivered. “There’s a garage there too, to hide the truck. I’m okay with it. As long as I don’t have to see that bathroom ever again. That was the stuff of nightmares.”

Which meant Tod, if he’d done it, was able to be violent enough to kill someone face-to-face. That took a special kind of evil, one that Connor wasn’t looking forward to meeting.

Chapter Twelve

Connor had taken the couch at Aunt Joy's and Randy had taken the office, leaving Lacy with the spare bedroom, since she wasn't about to sleep in the dead woman's bed. She had heard Connor talking on the phone with Brendon earlier, but she didn't want to make him rehash everything with her. She closed the door to her room and called Ferd.

Ferd answered on the third ring. "Lacy? Is that you?"

"Yes, Ferd. How are you? How is the ranch?"

Silence made Lacy's stomach tighten. "We're taking this hour by hour. Officer Nixon has been in touch with us a lot. He's got eyes on the entrances to town and another stationed on the road that leads to Wayside."

"So, you're boxed in." She'd hated that feeling when they'd had to be behind locked gates and security systems. When Viceroy was finally gone, they wouldn't need to have such stringent security. Their guests could roam freely again around the ranch.

"Yes, but so far, we're doing all right. I'm actually more worried about Christmas than I am about an attack. I personally feel, and Nadine agrees with me, that Viceroy will stay away. He has to know that coming here is a huge risk. He could be captured again. I think his main goal is staying out of jail and avoiding trial."

"That's a great thought but criminals don't always make sense." She took a deep breath. "I may need a place for a friend to stay when we return. Can you get a cabin ready for me? One of the smaller ones is fine. She won't need a family one." Hopefully, she would make it through this and be able to come to Wyoming for the winter until Melinda could get back on her feet.

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“Sure. I can do that. Just so you know, even though I personally don’t think we need to, security has remained on high alert. The guests have been made aware of the risk.”

“Good.” Lacy realized then that Connor probably hadn’t talked to Ferd. She felt comfortable telling Lacy about the security, but Connor wouldn’t want to know her opinions. He’d want facts. “Have you talked to Connor at all?”

Ferd made a noise that could’ve been a snort. “No. Despite his attempt to talk to me right before he left, he hasn’t talked to me since. I think he knows that there was little for me to do. The men handle everything, especially Brendon and Edwyn. I’m not really needed.”

“That’s not true.” Lacy needed her to want to the job because if she was ever able to get back together with Connor, she didn’t want to work for him anymore. She would always be part of Wayside, but as a spouse, she wanted each of them to have their own commitments that didn’t rely on one another. There were other things she could do around the ranch allowing her to be Connor’s wife and not coworker. “You’re needed. I need you.”

“That doesn’t help right now when you’re not here to show me what you do. Dad said I should put up the tree in the dining room and one in the living room, but then I guess I got the trees backwards and it seemed to put everyone in such a foul mood that I had to take them down and move them.”

Lacy could almost laugh at that. Some things in life were simply tradition and shouldn’t be messed with. Even though the guests would never know that the Christmas trees were in the opposite rooms they had always been in, the workers

would know. To them, it wouldn't be quite right. "Don't take it to heart. That's something small. I promise, I'll show you my job when I return. You'll be perfect for it."

"What if I don't want it? What if you decide you don't want to give it up?"

That would only happen if Connor couldn't work out his issues. If he wasn't willing to examine his heart and his ability to bring his problems to her instead of shutting her out, then she'd keep her job or move on, but things couldn't stay exactly the same. Her heart couldn't handle another break. "The only way I'd possibly want to keep my position is if things don't work out between your brother and I."

"I'll say it again, he hasn't contacted me since we talked the day before he left. Can he be trusted? I don't know. You know him better than I do."

"I wish you could see him like I do, at least a little. He's a good man. I just need him to be able to forgive his mother for walking out on him. That's a big ask."

"If he hasn't done it yet, do you think he will? That was twenty years ago."

Lacy could see Ferd becoming a friend, hopefully a sister-in-law, but at least a friend. "I think there's always a chance for healing and forgiveness while there's breath in our lungs. I'm sorry that Peg never took that opportunity. She died angry with Teddy and apparently Connor, too. It's so sad to me because Connor never thought less of her."

"Yeah, I know. He still hasn't gone to talk to my mother, and we've been here almost a full month. Mom purposely stays home even when Dad is gone so she doesn't encounter anyone from Wayside. She's worried that they'll dislike her because Connor does."

Lacy closed her eyes. This was worse than she'd realized. "I'm sorry. I'll talk to Connor about it. He can be hard to change. I'm not making excuses for him, that's not my job. I'm just telling you what might be going on. I know he'd planned to have your brothers over for Christmas so you could meet them. That's a start. Especially because he hasn't even talked to his brothers in years."

"Yeah, then he had to leave and now Dad and I are going to have to meet with them instead of Connor. Dad told me they haven't spoken to him since they left with Peg. I can see it hurts him, but I don't know how to make it easier."

"You don't. I'll talk to Connor. Thank you for letting me know what's going on. If anything happens, please text me when you get a chance. I need to know everyone is alright."

"Will do. Talk to you soon." Ferd hung up.

Connor had come to her aid when he'd really been needed at home. He'd chosen her when he was about to mend the gap between himself and his brothers for the first time in twenty years. She strode from the room and headed right for Connor before she could lose her nerve. She came out in the living room and was glad to see he was alone.

"Lacy? Something wrong?" He sat up on the sofa and swung his feet to the floor. "Come and sit."

She took a seat next to him and gave herself a breath to find the right words. "I just talked to Ferd."

His brow shot up. "I didn't realize you two were such good friends."

"I left her in charge of my job. Of course I was going to call her to check in." After

the first few words, she couched her snippiness. Why should she have to defend calling anyone?

“Understood. What did she have to say? Clearly, something is bothering you.”

She nodded. “It is. She said you haven’t talked to her, and she doesn’t know what to do. About her job, about her brothers, not anything.”

“I didn’t want to leave her holding the bag with them. That wasn’t my plan. You called me and I wasn’t going to leave you sitting in danger. What if I hadn’t come?” He looked her in the eyes. “What if someone had come back after you’d gone to bed and shot out the window, leaving Melinda’s body on the front lawn?”

She shook the image from her mind. “I think you misunderstand me. I’m not accusing you of choosing incorrectly. I’m glad you’re here. I’m worried though because Wayside might be in danger and Ferd doesn’t know how to handle it. She’s your sister.”

“I’m aware.” He frowned. “I put Dad, Brendon and Edwyn in charge for that reason.”

She laid her hand atop his, hoping that the slight touch would let him know she wasn’t there to question his authority or his choices. Wayside was his to run. “I just want you to try to accept Ferd and Gloria. She will always be your half-sister. No matter what. Frankly, she’s wanted to have more to do with you than your full-blood brothers.”

His chin dipped down, hiding his face slightly. “I know. I’m working on it. This isn’t easy for me. They are welcome at Wayside. I suppose I haven’t made them feel that way though.”

Lacy squeezed his hand. “Now you’ve taken the first big step. I just wish we could be

certain that you'd be home in time for Christmas. That would be the best outcome.”

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Connor wished he could be as optimistic as Lacy. That was probably part of his issue. He couldn't be that way anymore. Too many things had happened in his life to make him jaded. There was no best possible outcome, only shades of mediocre.

"Let's deal with this first, then we'll think about the fallout from having to be away for Christmas." There was no chance he'd make it home in five days. Not with Melinda in the state she was and not with Wayside in danger. Maybe if someone caught Viceroy again, then that would open a door, but Melinda would still have to be well enough to travel for hours and that didn't seem likely outside of a miracle.

"Brendon confirmed that it's been quiet around there for the past twenty-four hours. That's good. That's promising. There's probably an APB out on Viceroy, forcing him to lay low."

Lacy frowned at the change in subject and nodded. "I'm sure you're right. I hope he's caught soon." She scrunched her face in thought. "You don't think he'd make a run for the boarder, do you? If he made it to Mexico, he could leave the country and never face charges."

Connor shrugged since he wasn't about ready to make a comment on that. If Viceroy had those plans, he'd most likely aim directly for Texas. There were a lot more places to hide in Texas. If they didn't see him, that was for the best. He didn't want to have to protect Lacy from two killers.

"I have no idea what he might be planning. I'm sure the police or FBI know more than they're sharing with us. They'll give us the all-clear when he's caught again. That's about all we can hope for. I'm not going after him right now. I've got my own

plate to worry about.”

She smiled then looked away. “I’m glad you do. I’m exhausted but sleeping is really hard when I’m alone back there. Mind if I curl up on that chair in the corner?” She bobbed her head toward a comfy looking recliner.

“No, go right ahead.” He’d rather have her where he could see her anyway. Plus, he’d know if she actually slept this way.

She got up from the sofa and headed for the room where she’d left her bag. In a minute, she came back with one fluffy blanket then covered herself as she curled her legs up onto the chair. She rested her head against the back then tilted her chin down slightly. He wanted to warn her of neck pain when she got up if she slept that way, but who was he to tell her what was comfortable?

He laid back down on the sofa, but his senses were anything but restful. While he knew in his head that they’d reached the time of the morning where Tod and Cal would most likely be sleeping, that wasn’t a guarantee. They’d almost managed to kill Melinda. Once they found out she wasn’t dead, there would be a frenzy of activity from them. Connor had been in the military long enough to know what people did when there were no options left.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on the sounds around him. Lacy’s soft breathing was the first thing he noticed, then the sound of the wind outside. Somewhere nearby, a clock ticked away the minutes. Occasionally, he caught a random deep snore from wherever Randy was sleeping.

With Lacy here, even in an uncomfortable chair, he didn’t have to worry that someone would break into her room. The windows in the living room where he was didn’t open. It was a bay window with three sections curving out from the house but all of them were made so they couldn’t open. He’d found Melinda’s aunt to be a

fastidious housekeeper and an interesting personality. The police had obviously collected a lot of evidence though because the area where she'd been found had been gone through heavily.

Hopefully, they caught whoever killed her.

Outside, he heard the first car of the morning drive by. People would be going to work and school, to meetings and run errands. Life as usual was going on just a few yards away. Yet, here he was, waiting around for evil to pounce.

Connor stood and headed for the kitchen. If he had to be awake, coffee would help him remain focused. He set up the coffee maker, glad that the former owner had appreciated good coffee. In the cupboards, he found a whole shelf of mugs. All of them were smaller than he was used to and all of them had images of various dogs on them. He chose the most masculine one he could find, a husky with bright blue eyes staring out at him.

His phone buzzed on the counter, and he picked it up then headed outside so he could talk without disturbing anyone. "This is Connor."

"Hi, this is Dr. Carol. We've been observing Melinda all night. She has now been stable for three hours and we're admitting her to the hospital. Have you been able to get copies of a restraining order or anything that will limit who can see her?"

For one, that didn't exist. "No, there isn't any documentation like that. Though there is a police report filed two days ago stating that he roughed her up and threatened her. Is that enough?"

Dr. Carol was silent for a second. "I'll see what I can do. Generally, in the cases of spousal abuse, the abusers are on their best behavior in front of hospital staff. Was it her husband who did that to her?"

“Can’t confirm that, but we suspect it. There was no one else who could’ve.” Unless she’d met with a random act of violence, but it wasn’t likely some stranger would kidnap her from a home and leave a threatening message for Lacy to find.

“Since she was the victim of intense violence, I’m going to limit the people who can visit her. If you want this to be foolproof, I’ve got to keep all of you away, too. Since I’ve got to call in the police, everyone will be a suspect until they apprehend someone.”

“I think that’s best. Lacy won’t take it well, but we want Melinda safe.”

“Good to hear. I’ll call the police department and report what I found. Since this appeared to be an assault, photos were taken right away, those will also be turned over to the authorities. They may be contacting you for questioning.”

He snorted. “I would hope so. We were some of the last people to see her before she was taken.” Though he meant Lacy, not himself. He’d only seen her once she was already attacked.

“Thank you for calling the ambulance. She wouldn’t have survived without help.”

He’d thought as much but hadn’t said that to Lacy. “We couldn’t leave her there. She is a friend. I’m just glad no one else was hurt. Someone tried to break into the house from another side after dropping Melinda’s body in the front yard. I suspect they planned to do more than what they did.”

“We’re a small town. This doesn’t happen here. Makes me want to lock my doors and call my adult daughter. I want this guy caught.”

“We all do. Thanks again.” He hung up the phone and headed back inside for his coffee infusion.

Maybe a report coming from a doctor would sway the police into seeing Melinda's history a whole new way. She couldn't be the only person who'd faced domestic violence and had her spouse try to put the blame on her. He bowed his head over his steaming cup and said a prayer for clarity for the police and everyone else involved, including himself. He needed clarity most of all.

A text came through on his phone and he finished his prayer before he looked up to see who it was. Brendon's name splashed across the top of the screen and the words chilled him to the core.

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Viceroy has been spotted within a mile of Wayside. Police are on alert. So are we. Pray he's caught before he gets here.

Chapter Thirteen

Lacy shifted uncomfortably as the sun's rays peeked over the house across the street. A golden glow filled the space between and for a moment, her soul was at peace. She looked around for Connor, but he wasn't on the sofa where he'd been when she'd fallen asleep.

Her chest tightened. Had he left? "Connor?" She looked around the room and swallowed the bile that pooled in the back of her throat.

She stood stiffly from her spot. "Connor?" she repeated a little louder.

When he didn't answer, she headed toward the hallway. He could be in the bathroom or the garage. She shouldn't jump to conclusions just because he didn't answer her. Randy slept in the first room down the hall. He'd left the door open about two inches and she could see him without opening the door further.

Down the hall, she poked her head into Aunt Joy's former room. Connor sat in a dainty chair that he'd turned to face the wall away from her.

"I need to know. What's the danger? What is the risk? Has he actually been seen or was it someone that might be him?"

An awful cold sensation skittered down her spine. Had Viceroy been seen? She

waited, not making a noise, so she didn't interrupt his important call. She pulled her flannel shirt tightly around her stomach like a robe and listened.

"That's not what I want to hear, Brendon. You know that." He sighed deeply. "What else?"

She could hear the low tones of Brendon's voice, but not what he was saying. Brendon didn't get worked up about anything. He was about as moderate in tone and action as she'd ever seen, but today he sounded rushed. That couldn't be good.

"Would it be safer to send our people somewhere else?"

Lacy gasped and Connor spun around. He held up his finger to have her wait and then turned his phone on speaker so she could hear.

". . . that's not optimal though. I don't know of anywhere secure enough. Not to mention this is short notice right before Christmas. Nixon is doing his best to keep things safe for everyone. Nadine is working overtime and getting help from Teddy to watch the cameras. She's also using drone technology now to go to the areas where we don't have cameras. We're doing our best to keep everyone calm."

"Are you trying to tell me not to worry?" Connor stared at his phone.

"That would be pretty fruitless," Brendon deadpanned. "I know better than that. You'd worry if I told you we were having sunny weather, and everything was going great. Let's not kid ourselves."

Connor snorted. "Is there anything you need me to do? I wish I was there."

The words pierced her worse than she thought they would. Of course he wanted to be there. His heart was Wayside. It always had been. He wanted to help those who

needed him the most. She didn't need him as much as they did.

Whatever Connor said to end the call, Lacy missed it. She turned around, heading out of the room.

"Hey, good morning." Connor came around the chair.

In her emotional state, she shouldn't talk to him. She shouldn't say anything. If she did, she'd regret it. Being hunted by a man who wanted her dead had made her scared and that usually wasn't a word she'd use to describe herself.

He turned her around and held her shoulders, but she couldn't look him in the eyes. If she did, she might cry. He hated tears. Connor wasn't one to be softened by them and since his mother had been a crier, he had a negative association with what he called waterworks.

"Sounds like things are going down at Wayside. You should go. You're needed there."

He didn't say a word and she felt him staring at her, waiting on her.

"Lacy?" His voice held so many questions.

"Yes?" She still couldn't look him in the eye. Not before she got her emotions under control.

"Why would I leave you?"

She finally met his gaze. "Why wouldn't you? Wayside needs you."

"Um, Wayside has multiple people there who are just as capable as I am whereas you

only have Randy . . . who doesn't even use weapons. Not sure how you hope to stay protected that way. Leaving you behind is not on my bingo card."

"But—"

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He stopped her with a look. “Nope. You called me. I’m glad you did. We’re in this together until you go home. If that means I have to bring all four of us to Wayside, so be it.”

She gave a nod of agreement because she couldn’t find the right words to say what was going through her mind. He’d planted seeds of doubt, even if he hadn’t meant to.

“Did you finally get some sleep?” He let his hands drop from her shoulders.

“A little.” She stretched her neck one way and then the other. “I’m a little stiff this morning. In my twenties, I could doze almost anywhere. Now, I need a bed that is just the right firmness, or I wake up feeling like I slept in a pretzel.”

He chuckled. “I thought about asking you if you were sure you wanted to bend your neck that way, but thought you might stay in that position just to spite me. You sure like to prove me wrong.”

“Well, if the shoe fits.” She grinned as she dodged his hand, aiming for her shoulder in a playful punch that he intentionally missed.

She reined in her emotions and took a deep breath. “So, you heard from Wayside, but have you heard anything from the hospital?”

He nodded as he hid a yawn behind his hand. “She’s been moved into a room, but because of the fact that we don’t have a restraining order, they aren’t letting anyone see her. The doctor thought that once she was awake and could tell police what happened, they’ll lift the rule and we’ll be able to visit.”

Her stomach rumbled and she realized that every time she'd even thought about eating over the past day, she'd been interrupted. "So, we have until ten in the morning to eat and make a plan because if Tod knows she'll tell the police what he did, he'll have to act quickly."

"I was thinking the same thing. Today, we keep low and try to stay away from him. I'll need to keep in contact with Wayside too."

She headed for the kitchen and slowly opened cupboards until she found where the food had been kept. A wave of guilt washed over her at eating a deceased woman's food, but if not them, who else? "We have to make sure they find who did this to Melinda's aunt."

He brushed some hair back from her face. "Absolutely, but the urgent issue is making sure that his body count doesn't go up any higher. To do that, we stay hidden. I moved my truck into the garage last night so no one will be able to tell from outside that we're here. If we're smart and quiet, no one will know. This could be the perfect hiding place."

Randy dragged his feet down the hallway, his eyelids drooping. "My dad just called, waking me up." He set his phone on the counter. "He told me that my boss called to find out where I was. Since Dad didn't know, he used the 'find my' app to see where my phone was. He just called to let me know my boss is on his way here."

Lacy tried not to panic, but the continual running was getting to her. "I want to go home," her words were quiet, but sounded loud in the silence.

"I know." Connor took her into his arms. "Soon. I promise."

Randy leaned against the counter. "The way I see it, we've got about ten minutes before we have to be gone. I'm sure as soon as they heard the address, they knew

exactly which house my dad was talking about.”

“Since they were probably the ones who killed Melinda’s aunt,” Lacy guessed.

Randy frowned. “If we’re going with the insurance theme, it was probably to eliminate any chance of outside help for Melinda. They didn’t count on you. I can only imagine that the payout is massive if they are willing to kill multiple people to get it.” Randy pulled the coffee pot out of the maker, then shoved it back inside. “No time to brew. Ready?”

Lacy didn’t answer. Instead, she headed for the room where she’d left her bag to grab it. She hadn’t even had time to get dressed. At what point was this going to end? When could they feel safe? “We need to talk to the police. Tell them what we know.”

Connor’s hesitance surprised her. “I agree with you, but I’d bet he’s planned for that. We need to make sure we give them enough information that they can’t ignore us.”

She wasn’t sure what that could be. They’d told the police everything they knew for sure. Connor grabbed his bag off the sofa and held the door to the garage for her. Randy swiped the garage door opener and tossed it to Connor. “You never know when we’ll need a place to go. If we keep moving, they’ll have to check many places to find us. Like whack-a-mole. At least until Melinda wakes up and tells the police enough to get her husband arrested.”

Lacy bit her lip and swallowed the thought that popped into her head. No one needed to hear her negative thoughts. There was a chance Melinda wouldn’t remember anything. The doctor had said she had a head injury. In that case, they’d have to wait for Tod to strike again.

Lacy sat between Connor and Randy in silence. Randy fiddled with his phone and turned off a bunch of apps. Connor didn’t seem to know where to go, so he simply

drove. After a few minutes, they found themselves in the parking lot of a diner.

“I’ll park around back. You both go in and get a booth for us. One by the window where I can see the road.” Connor nodded at the front door.

“Got it,” she said, knowing Connor liked to have eyes on the front door no matter where they ate. He wanted to be situationally aware at all times and having his back to the door didn’t allow him to do that.

Randy followed her inside and when she saw the sign indicating they should seat themselves, she led him to the perfect window seat where Connor could watch the door, and she had eyes on the front entrance to the parking lot.

She handed Randy a menu but didn’t pick hers up. She wouldn’t look at one until he was finished so that someone had their attention focused on everyone coming and going at all times. If she didn’t get to look at the menu, that was fine too. Places like this always had eggs, pancakes, and bacon with coffee. That was her standby at any diner and she’d yet to find one that didn’t serve that.

Connor came inside and headed right for the table, settling in across from her. “I didn’t see anyone on the road while I was parking. Most people are at work by now, so it’ll be easy to see anyone out for a drive.”

“When we saw Tod’s car at Aunt Joy’s it was dark. That’s all I remember.” Lacy caught the waitress’s attention and waved her over.

“I know what Cal drives,” Randy scrolled on his phone.

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“And what’s that?” Connor asked, clearly annoyed that Randy hadn’t thought this was pertinent information.

“An older red Chevy Impala. It’s recognizable enough if you’re watching for it, but as far as cars go, it isn’t one that stands out.”

The waitress leaned against the table and popped her gum. “Hey, Randy. You’re usually at work at this hour. What’s going on over at the hotel?”

Randy turned slightly red. “Just a little water damage. That’s all. I don’t work until the repairs are done.”

She snorted and popped her gum loudly. “What can get for you?”

Randy ordered something that sounded Spanish while Connor and Lacy ordered the closest thing to what they would have back at Wayside. The server wasted no time in bringing over a pot of coffee and three mugs. “Your orders will be out shortly.” She stuck her pencil behind her ear and headed through the swinging door to the kitchen.

Something about the place made her nervous, but she couldn’t say what. They were completely alone in there, so it couldn’t be someone watching them. She searched around for anything odd that might not have seemed out of place when she’d first looked everything over, but nothing stood out.

“Isn’t it odd that we’re in here alone?” Connor slowly glanced over the whole place. “This feels like a trap. I’m sure I’m just feeling the pinch of this guy being one step ahead of us everywhere we turn, but it feels like every time we think we’re safe, he

shows up.”

The fact that she wasn’t alone in feeling off about the diner made her even more nervous. “Should we get our food to-go? Randy, does your boss have a connection to this place that we should know about?” Since he seemed to own everything in the small town, she hoped he would say something if he did.

“No, but I will admit that I don’t know where Cal gets his morning coffee and doughnut before he comes in.” He looked at his phone. “If he gets them here, he’ll be around any minute.”

Connor glanced at the swinging door where the server had disappeared. “I don’t want to jump to any conclusions without something to warrant the leap. Maybe we’re all suffering from fatigue, and everything is looking suspicious to us.”

Randy took a deep breath and jabbed his finger on an icon on his phone. “Dad is wondering where I am. He says Cal is looking for me and he’s mad that I didn’t wait around for him. I’m supposed to report to work tonight.”

Connor shook his head. “He knows you’re with us. That’s a trap. Thank your dad for letting you know and leave it at that.”

“Dad already thinks I’m a loser. If I get fired, he’ll probably kick me out. I can’t pay for an apartment and school in this town. Since Cal owns most of the rentals, he’d charge me a fortune after this. Unless I want to live in the worst neighborhood. Then there’s openings.” He shook his head as he rapidly typed a reply to his father. “Life is hard when you don’t make enough money to do what you need to do so you can eventually make the money you need.”

Lacy had heard the same from Ferd. Connor’s half-sister had a good head on her shoulders and wanted to go to school, but she didn’t want any debt. That meant she

had to work hard and save for a long time in order to pay for it. When she'd told Connor that hiring Ferd to do Lacy's job would help her manage the task of saving for college even faster, he'd agreed to let her.

"I know. It's easier for students when they can live at home or if they earn scholarships," she said.

"You'd think there would be more of those for people who want to learn coding. Tech jobs are literally everywhere. The trouble is, there aren't any. If I wanted to be a nurse or if I wanted to go into a trade like welding, then I could've gotten help." He shrugged. "I'll manage. I always do."

She heard the sorrow of borderline depression cling to his voice. Lacy glanced to Connor for help, but he was focused on the door, watching for the waitress. She hadn't come back out but there wasn't anyone else for her to serve, so that didn't seem odd.

"Connor? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Yet." He drummed his fingers. "This town is small enough that they can drive around fairly quickly and find us. I hid the truck out back, but all they have to do is drive slowly around the block and they'll see it. I haven't seen anyone drive by, but it's only a matter of time."

The waitress appeared with a large round tray balanced on her right hand and a folding stand in her left. She didn't smile as she approached the table. Instead, she was super-efficient. She whipped the table out, gravity making it separate to set the tray on. She set each plate in front of them, then pulled a bottle of ketchup from her pocket. "You let me know if you need anything else." She nodded, half-smiled, and headed back behind the swinging door.

Lovely scents drifted up from her plate and her mouth watered. Was she finally going to get the chance to eat? Maybe that's how Tod was going to get her. He'd make her starve. She picked up her fork and glanced around to make sure she wouldn't be interrupted.

Connor blessed the food quickly, setting the pace. They didn't have time to enjoy what was before them. A raced prayer meant a ticking clock started in her head. She'd finished about half of her plate when Connor's phone buzzed. He tugged from his pocket and smiled.

For the first time in at least a full day, her stomach settled. Connor wouldn't smile unless something good had finally happened. "What is it?"

"Melinda is awake and talking. Talking a lot." He stuck a fork into his pancakes and lifted up a hearty mouthful. "If the doctor is right, Tod will be the one on the run soon."

Chapter Fourteen

Her plate held only her used napkin after having a few minutes to feel completely free of the stress of the last few days. The good, strong coffee perked up her sluggish mind. Soon Lacy would feel normal again, probably after seeing Melinda and making sure her friend was okay.

Randy's back straightened in the seat across from her as he watched a car pull into the parking lot. A huge man sat behind the wheel and slowly pulled into the handicapped parking, though she didn't see any hang tag or sticker on his plate to say he could park there.

The man slowly got out of the old, red car. It swayed as he released his weight from it. Randy audibly swallowed. "That's him."

She'd figured that much out, but what could he do to them in the diner? Granted, there wasn't anyone else inside. Everyone who worked there was in the kitchen, so the usual safety of a public place was severely lacking.

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Cal tugged the door open and headed inside. He did a full surprised jump and gasp as if he was surprised to see them there, but his eyes were cold. There was no way he was legitimately surprised to see them. With a slow gait, he made his way to their table.

“Randy, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you.”

Randy frowned and held up his phone. “You have my phone number. You could’ve called me.”

“This is a discussion that needed to happen in person, not over the phone. I called your father, since we’ve known each other since childhood. He told me you were staying at some house the next town over.” He thumbed the direction they’d come. “When I went there to confront you, you were gone. I understand why you would run from me. No one wants bad news, but I think you know why I’m looking for you.” His gaze never wavered from Randy.

“I don’t think it’s fair to be having this conversation right here,” Lacy pointed out, hoping Cal was talking about actual work and not Melinda.

Cal turned to her. “You were at my hotel that day, the day he pulled the fire alarm.” He pointed at Randy. “Are you in on it? He’s facing a fine, but if you were part of this, you should pay too.”

Connor stood, making her immediately feel better. Trapped by the table, she couldn’t have stood to defend herself. She was stuck in a position of being looked down on.

“I think you need to lower your tone and curb your accusations without proof. Before anyone can be fined, there has to be verification. Are there cameras on the premises that prove your accusations or are you just looking for someone to blame?”

He stepped closer to Connor, but was at least five inches shorter. “I do have cameras. Oddly, they all went black a few seconds before the fire alarm was pulled.”

“I had nothing to do with it. There was a man pounding on my door, threatening me when it happened. I was glad the alarm went off and assumed it was a gift from God so the man would go away.”

Cal snorted. “Well, if God pulled the alarm, maybe He should pay for the repairs? I think it was a very human person who set off the sprinklers and only one man could turn off the cameras and force the fire alarm and that’s Randy. He was working that morning.”

“What about the man who was threatening me? He could’ve pulled it, thinking it would force me from my room.” She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, hopefully letting him know she was quite aware that he would have to admit he knew the man banging on her door if he wanted to ruin her theory.”

“That’s right,” Randy agreed. “If he knew that all the doors would unlock when the fire alarm went off, he could simply walk inside her room.”

Cal rolled his eyes and lowered his voice. “Only people who work for our hotel know that. It’s not common practice because it’s a safety hazard. If there wasn’t actually a fire, you put everyone else at risk. No one else would think that would happen.”

Randy smiled slowly. “Except your brother. He knew. If he was trying to get into a room, pulling the smoke alarm was a sure way to get what he wanted.”

Lacy held her breath. There was a clear gap in Randy's logic. Why pound on her door if he knew how to get in? Though sounding an alarm would also send people out into the hallway and he'd be sure to be seen, it was still a risk.

"Are you accusing my brother of something?" He moved away from pressuring Connor with his size to leaning over the table toward Randy. "He wouldn't do something to jeopardize my business."

If she pointed out that it was his brother who'd been threatening her, then she would give away that she knew the connection, whereas that fact was unspoken so far. A known connection might make him do something rash whereas now, he probably assumed they were too stupid to have figured it out. She kept her mouth shut.

"Randy, you'll be getting the bill for the damage and if you can't pay it, you're going to jail. You're also fired. You put multiple lives in danger and cost me days of work. I can't let that slide."

"Are you firing me in a diner?" Randy's face contorted into an incredulous grimace.

"Well, I had to since you kept running from me. You can pick up anything you left in the break room in the next two days. We'll throw it away after that. You can return your uniforms at that time." He turned and headed for the order counter and rang the bell.

Connor sat back down and bent forward, lowering his voice, "Any of you get the impression he knew we'd be here?"

Lacy nodded and Randy joined in. Randy bent forward and muttered, "He could've called me. I think he was sent out to find us and use that as an excuse."

Connor glanced behind him to the counter and Lacy followed his train of thought,

watching Cal. The waitress came out and quickly took his order, called it up, then went back through the door. Cal dug in his coat pocket and pulled out his phone. Lacy quickly averted her eyes so he wouldn't see them watching him.

She felt him stare at her and her skin tingled in unwanted gooseflesh. Taking a chance at getting caught, she looked up at him. He had his phone to his ear and kept looking back at them. From her vantage point, she didn't need to turn around to see him like Connor did.

"We should get out of here. He's on the phone, probably calling Tod. If he knows the police are after him, he'll take chances to find us," Lacy said as she shoved her wallet back into her purse. Thankfully, the waitress had already taken care of her card, and they had been ready to leave.

"Good idea. Don't rush, just grab your coats and act like we were going to leave anyway."

Connor stood and slowly shrugged on his coat, then helped her put on hers. He paused with his hands on her shoulders, giving her a reassuring squeeze. He stepped forward, his mouth just inches from the back of her ear. "Hold my hand and walk slowly out. I don't want that guy to think for a second that you're vulnerable."

She gave a nod and held out her hand. He took it, his fingers tightening around her ring finger. She remembered she'd left her wedding ring at home and felt his fingers searching for it. Even when there was no hope, and she'd told him she was not available to return to his side as his wife, she'd kept it on until now.

Outside, he held the door for her and waited for her to climb in before going around to the driver's side. The moment Randy got in, he closed the door and locked it.

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He turned to face them. “Look, I know being here is making this harder on you. I don’t think I’m actually in danger other than losing my job. I want you to drop me off back at Dad’s rental house where my car is. I’ll deal with this situation on my own from here. I’m too close anyway. I know all these people and that means they can pick me out from a mile away. They don’t know you.”

Connor nodded. “I think that makes good sense. I know you’d talked about going with us. We may have to leave on a moment’s notice, but you’re welcome at Wayside.” He dug his wallet out of his back pocket and pulled out a business card. “You helped Lacy when she needed it and that means I owe you. It’s rare that I give these out, so don’t let that into the wrong hands.” He handed it over.

“Thanks. I won’t.” He kept silent the rest of the way back to the rental.

“This is me. Thanks for taking me along for the ride.” Randy laughed but it held no humor.

“Thank you again for all your help,” Lacy said. She wasn’t quite sure she agreed with him that he wasn’t in danger, but he was an adult, and they couldn’t make him stay.

“No problem. If you don’t leave in a rush, be sure to call me. I’d love to get out of here.” He waved and got out of the truck.

Lacy moved over in the seat to give Connor more room then buckled in. “So, where do we go now?”

“Honestly, I’m not really sure. We can’t report what happened at the café because he

tried to make it seem like nothing. We could tell them that we suspect Tod will be there, but that might not happen and then they'll have wasted resources, making us look bad. I should call Wayside and find out what's happening there."

She gave a single nod of agreement but said nothing. At least her friend had survived and by all appearances, they'd be able to leave soon. If Wayside wasn't in danger, they could go even sooner. "There's a little overlook on the edge of town. Melinda showed me when we were driving to her aunt's house. The reception is really good there and you can see people coming from a mile away."

He snorted. "Sounds like the perfect place."

A few minutes later, Connor turned onto a gravel road that led up a small incline. After about a quarter mile, everything seemed to open up and the whole town came into view below them.

Lacy got out and closed her door. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket and looked out over the guard rail. "It's too bad that I haven't had a chance to enjoy this place. It really is pretty."

The sun was halfway up and sending golden rays over the orange hue of the town. Connor wanted to get the call over with, but talking to Lacy, alone, was an even bigger draw.

"And even sadder that you'll probably never want to visit again." He brushed hair away from her cheek that had come loose in the wind.

"No, but maybe I'd like to go to Santa Fe. It's pretty here and not as cold or windy as Wyoming."

"I thought you missed being home?" Though he'd known she said that because of the

situation. Still, she'd chosen to leave and had said she needed time away. He doubted she'd gotten what she hoped for.

"I do. Home is just that. I love Wyoming and Wayside ranch. I'm not above saying there are perks to other areas though." She smiled at him over her shoulder.

He leaned against the front of the pickup and gave himself permission to be still. Lord, what would You have me do with this amazing woman? She told me no not so long ago, but I feel like something has changed between us. I don't want to ignore her wishes, but I also don't want to ignore encouragement if that's what this is.

She moved closer to the railing and peered over the edge. "It's not as far down as I thought it would be, the slope is less harsh than it looks."

He laughed. "You've never been one to appreciate heights. What was it you said when I wanted to take you skiing when we were first married?" He hadn't remembered that in a long time. She'd refused to admit it scared her. Since she was never afraid of anything, he'd teased her good-naturedly for a while about it.

"I told you that skis belong at the end of last names, not on my feet. I still stand by that."

He couldn't help himself. He headed over to her and wrapped his arms around her. Sticking his hands in her front coat pockets, he held her hands warming both of them. "I miss you, Lacy."

"I'm right here." She chuckled.

"That's not what I meant. I'm not here because I think of you as some second-chance mission. I'm here because I still care about you. I don't think I ever stopped."

She released his hands and doing so tugged them from her pockets then turned around and rested her hands against his chest. “I know you’re not here on a second-chance mission because I told you that I wouldn’t do that. The issue that I had, that I still have, is that you still don’t believe I won’t walk away. Even after all these years. I’m not her, Connor.”

He bent his head and backed away, hiding his face from her. How had she known how hurt he was by that? He’d never told her the reasons he was so sure he wasn’t worth loving if trouble came up. He just knew it was true.

“It’s not you that I don’t trust, Lacy. It’s me. I don’t know what I did to make the one woman who was supposed to care for me unconditionally . . . walk away. She just walked away. No goodbye. No explanation. No offer to take me with her. She stayed in contact with my brothers. Why not me?”

He shook his head and turned away. “Now I sound like a whiny child. I’m not.”

“Connor.” She held his arm and stopped him from turning away further. “I know you’re not a child. Adults have feelings too. What she did hurt you and it had a direct effect on our lives. I always felt like you didn’t fully trust me to love you, no matter what.”

“How could I?” He looked into her eyes. “How could I risk rejection again?”

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“I never left, Connor. All this time, I wanted you to see that. I never left even when everyone else thought I should. I didn’t want to be your second chance mission because I am not willing to go through that again. I left because I wanted to show you once and for all that I will always come back. I will always keep in contact. I will always welcome your presence in my life. The trouble is you got so used to my presence that you never noticed. You didn’t put two and two together.”

He shook his head. “You didn’t leave because my dad stepped in and said you had to work at Wayside, or he’d kick me out.”

She slowly shook her head. “No. That’s not it at all. Do you think I would’ve stayed just because he wanted me to? Do you think I could stand to live in the room next to my husband for ten years if I didn’t want to be there, if I didn’t need to see you? Come on, Connor. You know me better than that.”

The only thing that would’ve kept her there was love. Was she telling him that she’d never stopped loving him? He cupped her cheeks and drew her face closer. He couldn’t say the words out loud yet. If he did, he risked being wrong. He’d already been wrong for ten years and that had cost both of them so much. If he was wrong now, so be it. At least he’d be happy.

Ever so slowly, he drew her into a kiss. The sun warmed the side of his face as he slowly took his time telling her with his mouth but without words how much he missed her and still cared for her. How much he wanted her back.

To his utter amazement, she still spoke his language.

After a few minutes, when he was sure he couldn't take any more without risking saying or doing something he would regret, he ended the kiss and held her close. Her hair was soft where it blew against his cheek. This was what life was for; little moments alone where the truth could come out and clear all the cobwebs. Talking to her left him feeling like he could conquer the world, not to mention his troubles.

"You should call Wayside. There's no telling how long we'll be safe up here. Anyone with a good pair of binoculars could see us."

"In that case, you'd better go sit in the truck or they'll catch you in your P.Js." He laughed but the idea of anyone watching her through glass was disturbing.

"I already had breakfast in them, so I guess I shouldn't hide." But she climbed into the truck anyway.

He opened his phone and checked the signal. Lacy had been right, this high area had great reception. He pressed Brendon's number, and his friend answered on the second ring.

"Connor, good to hear from you."

"Hey, how are things going? Have they caught Viceroy yet?" The court case was due to start in under two weeks. Hopefully when they caught him, they'd charge him with fleeing and contempt of court, but Connor didn't know enough about the judicial system to guess.

"No, not yet. He's still on the loose. Worse is the fact that sightings of him have dried up in the last two hours. No one knows where he went. He's gone off-grid, which is scary. We can't stay locked down forever."

"It's only been a day. I'd say we need to give the police time to locate him and arrest

him.” And it meant he couldn’t bring Lacy back. If Viceroy was anywhere along the way and managed to catch them, he’d kill Lacy without hesitation since she’d already agreed to testify against him.

“Then I guess you’ll stay gone for longer. Everything working out? Is Lacy okay?”

Connor grinned because he couldn’t help it. “Yeah, things are starting to look up here. We just have to wait until they catch the guy who’s been after her, then we can think about what to do.”

“Take your time. No sense in going from the frying pan into the fire. We’re watching everything that dares to move around here. I’ll let you know if anything changes. Oh, your dad told me to tell you that your brothers confirmed they are coming on Christmas Day. He didn’t want that to make you hurry, but he hopes you’ll be home by then.”

Connor glanced off over the town and thought about what Lacy had said. The hurt wasn’t just because of his mother. He’d been close with his brothers before the separation, too. Some hurts were layers deep, not just a simple wound with a scar.

Chapter Fifteen

Connor was super quiet after talking with Brendon and Lacy wasn’t sure why. He’d told her that, generally, everything was fine. They just couldn’t rush back yet. While that made sense on the surface, he’d always let her into his thought process before. Now, he wasn’t telling her anything.

They’d moved from the overlook to the edge of a large city park. String lights swung in the breeze of the cool evening. There were so many bulbs that the whole area was filled with a soft glow. Quaint shops advertising Christmas gifts and ornaments lined the opposite sides of the street, forming a fence of businesses all selling Christmas

from a store. One single church stood at the head of the square, its huge Gothic spires piercing the night.

She wanted to enjoy the solitude for just a moment. There was one phone call between peace and stress. Every sound that was like a phone ringing made her shoulders tense painfully. In order to stay hidden, they'd avoided getting out of the truck unless they had to. Lunch had been gas station burritos since there were also bathrooms available to take care of other necessities including changing into something besides her flannel jammies. Life out of a truck wasn't much fun, but after running for days, at least it was boring.

Connor sat next to her, leaning against the window with his arm propped against the door. He'd fallen asleep a few times, but she couldn't blame him for that, either. He'd been awake for nearly two days straight. They were in a shallow lull, why shouldn't he catch a few z's?

A four-person band started playing a mariachi version of "Away in a Manger". She hadn't let herself feel any of the usual joy for that time of year. She'd almost forgotten that the day they celebrate the birth of Jesus would arrive in less than a week.

Careful not to wake Connor, she got out of the truck and headed for the small group of people surrounding the band. They swayed in time with the music and a few people joined in singing. The conversation she'd had earlier with Connor lay heavily on her shoulders.

His words still stuck in her head even though she'd refuted them. You didn't leave because my dad stepped in and said you had to work at Wayside, or he'd kick me out. All this time, he'd thought the reason she'd stayed had been a job. He'd convinced himself that she couldn't possibly stay for him.

Thankfully, her own parents had been loving and understanding. She'd never faced what Connor had. Could she let that pain go so easily? Probably not. The words to the final verse of the song struck her deeply, Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask You to stay close by me forever and love me I pray . . . Parents were supposed to teach children what that felt like, so they would understand, at least in some small measure, what Jesus meant. He would never leave.

No singular moment or words would heal decades of hurt. Being there when his brothers came back would be a start, but Connor needed more. How could she help him heal? Would she have to risk her heart again, knowing he could do the samething, just to prove to him that she was the real deal? She loved him. Always. Not only when the feeling worked in her favor.

A large presence stepped in at her side and for a moment, she tensed to step away until she realized it was Connor.

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“You scared me. I woke up from a dose to an empty truck.”

She smiled at him. “I was drawn to the music, and I stayed within sight. I figured I was safe in such a large group of people.”

He put his arm around her shoulder and tucked her close to his side. “I know I shouldn’t worry about you. You’re perfectly capable. But if the last few days has taught me anything, it’s that you don’t take situations for granted.”

She nodded as the band played the song through one more time without words. They started walking and much of the crowd followed them, leaving Lacy and Connor in a grove of trees, bathed in the glow of twinkling light overhead.

“Do I lose my man card if I tell you that you look positively amazing right now.” He threaded his hand within the hair on the back of her neck, drawing her closer.

“I don’t see how you could.” Why would that make him any less manly?

“Because I have uniquely un-manly words going through my head. Like cute. As in, your smile is cute. Forgive me, that’s not a word I would even usually have in my vocabulary. Adorable would be another.” He laughed as he kissed her forehead.

Somehow, the endearments were even sweeter coming from a huge, grumbly, masculine guy. She’d never thought for a second that he would equate her with ‘cute’. She worked, wore flannel, was in her thirties, and didn’t take a lick of time to beautify herself. Yet he thought she was adorable?

“Sorry, I don’t see it.” She held the unzipped front of his denim and duck canvas jacket and playfully tugged them slightly.

“Well, that’s okay. I’ll show you.” His kiss was gentle at first, a request, really.

The moment she responded, he held her closer and took his time. If he’d done this very thing back at home, she would’ve pulled away. She hadn’t been ready. Somehow, in front of a band playing a song she’d heard hundreds of times, she’d realized the error of her thinking. And his. They’d both believed incorrectly about the other.

Which meant they could both work together and fix the problem. It wasn’t one-sided. She ended the kiss and tucked herself close to him, letting his strength infuse her for a while. He would protect her. He would come for her. There was no question about it.

His phone buzzed in his coat, and she stepped back, letting him take the call. He looked torn for a moment, then relented and dug his phone out.

“It’s the hospital. I’ll answer, but let’s head back to the truck where it’s quiet and I can let you listen.” He was already walking that way as he swiped to answer.

“Connor.”

She rushed to keep up with his long strides and they made it back to the truck in less than a minute. He unlocked it with his key-ring, and she climbed inside. The moment she closed her door, he turned the phone on speaker.

“Melinda just finished her final meeting with the police. They said it was fine to allow Lacy to go in and see her friend. We’re not letting any men into her room yet. Since her husband hasn’t been apprehended and we don’t want the job of questioning everyone, that’s the rule for now.”

Connor half-grinned. “That’s fine. Lacy would like to see her if that’s okay? If Melinda is too tired, we can wait, but we’d like to hear how she’s doing from her own mouth.”

“She said she could see Lacy, but there was no one else she requested. She’s still so tired that it will have to be short. The police questioning was lengthy.”

“Good. I hope she told them everything,” Connor said.

“I’m not able to tell you that, I wasn’t there.” The nurse’s serious tone hinted that she was ready to end the call.

“Thank you for letting us know. We’ll be there shortly.”

“Great. Visiting hours end in fifty-five minutes.” The nurse hung up.

Lacy wasn’t ready to consider this a win until she talked to Melinda. People who lived with abuse were like people who lived with chronic pain. They often tried to hide the severity of what they went through because they were sure no one would believe them if they told the truth. Since Melinda had learned how to act in public so no one would ever suspect the internal screaming. She was probably good enough to win an Oscar.

Lacy buckled in while Connor started the engine. She hadn’t thought Melinda would be doing well enough talk within a day. The care at the hospital must be good or God was working on her in a supernatural way. She was the key to putting Tod behind bars.

As they made their way through town, the holiday lights slowly disappeared until they drove through a few neighborhoods where there was no indication that it was almost Christmas. The hospital at the edge of town was three stories tall and other

than a large wreath, showed no decoration.

Lacy got out of the truck and a shiver washed down her spine. After Connor had been shot, she hated hospitals. At least, with him at her side, she could face this now.

At that hour, the hospital parking lot was close to empty. He maneuvered into a spot near the door and stashed his weapon in a locked box under his seat. "I'll follow you inside, then wait in a waiting room."

He didn't like how unsettled Lacy looked. She wasn't one to let nerves get to her. "Do you think he's here?" He doubted Tod was anywhere around because there were so many cameras around hospitals.

"No, I just don't like being here." She visibly shivered but he knew she wasn't cold.

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“I don’t blame you.” He had much the same feeling.

“When the strongest guy you’ve ever known gets knocked off his feet time after time in one of these buildings, you start to lose confidence in what they can do.”

He gripped her hand, knowing she was talking about him. “But look what they did for Melinda.” That was nothing short of a miracle. She’d been unresponsive when the ambulance had rushed her away from the scene.

“I suppose you’re right, but they thought you were fine twice before it was the truth.”

He didn’t need the reminder, though there were parts of his stay that he couldn’t recall no matter how hard he tried. The first week was a blur that had nothing to ground him in reality, making the memories difficult to place.

As they made their way down the hallway, following the signs to the hospital rooms, Connor kept watch for anything that looked suspicious. While it was unlikely Tod would try anything there, he was running out of time to silence Lacy and Melinda.

The desk area was in the middle of the floor with the room surrounding it in a circle. The woman sitting there looked up from her desk and waited for them to come to her.

“Hi, I’m here to see Melinda McFarland.”

“Are you Lacy?” she glanced between Lacy and Connor.

“I am. This is Connor. We just got a call saying I could see her.” Lacy gripped his

hand tighter.

The nurse nodded. “She mentioned both of you by name. I know I’m not supposed to let any men in there, but she wouldn’t have given the okay if she was worried about you. She gave me two names who are absolutely not allowed in. Keep the door open and be sure you’re on your way out by ten.”

Connor appreciated that they would let him go into the room, but that seemed to be less secure than what she’d said at first on the phone. The nurse wrote down the room number on a sticky note, so she didn’t have to say it out loud and sent them down the hall.

Lacy followed the direction, then turned left down the circular hall that would lead back to the desk eventually. When they reached the room, the door was slightly ajar and beeping noises came from the inside. Connor opened the door for her and held it as Lacy headed in to see Melinda.

He left the door open a few inches and pulled two folding chairs off the wall, setting up one for Lacy and one for himself.

“It’s good to see you.” Melinda’s voice was hoarse and weak.

Lacy grabbed the mug of ice water on the table and held it to Melinda’s lips, then sat back down after she’d had a drink. “I’m shocked at how quickly you turned around.”

Melinda chuckled. “All I could think about was getting well enough to tell the police what happened. I told them everything I know, which isn’t much. Tod didn’t tell me why he was doing anything. I know there’s some plan. It involves money. That’s the reason he wants me dead. I don’t understand all of it, but if I die, he’s going to get a huge payout. Somehow, his brother is involved too.”

“That’s what we thought. Randy helped us for a while, but since his father is good friends with Cal, Tod’s brother, it seemed like they were tracking his whereabouts. He’s now at home.”

Melinda frowned. “This town is so small. Everyone knows everyone else. They wouldn’t have had to make many calls to find Randy.” She slid down lower in the bed. “The police finally listened to me. Especially when my doctor came in and made them look at my ex-rays and files, confirming that my injuries were consistent with classic physical abuse. I know that doctors try to help people get out of situations, but I was never allowed to talk to a doctor without my husband there. I was never able to tell them he gave me those injuries. They may have suspected, but they can’t accuse someone on a hunch. At least, they can’t in small town America.”

“I’m glad they listened. We were told that they are looking for Tod right now.”

“Yes, that’s what they told me, too. They also asked me if I had anywhere safe to go tomorrow afternoon. That’s when they’re releasing me. I don’t have insurance so they’re releasing me as soon as they can. I’ll still be needing pain meds and lots of rest, but they feel I can get those at home.”

Lacy snorted. “Not likely. And with the hotel shut down, where can you go?”

“I have no idea.”

Lacy turned to him. “Wayside. It’s time to go home. Melinda will be safe if she leaves the state. We can have her prescription moved to a pharmacy close to us.”

He hadn’t expected her to want to leave by tomorrow. They couldn’t. Viceroy was still on the loose. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

Melinda squinted at him then coughed until Lacy got up to help her get another drink.

Lacy looked at him with questions furrowing her brow. “Connor, it would be safer for her there than here. For as long as she is sitting in this bed, she’s at risk.”

“And you don’t think putting her in a car for hours isn’t a risk?” He couldn’t believe she was suggesting this move right after she’d almost been killed. “What happens if she can’t handle the drive? We’d be in the middle of nowhere. No help in sight. That’s dangerous, Lacy.”

Lacy leaned over Melinda and said something to her quietly, then tugged the blankets up and headed for the door. It was clear she wanted him to follow even though she’d said nothing. He gave Melinda a nod of goodbye and before he could close the door behind him, Lacy lit into him in the hall.

“This isn’t about Melinda and her safety. This is about you and your brothers. You don’t want to see them. You made the arrangements, but now you see a way out of doing it and you don’t want to. I’m not accusing you of being weak. I get why you wouldn’t want to face them, but this is important. This is her life.”

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed.” This was probably not the time for sarcasm, but that was his second language.

“Connor!”

He laughed, despite the fact that she stared daggers at him. “Lacy, I know that there are risks either way. One way risks your life and I’m not willing to look at that option. The other has risk too, but as soon as Tod is caught, the risk is gone.” He wasn’t ready to admit that he didn’t want to build a bridge between himself and his brothers if it meant hurting Lacy.

“How do you expect me to have a comeback for that?” She planted her hands on her hips.

He slid his arm to her waist and pulled her in close, then rested his forehead to hers. “You can say whatever you want, darlin’, and I will listen. I may not change my mind, but that’s because I’m a stubborn, old, good-for-nothing cowboy.”

She leaned in and kissed him so soft and quick he almost missed it. “I know quite well what you’re good at.” She walked off down the hallway, leaving him standing there. “Are you coming?”

He shook his head and caught up to her quickly. He held his tongue because he knew he hadn’t won yet and he wasn’t going to take her back home just yet.

“Admit that your brothers are part of the reason you don’t want to. All I need is for you to be honest with me.” She kept walking, gaze straight ahead.

“Fine. That’s a very small part of it. You mean more to me than they do. That’s history. You’ve treated me better, even after what I did to you.”

She stopped dead in her tracks and looked over at him. “You mean that?”

He snorted as he finished walking to the door and held it open for her. “I’ve never been more serious.”

Chapter Sixteen

Spending the night in Connor’s truck wasn’t an option so they had to find somewhere to go that was close enough to respond if Melinda needed them and far enough away that Tod couldn’t find them. Lacy let him make that decision, since it relieved her of the stress.

He drove out of town and took the entrance ramp onto the highway. She didn’t remember anything along the road, so they had to be heading out of town in a direction she’d never gone. She stared out the window, waiting for Connor to break the silence.

She was still mulling over the idea that Connor had placed her safety above the importance of seeing his family. She’d assumed because he’d wanted the divorce that her importance was equal or less than that of his blood family.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me that you thought I was important?” she mumbled, trying not to sound like she was accusing him of anything.

He took a deep breath and scratched his jaw, the whiskers making a loud raspy sound. “I don’t know. After our divorce, there were a lot of landmines in our relationship. We had to navigate everything all over again. What right did I have to tell you that you were the most important person in my life when, by my own actions, I showed you that you weren’t? It’s a convoluted mess, but feelings are just that.”

His honesty didn’t surprise her. He could be counted on, without question. “When

you came home from serving, and you didn't want to talk to me anymore. I was broken. I wanted to help you return to civilian life. I'd read books that talked about what spouses could do to help their soldiers make the switch. I even understood that you might always think or act like those men were family. I wasn't prepared for you to remove me as part of your family so you could replace my friendship with that of others."

He shook his head slowly. "That was never the case. My guys are family, but they didn't replace you. It's a long story and I'm all out of words today. I just want you to know, from where I'm sitting, from my thought process, I wasn't replacing you with friends."

She didn't press any further for information. He'd already said more than she'd expected him to. A text came through on his phone and she pulled it from the cubby where he'd stored it. The text was from Randy.

Dad is kicking me out. He thinks I'm making the wrong choices as usual. I've decided to drive around and look for Tod or Cal. I'll call them in if I see them.

She read the text out loud to Connor and the area between his eyes puckered slightly. "He's going to find himself in the line of fire. I should call him and tell him to come to the hotel where we are. He can stay away from the action that way."

Lacy stared at the road ahead and tried to remember why the other local hotel was a bad idea, but she was too focused on Randy. "Unless he doesn't want to. Maybe he feels like some of this is his fault, since his phone led to us being found?"

"I hope not. His father thought he was doing the right thing. Sounds like his father isn't the greatest guy in the world either."

She'd gotten the impression that his father like to push him to be better but kept

moving the bar higher and higher until Randy had simply given up ever reaching 'good enough'. "I pray that he doesn't get hurt and isn't seen." But if he could help the police find the brothers, then Melinda and Lacy would be safe.

Connor said, "He mentioned there were bars where the brothers drank all night. I wonder if that's where he was headed?"

"Want me to ask him?" Lacy held up the phone. That seemed like the easiest way to find out.

"Sure." He flipped on his blinker and went around a slower car.

Lacy typed out the message and hit send. An answer came back in less than a minute.

Yes. The Pretty Pint is where they go. I'm waiting down the street to see if they come tonight. They may decide not to since they're wanted.

"They would be smart to lay low, but no one ever said they were smart," Connor said after she read the text aloud.

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“Should we go and watch with him?” She’d had a chance to rest but Connor had only slept a few minutes in the truck while they’d been at the park. The whole day had been spent hiding as much as possible.

He scraped a hand down his face. “I don’t think that’s the best idea. He wants to kill you. Sitting a block away from where he is known to go is like asking for trouble.”

“Or it’s a way to make sure I stay out of trouble because we can watch them be taken away in cuffs. They tried to murder Melinda. Don’t you want to see them caught?”

“Of course I do, but how can I protect you? Isn’t that why you asked me to come?” His exasperation came through loud and clear.

“Yes. I guess I trust you. Without reservations. I know I’ll be okay when I’m with you.”

He shook his head. “I wish I had that sort of confidence.” He looked over at her. “Let me check in at the hotel. We’ll get settled. Then, we’ll text Randy and see how he’s doing. If he doesn’t think he needs us, we’re not going.”

“And if he does?” Not that she expected him to, but she wanted to see this end.

“Then I guess we’ll go and help if we can. The police would’ve checked their addresses. They won’t be at home. They’d be really foolish to go to their normal hangouts.”

Targets in sight! I’m calling the police.

Lacy squealed even as another text came through. He had to be using text to speech.

They saw me. I'm on the run.

Connor hit the gas pedal and exited at the nearest ramp. He quickly turned down the street, then entered back on the highway retuning to town. Randy had risked his job and getting fined to help Lacy and that meant Connor wasn't going to let him face danger alone.

"Tell him to drop a pin on his location if he can." Connor pushed the truck a little faster.

Lacy pressed in the text, her keystrokes more rapid than he could usually manage. His mind whirled with different thoughts about what they could do to help. Honestly, if he was in a chase, they might not be able to do much besides call the police and pray.

"He's near the hospital," Lacy looked at the map on the screen.

Connor barely caught enough of it to know what she was looking at.

"What is he doing there?" Why would he be leading them right to Melinda's door?

"I don't know. He's running from them so he can't really answer me." He heard Lacy tapping her boot on the floor.

Within minutes, they were back at the hospital, driving around to find Randy. "What does he drive again?" Connor tried to remember what the car looked like as he searched down streets as far as he could. That late at night he couldn't tell much past a half a block away.

"He drives an old white Oldsmobile." She rolled down her window and stuck her

head out a little.

“I didn’t even know there were any of those still on the road. What are you doing?”
He wanted to find out before telling her to roll it back up so Tod didn’t see her.

“If they’re chasing Randy, we might hear something like revving engines or squealing tires. I thought that might be easier than driving around the neighborhood.”

A screech at the end of the street surprised her and she pressed the button to put the window back up. Thankfully, the inside of the pickup was dark and there was no way for anyone to know who they were.

A moment later, a car drove by them and Tod looked straight at her. Realization dawned on his face, and he pointed at her.

Connor pounded the steering wheel. “This is exactly why I didn’t want to come help. Call the police, tell them he’s here and he’s after you.” Connor abruptly spun the wheel and turned the truck away from the hospital.

If they were already in danger, he’d lead Tod away from Melinda. It was after hours, but that only meant Tod would have to try harder to get to her. It wouldn’t be impossible.

A car turned down the street after him and pulled up behind him, revving the engine. Lacy talked to the dispatcher, trying to tell them where the truck was headed. Unfortunately, she didn’t know the area well and he couldn’t help while he drove. He glanced both ways at every cross street, trying to remember how to get to the park. They could lose him in the snarl of businesses.

Tod tried to pass them even though they were on a city street and Connor had to speed up to avoid letting him get alongside.

“Lacy, duck down. I don’t want him to be able to see you. If he’s already going to jail, he has nothing to lose.”

She unbuckled and lowered to the floor of the cab, ducking her head down. At the next cross street, he yanked the wheel and turned his tires screaming in protest.

“Where is Randy? What did they do to him?” Lacy yelled.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him anywhere. He said in his text that he saw them, so maybe Cal went after him?” He didn’t know and didn’t have time to think further than that. Tod must have made a U-turn and followed them. He was behind by a few blocks, but still coming.

“Where are the police?” Lacy held tight to the seat as he turned again.

“I don’t know. Since I have to keep driving, they probably can’t find us.” She’d been talking to the dispatcher, but something had happened to his phone, and he’d missed it, probably when he’d had to act quickly.

A car yanked out in front of them and hit their brakes, forcing Connor to slam on his or rearend them. It left no space between him and the car. Tod stopped right against Connor’s bumper, trapping them.

“Stay down there.” He held his hand to her shoulder, not that she was trying to rise.

Tod came to Connor’s window and motioned for him to lower it. All the possibilities for what could happened went through his head. Was it better to leave it up and risk glass flying into the cab? His window wasn’t going to stop a bullet either way. He rolled it down two inches.

“You two have messed around. Now you’re going to find out.” He pulled his weapon from the waistband of his pants.

Connor was painfully aware that his was still locked under his seat. Lacy reached between his ankles, holding herself steady with one of his boots and staying in the dark. He felt her tug the lockbox free. Unfortunately, the key was on his key ring, and he couldn't hand it to her without Tod seeing him.

"Turn off your engine and step out of the car." Tod waved his gun for Connor to step out.

Lacy quickly pulled back to her side with the box. He took the keys from the ignition and laid them on the seat with the lockbox key pointing at her. He held up his hands as a show. He wasn't going to make any rash moves.

"Where is she? I saw her in the truck with you." Tod yanked the door open.

Connor shifted his body, protecting her from Tod's view. Tod pointed his gun at her. "Get out of the truck."

She climbed over the seat and out the driver's side following Connor. He wasn't sure what they planned, but they'd been fairly brazen up until now. He wouldn't put it past them to just shoot Connor and Lacy and leave them in the street.

"Why did you kill Melinda's aunt?" Lacy asked, huddling closer to Connor but keeping her hands up.

Tod laughed. "Melinda had contacted her against my wishes and told the old woman that she was scared for her life. That woman told Melinda she could come and stay there until they could find a way to move back home. I had to stop that. Melinda is my key out of this place and into the bigtime."

"Shut up," Cal lumbered up to them from the front car. "Randy is busy. He'll be busy for a long time." Cal snickered.

Connor felt Lacy tremble next to him. The realization hit him that this was partially his own fault. If he'd left earlier with Lacy, they wouldn't be in this position. He'd wanted to avoid Wayside because of the possibility that Lacy could get caught. Yet here she was, caught and risking her life.

"But why? How? She has no money. I don't understand how this all fits." Lacy kept her voice quiet, non-threatening. Was she hoping the police would find them in the street? It was a good enough plan, if it worked.

Tod snickered. "Insurance on her and insurance on the hotel. The end game had been that she would be the only victim in a hotel fire that would pay out over ten million in insurance between the two."

"Shut your mouth," Cal repeated. "Why does she need to know anything?"

"What does it matter? She'll be dead soon anyway."

Connor's mind whirled to life. "You realize that by killing us, you'll make sure you go to prison for a long time, right? As of now, you're only facing attempted murder. There's a big difference between attempted murder and first degree . . ." Connor hoped that talking sense would make these two think a little bit about what they would face.

"That would mean we'd have to get caught." Tod laughed. "I don't plan to." He cocked his pistol. "Lean against your truck, hands behind your head."

Lacy let out the softest whimper. He wished he knew if she'd had a chance to get his weapon. He wished he was in control. He had to trust her. She had it in her to defend them, but he didn't know her plan.

"You too. Against the truck." He waved the pistol again.

Lacy took that instant, while the barrel of the gun was pointed away from both of them, to draw her gun from her holster and his from her pocket. “Freeze.” She aimed at Tod since he was closest to them.

Cal took off jogging toward his car. Since he hadn’t pulled a weapon, there wasn’t anything they could do about him. Connor willed her to keep an eye on Tod as he took his gun from her. He’d watch what Cal was up to.

Tod didn’t lower his weapon. “This is interesting. Wonder who is the quicker shot?”

Lacy took aim at him. “I’ve been shooting since I was nine years old. That means I have a PhD worth of life experience.”

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A police car with swirling lights pulled onto the street behind Tod's car. He bolted toward it. Connor jumped for him, catching him at the waist and pulling him to the ground. He was done letting this guy have the upper hand.

With one well-placed and incredibly satisfying punch to the face, Tod was finally subdued. He lay on the ground as the police cars pulled to a stop, blocking the street. Men and women officers poured from the cars and took control of the situation.

Cal hadn't even made it a block before he was pulled over. Connor answered the questions the police had for him, but all he cared about was making sure Lacy was alright. He watched as they loaded Tod in the back of a patrol car. Lacy had been right, it was satisfying to watch, knowing he wasn't getting out anytime soon.

Lacy finally came over and holstered her pistol. "They asked me questions about it, but since I didn't have to shoot, they let me go."

He shoved his own gun into its holster and pulled her close. He'd pictured her on the ground with a bullet hole and that irrational thought wasn't going to go away soon. "I can admit when I'm wrong. I'll take you home tomorrow and we'll deal with Viceroy head on if we have to. It's better to lead from a position of knowledge than to run headlong into danger without knowing anything."

She nodded her agreement. "Randy will have to follow along later. He was locked in a yard with a dog known to be a fighter. The police won't tell me how he is, just that he will make it and what happened is nothing short of a miracle."

"We like miracles." He kissed her forehead, letting the short hairs on her hairline

tickle his face.

“So, I get to go home.” Lacy sighed. “I am so ready to never leave again.” She laughed. “Traveling isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

He laughed. “You wonder why ranchers never go on vacation? That’s why.” He loved that she could find humor so quickly after such a horrible situation.

“Somehow, I doubt this is what ranchers expect when they leave the homestead.” She threaded her fingers through his and headed for his truck.

“Maybe, but who wants to take chances?”

“Not me. I’ve never had a greater desire to sleep in my own bed.”

She slowed her steps. “Things will be different once we get home. I’m worried we’ll go back to being just how we were before.”

He opened his door for her and waited while she climbed across the seat, then climbed in after her. “I know what you mean. Everyone at home expects us to be a certain way and they’ll notice immediately if we aren’t. How do you feel about keeping this to ourselves until we can come to an agreement on where this might lead?” He still wasn’t sure if she ever wanted to be married to him again.

“I like that plan. Secrets aren’t good. In this case, we need to figure this out on our own before we let anyone else decide our future for us.”

Chapter Seventeen

The following morning, Connor checked his phone and saw Randy had sent him a text. He hadn’t expected to hear from him though Lacy had said his situation was

miraculous. He threw the covers off the bed and glanced at the other queen bed in the room. Lacy slept deeply, curled around a few pillows. He wanted to let her sleep as much as possible, especially because Melinda wouldn't be released until the afternoon and the drive home would be long.

He slid open the sliding door and stepped outside onto the narrow patio. It was just wide enough to fit a chair in the corner. If it had been sitting facing directly out, there wouldn't have been room for his knees. He lowered himself into the seat and pressed Randy's number to call him.

"Morning." Randy sounded groggy but answered right away.

"Morning. Want to talk about it?" Connor asked.

"If I was the believing sort, I'd say it was a miracle."

"You're not?" He hadn't suspected that but a lot of people in their twenties seemed to go through a period of exploration where they decided what they really believed or didn't.

"No, at least I wasn't. Not sure what I believe now. Cal shoved me into a back yard with a growling dog. It was huge. I couldn't even tell you what kind it was, but it was angry. It knew I wasn't supposed to be there, and it went for my face."

"I'm not usually afraid of dogs, but I've got to admit that would be terrifying."

"Yeah, but here's the part I can't explain. The dog wasn't chained, but he couldn't reach me. He was clapping his jaws together so hard that I could hear his jaws snap. I could feel his damp breath hit my face. I'm lucky Cal ran off to go help Tod. If he'd known I wasn't being eaten alive, he'd probably have shot me. He threatened to, but didn't want to go to jail for the crime. He figured this would look like I was trying to

break into the house and got what I deserved.”

Connor couldn't explain the miracle any more than Randy could. “Well, praise God. Are you in the hospital?” He'd thought that's what Lacy said, but the last few days were starting to blur in his mind.

“I went there last night to get checked out. Other than a cut from the fence, I'm fine. The dog never bit me. Thankfully. What happened with you?”

He told Randy about racing away from the brothers and almost getting shot, then having the police arrive at the last minute. He hoped going home was a lot calmer than the trip to New Mexico had been.

Randy went quiet for a few seconds. “So, do you have room at that ranch for one more? I'm good in hospitality. I promise, I won't start any sprinklers without motivation.” He laughed.

They had hired temporary cleaning staff while he'd been in the hospital almost a year ago, since Lacy had stayed with him. That job had bothered him all this time because he didn't personally know the pair who did it. Then again, Randy was used to front desk work, not cleaning.

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“What do you know? What are your strengths?”

“I’m good at coding and problem solving. My biggest strength though, is that I’m willing to learn. I don’t know the first thing about horses, but if you want me to learn something, I will.”

“I like your attitude.” Honestly, that was practically priceless. Finding someone willing to do a job from the start was a rare commodity. “I don’t know yet what we’ll find for you to do, but I know you help when you feel it’s important and that’s exactly the kind of people I want at Wayside.”

“Great. Are you leaving today?” Randy’s deadpan confused him for a minute, but he realized Randy probably didn’t allow himself to get excited. Having the father he did probably meant he’d been disappointed in the past and no longer got his hopes up.

“Yes, this afternoon. We’ll have to caravan because Lacy has her car here and I’ve got my pickup.”

“And I’ve got my car, too. Though I’m going to start filling it soon. I don’t have much, but I don’t plan to come back.”

“You’re an adult. It’s your choice where you want to live. I’ll give you a call when we’re ready to pick up Melinda.”

“Sounds good. Talk to you soon.” Randy hung up.

“How is he?” Lacy asked from the doorway.

He hadn't heard her slide the door open. "Good. He's coming with us."

She nodded with a soft smile. "I'm happy."

The word happy made him think of Christmas. "Do you realize it will be Christmas Eve in three days?" The last 48 hours had been so full, it felt like the holiday had come and gone already.

She looked at her watch. "Wow, I totally lost track of days, times, everything. When we get back, the tree will be up, and Victoria will be making her famous pudding."

He grinned. That chocolate desert was fantastic Christmas Eve night, but she always took whatever was left and froze it into a graham cracker crust with whipped topping, then froze it as a pie. That might be even better. "Can't wait."

She hid a yawn behind the back of her hand. "I think it will take me three days to catch up on sleep. Hopefully, I'll be able to concentrate on the drive."

He'd keep an eye on her. "I plan to keep in a line all the way back. You'll be in the middle. Just follow me and you'll be fine."

She grinned and turned around, leaning against the railing. "I'm sure Melinda will be tired, so I'll turn on my music and focus the whole ride."

"What will you focus on?" He was curious what kept her interest when she wanted to stay awake.

"Lots of things, but mostly the new year. I've got a few things I want to see happen and they'll take work."

He stood and came up to her. "Like?"

Her face tipped up to look him in the eye. “Like figuring out what you and I might look like if we became again.”

“I hoped that was on your resolution list. I promise, this will be one that we don’t give up on by the end of January.”

“I don’t know . . . I’m pretty good at giving up on all things that I vow to do, even if they’re good for me.” She grinned.

“Are you saying I’m good for you?” He slipped his hands behind her back.

“That remains to be seen, but I think there’s a pretty good chance.”

He leaned in closer, intending to whisper in her ear when she leaned in and kissed him, taking him by surprise. He gripped the railing with one hand and pulled her close with the other. Having her there, with him, felt perfect. He hadn’t felt this whole or this alive in years. She really was his better half, and it had been missing for too long.

She pulled back and put her finger to his lips. “We’ll have to save that for later.”

He playfully bit her finger. “Maybe I don’t want to wait. We don’t have to check out for an hour.”

Lacy rested her hands against his chest. She had to feel his heart racing like he’d just run a marathon, but her voice remained calm, soothing. “I know we’ve been married before, but we aren’t now. I want our first time together again to be as special as it was the first time. So . . .”

She didn’t need to finish explaining to him what she wanted. He agreed with his mind and soul, but his heart was having a temper tantrum. This wasn’t completely new

territory. Then again, it was in some ways. “I agree.” He kissed her forehead.

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“You do?” Her eyes widened. “I thought I’d have to convince you. Especially since you’ve called me your wife twice this week.”

He shook his head, hoping to convey how much her opinion meant to him. “While I agree, a piece of paper doesn’t make you family, it does mean an awful lot. Especially when it means something to you.”

While some would say his actions showed her he cared, he wanted her to know he was more than a protector who’d show up and flex his muscles. He was there for her in every way, especially emotionally. She might even need to know that the most.

Lacy helped Melinda into her car and waited for her to get comfortable and buckled in. She’d have to use the drive -thru at the pharmacy to get the medications Melinda would need in the next few weeks to combat pain, but the doctor had been sure that rest was the best medicine, especially for her headaches.

Even knowing Tod and his brother were in jail, Lacy kept on high alert. In a small town like this one, he might have friends willing to do something to stop her for him. After transferring her bags from the back of Connor’s truck to the trunk of her car, she finally settled in behind the wheel, only feeling safe once the doors were locked.

“I never dreamed I’d be alive to leave town,” Melinda mumbled as she stared out the passenger window. “I really thought my life was over. I’d happened upon a video online that showed how to permanently delete phone calls from your log. I knew he had threatened my aunt, but I figured he would never recognize your number, even if he found it. I could claim it was a mistake.” She slowly shook her head and heaved a deep sigh. “I’m sorry for all this.”

Regret was one thing Lacy wanted to avoid. “Don’t. Not for one second. I’d do all of this three times over if it meant you got out of that situation. You didn’t deserve to be there. I know, you’re going to convince yourself over the next few weeks that it wasn’t really that bad. He didn’t do all those things. You weren’t really in danger. Our minds like to convince us that we’re over-reacting. I’m here to remind you that you aren’t. You are a survivor, and you are worth every second of effort to get you out.”

Melinda flashed an embarrassed smile. “Thanks. I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“And you won’t for a long time. Encouragement will make you uncomfortable because you’re used to being put down. You’ve come to accept nothing more than the minimum. There’s more to life than that.”

One thing she needed to know was how Tod had gotten into the house. “Melinda, you don’t have to answer this, but at the rental, there was no forced entry. How did Tod get in? What happened?”

Melinda swallowed so hard Lacy heard it. “He told me he was sorry, just like he always does. He told me he’d never hit me again if I just came back. He was so quiet, so contrite, so believable. I wanted to trust him. I keep believing that my life won’t be wasted if he changes. So, I opened the door, and then he hit me over the head. I’m so sorry, Lacy.” Melinda hung her head.

“You don’t have to apologize. You’ve lived on hope for a long time. Hope, then disappointment.” She pulled out onto the road behind Connor and Randy followed her in their little caravan toward home. While she hadn’t planned when she left to return with more people, the willingness to help others made those in need attracted to the cause, whether they fit or not. Wayside and the people there would always want to help people, meaning those in need would gravitate toward Connor and those

around him.

After days of watching behind her back, the road ahead seemed a little too open. Connor had been at her side for only a few days but having him in the truck ahead felt too far away.

“You mind if I turn on the radio and rest?” Melinda said as she dug her medication out of the stapled bag from the pharmacy.

“Of course. Rest if you need. There’s a long road ahead of us. We will either stop along the way or get back to Wayside early in the morning.”

Part of her hoped to push through the night so she could get home to all that was normal. Odd how the terrible stories from the survivors there were welcome compared to what she’d been through. Even being caught by one of Viceroy’s wives hadn’t been as terrifying as being on the run from a killer.

The sun dipped over the horizon to her left as they headed straight north. Random, widely spaced houses gave way to nothing but long stretches of land. While concentrating on the road, she couldn’t tell if it was privately owned or if they were traveling through some type of preservation area. All that was apparent was they were alone on a long section of highway.

Headlights appeared in the distance far behind Randy’s vehicle. While they could simply be another driver, her thoughts refused to ignore them. They seemed to be traveling fast, as they closed the distance quickly.

Their little caravan hung close together. If the person wanted to pass there were no other drivers coming, but they hung in behind Randy like they either couldn’t pass or wanted to stay with the group.

Lacy's phone rang and she grabbed it, wanting to keep the car quiet for Melinda. "Hello," she muttered, keeping her voice low.

"Hey. We have company. I just talked to Randy, and he said it's Cal in a different car. We both know this isn't about money anymore, it's personal. We stopped his brother and had him arrested. They must not have had enough evidence to hold Cal. Knowing there aren't any large towns between here and home, we're going to keep driving. Unless he starts some road rage, we're safest keeping on the road in our vehicles. When we get close to Wayside, I'll let them know if he's still tailing us. My hope is that he sees we aren't threatened and backs off when we cross the state line. Federal crimes carry a lot more weight than state."

Connor was right, of course, but that didn't make her mind feel any better about the fact that a man who wanted them either dead or hurt was following them closely. "Okay. Let me know if the plans change. I have my caffeine at my fingertips and Melinda is asleep."

"Good. Let her rest. She'll be worried enough if she wakes up and sees a car back there."

Lacy hung up and glanced in her rearview. Randy was now hanging very close to her as they drove, preventing Cal from passing him to get to her. If he tried, he may try to shove her off the road. Defensive driving was hard enough to do in the daylight but at night, while tired? She prayed for God to protect them and to keep Cal away. He'd seemed like the one of the two brothers who was less likely to want to personally do anything, but if he was following them, that couldn't be the case.

She slowly sped up to get closer to Connor, allowing Randy to adjust his speed and do the same. While Connor was right, there were no large towns on the way where they could find safety in numbers, there were small towns. Within those, they would have to slow down and possibly even stop. Would Cal use that as his opportunity?

She glanced over to Melinda whose chin lay against her shoulder in a terribly uncomfortable looking position. She was probably so groggy that she wouldn't notice later. She had bandages up both arms and various healing wounds and bruises were visible on her face and neck. Over the years she'd been married, she'd toughened herself. She had a will to survive, which was why she was here. There was no way she'd let Melinda be caught or hurt again.

Her thoughts tumbled around in her head. She needed to stay within the safe bubble of Connor and Randy, but a rebellious part of her wanted to pass Connor and speed for home. Run. As fast as she could. If she got pulled over by police, all the better. She could tell an officer why she had to run. Lord! Help me decide what I should do. Is this Your Spirit, prodding me to do something I feel like I shouldn't to avoid harm or is this doubt? Help me decide.

Instantly, she felt the tension in her foot release. She'd been ready to press the gas pedal and go, but if she was to relax, then God had this. He didn't need her to do anything more than what she was already doing.

A small town loomed in the distance. It was only the soft glow of a bunch of security and street lights delineating a segment of humanity was asleep ahead. Connor kept heading right for the town as they passed a sign on the side of the road saying they'd entered Colorado.

They wouldn't have to stop for gas anytime soon, since they'd all filled up before leaving New Mexico but any stop was dangerous. The closer they came to the town the more tension rose in her stomach. She vaguely remembered going through this area on her way and getting stuck at a hanging stoplight that they didn't turn to flashing red at night like many small towns did. Unless Connor planned it just right, one or more of them would have to stop, possibly separating them and worse, giving Cal time to do something.

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She knew to blow through the stoplight if she had to, but would Randy know to do that? He'd never been faced with a situation like this before. Connor adjusted his speed as they crossed the city limits, slowing to about fifteen miles per hour.

Lacy trusted him to think ahead. While she only had to worry about Melinda and doing what would keep them safe, he had all three vehicles to consider. The light ahead was still red with about a block to go. No cars waited in front of the light, nor on the cross streets.

The moment it turned green, Connor sped up to go through it. Lacy concentrated on his speed and let Randy do his own thing. She followed him, accelerating quickly. From behind, a shot tore through both of her windows, and she screamed as she swerved off the road and onto the sidewalk.

Chapter Eighteen

Connor cranked the wheel to turn off the road then flung the door open the moment the truck came to a stop. Randy revved his engine and kept driving. Cal drove alongside him, preventing Cal from shooting at Connor as they raced through town. Once he realized Melinda was in Lacy's car, he would most likely turn back.

Lacy opened her door and stumbled from her car as she ran around to the other side. A cold doused his whole body. Had Melinda been shot when the bullet had gone through the windows? When he blinked, he could still see the glass instantly web in the dim light of the streetlights.

Lacy got to Melinda's door faster and opened it wide. Melinda's body fell

haphazardly to the side. He picked up the pace to help her. She shook Melinda's shoulder and called for her to wake up.

He reached her side and helped support Melinda. "What happened?"

"He shot the windows out. He didn't hit either of us, but I want to get us out of the street before he comes back. Melinda took one of her pain pills about forty-five minutes ago, so she's out," Lacy stated quickly, still trying to wake Melinda.

He gently moved Lacy out of the way. "Get the bags from the trunk. I'll move her to my truck. We'll need to follow and make sure Randy is alright." He unbuckled her seatbelt as he spoke.

Lacy opened the trunk with her key fob and lugged the two bags out of the back. She had them stored in the bed of his pickup before he could get Melinda moved. Lacy climbed in so she would be in the middle and he set Melinda in. Lacy held her steady so he could buckle her and didn't drop her into the street.

"I wonder if she's sensitive to whatever they prescribed? She seems to be even more sleepy than I would expect." He closed the door before Lacy could respond, not that he needed an answer to his question.

He ran back over to Lacy's car and climbed behind the wheel. Easing the car back into the street, he parked it. Thankfully, nothing was damaged except the windshield and rear glass. She hadn't hit the building when she'd driven onto the sidewalk.

After locking the car, he ran back to his truck and headed in the direction Randy had gone. "Any word from him?" He glanced over to Lacy.

She shook her head. "No, nothing. Then again, if he's racing away, he may not be able to call."

“Help me watch for lights. I wouldn’t put it past him to drive Randy into the ditch.” With as dark as it was, he hoped any shred of light would stand out like a beacon, but he couldn’t see anything as they reached the outskirts of the small town.

Lacy dug her phone out and held it in her hand. If he wasn’t driving, he’d keep his close by too. He accelerated feeling like he had to find Randy fast. As the miles passed, his gut twisted. Where was Randy? Had he turned off onto another road? Had he been injured? The only promising thing was that they hadn’t seen a car left behind.

He squinted into the distance but all that appeared was another small town.

“My gut says we should avoid that. Slowing down is a bad idea,” Lacy muttered quietly at his side.

“I know, but if we go around it, we might miss seeing his car. What if he was able to get away and is waiting for us in that town? If we skirt around it and change the route we’d planned, we might make Randy face more danger.” Though he agreed with her. Slowing down for town was a recipe for disaster.

As they neared the little city, Lacy reached over and verified the doors were locked. She then checked Melinda’s seat belt.

“Is everything secure?” He knew it was, but having her repeat it would calm both of them.

“Yes.” Her head swung slowly from left to right as she looked intently down the streets while he drove.

“Look there!” She pointed at an all-night gas station. There, waiting in front, was Randy’s car.

Connor flipped on his blinker and turned in. There were no other cars at the pumps or in the lot. He took the spot right in front of the door and killed the engine. “Wait here. Keep the doors locked. I don’t know what’s going on, but better safe than sorry.” He touched the holstered to his side to remind her to use hers if she needed to.

Lacy nodded and mimicked his action to agree. “I’ll be here.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Good. I wouldn’t want it any other way.” Carefully, he opened the door and headed inside the gas station.

Randy sat on a stool near the counter. A food warmer sat next to him with slices of pizza circling in a glow. The scent made his stomach grumble. “Randy?”

He looked up from his energy drink and grinned. “I knew you’d see my car. After what you said about Wayside, I didn’t want to be driving in there without you.”

“What happened to Cal?” If he was anywhere nearby, they needed to rush away.

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“I’m not sure. I turned on the map on my phone and decided to take a few detours. At one point, I turned off my lights so he wouldn’t see where I went.” Randy shrugged. “Every time I turned, my map app would reroute me, so I was never far away from where I needed to be.”

“It’s always a good idea to stay close to the plan.” He took a deep breath. “You ready to get back on the road?”

He nodded with a grin. “Thanks, man.” He reached over the counter and gripped the clerk’s hand.

The attendant waved. “No problem. Safe travels.”

Connor headed back outside, still aware that Cal could be anywhere. If he had map software on his phone, then he could find his way back to the highway. Now might be a good time to change the route, since they were all together again.

He headed for his truck and Randy followed. The moment he opened his door, he noticed that Lacy looked really tired. After the adrenaline rush of being shot off the road, she was probably ready for sleep. He opened his map software and looked for the nearest hotel.

“Unfortunately, if we decide to stay the night somewhere, or what’s left of the night, we have to drive about twenty miles out of our way. We’d be forced to take the highway back to Cheyenne, then west to Wayside.”

“Looks like they could both use a comfortable bed. As long as Cal doesn’t catch back

up with us, I'm fine with whichever way you want to go," Randy answered.

The only risk was that he'd wanted to avoid Cheyenne. Chances were good that if Viceroy was anywhere, that's where he'd choose to be. That was where he had multiple comfortable places to hide. That was where he'd kept Scarlet when she'd been his personal attendant. Going through Cheyenne held more risk.

He waited for the Lord to give him direction. When he didn't feel fear override his desire to rest, he told Randy to head for Colorado, and he went to his own car. Before getting into his truck, he called into the insurance company and left a message about Lacy's vehicle and where it was. He knew he'd forget to call in the morning if he waited.

Back on the road, he watched for anything out of the ordinary. While the dark was a great time to hide for some things, being the only vehicles on the road made them easy to spot. With only a few hours left until they would enter Wyoming, they pulled into the parking lot to check in for the rest of the night.

At least there were no vehicles in the lot that looked like they belonged to Cal. Maybe he'd actually get a couple hours of shut eye. He gently shook Lacy awake and she startled. After blinking a few times, she seemed to realize what was going on and asked no questions. Lacy shook Melinda slightly and this time, Melinda woke.

Bone-tired, they all headed inside. Connor's phone buzzed and he groaned, knowing whatever was on it, would be bad news.

Something thwacked Lacy in the head, jolting her awake. The room was strange, and she couldn't remember entering it or how she got there. Fear prickled over her skin. Melinda thrashed around next to her.

"Help, get me out of here," she muttered in her sleep as she tried to untangle herself

from the blankets.

Lacy took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. She was safe, at least for now. They were in a hotel roomsomewhere in Colorado. Hopefully, they were close to the border, within a few hours of home.

Lacy helped untangle Melinda and that immediately calmed her. She fell back to sleep with a deep sigh and made no more noise.

“I wonder how long it’s been since she had a good night’s sleep?” Connor’s voice rumbled from a few feet away.

Lacy turned around to find him watching her. Randy was facing the other direction on the other side of the bed with Connor. They clearly weren’t comfortable with the arrangement, but it was the only suitable one if they wanted to only pay for one room and be as safe as possible.

“I’m not sure. When are we heading back on the road?” She glanced at her watch and found it was already nine in the morning.

“In about an hour. We didn’t roll in here until about three, and I wanted to give everyone plenty of time to sleep. As long as Cal didn’t drive by here, he shouldn’t have any idea where we went. My hope is he turned around and drove home.”

Randy stirred and rolled onto his back. “Morning. I was planning on calling my old man before we leave and ask him if he could call Cal and see if he answers. He used that trick on me, so it seems only fair that I use it on him. He seems to think everyone is too stupid to figure out what’s going on so he might tell my dad where he is.”

“As long as you don’t tell your dad where you are. He seems more than willing to help Cal find you.” Lacy crossed her arms and stifled a yawn.

“Yeah, I hadn’t planned to let him know where I am, and I removed the app that tracks me yesterday morning.”

Lacy unzipped her travel bag and dug through what was in there. She’d lugged her bag along this whole time and most of her clothes had gone unused. At least today she could take a shower safely and put on something fresh for the arrival home.

“I’m going to make use of the shower while all of you are still waking up.” She lifted the one clean pair of clothes she had out of the bag and headed for the bathroom.

She wasn’t a nervous sort of person but knowing someone had broken into the house where she was staying, kidnapped her friend, and wrote on the mirror in the room where she was showering, made her distrust the standard safety measures in the bathroom.

After locking the door, she rolled up a towel and shoved it in the crack under the door. No one was going to fish a wire through there to open the locked knob from the other side. She turned on the water and waited until it was so hot steam rolled from the shower toward the vent fan.

She caught her reflection in the mirror. The bags under her eyes gave her the most pause. How could Connor be attracted to someone who was clearly aging? She didn’t like the wrinkles forming by her eyes and how her hair seemed to be changing as she aged. She wasn’t old, but she certainly wasn’t young anymore either.

Closing her eyes, she climbed into the shower and listened for any sounds outside the bathroom. She hoped once she was home, all the worry and stress would fall off her shoulders. When the police had caught Tod, she’d been sure there was nothing else she needed to worry about.

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A noise from outside the bathroom that sounded a little like a muffled cry made her hurry to rinse off, towel dry, and find out what was going on. The moment she opened the bathroom door, she heard Melinda crying softly.

“What happened?” Lacy asked as she stepped back into the room.

“I got a text when we arrived here at about three in the morning. Tod posted bond and immediately skipped town. There’s no way he could find us where we are,” Connor said.

Melinda looked up and swiped under her eyes. “I know that, but he knows Piper’s Ridge. That’s where he met me. Don’t you think that’s the first place he would go to look?”

Lacy sat on the bed next to Melinda. “We need to take away his power. If we can find out what company holds the life insurance policy on you, we can cancel it.”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t think that would help. The payout was a bonus, but he loves the manipulation. He loves feeling smarter than the police. What started as a get rich scheme has turned into a mental game for him. He always has to be the best, smartest, strongest, most . . . whatever you can think of, in the room. And this is the ultimate game.”

Lacy’s stomach heaved and she was glad she hadn’t eaten in a long time. “That’s twisted and I know twisted.”

Melinda nodded and sniffled. “I can’t imagine why they would let him go. He tried to

kill me. Why would they do that and how did he get the money? I don't understand."

"I don't know, but I know we'll be safe once we reach Wayside. It's protected and secure." Though not as much as it had once been when there were security gates and perimeter fences around everything.

"I trust you. It's just that every time I believe something is going to go right, I'm reminded that nothing ever does for me. It hasn't for years. I'm forgotten." She looked away. "I'll be quick, but I need a shower too."

Lacy worked on drying her hair as Melinda headed into the bathroom. Connor had already moved to the desk and was on his phone, looking something up. She headed over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder to let him know she was there.

"What are you doing?"

He moved the map around with his thumb, looking around the area. She could see the pin on the location where they were.

"I'm trying to figure out if the route would be better to go back where we were, then take the backroads north like I'd originally planned or if we should take the highway through Cheyenne. There are risks to both."

She nodded, understanding exactly what he meant and knowing the safety of all of them fell on his shoulders. "Thank you again for coming."

He glanced up at her and snorted. "Like I'd just leave you to deal with a situation if you asked me to help. That's not happening."

The truth of the statement washed over her. He wasn't leaving. Not again. He wouldn't choose to walk away this time. Had he even realized he'd answered her

prayers so casually? Almost as if she should know better than think otherwise.

“Good to hear.” She leaned over to look at the tiny map on his phone. “So, we’re trying to avoid Cheyenne.”

“Viceroy is still missing. Police are searching but according to the text I got from Brendon while you were in the shower, he still hasn’t been caught. Part of me wonders if he’s in Wisconsin with Ramona, but those two seemed like they were fighting more than anything last time we knew they were together.”

“And now that her son is gone, she has no reason to stay with Viceroy.” Not to mention, he’d treated Ramona terribly, not that Ramona didn’t deserve it. She’d been behind the killing of multiple people in order to save her terminally ill son.

Connor mumbled a noise of agreement. “Which means, he’s most likely in Cheyenne. His other wife is deceased who was from there, but he has a huge network there. Lots of places to hide out.”

“But what are the chances that he would see us? He doesn’t know our vehicles and doesn’t know we were traveling. Cheyenne means highways, faster speeds. We could get home sooner.”

He frowned slightly, then zoomed out. “It would take about ten minutes off the trip. Not really enough to make a decision one way or the other but I’m leaning toward agreeing with you. Viceroy doesn’t know we’ll be coming through town and Cal knows we’re somewhere in the area headed north.”

Melinda came out of the shower looking rosy from the hot water and scrunching her hair in a towel. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

Randy zipped his bag and hefted it onto the bed. “Me too.”

Connor stood and stretched. It took all of Lacy's effort not to step right into his arms. She could use a hug that morning. Soon enough they would be home, and she could get a hug whenever she wanted. For now, she'd have to settle for looking.

Chapter Nineteen

They'd only been on the road for about an hour when Connor's phone buzzed. Lacy pulled it from the nook on the dash where Connor usually tossed it while he was driving and opened it. She immediately clicked the button on the side to make the screen blank.

"Wayside is in trouble. Officer Nixon has been shot. Brendon wants to know how far away we are."

If he hadn't stopped last night, he'd be there already but he'd thought Lacy and Melinda both needed actual rest in a bed, off the road. He swallowed and tried to quickly figure out if he dared go faster. "We're still about two hours from home."

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She opened his phone again and quickly typed out a text for him. He prayed that everyone was alright. Now was not a good time to take a call from Brendon. Here, in the truck, he couldn't be objective with Melinda listening in. She wasn't the same as a Wayside guest, but certain aspects of running the ranch had to be kept from her as much as they were kept from the guests.

"Should we pull over so you can call him and find out what's happening?" Lacy leaned forward in her seat and searched the road ahead.

"I'll wait to see how he answers. He knows I'm on the road and headed there as fast as I can. I wish I knew what 'in trouble' meant. Is Viceroy there? Are they under attack? What is going on?"

"I could call your dad, if you want," she offered.

He glanced at her, then quickly over to Melinda and Lacy nodded her understanding. Melinda had been through enough and her danger wasn't over. Her husband was free, had skipped town, and was probably headed for Piper's Ridge. Plus, the main officer in town would now be in the hospital.

His phone buzzed again, and Lacy read the text then lowered her voice. "Nixon was trying to keep out three cars that descended on Wayside early this morning. He was critically wounded in a shootout. Edwyn and Sam were able to keep the vehicles off the property and the officer working with Nixon was told to bring him in since the ambulance was so far away that it made more sense for the officer to do it." She put the phone back on the dashboard.

“I would imagine if they took him in a squad car instead of calling the Piper’s Ridge Fire Dept., then they thought he would survive the transport. That’s what I’ll believe until I’m told otherwise.” Nixon had become a friend over the years with the help they needed on Wayside. He’d been one of the few people to know what Wayside actually did and he supported the effort.

“Brendon didn’t say whether or not we should use the front entrance or if they were concerned about being stopped. I guess when we get within a half hour of home, we should call and find out what the exact situation is,” Lacy offered.

“I agree with that plan. Things could change quickly there and what would work right now, might not by the time we arrive. We need to let Randy know, though he’ll follow me.”

“Did he call his father?” Melinda asked. “I wasn’t paying attention right before we left.”

“He did. His father said that the news around town was that both of them were gone. The hotel is locked up tight, even though it was supposed to open back up today, and Tod didn’t even go home before he took off. Do they have relatives anywhere?” Connor asked.

“Yes. He has distant family near Piper’s Ridge. He was staying with them the summer we met. They were so nice, so I never thought for a moment to question Tod’s actions. To be completely honest, he wasn’t awful until after we married. Before then, he was a gentleman. I only saw the dents in his armor looking back with 20/20 vision. Being in love can be dangerous. It blinds you to things you would normally notice without hesitation.” She laid her forehead against the window.

“It happens. No one here thinks less of you. No one at Wayside will either,” Lacy said.

“I wish there was a way to know where he is. I would imagine he’ll be heading to Piper’s Ridge. He knows you still have family there even though your aunt is gone.”

“They must not have found any evidence against him in my aunt’s murder.” Melinda’s voice shook. “I will be so angry if they don’t convict him for that. I know he did it. If she hadn’t moved to be closer to me, she’d still be alive. It was worthless. I never got to talk to her anyway. She picked up her life and moved for me and I never even thanked her,” Melinda’s voice trembled.

Connor gripped the steering wheel; glad Lacy was there. He could deal with emotions at work, when he knew what to expect and he’d been trained. When it came to everyday emotions, Lacy was much better equipped.

“She knew, Melinda. You can’t sit in guilt over something you had no control over. Take it to God. That’s all you can do.”

“Without police, am I even safe in Piper’s Ridge?” Melinda turned to look at him. “What if he finds out where I am?”

If they could deal with Viceroy, they could deal with a couple narcissists. “I’m sure we have at least today to get where we need to be and settle in. Tod seems to mostly work with Cal. They were headed in the same direction so they’ll meet, but that will take time. Then, they’ll need to decide what to do. By then, we’ll have you safely behind security.”

His men would deserve a party and time off after Viceroy went to prison. All those who had been asked to testify would do so and get him put away for a long time. Even as he thought about it, he had doubts. When they had been in Cheyenne at a hotel, they’d found out it was known to be used by traffickers and owned by a politician. Viceroy wasn’t the only man they needed to stop but when would it end?

Miles on the road brought them closer to home and the turmoil there. He reached for his phone and called Brendon. After two rings, he answered.

“Connor, how far away are you?”

“About a half hour. What’s the plan?”

Brendon paused for a second and Connor heard him rolling his wheelchair, then closing the door. “So, the front entrance is probably bad. We have it covered right now, but we don’t know how far down the road before it’s blocked. Edwyn and Sam both report that no cars have gone by all morning. Now, we both know that people driving on this road is rare, but not that rare. It’s possible they are stopping traffic on both sides and sending them a different route. I’d bet they’re waiting for us to try and leave.”

“Or for us to come home.” Either way, if they were rerouting traffic one or the other would know someone was coming from Wayside if they came from the opposite direction as other traffic. There would be no other explanation.

“Right, so I propose that Junior will meet you over by the eastern fence where it meets the road. He’ll have one of the ATVs that seat four.”

“We don’t have one that seats five, but we’ll make it work,” Connor said.

“Leave all the bags in the vehicles. We can send someone to get them afterwards. It’s more important to get you onsite than it is for your belongings to get here,” Brendon continued.

“Agreed. I’ll have everyone ready to run to the ATV. Have Junior there when we arrive. Has anyone checked that way to make sure no one is even close to that area?”

“Affirmative. Nadine has been employing drones to check areas that are too far away for us to ride to. She has been our eyes and ears. She can confirm they aren’t near that spot, but she’s afraid to fly her drones down the road to see where the men are. If they shoot it down, it’s expensive to replace.”

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“Understood, though in order to know, I’d buy her another one.” If they were only sitting a quarter mile on either side of the driveway, then he could easily drive to that spot with no worries about being seen. If they were further away, their cars might be seen and detained.

“Last question. When she was checking this out with her drone, did she happen to see any other vehicles drive by that area?”

Brendon was quiet for a split-second. “No, but I’ll pray that it’s only because we’re close to Christmas and everyone is preparing.”

“Call John Willis Sr. He lives down that way. If he was stopped, then we know this isn’t safe.” John was a good friend and would be willing to check out the situation if he didn’t know firsthand.

“Will do. I’ll call you back in a minute.”

Connor hung up and the cab was silent as they drove closer to Wayside. He turned down a dirt road that would take him alongside the ranch in the next ten minutes, but he hadn’t heard from Brendon yet. He glanced at his phone, willing it to ring.

“What do we do? We’re almost there and we can’t risk getting stopped by Viceroy’s men. They’ll recognize both of us,” Lacy’s voice had taken on a frantic tone.

His phone rang and he pulled off the road. Randy pulled in behind him and waited.

“Connor, I just talked to John. The road is open but be cautious. He said when he

tried to come home from the store, he was stopped by a car parked about a quarter mile from our driveway. They made him turn around and go another way. When he told them he lived down that road, they asked him a bunch of questions. It was only when they discovered he wasn't from Wayside that they let him go."

"Okay. We'll be careful. We're about five minutes from the fence line. Is Junior in position?"

"Yes. Praying for your safe return." Brendon hung up.

"Ladies. It's time to pray us in."

Gooseflesh rippled over Lacy's arms as Connor drove them slowly toward a remote area of Wayside, the same area where men had broken through the fence earlier in the year to steal horses. Thankfully, they hadn't been successful, but they'd torn down a section of fence to do it.

Connor slowed his progress even more and inched along the gravel road. She assumed he was trying to keep quiet, but maybe there was some other reason. Now seemed like the worst time to ask. He was clearly concentrating.

He pulled to a stop and drew the key from the ignition. "Junior is waiting just over there. I want you both to go as quickly as possible while I tell Randy. Someone will come back for your bags."

"We heard." Melinda gave a nod and opened her door.

Lacy jumped out of the pickup right behind Melinda and gently closed the door, so it didn't make noise. She ran through the snow over to Junior. The ATV he had was more like an all-terrain golf cart that went fast. Lacy and Melinda pressed in tightly next to Junior and a moment later, Connor and Randy piled into the back seat.

The machine took off, kicking up snow as it sped over the hills toward the lodge. She'd never been so happy to see the glow of the lights from her house, the place she'd called home for so many years.

The last few days had taught her she didn't need to go searching for anything. Everything she'd ever held truly dear, she had at Wayside. Her faith had grown here. Her love for Connor had started here. She was who she was because of what she'd experienced on this ranch.

Melinda held tight to the side of the ATV, the strain on her face made her look years older than she was. It was probably past time to take her medication, but they hadn't stopped to eat, and she hadn't wanted to take it on an empty stomach. Now, she would need to rest. Hopefully, they could get into the lodge and find somewhere for her to stay until she was healed.

Junior pulled the machine to a stop right in front of the porch. Connor got out first, then helped Melinda get down. He handed her hand off to Randy who assisted her up the stairs. Teddy opened the front door and limped out, immediately pulling Connor into a hug. Then, the moment he freed Connor, he tugged Lacy into the tightest hug she'd ever had.

"I was worried about both of you. I know you're adults and I'm not supposed to worry, but I did. In fact, I think worry is one of the hardest things to give to God as a parent." He led all of them inside and closed the door.

A huge tree stood in the living room, beautifully decorated and lit. Lacy wanted to take a minute and enjoy arriving home, but there wasn't time for that. They were basically under siege. Brendon rolled out from his office and joined them.

"Glad to have you back. I've been trying to get a hold of anyone on the police force to come help us, but no one is answering. I'm going to have to call Cheyenne, but I

know they won't want to come out here. Until they do, we're stuck."

"How long have Edwyn and Sam been out there?" Connor asked.

Teddy answered. "They've been out there for three hours now. They have a heated ATV, but I'm sure they're cold and tired."

"Send Eric and Cole out to relieve them. Brendon, go ahead and call Cheyenne. See if they can send anyone. They know the issue, Nixon was shot. They must know that by now."

Brendon nodded and headed back for his office. This was part of Wayside she usually didn't see. She wasn't part of security. Her forte was hospitality and comfort. She took care of making sure the guests had everything they needed. She headed for the tree, wanting a few feet of distance between herself and the stress of the situation.

Melinda followed her. "It's beautiful. I asked for a tree the first few years of our marriage. Whenever he learned something was important to me, he'd use it against me. If I wanted a tree, he'd buy a small glass one with lights for the table and tell me it was a gift, that he was thinking of me. It took me years to realize that it wasn't a gift. He was using my emotions against me. If I asked him why he didn't get a Christmas tree, he could hold it against me and say I was picky. Everything that was wrong was my fault, no matter how careful I was."

Lacy knew it would take a long time of talking through all the things Melinda had been through before she felt good enough to understand that she wasn't all those things she'd learned she was when she was with Tod. But she would.

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“While you’re here, I hope you enjoy the tree. There’s one in the dining room too. Want to go see it?” The one in the living room had all the presents under it and that was where everyone would gather on Christmas Eve to have a celebration and open gifts. They’d sing a few songs, and Connor would read Jesus’ birth story from Luke. The continuity of it all made her soul happy.

“Yes, I’d love to.” Melinda grinned.

The smile made the last two days easier. If she could handle the pain of needing her medications and still be joyful about a Christmas tree, Lacy wasn’t going to let this stress get her down.

Lacy headed for the door to the dining room and held it open for Melinda. Her breath caught as she saw the tall tree in the corner. Ferd had done such a beautiful job with the trees. As Lacy brought Melinda over, Victoria, the Wayside chef, came out of the kitchen. “Lacy! It’s so good to have you back. I was worried you wouldn’t make it in time.” She gripped Lacy in a tight hug. “Who do we have here?”

Melinda stepped back a little and ducked her head.

“This is my friend and she’s starving. Do you have any leftovers in that kitchen that you wouldn’t mind parting with?”

“Do I have leftovers?” Victoria laughed. “You know I do. I make big portions around here. Have a seat wherever you want, and I’ll bring something right out.”

Melinda looked at Lacy and her cheeks turned pink. “I’ve never had anyone make me

anything before. At least, not that I didn't pay for."

Lacy laid a hand on her arm. "Think of this as the best way to heal. We'll find you a room, probably here in the lodge temporarily because we won't want to be out and about any more than we have to be with those guys blocking the road. After this, I've had Ferd, Connor's sister, make up a room for you."

Melinda laughed. "I guess I'm safe from Tod as long as they're there."

She hadn't thought about that and wasn't sure that made the situation any better, but she could appreciate a small silver lining. "I'm just praying that both of our troubles are gone before Christmas."

Chapter Twenty

How had it only been a few days since he'd left Wayside? Connor braced his hands against the corners of his desk and bowed his head. Travel wasn't in him. As a kid, the ranch always came first. There wasn't time for a vacation. Now, he only left when he had to, never for fun. He wasn't even sure he knew how to have fun outside of Wayside.

Brendon came through the door and locked the brake on his wheelchair in front of Connor's desk. "I called, but they insist we're outside of their jurisdiction. They said they are risking action against them if they come to help and instructed me to call the local line or the state police, but they are taxed right now looking for Viceroy. When I told them I have been doing that for hours, they had nothing more to offer. I know this is a unique situation, as small towns are, but I'm not sure what to do next."

Connor gave a nod. "I don't know off the top of my head. I hate to call a meeting when Edwyn and Sam were just called back in, and Cole and Eric are out there."

Brendon frowned for a moment. “Yeah, that pretty much leaves you, me, Teddy, and Junior who is headed back to the vehicles to get the bags. He’ll be back shortly. Nadine is in her office and might have some ideas, but she is the first to say she doesn’t want any more action. Behind a computer is where she thrives.”

Connor snorted. “Not taking on any missions of her own from now on, huh?” He was sort of kidding, but she had instigated the mission that had gotten all the Wayside women abducted. To be fair, it was also the mission that got Viceroy arrested, so he couldn’t be too critical.

“She was sorry. That’s all that matters. And I can tell you she is truly sorry. She thought there was some kind of patriarchy going on here that was keeping the women from doing anything because we supposedly thought all women were weak.”

Connor’s brow rose slowly. “Um, we literally see the strength of women every day. They are more resilient than anyone. I protect the women here because I’m a man and that’s what God calls me to do. Not because women are inherently weak, but because they need time to heal.” He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to explain his thoughts to Brendon. The man knew all the reasons they were there.

“I know. I just wanted you to have a little insight into why she led everyone to Viceroy’s house without telling any of us.”

“Except Edwyn. He knew.” And that still bothered him. He’d always been able to trust Edwyn because he was a ‘by the books’ kind of guy. He never tripped or went down the wrong path. Then again, no one was perfect. Which was why he’d been forgiven and hadn’t lost his job. His first mistake shouldn’t be his last and grace in uncontrollable circumstances was pretty much the Wayside motto.

“Yes, he knew. Again, he was trying to keep Nadine from bolting. But we have here and now problems. Not last month’s problems.” Brendon rested both arms on the

armrests of his wheelchair. “So, meeting, or will you and I figure out what needs to happen alone? At some point, those men will get cold or run low on gas. They can’t sit out there without their vehicles running. If we don’t have a police force and we can’t take action, then waiting is one thing we can do.”

Connor hated simply waiting around and seeing what they would do. They’d shot at a cop and trapped an entire ranch of people inside their homes. “What about the feds? These guys shot Nixon. I can’t blame the other officers for wanting to stay by his side instead of rushing into a situation where they are outmanned and outgunned. But the FBI? They could handle the situation.”

Brendon slowly nodded. “True. It’s possible. My worry is that the only place they can ‘fall back’ to, is Wayside. If they are under attack from both sides by the feds, they’ll simply drive right up our driveway and force the FBI to bring their guns up here. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want a shootout in the front yard two days before Christmas. If it can’t be helped, then it can’t be. But that is most likely what will happen.”

“Which means we’d have to get everyone below ground again to avoid bullets. We both know the stress that caused last time we had to use it. Some of our guests would feel trapped, which is better than how they’d feel listening to gunfire, but we have to think of all aspects. Like you said.” Connor released his hold on the desk and folded his hands together in front of him, leaning on the surface because fatigue still weighed him down.

“True but feeling trapped is much easier to deal with than injury from gunfire or the trauma of watching another person be injured or even getting injured themselves. Sometimes, I think that’s harder for our guests to deal with than their own trauma. They can dissociate their own pain, but they can’t with the pain of others.”

Connor took a deep breath. “Then I feel like that’s our only course of action. You

want to make that call?” Brendon was better at that sort of thing than he was. Normally, he’d even ask Lacy to call but at the moment, she was caring for Melinda.

“Sure. I also wanted to let you know that Dee and I have decided to go on a belated honeymoon in the spring. We didn’t want to travel in the winter, but in a few months when the grass comes back and travel is easier, we want to go and see some great sights.”

Connor nodded. This was the perfect opportunity to tell Brendon that he and Lacy had made progress the last few days, but he held back. What if she changed her mind? He knew he would never ask to separate from her ever again, but that didn’t mean Lacy wouldn’t. She’d lived here all this time as his friend, not his wife. Would she find that loving him was too hard and want to return to the way they’d done things for the last decade? Change was never easy.

“I’m glad to be home and glad to know you both are going. You don’t usually agree to travel, so I’m happy.” And he prayed Brendon’s travel ended nothing like the trip he’d just taken.

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“Before you go, Melinda McFarland came home with us. She’s lived in an abusive relationship for many years and shows all the classic symptoms. The reason Lacy went to get her out was that Melinda felt sure her husband was going to try to kill her and make it appear like it was self-defense. He wanted a huge payout from a life insurance policy. He and his brother were somehow going to make it happen in his brother’s hotel so that it burned down in the process and he, too, could get a pay day.”

Brendon’s usually reserved face melded into horror. “With people inside? He was willing to burn down a hotel? Doesn’t he know how dangerous that is? Not to mention trying to kill Melinda.” He released the brake on his chair. “I’m going to call the FBI and file a request for help. We both know they may or may not come. Then, I’m going to check in with Nadine and see how she’s doing.”

Connor nodded, thankful Brendon was there to help him through this. “Thanks. Keep me posted.”

Brendon left the room and Connor sat alone in his office for a moment. Before he could even finish thinking how tired he was, Randy knocked on his door jamb. Connor waved him in.

“Hey,” Randy said. “Sorry to bother you. I know you had to get right back to your job the minute you walked in. Junior just brought all of our bags to the house. Where should I put them?”

Most of the area that was ready for people to actually live within the house was taken. There were beds down in the bunker and it was set up as a living space, but that could soon be taken over by everyone living at Wayside. Though, the men had to have been

able to come from the Homestead, the ranch next door that he'd purchased so his men could live separately from work. If that was the case, then they could leave from there and not be seen, should the need arise. At least he had a plan B if needed.

"For now, ask Junior to show you to the bunker. That's all I have that isn't one of the cabins outside. We'll have to clear those if these guys get too close to the house. You may as well get settled there instead of having to move right away."

"Good plan. Should Melinda do that too?"

Connor gave a nod, glad to have something decided. "Yes, for now, that's the plan. We'll get you both set up with something more permanent when this is in the past." Hopefully soon.

"Sounds good."

As soon as Randy stood, Connor's phone buzzed with a text. He glanced down at it and Nadine's name splashed across his notifications. He opened it up.

Men are on the move. Closing in.

Lacy sat with Melinda as she completely cleaned a heaping plate of spaghetti with a mountain of sauce and meatballs. Thankfully, Melinda didn't apologize for it either. Some women who came to Wayside limited the food they took because they were worried about looking like they were taking too much. She had to tell them Victoria made plenty for everyone and to take what they wanted.

"Ugh, I'm going to put myself in a food coma." Melinda laughed. "At least I know I won't get a stomachache from the medication." She yawned.

The reminder made her think about what Connor had speculated in the car. "Did the

doctor say what kind of side-effects the medication would have? You were pretty sleepy most of the ride home and it was a long drive.”

Melinda scrunched her brow. “I’ll be honest, I don’t remember much about the hospital stay. I was pretty medicated the whole time. I remember various police officers coming in to talk to me, since I had to concentrate so hard on what actually happened. You’d be surprised how easily your brain decides to make things up that it doesn’t really remember. I had to do my best not to do that. How he managed it, knowing that the questioning would come under fire because they did it when I was medicated, was that he would read a doctor’s report to me and ask me what really happened. Some I couldn’t recall, and he told me he’d ask later. The last time they came, I insisted on letting the medication fully wear off so I could answer everything. I just wanted to leave that hospital.”

“You were only there a day and a half. They came multiple times to bother you when you were so badly injured?” Lacy couldn’t believe they would do that. Then again, their job was to arrest people who committed crimes, not take care of those victimized by it.

“Yes, at least three times that I recall. But the last time was the one that proved I’d been telling the truth. I never gave an account of what happened when Tod brought me to the ER for injuries. He was the one who did the explaining, which is a red flag in the ER. Any time the patient does talk when they can, it’s documented.”

“Good. I’m glad you had someone on your side. I can’t figure out how he was able to post bail and get out though. His brother was after us, so it couldn’t have been him.” Lacy stared at the Christmas tree, trying to make sense of the situation.

“It’s a small town. Even Randy’s father could be the one, though Randy said his father has almost nothing and lives on social security disability income, so I don’t believe he’s the one. I’m only using him as an example.”

“It’s interesting to me that he could be so awful behind closed doors and be so respected in the community.” Lacy grabbed Melinda’s plate and took it up to the bin for dirty dishes.

“Everyone, to some extent, is different in front of people than they are at home. Tod was just exceptionally different.” Melinda stood and pushed in her chair.

“I suppose you’re right.” Though this kind of difference seems so polar opposite that it was appalling.

Randy peered into the room. “Hey, Junior is about to show us down to our hideout where we’ll be staying for a little while. Ready to see your new place?”

“Down?” Lacy was shocked Connor had agreed to send them to the top-secret bunker below Wayside.

“Yeah, there aren’t enough rooms up here so he said we should go down there.” Randy shrugged. “I’m just doing what he says.”

There was no way he could’ve known about it unless Connor had said something, but she was still surprised. “Do you need any help bringing the bags down?”

Melinda smiled. “I think I can manage my little backpack. Thank you for all you’ve done for me. You literally saved my life. Probably more than once. I’ll never be able to repay you for this.” She gripped Lacy in a loose hug.

“Don’t think that way. I’m not looking for repayment. I want you to be healthy, happy, and safe.” And that was exactly why she’d come to her friend’s aid.

Randy led Melinda out of the dining room leaving Lacy on her own for the first time since Connor had come to her rescue. So many things had changed since then. He’d

showed her his heart which was surprising since Connor was good at keeping himself guarded from everyone all the time. He had to be as their boss. He couldn't show much emotion or risk the barrier of management being broken. That also left him separate when he needed people.

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She sat back down at the table and took a sip of her coffee. She'd probably regret drinking it later when she wanted to sleep but with danger just down the road, she didn't want to be caught nodding off. Ferd strode in and grinned at her.

"You're home! I can't tell you how happy I am that you're back. Even in a slow season, your job is so much more than I was expecting." She plopped into the chair across from Lacy.

"You did a fantastic job. I know you mentioned the trees, but they are lovely. I don't know who would complain. You did so much better than I ever have."

She laughed. "Well, when you have to do both of them twice, you get good at it very quickly. Teddy helped me as much as he was able to. I should've asked him which tree went in which room, but I was stubborn. That's what I get for assuming I knew what was going on."

"I know it feels like a big deal, but you didn't know we open presents in the living room. It's really the only time the guests use that room at all, and none of the guests who are here now were here last year. You must have gotten pushback from the guys. So, I'm sorry about that."

She shrugged a narrow shoulder. "I think it was more that it wasn't you doing it. They are all very protective of you. Even if they are usually kind to me, they want you in your job. I don't think it's a good idea for me to take over your position."

"They'll get used to it." They had to because she didn't want to stay in the situation she was in. It would be a conflict of interest if she was Connor's wife and doing the

job she had always done. She would be at risk of doing something to benefit her husband above the clients who stayed there. That couldn't happen.

"I don't know that they will, and I don't know that I want them to. I like Wayside and what it does, but I've been thinking about things. Nadine told me about the Northern Guardians, in Minnesota. They train people to handle security. Sometimes, they even do big jobs like helping the Secret Service. I don't know what I want to do, but that sounds fascinating."

"And dangerous." Lacy hoped she could stop that idea before it went any further. Connor hadn't even taken the time to get to know his sister yet and she was thinking of leaving?

"That too. I don't know. I haven't made any permanent decisions yet. It's on my mind though. Especially now that Connor's brothers might be coming back. It feels like that family has a lot of healing to do and Mom and I might get in the way of that. Mom and Dad are together, that won't change. I'm like an adult third wheel in this whole situation."

"Wayside is your inheritance as much as Connor's. You don't have to leave. I understand your feelings, but the guys here will never adjust if you aren't here for them to get used to. Knowwhat I mean?" She refused to be selfish and say that she wanted Ferd to stay so someone could do her job. As much as she felt Ferd was perfect, that couldn't be the reason why Ferd stayed, or she might hold it against Lacy someday.

"In my head, I know that. I know everything worth anything is work. I guess I was looking for you to tell me to chase after my ideas." She laughed shortly. "I've never left Wyoming. I don't know why, after just being here a month, I want to get back on the road and keep going. Maybe I'll feel better if I stick it out here for a while."

“I hope so. I’ve never had a sister before and if Connor and I get back together, you’ll be my sister-in-law.”

Ferd’s eyes widened. “Is that an option? I thought you both were strictly done?”

“We were, until I realized I was the one keeping us apart, because I was afraid of being hurt again.”

Ferd tilted her head to the side. “And now you’re not?”

That was a tough question, one that deserved an answer before she could ever agree to marry again. “Let’s say it’s under advisement.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Connor grabbed the phone and called Brendon. “Are you with Nadine? What does she mean that the men are on the move?”

Brendon turned his phone to speaker, and suddenly the call sounded more distant. “Yes, I’m here with Nadine. She can probably tell you what she meant better than I can.”

Nadine’s voice and the sound of typing came through the phone. “I was flying my drone as close to them as I dared. It’s quiet, so I was hopeful they wouldn’t hear it from within their cars. I was more worried they’d see it. Anyway, I got close enough to see that they’ve moved their cars to about fifty yards or so on each side of the driveway. They are focused on us completely.”

“Why wait out there? What in the world could they hope to accomplish?” Usually, guys like this were more likely to come in with guns blazing, like they had at first.

“Likely because the two guys who sent them packing are still here and they know there are more than just those two guys available. So, they’ll wait us out. My main concern is that you’ve got company coming and they probably know that with Christmas almost here, they are likely to be able to take hostages. Once they have people we care about, they’ll have a bargaining chip.”

He hadn’t considered that they would camp out there in the cold for that long. Did they have the wherewithal to do that? “Have either of them left at any point?”

“Hard to say. I only just began random fly overs with the drone. If they left to get gas or food earlier, I didn’t catch it.” Her typing paused for a moment. “I’ve also checked the perimeter cameras. I didn’t see either of those cars drive by those cameras. My gut is telling me they haven’t yet. Do you want to know if they move?”

“Yes,” Connor said without hesitation. If they were gone, even for a half hour he could move his guests to the bunker where they’d be safe in case Viceroy and his men made it through. “Are we fairly certain this is Viceroy?”

“Unsure,” Nadine answered. “I can zoom in on the cars, but they have tinted windows. I can’t see who is in them or even how many of them there are.”

Brendon spoke up, “I just had an idea. I’ll call John and see if he can drive to the cars and count how many are in each one. Since they aren’t doing more than directing cars that aren’t headed for Wayside around their barricade, that would be a good way to find out how many men we’re dealing with.”

“Good plan. Just tell him to be careful. If these guys are tired of waiting, they may do something we’ll regret. More than they already have.”

Brendon said, “I put a call in to Nixon’s family. They tell me he’s doing okay and mad as a hornet that they got him.”

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“Good to hear. I’ll be right here when you find out anything.” He hung up the phone.

Dad came in and sat down in the chair Lacy usually sat in when she came to see him. She hadn’t since they’d returned home, and he wondered where she’d gone. “Hey, Dad.”

He lifted his chin in greeting. “How did things go with Lacy?”

Dad would understand all that had happened, and he’d never kept anything from his father. “Good. Really good. We may have had a breakthrough. We’ll see what happens.”

“Glad to hear it. You ready for your brothers to come?”

Connor scratched his chin and realized he was in desperate need of a trim. His facial hair was longer than he usually allowed. “Assuming we’re able to have guests by then, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. Are you ready? They could question the change to your living trust. They could want their portion back again. That might be the only reason they decided to come.”

Dad snorted. “Seems to me if they wanted anything to do with the inheritance, they would’ve contacted me before now. I’m not young and they already lost one parent. Nothing makes you more aware that people have a finite amount of time on this earth than losing one of your parents.”

Connor nodded, though he had to admit, learning that his mother had passed away had only affected him in that he’d lost the chance to reconcile with her. He’d tried

over the years but had been shut out. Now, that door was closed. He'd never know why she didn't love him, and he'd never be able to prove to her that he was worth loving.

"I think the main reason they're coming is to meet Ferd." He hoped so, anyway. Ferd could find herself in the middle of an uncomfortable situation if that weren't the case and he didn't want that for her. She'd proven herself to be trustworthy and helpful while he'd been gone. Having people like that around was always welcome.

"They may be curious about Gloria too, which is why I'm still not sure I want to bring her to the get together. She might be a distraction, and she doesn't like being the center of attention."

"If you don't bring her, they'll think you're ashamed of her." Guys his age and older weren't immune from making decisions based on what a situation appeared to be as opposed to what it was.

"You might be right. I'm just thinking of keeping her from the stress of it. If they're only coming this once and they never plan to talk to me or Gloria again, do I even need to worry about what they think? They assumed all this time that I had a torrid affair that split the family. That was only half-true."

Connor wasn't ready to ask for that explanation. It was still too new to think about a twenty-year-old half-sister. How Dad could have "half" of an affair was too much for his brain to work through. "I guess you're welcome to bring her or not. I haven't had a chance to talk to her at all since you arrived. She's been taking care of you, and I've been busy."

"Right. Busy." Dad frowned. "She's not leaving, Connor. I may have made a pretty serious mistake, but that doesn't mean I'm not forgiven."

Hadn't he given grace to Edwyn for a much more personal slight? Hadn't he thought that Wayside was built on grace? Yet he hadn't extended it to his own father. "I'm sorry, Dad. I put you on a pedestal and expected you to do everything right to stay on it. You've always been the man I looked up to. It's hard to admit you're human."

Dad snorted and it turned to a chuckle. "I'm only human and so is Gloria."

Connor's phone rang and he picked it up. "Connor speaking."

Brendon said, "I just spoke to John. There are six men in the cars. Nadine just told me that we've lost our window we hoped to use. They didn't go to town to gas up or get supplies. They are now headed down the driveway on foot. I'd rather we pull Cole and Eric back to join with us instead of facing them alone. Six to two are pretty tough odds."

"Agreed." He'd hoped to have a chance to move everyone to the bunker before the men could strike. Now, he'd have to meet them far enough away to keep the bullets from penetrating any of the cabins. "I'll let Lacy know she's to tell everyone to stay in the house and to call all of the guests and tell them to take cover."

"Sounds good." Brendon hung up.

"I've got to go." Connor hung up as he spoke to his father.

"I know. I'll let Victoria know and I'll call Gloria. She'll let all the women know over on the Homestead."

"Perfect, thank you." He quickly stood and headed for the living room.

He'd expected to find Lacy there. Had she gone out to her office? He prayed she was safely out of harm's way. It was bad enough that his guests were out there, but Lacy

too? He heard a soft laugh come from the dining room and recognized it as hers immediately.

He headed that way and found her in the dining room, talking to Ferd. She stopped talking the moment she saw him. She stood. “What’s wrong?”

“The men are coming up the driveway. I need you to call all the guests and tell them to take cover in their homes. Don’t go outside, whatever you do.”

Ferd’s mouthdropped open as Connor turned and walked away. “We can’t . . .”

“No, we can’t.” Lacy pushed her chair in and headed for the door.

“Lacy, talk to me. I’m still new to this. I know what I think we should do, but you’ve been here longer.”

Lacy headed for the row of pegs by the front door where most people left their coats when they came in to work. She donned one of Connor’s and Ferd shrugged on her own. “First, we have to make sure the coast is clear. We’ll do no one any good if we get shot running in to help.”

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Ferd swallowed audibly. “Is this a common event here?”

“No. It’s only happened twice, and I hope it never happens again.” She grabbed a huge flashlight off a ledge where various tools waited for use and shoved it into her pocket.

“So, how do we know if the coast is clear?” Ferd peeked outside the large window.

“You can’t see up the driveway from that vantage. We’ll have to look out the hidden window. There’s a small, windowless nook right back here. It used to be a closet. Behind that is a secret office that has a window to that side of the house.” She led the way.

Beyond the door was where Erica worked while she and her son had been staying there as a riding camp. Erica would be another person who could do Lacy’s job but she, too, might have a conflict since her husband also worked for Connor. Through another door that required her master key, was a very old office. Dust covered every surface. Rose colored walls and lace doilies captured the time period the room was last used.

“This doesn’t look like any other room I’ve seen on this ranch.” Ferd lowered her voice.

“This was Connor’s mother’s office. Believe it or not, the wives of ranchers have a ton of work to do. She might not have worked the ranch, but all the bookkeeping and management was her domain, and this was where she did all of it. She wanted this room because she could see who came and who left from that window.” Lacy

pointed to the large bright spot in the middle of the dark room.

“It’s sad.” Ferd touched the desk. “This has to have sat untouched for decades.”

“Yes. I wasn’t here then, obviously, but as far as I know, Teddy never came back into this room. The closet just outside of the office was where she kept all the records and that’s as far as he came. They locked it up and no one goes in here.”

“Why didn’t you ask to use it instead of having your office out in a cabin?” Ferd asked.

“I . . .” She hadn’t wanted to invade this space. It was practically sacred ground. Connor didn’t talk about his mom, so asking if she could paint or make changes had always felt too personal.

“You don’t have to answer that. Your answer is all over your face. It’s really great that you care about him so much. I hope he cares about you the same.”

That was the question of the century. Did Connor love her more than his elevated memories of his mother? Only time would tell. “The area looks clear. We should move now.”

She didn’t want to hang out long. If those men were walking up the driveway, she would have about ten minutes to get to the first row of cabins. All of those behind the front row would be easier. “Let’s move.”

Ferd pulled her hat from her jacket pocket and tugged it over her forehead, then followed Lacy. Cold air nipped at her nose, and she was happy for the darkness that covered everything. The security lights cast circles of light around the barn entrances and at each cabin where women were staying, a security light lit their front porch. She’d have them shut those off as they came with her.

Only six guests were outside in the cabins. The seventh was Rebecca and she was in the main lodge because of her wheelchair. The house was easier for her to maneuver around in. Lacy came to the first door with a light and knocked.

Moira answered and her son Adam stood behind her. “What’s wrong?”

Inside her cabin, she had a small Christmas tree in a corner and pictures of her son all around on the tables. It was cozy in there, probably more homelike than anything they’d had before. “We need to get moving. Viceroy is breathing down our necks. Grab your coats and come help me get the others. Turn off all your lights and lock your door.”

Moira didn’t hesitate. She ordered her son to put his coat on and follow Lacy, all while she rushed around the house turning off lights. The final one she turned off was the overhead light on the porch, plunging them into only the weak light of the nearest occupied cabin.

“Do you want us to split up? I can take these two somewhere while you continue,” Ferd asked.

“I’d like to stay together if possible. My plan, in case we get separated is to bring everyone to the barn. All those boards are thick with many layers of wood because of the stalls. While one or two might not stop bullets, near the back, we should be safe.”

“As long as they don’t come to the barn,” Moira said.

“We’ll figure that out if it happens. I’m hopeful the men will keep them from getting that close.”

She heard a shot in the distance and hurried as she gathered the remaining women. All the others were either safely in the lodge or over at the Homestead. She had them

huddle near the last cabin closest to the barn. There was a long gap between the cabin and the barn. Even in the dark, they would be visible walking across the snow.

Another few gunshots came from the driveway.

“They must be close,” Ferd whispered.

“On three, we’ll all run,” Lacy pointed for the door.

Everyone nodded in agreement and Adam gripped his mother’s hand tightly. “I can do this, Mom.”

Lacy gripped his other hand in case he tripped so they could easily carry him together and keep moving. Everyone hung close and raced across the snow. Yelling broke out to their right, but Lacy refused to stop and listen to what was said. Hopefully, they hadn’t been seen. She’d know soon enough.

When everyone was inside the dark barn, she gathered them close. “Grab a hand. Make sure no one is left behind. We’ll slowly walk back to the other end in the dark. Keep quiet and be careful where you step. This is a barn, meaning sharp tools are around.” If she felt safe enough, she’d use the flashlight but with the yelling, she couldn’t give away their position.

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One of the women mumbled a prayer as they walked and soon the others were joining along. Lacy silently added her own request for safety for all of those who lived on Wayside Ranch.

Finally, she made it to the wide back door of the barn that led out into one of the corrals. To the right was a wide stall that originally had been used to store horsedrawn wagons. Now, it was used to store huge bales of hay away from the horses.

She had them climb to the top of the bales and huddle against the wall. The likelihood of bullets finding them up there wasn't great, but she still worried she hadn't done enough. Everyone continued to hold hands and remain silent. She thanked God that no one had started crying even though the fear warranted it. Tears were loud and they couldn't afford to make noise right now.

A voice with a thick accent came from the front of the barn. "I saw them go in here. Find the lights. Search it top to bottom. When we find someone who we can use as a shield, we'll have them right where we want them."

Lacy held her breath. The moment they found the lights, all of them would be visible up on top of that mound of hay. If she said anything to direct her group, the men would hear her.

"Where do you think the light is?" a man said.

"I don't know. Feel around by the door. It has to be there."

Lacy tugged on Adam's hand, and he silently followed, then he pulled his mother's hand. Within minutes, they were all slowly and silently climbing down the stack. The only problem was, in order to get out, they had to step into the bright moonlight of the back door and the only place to go from there was over a fence.

Her palms sweated and Adam's hand slipped loose. How was she going to save them before they found the light under the switchbox near the door?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Connor led his team, consisting of Cole and Edwyn around the right side of the house. Junior led another team with Sam and Eric around the left. They were each to leave about thirty yards between themselves and the driveway, putting them roughly sixty yards apart.

As long as they stayed ahead of the attackers, there would be no shooting at each other accidentally. That was the last thing Connor wanted to happen. In the dark, there was always an issue of knowing the target before pulling the trigger. He trusted all his men to know what was ahead before doing anything.

A few gunshots on the left signaled that Junior and his team had encountered someone. Cole blew his whistle three quick blasts so the other team would know their location. The men headed in the direction of the shots, keeping behind as much cover as possible.

Cole took out his night binoculars and looked ahead. "I've got no sight," he mumbled.

"We'll need to get closer. How in the world did Junior meet up with them first? I thought they were headed right up the driveway?" Had their intel been wrong or had they left the visibility of the driveway and Junior's group had surprised them.

Edwyn braced against a tree. “If we cross the driveway, we’re putting ourselves in danger. I want to help them, but they need to signal us first. What if the group of six broke into two groups like they were in the cars? We could be setting ourselves up for an ambush.”

Connor nodded his agreement. Nothing about this felt right. He checked his weapon one more time, just to make sure everything was in working order. He motioned for Cole to move in a little closer. Cole got low and ran to another tree, then used his binoculars again.

He held up two fingers then pointed right. If Junior had found others, then they were surrounded on two sides. Connor motioned for them to hold their position. He squinted into the darkness where Cole had been looking until two forms appeared from behind the trees, the snow was the only thing making them stand out.

Within seconds, he lost them in the trees again. Connor held completely still pressed to his cover. If he waited until they passed his three o’clock, he could safely engage without risking his men. He held his breath and counted the seconds as they ticked by.

These two didn’t seem to understand combat. While they knew how to hide and stay out of the light, they weren’t being especially quiet, nor did they hide their footprints within the tracks that were already out there. One of them pointed to the ground and muttered something. Just a few more feet and Connor could lunge for them.

One of the men whipped around and took a shot at Edwyn. The bark of the tree where Edwyn had been hiding exploded as Edwyn dove to the ground. Connor took aim but wasn’t sure where Junior and his men were. They hadn’t put up a sound marker. Had they been caught?

The other man took a shot at Connor, narrowly missing. If he hadn’t been on slick

snow, he might not have missed. Connor and his men fell back a few feet. He couldn't call Junior, but he needed to know where the men were. He took out his phone and opened up the app to show him the location of every man. He'd thought Junior had engaged someone, but he was now heading toward the barn.

"Guys, something is going on at the house. Team B is running for the barn. We have to follow those guys. I don't know what caused Junior to break protocol, but that means we could have guys right up at the house."

They couldn't run with the two attackers somewhere in front of them. He sent off a text to Junior, knowing he might not be able to answer. If they were being chased, then things didn't look good. Once they had hostages, they would be able to get whatever they wanted. Connor would never risk lives.

Slowly, they made their way back along the path Junior was supposed to have followed toward the house. The silence worried him more than the gunshots had. Was it possible Junior and his team had been shot and it was their bodies that he'd seen on his app? He refused to think that way.

As they neared the house, the two men they'd encountered before waited, looking at the house beyond. He took a shot at one of them, but hit the tree the intruder was using for cover instead. With quick movements both men moved to better cover and took aim toward Connor and his men.

"Hold your places. Don't move," he muttered. "Make them come after us. I want them away from the house." If they came after Connor and his team, it was less likely that Junior and his had been overtaken by others.

"Message in from Team 2, they heard some shots by the barn and went to check it out. They are almost there," Edwyn's voice was barely above a breath.

Good. That meant none of his men were captured. He motioned for his men to fall back further, trying to draw the two intruders out. When they followed, Connor led them closer to the driveway where there was more open area. If he could trick them out in the open, this standoff might come to an end.

Edwyn huddled in next to him. “Team 2 says they have two men in the barn. A third just left. That means one lone wolf is wandering around. Keep your eyes open.” He headed over to Cole’s position to tell him what was happening while Connor covered him.

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Cole drew something out of the back of his jacket and tore off the end. He took the end that he tore off and struck the long stick. It flared immediately, illuminating everything within a few feet.

Three shots came from the trees and Cole threw the road flare onto the driveway about twenty feet behind him. He then ran across as the men fired on him. Connor gripped the tree; unsure what Cole was doing. He could be volatile and when he felt cornered, would rely on no one but himself.

The men followed him, running toward the light. The moment they ran for the trees, Connor clotheslined one of the men who tried to run past him. Edwyn tackled the other. He let Edwyn deal with his own man as Connor wrestled to get the attacker's gun from him. Cole returned and raced over to help Edwyn. Once they had him subdued and his hands tied, they came over to wrestle the man Connor had trapped.

"That leaves four." Connor looked toward the house. He could barely see it through the trees.

"We'll get these two locked away. Where should we go?" Cole asked as he led the two men they'd caught slowly toward the house.

They had an area in the barn where Sam occasionally locked dogs that were too untrained to be part of his kennel. That made the most sense to use for now until they could gather all of them and get a hold of some police force.

"Message from Brendon. There's a team of FBI agents on the way. Viceroy is a big fish, and they want him," Edwyn relayed the news.

“Great. They’re only an hour away. Let’s get as many rounded up before they get here as possible.” At least Lacy was safely inside and the only thing those men who’d been headed for the barn could’ve found were horses, hay, and feed.

“Let’s stow these two in the barn and see what Junior was after.” Connor headed left though the house was to the right along the driveway. His heart might be there, but he couldn’t follow it until the work was done.

At the base of the haystack, Lacy glanced around for inspiration. She needed something to make noise on the other end of the barn or to distract the men hunting for the light switch.

“By the time we find it, they’ll be gone,” one of the men said.

She heard the click of the switchbox flipping open and she knew they’d found the light. They didn’t use the fluorescents often, but they took a minute to come on fully. Lacy headed for the first stall. Maximus, a massive gray workhorse, stomped in his stall. She carefully slid to the front along the wall and quickly released him.

As she backed him out, the men noticed her. “Hey! What are you doing?”

Lacy whispered a command, telling Maximus to go to the house. One of the biggest issues with that particular horse, that Eric couldn’t break him of, was once he was given a command, he would trample anything in his way to complete it.

Maximus headed off at a trot, right toward the men. Lacy grabbed Adam’s hand and ran out the back of the barn. There was no time to cover their tracks, so she swung Adam up on the top of the fence, then started helping the others over. She had a vague idea where they could go, but her main objective was to get away from the men.

“Wait, don’t shoot!” the strange voice yelled.

Junior’s voice answered. “Hands in the air where I can see them.”

That was two of the men down, but she had no idea how many there were in total. Connor had always told her she should keep going until she knew she was safely away from danger. “Keep going!” she encouraged her group.

Ahead of them was a dark pasture that led to the Homestead. Most people outside of Wayside didn’t know it was there. Viceroy and his men might still think the whole place was a burned-out shell. Even people in town didn’t know they’d built homes there, since the Homestead was heavily wooded and private.

Moira waited with Adam on the other side of the fence until Lacy climbed over. A volley of shots from the lodge scared her into moving quicker.

“Do you think they got in the house?” Moira glanced quickly at her and they ran as fast as they could through the snow.

“I hope not. I don’t think Connor would intentionally lead them that way.” It was hard to talk as she ran. Some of the women were already slowing down. They wouldn’t make it the full mile if they kept at such a pace.

Lacy kept her voice as low as she could. “Everyone, stay together. Slow down so we don’t lose anyone.” She watched behind her, waiting for dark forms to follow them.

Slowing down was a risk, but no one in the group was used to speeding through snow on foot. She didn’t want to risk anyone having a heart attack from fear and strain. There were other risks though, too. Animals wandered around in the dark, ones that might not take on a full grown horse but would think a person was easy prey. Especially with the scent of fear on them.

“Watch around you. Keep your eyes open. Help me look for anything that moves.”
Maybe engaging them in doing more than moving would keep them focused.

Moirra kept her pace slow to accommodate her son who, at ten, had lots of energy but short legs. He also swiveled his head back and forth, watching for anything. The dark line of trees Lacy was aiming for seemed further away the longer they walked, not closer.

More shots made one of the women scream. She couldn't help it. These poor women had seen the worst of humanity. Some had seen death, beatings, starvation, and worse. Hopefully, Connor would get the men who'd attacked them, and they wouldn't have to be afraid in their home anymore.

“There's someone coming,” Adam whispered to her.

“Where?” She'd been trying to watch everywhere.

“Behind us. He's alone, but I can see he has a rifle. We should hide.” He looked behind him again.

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Lacy slowed, letting the others get ahead of her then looked behind where Adam had indicated. The form stopped as soon as she turned, then dropped into the snow, making himself all but invisible.

Lacy quickly caught up to the group. There was nothing in the pasture but random trees and nothing nearby to hide them. Where could they get away from that guy? None of the Wayside men would be using rifles, they all used handguns in situations where they had to defend themselves.

She knew this land better than the man behind them did, but with dark coats on and in the moonlight, they were visible. Too visible to hide where they were going. Unless she found a way for them to spread out and blend with the snow.

“Everyone, drop to your knees and spread out. Stay as close to the snow as you can.” While her plan might make them slower, they would only stand out if they had to crawl up a hill that was facing the man behind them. If they crawled now, while they were in a low spot, and headed east, they could go around the hill and go unseen.

She headed to the front of the group, leading the way. A trio of wolves growled a few feet away. Lacy raised her arm to stop the group. Now they were trapped between a shooter behind them and aggressive predators ahead.

The wolves had caught something and were all trying to nip bites of it. Thankfully, Lacy couldn't tell what it was, only that it was far too small to satisfy three huge animals. She pointed to her right. Even though she'd hoped to swing back around in the direction she'd been heading before, now they would have to crawl further out of the way.

The man behind them shot, but the only thing it did was scare the wolves. They ran off toward the trees, exactly where Lacy had hoped to go. If she grabbed her phone to call Connor, it would light up. Even facing the ground, it might give off enough light to give away their position.

She pulled it from her pocket and realized there had been areas where the snow had brushed against her belly and snow had filled her pockets. Her phone was totally wet and wouldn't turn on at all. They were far away from the goal, though she could barely see the security light in the distance now. Behind her, the man with the gun stalked them.

"Mom, I'm soaked and cold," Adam wasn't a complainer, but it was dark, cold, and now they were wet and sore.

How could she expect them to crawl through the snow for a mile? What kind of leader was she? She'd saved them from their warm homes to freeze in the middle of a field. Doubt bashed her over the head.

"It's okay. Just keep going. We'll get warm and dry as soon as we get to safety," Moira answered.

They were the only two who hadn't been directly trafficked though Viceroy's wife had tried to kidnap Adam and planned to use his organs to save her dying son. They both had stayed at Wayside for a better life and to start over. This certainly wasn't better than poverty.

Lacy tried to crawl faster. At some point, they would have to risk going over a rise and that might put them in the line of fire. This close to the ground, they'd be harder to hit, but she wanted to avoid shots at all.

"Is he still there?" Adam asked.

If anyone was going to take a chance and look, it would be her. She motioned them to keep going as she crawled up the back of a small hill. Searching the darkness, she tried to find a dark spot, anything that didn't look like snow. Worse was the fear that if she didn't see him, he could still be there. If she told everyone they could get up and walk normally, she would be at fault if any of them were shot.

She scanned the whole area slowly once again but saw nothing. Had he given up? Were they too far away and he'd wanted to stay closer to his men? She had to be absolutely certain.

Distant shots came from Wayside, and she prayed fervently none of their men were hurt. Both Connor and his father had been shot in the last year and she didn't want any of the others to deal with the pain and risk. That they were willing to do it for the people who lived there spoke volumes about the integrity of the crew Connor put together.

She turned back and jogged down the hill then encouraged them all to stand. "I think we're okay to walk now. We're about halfway there and we'll be faster on our feet. I didn't see the man who was following us."

Adam happily stood, the others got to their feet, but stayed hunched either from the cold or because they wanted to stay as small of a target as possible. The first home to come into view was Teddy's. He lived there with Gloria and Ferd.

Ferd made her way up to Lacy. "Let's go to my place. Mom will have warm drinks and lots of blankets. No one is more ready for us than she is."

"I thought you said she didn't really like groups of people?" She'd thought about Gloria but hadn't wanted the poor woman to have a breakdown at seeing so many needy people at her door.

“Nope, when Mom is needed, she is happy. Let’s go there.”

Lacy breathed a sigh of relief. She now had a destination. “Great. Let’s let everyone know. We’ll head for that first cabin with the lights on.”

Finally, the trees seemed like they were getting taller, the light glowed a little stronger. They would make it to safety. She again prayed for Connor and all the men. Junior had caught the two that had been in the barn, but there was one wandering around alone and he was the most dangerous of all.

Ferd opened the door as they reached the house and Lacy took a deep breath, allowing all the others to go in first. By the time she walked through the door, Gloria had stacks of warm blankets, and she was collecting wet shoes and coats to hang in the back room.

Praise God, they’d come to the right place.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Swirling red and blue lights broke through the dense trees. Connor let the lights distract him for a moment. His team had caught two men and so had Junior and his team. That left two men still wandering around Wayside. Two men who had managed to evade all of them.

As the dark colored cars drove up the driveway, Connor realized these were the FBI agents Brendon had said were coming, not police. He took a moment to fish his phone from his pocket and called Lacy. Hopefully, she was safely in the house where he’d left her but since two men were still missing and the house was one place they hadn’t looked, he wanted to warn her.

Her phone rang many times, but she didn’t answer. He shoved his phone back in his

pocket as the line of feds came to a stop in front of the house. The passenger in the first of three cars got out and headed toward Connor.

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“I’m Connor Kincade, owner of Wayside.” He held out his hand to the man heading for him.

“Trent Barker, Special Agent in Charge.” He glanced around. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Connor explained where the four men were who’d already been captured. “We need to find those other two men. No one here is safe until we do.”

“And none of the four were Nicholas Viceroy?”

“Affirmative. We haven’t seen him yet,” Connor confirmed.

“Where have you looked already?” He gathered his men around him.

“We’ve covered the driveway, the barn, the paddocks, the outbuildings, and the ATV shed. We have not checked the lodge or any of the cabins.” He turned to the cabins, and something was off about them.

“Usually, the lights are on. Everyone must have shut them off so no one would know where they are.”

“That’s smart. Take Agent Ross with you and look through the lodge. The rest of us will split up and look through the barn and cabins. We left one man at the end of the driveway near the cars to keep anyone from attempting to leave.”

Connor nodded his agreement to the plan. Now that the men were there who could

legally take the traffickers into custody, he holstered his weapon and led the agent to the house.

“How many people should be inside?” Agent Ross asked.

Connor did a quick count in his head. “Should be eight people.”

“Great, I’ll stick with you or one of your men so I don’t threaten anyone who should be here.”

Since at least two of the people inside were former victims of trafficking, he appreciated the willingness to hold off on aiming his weapon as he went through the house. They went inside and he expected to see Lacy with Ferd there in the living room, but it was empty.

“At least three of the eight should be down this hall.” He headed toward Brendon’s office. On the way, he knocked on Rebecca’s door. Inside, Rebecca and Dee played a game of checkers.

“Sorry for intruding. Just doing a check.” Connor waved and backed out of the room. Other than the bathroom, there was nowhere else for anyone to hide in that small apartment. If there had been anyone else in there, Dee and Rebecca would’ve looked terrified.

He headed for Brendon’s office and knocked on the jamb. Brendon waved him inside.

“Connor?” He glanced at the federal agent with him.

“This is Agent Ross, he’s helping me search through the house but if you’ve got Nadine on the line, she can probably tell us where everyone is.”

Brendon snorted and picked up the receiver of his phone, then hit three numbers. It rang and Nadine quickly picked up.

“Yo.”

“Nadine, I need to know who is in the lodge right now,” Connor asked.

“No problem.” Her fingers clacked against the keys. “Right now, I am here. Obviously. Brendon hasn’t left his office. I saw you go down the hallway, so that’s where you are too with a guy I don’t recognize.”

She typed some more. “Doesn’t look like I’ve seen anyone in that hall for an hour, so Dee and Rebecca are in her room. Victoria is still in the kitchen, even though she usually leaves well before now. Teddy is with her, helping her clean up. That’s it.”

“Wait,” Connor leaned closer to the phone. “Where are Lacy and Ferd?”

She did some more typing. “Looks like they left within five minutes of you.”

Lacy and Ferd were gone after he’d told them to be safe and stay in the house. She wasn’t answering her phone and two of the most dangerous men to ever set foot on Wayside land were loose. “Can you look over the cameras and tell me if you see them?”

He swallowed hard. If he’d lost her without ever making up what he’d done, he would never forgive himself. He’d looked forward to slowly bringing her back around to loving him. It wouldn’t be easy. He wasn’t a great guy, but for her, he could try.

“Um . . .” Nadine stalled.

“Nadine, answer me,” Connor hated using the boss card, but this was important.

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“She and Ferd went to all the occupied cabins, and they headed for the barn. They were in there for about fifteen minutes, then raced out the back. After that, I lost them. Wait . . . Right after they passed the camera on the back of the barn, a shadowy guy followed them. I’m sure I see the outline of a rifle when I stop the video.”

Agent Ross tapped his shoulder and indicated they should leave. He followed the agent to the hall.

“If a figure followed them, we need to go look at the barn and check for footprints. That will give us some clue where they went.”

Connor nodded and grabbed his phone to call Junior. If he was already out there, they could check first. “My phone is dead.” He shook it, knowing that would do no good, but still angry that it happened. He’d had to use his phone so much over the last day that he’d had no time to charge it. That was the one weakness of cell phones.

“When we meet back up with Trent, we’ll get our numbers distributed so you’ll be reachable.” He kept walking.

Connor was less worried about his men, who could and would simply call anyone else on the team to find him. He was worried about Lacy who wouldn’t know who he was with, where he was, or how to reach him. Assuming she wasn’t captured.

He quickened his pace and got to the barn in record time. The florescent overhead lights were on, which was strange, they rarely used those preferring the dimmer incandescent bulbs. He switched on the other lights and turned the larger ones off.

Maximus was out of his stall and munching on a sack of grain that had been left on the floor. “What are you doing out here?” He took the horse’s halter and led him back to his stall.

Junior followed him. “Maximus was out when I got to the barn. The guys said he almost trampled them. He also claimed there were people in the barn who’d let the horse out.” Skepticism gave his voice an edge.

“I’m thinking the people he saw were Lacy, Ferd, and everyone from the cabins.” Connor tied Maximus back where he belonged and edged out of the stall.

“Why would they be out here?” Junior asked.

“I can only assume Lacy was worried about the safety of our guests with men coming. She couldn’t leave them stranded in their cabins. So, where would she take them?”

Edwyn strode up. “Unfortunately, they ran out the back and that’s where all the horses are let out to pasture. There’s not a hint of snow left there to look for tracks. But, over near that fence that connects to pasture two, there are prints over there that make no sense.” He leaned his head in that direction.

Connor went over to investigate, and Ross followed him. Agent Ross took out a flashlight and clicked it on. In the powerful beam of light, a trail of many footprints led to the fence, then over it. Ross followed the trail with his light until it disappeared over a small hill.

“I think we know what direction they went,” Ross said.

“Warm showers are available to anyone who wants them,” Gloria said as Lacy accepted a mug of hot coffee. “I put all the coats and shoes on the back porch. They’ll

take some time to dry, but I have a heater out there.”

Gloria had taken charge the moment Ferd had welcomed everyone in. She’d dug through her own clothes, gotten out blankets, put coffee on, and made hot soup, all before Lacy could even think of what to do to help.

“Girl, sit. You’re soaked to the skin and dripping,” Gloria took her arms and led her to a kitchen chair. “That kind of thing will take the starch right out of you.”

Lacy found she could do little more than nod. She had to get word to Connor that she and everyone else were fine, they’d made it, but she didn’t know where he was. If he was still hunting those men, a phone call could give away his position. Even with his phone on silent, it would light up if he had it with him. She suspected he’d put it on do not disturb, which meant she couldn’t get through anyway.

With shaking fingers, she handed her phone to Gloria. “Do you have any rice? If I was like every other woman and carried my phone in my back pocket, it would’ve been safe.”

Gloria laughed. “I don’t do that nonsense. I’m too old to fish my phone out of my back pocket. Mine stays in my purse where it belongs.” She took the phone and laid it on the counter. “I’ll see what I can do.”

It wasn’t urgent and she wasn’t surprised when Gloria was immediately sidelined by one of the ladies who’d cut her knee while she was crawling through the pasture. The gash wasn’t deep but needed to be cleaned.

Ferd approached her, already changed into dry clothes and ready to help her mother. Without skipping a beat, she grabbed a box of instant rice from the cupboard, put some in a zipper bag and dropped the phone in it, then handed it back to Lacy.

“I sent Brendon a message, letting him know where we all are and that we are safe. I figured messaging my brother was a bad idea.”

“Good plan.” Her jaw shivered.

She’d wanted to make sure everyone got blankets and what they needed before she took anything. Their comfort and wellbeing was more important. Ferd headed to the stack of blankets and grabbed one off the top, then draped it around Lacy’s shoulders.

“If you want to, there’s a shorter line for my shower. You can use it in a few minutes.”

“You have two bathrooms in these houses?” She hadn’t been a part of designing any of the houses built on the Homestead. Connor had wanted each of them to be a little different and not the same as the cabins. He’d wanted them to feel more like permanent homes so all of Wayside’s families felt comfortable and wanted to stay.

“Yes. I love it. I basically have my own hallway which is great because I need privacy sometimes.”

“I bet.”

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Ferd had hinted she wasn't completely happy here, that she wanted to spread her wings, and Lacy had immediately tried to convince her otherwise to suite her own needs. "Are you really thinking of going over to the Northern Guardians?"

"I don't know. I've literally never lived away from my mom. I wanted to know all about Wayside, but it's not my dream. I don't know that Minnesota holds my dreams either. I just want to find out where I fit in the grand scheme. Where does God want me? I've never considered that it might be somewhere other than where I've planted myself."

In some ways, Ferd was more responsible than Lacy had been. She'd grown up, married, divorced, and stayed attached to her former husband. The first time she'd ever felt she truly heard the Holy Spirit directing her was when she knew beyond a doubt that she would be married to Connor again. Being married to him meant she would be at Wayside.

"I know I tried to convince you to stay, and I still think you should give it some time, but I understand if you want to test the waters, travel, find a new path. I just don't think you can determine that this place isn't for you without giving it time. These guys are great, but they're also stuck in their ways, as you discovered with the Christmas tree."

Ferd snorted. "Yeah, that was a lot of work to learn that lesson. I don't know. I'm not willing to walk away right now. Mom is still figuring out how she fits in here too. Dad has said she doesn't need to work, she can enjoy retirement, but she's bored sitting here in the house all day." Ferd laughed.

“She doesn’t have to. Connor should’ve offered her something to do or asked if she wanted to. She probably feels unwelcome because Connor can be a bear, and he doesn’t show his emotions easily.”

“I don’t think many men do.” Ferd took a deep breath that hinted at her knowing exactly what she was talking about.

Lacy reached out and took her hand. “I still feel like I’ll have a sister when I’m with Connor again. Assuming he isn’t furious with me for taking all the guests across the field without telling him what I was about to do.”

Ferd laughed. “I love what Wayside does. This is Connor’s dream, and I have no desire to change it. I heard him talking to Randy about adding cattle over here though. I’ve helped myuncle with cattle most of my life. That’s one part of Wayside where I could add value.”

She was happy to hear that Ferd had no desire to ask Connor to sell off half of Wayside for her inheritance. “I think he’ll be excited to hear that.”

Ferd took her phone out of her back pocket and looked at it. “Still no response from Brendon. Sometimes, the signal is poor over here. We need to talk to Connor about that. It’s a safety risk.”

“Hopefully, after this, we won’t have to worry about safety anymore. I agree though, you should have the ability to call when you need to. Can I borrow your phone?”

Ferd handed it to her then headed over to help Gloria. Lacy couldn’t wait a moment longer, she needed to talk to Connor and hear that he was alright. He had to know she’d done her best, even if that was to go against what he asked. She had to think of the safety of everyone, not just herself. She never could’ve lived with herself if she’d been safely tucked away in the lodge while the cabins were wide open to attack.

She opened Ferd's phone and skipped the contacts, instead punching in Connor's number from memory. The phone rang five times before going to voicemail. Since she'd called from Ferd's phone, she didn't want to leave a message, but she did anyway.

"Connor, this is Lacy. We made it Gloria's. All of us are here. We're cold and wet, but safe. Come and get us when the danger has passed. I'm sorry I didn't listen to you, but I couldn't leave vulnerable people to deal with this attack all on their own."

She bit her lip, then decided to finish the message exactly as she'd wanted to. "Love you. Call this number when you get this. My phone is trashed for a while."

She hung up and took a deep breath. The warmth from the room and the blanket was finally working and she'd stopped shivering.

Gloria came back to her side. "You're taller and skinnier than I am, but Ferd might have some things that would fit you. Go ahead and get out of those. We'll put them in the drier for you while you take a shower. No sense in giving yourself pneumonia."

She was pretty sure that wasn't how people came down with it, but being freezing cold for a long time probably didn't make her immune system stronger. "Has everyone else used them? I don't want to make anyone wait."

"Yes, dear. You're the last one. I hope there's still some hot water for you. Go and warm up. We'll wait for any important calls."

As much as she wanted to wait for Connor to call back, she needed the shower and dry clothes. "Okay. Thank you, Gloria." She quickly wrapped the woman in a hug.

As if she wasn't the slightest bit concerned about getting herself cold and wet, she hugged Lacy right back. "Now, shoo. I'll have some more soup done by the time you

get out.”

She wasn't sure which sounded better, the hot water or the soup, but she was glad she was being offered both.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Agent Ross pulled Connor aside, away from all the other men forming a plan to canvas the ranch.

“I can tell you're distracted, but this team needs your expertise right now. The faster we find these two missing men, the faster you can find out what happened to Lacy.”

“And Ferd. She's my half-sister.” If anything happened to her, Dad might blame him.

While he was pretty sure his father wouldn't leave, he didn't want any distance there. He'd lost enough with his mother.

“I get it. I'd be distracted too. My sisters mean the world to me.”

Lacy wasn't anywhere near his sister, but there wasn't a need to correct the man. He wasn't ready to announce his feelings in front of everyone, especially before he did so with Lacy.

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He nodded his agreement and headed back over to the team. Trent, the Special Agent in Charge was splitting men up and giving them quadrants to look. When he mentioned the cabins, Connor had to step forward and speak up.

“I don’t mind if you look through them, but don’t leave a hint of your presence. These guests have had every privacy violated and I refuse to let them feel like their private homes have been violated again. I understand the need to search, but please be mindful of the people whose homes you are searching.” He held up his hand to defer back to Trent.

“Understood, thank you. My men will be careful and cognizant.” He continued splitting men and issuing orders.

Connor again wished he’d taken the time to charge his phone. A rookie mistake. If he had that one thing, he could check where Lacy’s phone was and know if she was okay or not. He’d know where she was hidden. That might even tell them where to look for the last two men if they had her, and he hoped they didn’t.

“It’s been quiet on the ranch for the last twenty-five minutes.” Trent raised his voice. “Four of the six men have been captured and no one has returned to the cars they abandoned at the road. Edwyn tells me he is in contact with the security team, and no one has crossed the perimeter of the grounds, at least, not where there are cameras. I have been told there are no cameras in some areas though, so I’ll send teams to those next.”

Since the Homestead was so new, they hadn’t put up cameras there yet. Nadine had been flying her drone over the area at random times, but that didn’t make a consistent

net like the cameras did. In most cases, the reason they didn't have cameras was because there were no trees nearby. Without cover, most predators—animal or human—avoided those spots.

He'd add cameras over there after this. That way, he'd know in an instant that all those living over there were fine. He stood back as Junior and Sam were sent on ATV to check two sections of fence, one being the area connected to the Homestead.

"Check the homes last. If anyone was there who shouldn't be, someone would've called security by now," Trent said as he waved them off.

That left Connor, Ross, and Trent still standing there. "Connor, you know this place better than anyone. I want you to think about places you would specifically hide if you wanted to evade being seen."

The pastures were too wide-open. While there were random groups of trees and some areas that had lots of trees outside the pasture, within them, the trees were sparse providing almost no cover. The buildings were populated, that posed a threat to anyone looking to hide. Though, he had to admit being behind closed doors was a draw. Wyoming in winter wasn't a hospitable climate to spend great amounts of time outside. The dog kennels would provide shelter, but the dogs themselves were a bigger risk than the humans.

"If I wanted to hide on Wayside land and I didn't want to be found, plus have some protection from the elements, I'd hide in the little chapel." It was rarely used, except on Sundays. The door was always unlocked. The only drawback was the windows were dark yellow stained glass to keep the building private. If anyone was inside, there was no way to see them without risking injury because anyone inside could see out.

"Are there cameras that are close to it?" Trent asked.

He never thought the chapel needed to be secured. It wasn't near any of the homes or barns and it was small. The only other shed out there was filled with hats where new guests could go to pick out their very own cowboy hat. That building was kept locked though. It was one of the few buildings onsite that was always secured because the wares were owned by a man in town, not Connor.

"No. The closest is the barn and if someone kept close to the barn, they could easily get around the cameras. Assuming they know where the cameras are." And most people didn't know they were there.

"Do you think Viceroy would know about them?" Trent crossed his arms and waited for an answer.

Enough of Viceroy's men had been on Wayside land when they'd broken in before that it was likely they knew of the cameras, if not where they were. Since they informed guests that the cameras were there and generally where they were, there was a chance that when Dee was captured, she could've told Viceroy's wife where the cameras were. She was drugged and there was no way to know what she said.

"It's possible, though not likely." Dee had no reason to know the location of every single camera.

"Humor me. If I was a high-level criminal looking to avoid prison, I'd assume there were cameras everywhere. What you're telling me is that it is possible the two missing men could be in that church. Right?"

"It seems the most plausible place. Though, I doubt they would've known to go there. They probably found it by accident. We leave it unlocked. There are candles and lighters inside for those who need that, and the temperature inside is kept at 65 degrees. Very comfortable as opposed to outside."

“Agreed. While the others are looking on foot, let’s head there and see what we find. If there are candles lit that we can see from outside, we’ll know someone has been in there recently. They may be using them to warm the building up more.”

“Yeah, I purposely don’t leave a thermostat visible in there. If you warm it any more than that and more than a handful of people are in there, it gets too hot. We leave the temperature where it is for that reason. There are no pipes to freeze since there’s no plumbing to that building.”

Which meant they couldn’t stay there long if that’s where they’d chosen to hide. “What is the goal here? That chapel isn’t near an escape. I can’t imagine what they’re planning.” And he hoped it didn’t involve murdering anyone who opened the doors.

“If we find them inside, we’ll try to make contact with them first. The best and easiest way for this to shake out is for both of them to give themselves up. That doesn’t always happen, but it’s what we aim for. No one wants a shootout.”

Connor agreed but knowing what Viceroy was capable of doing and what he’d face in prison, he doubted this would be an easy thing to accomplish. “Do you have someone with you who is good at negotiating?” If not, he could try to find Ali, Eric’s wife. She’d been a military lawyer at one time and was good at negotiating.

“I do. We’ll try to get this situation neutralized quickly. I know all your people want to get home. Is there a way to control the temperature in there from anywhere else?” Trent looked optimistic.

“Yes, from my office. Why?”

“Let’s assume they are there. Since we know there are no pipes to freeze, turn off the heat to the chapel. They won’t freeze, but they’ll get mighty uncomfortable in there.”

“Like I said, there’s no water out there. If they light a fire to keep warm, all they have is the little fire extinguisher in the corner. That would have to be used almost immediately or the whole building will go up in flames.”

Dad had built that chapel for him from nothing. He’d laid the foundation and done all the work himself. That chapel had been the place where many of his guests had found Jesus. He didn’t want to see it destroyed by Viceroy.

“We should be able to see even small flames inside, even those from candles. If they light a fire any bigger than a candle, we’ll bust inside.”

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He felt control slipping from his grasp. Did he want to hold onto a building and lose Viceroy or potentially lose the building and catch the man responsible for all the trouble? He held out his hand to Ross for his phone. "I'll make the call. Brendon can do it."

The shower had done what the hot coffee had not accomplished. Ferd's clothes didn't fit quite right, but well enough since Lacy's own were still tumbling in the drier. She'd have to convince Connor to help her with Gloria's electric bill if he didn't already cover it.

Out in the living room, all the seats were taken, pillows were on the floor with people sitting on them, and everyone was talking together like they'd come for a party, not run for their lives. She headed for the kitchen to find Gloria.

By the sink, Gloria stood with Ferd, doing a mountain of dishes. She sang a tune Lacy didn't know. Ferd joined in and she realized that there must be some history to the song. It was clear they'd both sang it together often.

"Oh, Lacy, you're all finished. Feeling better?" Gloria dried her hands on a nearby towel.

"Yes, much. Thank you. I'm surprised everyone is still up. It's almost one in the morning."

Gloria peered around the corner. "Too worked up. Give them time. For a while, all they would talk about was their pasts, and how they were similar. Sometimes, it takes a situation like this to shake out all that ails you."

Lacy nodded her agreement. It had taken getting captured by a trafficker herself to make her realize she loved Connor and wanted a second chance. She prayed that the conversations would be healing and not rip open old wounds.

“I did offer my room to Moira and Adam. He was looking pretty droopy. What a little trooper though.” Ferd grinned.

“Thank you for doing that. You’ve both gone so far above and beyond what we needed. Thank you.” She hid a yawn behind her hand.

As much as she wanted to find a corner to curl up and fall asleep, she had to find out what was going on at the ranch. When she knew everyone there was safe, she could get some rest.

“I put your phone on top of the fridge. It’s supposed to stay in the rice for a whole day. Don’t try to turn it on or you might wreck it,” Ferd said. “But you’re welcome to use either of ours.” Ferd pointed to the charger on the end of the counter where both devices were plugged in.

“Thanks. I tried calling Connor and left a message. I’m surprised he hasn’t called back.”

Ferd dried her hands and headed over to her phone. “I didn’t hear it but let me check.” She swiped up on the screen and frowned. “Nope, nothing. Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I feel like I shouldn’t rest until I reach someone over there. Mind if I try Brendon’s office?”

Ferd handed her the phone. “I think we’ll all be up for a while, so there’s no rush. When those ladies nod off, Mom and I will use her room. She doesn’t think Teddy will be back tonight.”

She hadn't considered Teddy. He'd been such a rare sight lately. "Has he called?"

Gloria shook her head. "No, if he had, I'd have told him you were here. He called early on and told me not to worry. He also said not to call him because he needed his line open in case of an emergency."

"Well, this isn't an emergency, but Connor might be worried that it is." She decided to call Teddy if she couldn't reach Brendon. Though she would guess that he would remain at his desk until everything was back to order.

She pressed in the numbers, glad she'd forced herself to always dial numbers instead of using the preprogrammed contact list whenever possible. If she hadn't, she wouldn't remember them in an emergency.

"Hello," Brendon answered right away.

"Brendon! This is Lacy." She headed down a hall for a little privacy. "What is going on over there?"

"I could ask you the same. Where are you? Connor was in here and when he found out you'd left, he turned as white as a sheet. I've never seen him look so scared."

"I'm okay. I got Ferd, myself, and all the guests in the cabins over to Gloria's. We're all here, fine, and accounted for."

She heard scratching on the other end like taking notes with a pencil. "That's good to know. Right now, we're still missing two of the six men who came up here looking for trouble."

"Four have been captured? What about the one with a rifle?" The one who'd been after them.

“No, he’s one of the two that are missing. None of them men we captured will give their names. None have identification on them. Thankfully, the FBI is here to manage them.”

“Oh, wow. Is Connor with you?” She wanted to hear him and know everyone was fine.

“No, he’s out with the agents. I just had to turn off the heat to the chapel. They think the men are hiding in there.”

Lacy groaned. That chapel was one of her favorite places. It was quiet and out of the way. When she needed a place to think, that was the best place. Even in the wind, there was a calm there. “They’d better not wreck it.”

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“If they do, we’ll rebuild it. That place is too important. I say that even though I rarely go out there.” He snorted.

“Is Dee alright?” She had been in the lodge when Lacy had left with Ferd. Hopefully, she was still there and safe.

“Yes, she was playing checkers with Rebecca until about midnight when Rebecca wanted to go to bed. Now she’s hereasleep on the couch.” His voice changed when he talked about her.

Did Connor’s do that when he talked about Lacy, or had they been friends for so long that he was merely used to her? Was the ‘cute love’ gone?

“Will you tell him that we’re okay?”

Brendon made a sound of agreement. “Yes. I’ll also let you know when it’s safe for you to come back. Now is not it. While they think the two are in the chapel, the truth is, they don’t know. There are a ton of men canvassing the whole ranch. If they see anyone wandering around, it might be dangerous.”

She shivered. “I’d rather wait. I want to talk to him, but I don’t want to get shot trying to talk to him.”

“That’s the best plan. His phone is charging in his office right now, so he won’t know where you are, but I’ll do my best to get the message to him. I’ve been in contact with Edwyn most of the night.”

“Thank you, Brendon. Not sure what we’d do without you as the command center.” She wondered if sometimes he felt like he wasn’t as much of an asset to the ranch as he was, simply because he was in a wheelchair. It wasn’t true, so she hoped he didn’t.

“Thanks. My strengths aren’t of much use in the snow, but I was able to give Nadine a break after she’d been watching cameras for twelve hours. At this point, you should probably get some rest. Finding these guys could take a long time, then they have to process them and ready them for transport. All that takes time. There’s nothing fast about bringing criminals to justice.”

That was true, but the peace would hopefully last a long time. She was more than ready for a little of that. She signed off with Brendon and headed for the living room where all the women were gathered. Some had been at Wayside for about six months, others had just arrived. Though they ate meals together every day, they didn’t always get together to talk. This was probably the first time they had done so.

“Lacy, how is it going over at Wayside?” Kelly, Sam’s fiancée looked over at her with wide eyes. “Is . . . everyone okay?” Kelly swallowed so hard Lacy heard it across the room.

“Yes, Brendon said everyone is okay over there.” She repeated the details about the two men as she sat cross-legged on the floor.

“If none of the four were Viceroy, that means he’s still out there,” Kelly said, pointing toward the nearest window.

“Brendon is watching the cameras, and all the men are out looking for them. We are as safe here as we can be.” Though she suddenly felt a lot less tired.

Kelly drew her knees up to her chin. “I think I’ll stay awake until all of them are caught. And if they aren’t, I don’t know what I’ll do. I’m not going back.”

Many heads slowly shook back and forth.

Lacy held up her hands, hoping to give them peace. “We’re all together and there are a dozen men hunting for them. Let’s keep praying and believing that this will work out for good.”

And Lord, forgive my own doubting heart.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Flickering light from inside the chapel alerted the group that someone was inside. Whoever was in there had covered the bottom half of all the windows to eliminate glow. Unfortunately for them, there was still enough light produced that the upper part of the windows revealed a glow visible from outside. They’d probably assumed the candles weren’t bright enough to see.

Trent pulled his service pistol from his holster beneath his FBI emblazoned coat. He and two of his men approached the door. He looked to Connor for the approval to open it. Connor had given the okay as they were walking out there. The men hiding had no rights, since they were on the property illegally.

Ross pulled out a tool that looked like a small battering ram. He’d jokingly called it the ‘big key’ when they’d told him how this would go down. It couldn’t be this easy. They’d said they were going to bust in the door, hopefully on the first try. Usually, the surprise was enough to allow them to move in and make arrests.

Connor had his doubts. Viceroy was slippery. He would try anything in order to get away, even if it was unplanned and risky. Viceroy didn’t care if anyone else was hurt, as long as he was free. Connor waited off to the side since that’s the job he was given to do. His men were supposed to leave the agents to their work.

Trent took the big key and slammed it right above the knob. The door splintered near the knob and gave way, squeaking open and leaving a split hole in the jamb. Before any of the feds could move in, shots blasted out from inside and everyone around him dove for cover.

Blood trickled down Ross's face and he held his hand to his temple. He was calm but his hands were already shaking.

"Edwyn, call that in," Connor yelled from his position. He was closest to Ross.

Edwyn glanced at his phone. "The emergency number hasn't worked for over 24 hours. I'll call the fire department. They have an ambulance." He fiddled with hunting for the direct number for a minute, then called.

Connor crawled over to pull Ross out of the open and into cover. He hadn't been able to move far. His earpiece had been severed where the bullet grazed his cheek. Now he was bleeding profusely.

With shaking hands, Ross dug into his cargo pants and tugged a bandana free. Connor grabbed it from him and used it to staunch the bleeding. He listened for the other two men, but the area was eerily silent.

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“Trent, location?” Connor asked.

Someone sent another high caliber bullet at him from inside the chapel. He couldn’t let this become deadly. Not for him, his men, or the agents. Ross would need attention quickly or risk losing too much blood.

Junior crawled toward him and took over holding the makeshift bandage to Ross’s face. “What should we do?”

Edwyn joined them, belly crawling over, still talking on the phone with the dispatcher. “The truck is on the way.”

The slightest hint of a shadow in the shape of a man appeared in the dark doorway. Either the candles had been put out or something was blocking the light. Those outside the chapel were at a disadvantage with the snow. Whoever was inside could see right where they were in the light of the moon and the reflection off the snow.

He pulled his weapon from the holster, just as Edwyn gripped his arm. Edwyn muttered the message he’d been dying to hear, “Brendon heard from Lacy. She and all the guests are over at Gloria’s. Lacy and Ferd helped all of them. They are fine.”

Now he could focus. He could do what needed to be done without worrying that Lacy might get shot. They’d had to hold back on shooting into the chapel when they hadn’t known. He laid fully prone on his belly and aimed dead center in the doorway.

Without Trent by his side to give orders, he carefully decided where it was most likely to take out the attacker and pulled the trigger. One of the men shot back at him

but the bullet went high. Trent belly crawled over.

“Report,” he said as moved Junior’s hand from the wound.

“I haven’t seen your other agent. Ross is shot and needs attention, ASAP. What are your orders?” Connor answered.

“We need to get him to a position where he can get help. No one is going to be able to get back here,” Trent said.

“Agreed. Junior, can you carry him back to the lodge if we find something to use as a bandage?” There wasn’t enough of the bandana to tie around Ross’s head.

Trent unzipped his coat and pulled out a small med kit. He unzipped it, then dug a roll of bandages out. Junior immediately grabbed it and ripped it out of the plastic packaging, then worked to get the gauze securely wrapped around Ross’s head.

Once that was done, Junior hefted him in a fireman’s carry and headed toward the lodge, while Connor and the others covered him. Connor didn’t require that his men stay in the same peak condition they had when they were in the military, but most of them did anyway.

“Now, I want this to end.” Trent reached for his duty belt and pulled out a narrow black tube. He pulled the metal ring on the end and thick smoke gushed from the top. He tossed it toward the gaping door. Someone inside tried to close it before the smoke grenade could enter, but they weren’t quick enough. Soon, smoke poured from inside the small, enclosed building.

Connor waited, his eyes burning from the brief contact with the smoke. He wasn’t sure if it was teargas or just powerful chemicals to create irritation, but it worked. When the men didn’t come out right away, he army crawled forward a few feet to see

if they had been knocked out from the fumes.

“Stay back. When it’s clear, we’ll go inside and get them,” Trent said.

Shots broke out, this time low to the ground and Connor covered his head and yelled for his men to do the same. Edwyn shouted to the dispatcher that he couldn’t stay on the phone anymore and he hung up, then shoved his phone into his pocket.

“Come out with your hands up,” Trent yelled. “Come out now because you won’t like it if we have to come in there and get you.”

A man with a thick accent called from inside the chapel, “You don’t scare me. What are you going to do to me that’s worse than dying? Nothing.” He laughed.

Viceroy would never face justice. He’d keep shooting and injuring anyone in his way. He may have his back against a wall, but he’d always managed to get out before. For all they knew, he could have reinforcements on the way to get him out of there.

Connor reached toward Edwyn. “Cole’s goggles.” He held open his hand. He’d forgotten for a moment about the goggles Edwyn had gotten from Cole earlier, the ones that had helped them find the first pair of men. Now, those very goggles would make all the difference.

“Trent, what are your options? How do you plan to end this?” He wouldn’t take the shot if Trent had another plan.

“I have to wait until the smoke makes them blinded or until they give up. I don’t have enough men to run inside.”

“Or you shoot.” Connor turned his head to look at him. “That man has taken many lives and ruined countless lives.” He wasn’t trying to justify death, but he also

couldn't wait there for another man to get shot.

In the next instant, the entire chapel burst into flames, the explosion burst out the windows. A wave of heat raked over Connor's back. He jumped to his feet and covered his eyes against the blindingly bright light.

Nothing but flames moved inside.

"What happened?" Edwyn took to his feet next to Connor, his gaze fixed on the building.

"I don't know. Maybe this was their final plan. Maybe they hoped we'd get closer, and they'd take us out with them. Or maybe they had something in there that reacted with the smoke bomb. I'm afraid we won't know until this is over."

Edwyn raked his hands through his hair. "I know it won't spread, but there's no water out here besides the snow to put it out."

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“I hate to say it, but by the time the fire trucks get here, there won’t be anything left,” Connor said.

Trent holstered his weapon. “I was hoping I’d be bringing a fugitive in to face trial. You never want to see this.”

All of them seemed to inherently know that no one could survive that blast, but none of them moved to leave. Connor had to stay to maintain safety. With a fire raging like that, it would be ludicrous to walk away. Trent made no move to order his other man to leave, and neither did he.

Junior trudged back toward them, looking tired. “Ross is on his way to Cheyenne. Two firefighters are coming with portable extinguishers, since I told them there was a risk of fire. We saw it blow on the way back. I doubt they’ll be able to do much, but that’s all they have.”

He was too tired to offer to throw buckets of snow on the building. If there had been any chance to save lives or the building itself, he would’ve tried but the effort looked futile. He was tired to his very core, but Viceroy wouldn’t be threatening Wayside anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Six

By Christmas Eve, Melinda and Randy had been moved out to their own cabins. Randy hadn’t found a job with Wayside yet, but Connor had asked him to wait until after New Years to learn something. Both men were good with that plan.

Lacy sat on the sofa with Melinda and everyone from Wayside mingled around. Soft music played in the background and the tree was bursting with presents this year. This was the first Christmas where all of the Wayside men were married or engaged so the party had doubled its usual size.

Victoria had gone out of her way to make mountains of food. With around thirty people in attendance, there had to be enough to go around and give her the day off tomorrow. Connor had told her that even though his family was coming, she didn't need to drive to Wayside, unless she wanted to. Victoria didn't have family close by, so she often came in even when she didn't need to.

Randy was currently in the kitchen helping Victoria. Pete, Cole's son, and Adam raced around the fringes of the room, avoiding adults, and making a ruckus, though Lacy loved it. Children had been a rarity at Wayside, now there were two permanent residents and soon there would be a third when Gabby, Junior's wife, ushered their baby into the world.

Peace filled her soul as the lights on the tree glowed. After finding out that one of the bodies removed from the chapel was Viceroy, she'd finally allowed herself to relax. She wouldn't need to see him at trial. No one had to fear his return. Talking and laughing ebbed and waned around her. She wasn't talking to anyone but felt part of everything. Connor came over from speaking to his father.

"Hey, how are you both doing?" He tilted his head slightly and his eyes finally held some joy. She loved to see that.

Melinda answered first. "Good. Now that I've been on the medications for a few solid days, the headaches have all but gone away. Not that I want to stop taking them before the prescription is up to find out if the pain is still there or not." She laughed.

"I just got some news that pertains to both of you," Connor said. "Dad talked to

Officer Nixon's family. He's healing really well and should be able to come home by Wednesday of next week."

Melinda shifted in her seat, all of a sudden looking uncomfortable. "That's great. It will be good to have him around again. I'm terrified to go into town. What if Tod or Cal are there?"

Connor nodded once in agreement. "I know. He won't be back on the job for a while, but he was the one who coordinated all the other officers. I've been reaching out to the man who temporarily took over and he hasn't seen anyone who fits the descriptions. I gave them the family name and, unless they are hiding Tod and Cal, no one has seen them. So, that's positive."

Melinda frowned and said nothing. Lacy knew the look well enough to know that she didn't believe what Connor said and she'd been shut down enough in her life that she wasn't willing to defend her thought.

Lacy spoke up, "I think it's wise to stay here for a while until we can be absolutely certain all danger has passed. With the amount of snow on the roads, maybe they turned around, knowing they couldn't handle the weather here? Maybe they made it somewhere they consider safe and are biding their time? There's no way for us to know."

Connor's lips slightly turned down. "I can see your point. Either way, it's good to know that Officer Nixon is healing and will get out of the hospital soon."

Melinda stood, gave Connor a weak smile, then took a deep breath. "It is. I'm going to go see if Victoria needs any help." She didn't wait for a response and headed for the kitchen.

Connor sat next to Lacy and laid his huge hand on her knee. "I get the feeling she

doesn't like me."

Lacy covered his hand with hers. "You're a guy, so, yeah. She's not going to trust you for a while. I've talked to Gabby, even though she's not taking clients until she has her child. I wanted to know if Melinda could meet with her instead of Brendon. I feel like she would interact better with a woman."

Connor's head slowly nodded. "I think you're right." He took a deep breath. "Look, my family is coming tomorrow. I would really like it if you could be there."

Her heart jumped for a beat then pounded in her chest. "I'm not family, Connor."

"Yes, you are. You're my family. Will you consider being there?" He looked her in the eyes and her insides melted.

She couldn't tell this man no. Not when it meant so much to him. "I can do that. Will Teddy and Gloria be there too?" She'd known the meeting was mostly for Ferd, but why shouldn't everyone be there?

"Gloria is still a maybe. Dad didn't want to force her to come because it could be legitimately uncomfortable for her. My brothers consider her a homewrecker. It's crazy to me that they can completely paint Mom as innocent. Granted, she didn't have an affair. She just didn't love Dad anymore. What they did was still wrong. No doubt about it. I don't know. The longer I live, the more I realize there are some situations that are gray. Not black or white."

Lacy nodded. "I know. If I'd heard about this situation outside of the family, I'd be quick to judge. I'm still not sure how I feel. Trouble is, they sinned twenty years ago. Once. God doesn't see sin as big or little. It's all sin. But who am I to hold it against them if they've repented? I have to assume they did."

Connor took a breath so deep his chest puffed, then he released it. “According to my dad, yes. He did. He felt horrible about what happened. He still cared about my mom, but he was seeing no love in return. I don’t want to rehash it all. I just wanted to say that Gloria may not be there. Dad will.”

She squeezed his hand. “If you want me to stand by your side, I’ll be there for you.” Truth was, she lived in the lodge and had nowhere else to be. If she wasn’t invited, she’d have to stay up in her room.

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The last few nights, alone in her bed, she'd thought about her time in New Mexico. She'd thought about the kisses and the things they'd said. They'd had conversations that she wished could've happened instead of the divorce. If only Connor had been open to it. Then again, she'd been so hurt at the time, she probably wouldn't have listened.

"I want to talk with you tonight, if you don't mind? We haven't had our usual TV sessions since we got back from New Mexico," Connor said.

"I'd like that." She noticed Teddy heading for the tree. "Looks like the supper must be ready. Teddy is about to pray. Want to eat with me?" She'd hoped he did, but he had other family members now and so many friends. She didn't want to pressure him into spending time with her.

"I'd like nothing more." He leaned over and kissed her temple.

That was the first time he'd kissed her in front of people. She glanced quickly around the room, but no one seemed to have noticed. There was a lingering heat on her temple where his lips had been, like her skin tried to hold onto the contact long after it was done.

Teddy limped slightly as he approached the center of the room. "Can I have your attention, please?"

The room slowly quieted.

"Thank you. This has been a year of a lot of trial, growth, loss, and gain. We've seen

some terribly hard times and beauty too. That is what God is all about. He holds us and leads us through the worst things imaginable out the other side to the glorious sunlight. Never, ever drop His hand. Hold tight to Him. If I've learned anything this last year, it's that He is the one steady. The one constant. He is faithful in all things."

Teddy bowed his head. Lacy followed suit, and Connor threaded his fingers through hers. They hadn't prayed together in years and the lack, now noticed, tugged at her heart. Praying alone was good, between her and God. But praying with Connor, was an experience so intimate and so inexplicable, she hadn't realized how much she missed it.

As Teddy finished the prayer, blessing the meal and the praying for all the people present, her heart added a hearty amen. Hopefully, the coming year would be the best of all.

The evening had all gone well, so why was Connor so stuck in his head? He paced in front of the tree long after everyone had headed home. Lacy had gone upstairs to shower, and he still couldn't force himself to go up there. What if things had changed?

Stop. Stop sabotaging yourself before you find out what a situation will bring.

He wanted to trust that Lacy wouldn't pull back, that she would always be there. She wasn't like his mother. Hadn't she proven that over and over? Hadn't she sat there next to his bed after he'd been shot? She could've left. Nothing kept her there. Not a ring, not a piece of paper. Nothing tangible.

He looked down at the wedding band on his finger. The moment Lacy had returned from Gloria's after saving everyone from potential disaster, she'd run upstairs and put her ring back on her finger. The wedding ring he'd purchased for her after saving months of earnings from working for his dad. Until she'd left for New Mexico, he'd

never seen her take it off. That too, had been unexpected.

“Connor? Is everything okay?” Lacy’s voice drew his attention to the stairs that led up to the living quarters he shared with her.

She stood at the middle of the staircase in flannel pajamas. Her hair was up in a damp bun and shorter sections of hair framed her face, some clinging to her shoulders. She was the most lovely woman he’d ever seen. His eyes would never roam from her. He’d even risk his man-card by calling her adorable. To him, there wasn’t a positive word he couldn’t bend to make it fit her.

“Just mulling a few things.” He tucked his hands behind his back and turned toward the tree.

When he’d been a child, the tree held some kind of wonder. Problems came into focus when he could stand there and think about the lights, Jesus, and what His birth meant. Something so simple as a symbol of Christmas helped clear the cobwebs.

Lacy touched his shoulder. He hadn’t heard her approach. “What’s wrong? I didn’t want to put the popcorn in the microwave without you.”

“Risking your book for some oily popcorn, huh?” He turned back to face her and rested his hands on her hips.

She immediately put her hands loosely around the back of his neck. “Would it surprise you if I said I might skip the book tonight and watch what you’re watching?”

That was new. Watching TV together but separate had been how they’d passed their evenings for as long as he could remember. “I guess I would be.”

“Maybe not every evening, but we can this evening. Relaxing is a good idea going

into tomorrow. It's liable to be stressful." She ran her fingers through the short hair at the nape of his neck, sending delicious sensations down his spine.

"True. Thanks for agreeing to be there." Lacy had never met his brothers. She only knew of them because he'd told her they existed. They hadn't come to Connor's wedding, nor any other event.

He pulled her in a little closer. "I need to say something before we go any further. I hope we'll get to a point where we can talk about forever again. But before that, we need to broach a topic that might hurt."

She stiffened slightly. "I'd hoped we would get there too. What's on your mind?"

He rested his forehead against hers and let her warmth seep into him. "I'm sorry, Lacy. I should've said it a long time ago, but I'm sorry. My refusal to face my fears cost us time together, but worse than that, it cost you the chance to have children. I know you wanted them. I took that from you and it's not something I can ever make up to you."

She hugged him tightly. "Connor, I'm not dead yet. I'm not even thirty-five. People my age still have children. Also, you're putting the cart before the horse. We have no way of knowing if we could even have children. So, take that guilt off your shoulders. It's not yours."

"But it is." He knew that to be true because he felt it so deeply. There was no moving forward for them until she knew and understood that he was sorry for their past.

"Connor." She cupped his scruffy cheeks, asking without words for him to look at her.

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The moment he searched her eyes, all he found was forgiveness and love.

“I don’t hold our past against you. What happened is in the past. It may have started with you, but I wasn’t strong enough to fight back, to ask the questions I should’ve. I didn’t refuse when I should have. You couldn’t force me to sign, but I did. Instead of waiting and finding out what the issue was, I gave in. I gave you the divorce. I’m sorry for that too.”

“I don’t hold that against you. I was in no condition to wait for you or argue with you. Which was another reason to be sorry.” He’d been so angry when he came home. After serving, nothing felt right. Moving back into civilian life had been a shock to his system and Lacy hadn’t been a part of the military, he’d assumed she wouldn’t understand his frustrations.

“Either way, we both understand where we were coming from and can move forward. Right?” Her brows lifted in question.

“Agreed.” He wanted to kiss her, right there in the glow of the Christmas tree. Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet covered box. He slowly opened it to reveal a single gold band.

“What’s this? I have a ring that I love already . . .” Lacy’s brows dipped.

“I talked to a jeweler who said that you can wear this separately if you want to or he can solder the two together. I wanted something to signify what we’ve been through and the new promise between us. Will you accept this as a promise to be faithful to you for the rest of my life? To never leave your side, ever again?” He held out the

box to her.

Her fingers gingerly took the box, and she stared at it. “I wasn’t expecting this. I don’t know what to say. I’m not going to leave you, Connor.”

He let himself smile. “I know. At least, my head knows. I’m still working on the rest of me getting the memo, but I’m working on it. It would mean a lot to me if you wore that ring to remind the world, and me, that we’ve already been through the fire and made it through to the other side.”

She slipped the ring from the plush pillow that held it and slid it on above her wedding ring. The band was narrow, smaller even than the band of the first ring. It was delicate and the color perfectly matched the original ring.

“Yes, I’ll wear it. I’ll remember what we’ve been through, and I’ll fight from now on to keep us together.”

He gently kissed her. It was quick, too much and his emotions would take over. He felt far too much for this woman to play with fire. “I wish I could marry you in the chapel this time.”

Her eyes dimmed for a mere second. “We’ll rebuild it, but I don’t want to wait that long, if you don’t mind.” She grinned. “I’ve waited a long time as it is.”

“Agreed. I have to get some things settled between Brendon, myself, and Ferd. Not to mention this family get together and finding Randy a job. We need to find some type of closure for Melinda. After that, we can set a date. Fair?”

“Absolutely.” She looked down at her rings again. “In the meantime, let’s go have our TV time before it gets too late to watch anything.” She laughed. “I’m getting too old to stay up late like I used to.”

He followed her up the stairs, unable to keep from grinning. Life was not only returning to normal, but looking up. Just a few more weeks of uncertainty and he could have all things he'd dreamed of for years.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Christmas Day dawned bright and crisp with the sun shining brightly off the snow. In the distance, Connor could see the blackened remains of the chapel. That, too, was on his list of things to clean up and rectify before spring.

He tugged his button up shirt over a clean tee, and slowly fixed each button. While he normally didn't care what he chose to wear, today mattered more than usual. He didn't know his brothers anymore. What did they do in life? Where did they work? At forty, his oldest brother likely had a solid career.

A soft knock drew his attention. He turned as Lacy opened his door. She wore her usual jeans, but her top was a thin sweater that looked butter soft. The color was chocolate brown and complimented her eyes and hair. "You look amazing."

She grinned. "Thank you. You clean up pretty well yourself. I wanted to come in and talk to you instead of having you go down and talk to Brendon."

"Brendon?" His worry spiked. What could be wrong on Christmas Day? Couldn't the bad things in the world hold off for a little while?

"Yeah. Officer Nixon finally had a chance to talk with his guys yesterday. I guess they all went to his room for the holiday. One of them talked to him about Melinda. He told them to call New Mexico and ask if either Tod or Cal had returned. They haven't."

Acid burned his stomach. "So, they're still here."

“Most likely. I just wanted to let you know. Unfortunately, the situation is far from over. I’m glad Blake asked them to take the initiative, but I hate telling Melinda that they’re still here.”

He took a deep breath and tried to think clearly about the situation. Likely, they didn’t know where she was. The trouble with that was, if they started asking around town, there were very few other places for people to hide in Piper’s Ridge. Worse, if he described either of them to anyone in town, they would immediately know who Connor and Lacy were.

“We can’t wait this out and hope they don’t find her, but we also can’t go out there and look for trouble.”

“I know. Nadine isn’t working today, but she can if you want her to.” Lacy bit her lip.

“I can’t ask her to work on Christmas Day. The guys will be out doing their normal chores and visiting. They will notice anyone coming in who doesn’t belong.”

“Except your brothers and their families are coming.” Her brows rose.

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“Yes, but they all look very much like me.” Or they did last he’d seen them. Twenty years could change people.

“Might be good to let the men know that we’re looking for two men, alone, and give a description of them. I refuse to tell Melinda she has to stay inside any more than she already feels she has to.”

He took her hands in his, so they stood face-to-face. “I agree with you. I’ll go down for my morning meeting and let everyone know what’s going on. Do you want to go tell Melinda to simply keep a cautious eye?”

Lacy sighed deeply. “I hate to do that. She’s already watching over her shoulder all the time. Victoria decided to come in today. She seems to be getting along well with Randy. I may tell them and have them check in with her to keep her company. Christmas can be really lonely in a new place, and I’ll be busy for quite a while.”

“That sounds good. I don’t want to keep you from her though. If you feel she needs you more, then I’ll deal with this.” He brushed his thumbs over her skin, feeling the softness.

“I didn’t say that. I’ll still be there for you. I only wanted you to know what was going on ahead of the meeting. I’m sure Brendon will talk about it.”

He nodded and released her. “I’m sure he will. My family should be here in one hour. I’ll see you then?”

“You can count on me.” She leaned forward on her tiptoes, giving him a quick kiss

on the lips.

The ability for her to slip right back into giving kisses and loving him was so surreal. In some ways, it was like their marriage had never ended. He headed down the stairs and to his office. Once inside, he only had to wait about a minute before Brendon came in, followed by Cole, Sam, Edwyn, Eric, Junior, Nadine, Ferd and Dad. They all found seats quickly. Though they could've had bad attitudes about meeting on Christmas Day, none of them looked put out.

“Thanks for coming, everyone.” He took a seat behind his desk. “Edwyn, you told me you had news about some cattle?”

Dad sat up straighter in his chair as he turned to look at Edwyn.

“Yes, there's an operation that's shutting down about an hour south of here. They are already selling half their herd to another ranch, so it will be about the perfect size for us. The issue is that we'll have to have the Homestead up and operational within a month.”

“And is that an achievable goal?” Connor asked.

“That depends. We only have these men here right now and all of them are busy. The fencing over at the Homestead needs a lot of work.”

Connor tapped his desk. This was something he wanted to do for his father as a thank you for all the time and effort he'd put in all these years. Not to mention how he'd made sure Lacy stayed. “We have multiple pastures on Wayside. Assuming we don't have any deep snow with no shelter, we could temporarily put them in one of those.”

Edwyn nodded. “We could, but that would mean hiring people soon.”

Dad shifted in his chair. "I could help with that."

"Good. You two can get together tomorrow and discuss what needs to happen. Let me know when you come up with something."

Brendon told the group what Lacy had already told him about Tod and Cal. Everyone was silent, waiting for instructions. Connor still wasn't sure what to do. He didn't know where the men were, couldn't go looking for them, and hated to have to be on the defensive until they made a move. "We have to keep our eyes open, looking for anyone who doesn't belong. My three brothers are coming today for a little while. Those will be the only strangers on the property. I'll go out when they come so if you see them with me, they are not a concern."

"Do you think these two will find their way to Wayside?" Cole asked.

"Eventually. I'm more concerned with them seeing me or Lacy in town and following us out here. They would recognize us."

"And Randy," Brendon said. "He was there, too."

"Right, Randy would be recognized."

"That could be an issue," Edwyn said. "I sent him to town this morning to get gas for the ATVs. We ran pretty low this last week. He took a Wayside truck with a bunch of gas cans."

The room went silent for a minute. "There was no way you could've known. I just hope no one saw him."

"Is he back yet?" Connor asked.

“I didn’t check. I told him where the cans were, handed him the keys and a credit card to pay for it, then assumed the job would get done. He seemed happy to be able to help.” Edwyn shook his head. “I had no idea.”

Connor picked up his phone and pressed Randy’s number into it. The phone rang quite a few times, then went to voicemail. “Weird. He’s attached to that phone. I never see him without it.”

“I volunteer to go to his cabin and see if he’s there. If he’s not, I’ll head into town to check on him,” Junior said.

Cole scowled at Junior. “Dude, your wife is about to give birth any minute. You can’t leave her alone on Christmas Day. What if you get a Christmas baby?”

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He turned a little pale. “I suppose you’re right. She’s been pregnant for so long, I forget that it’s going to happen really soon.”

“I’ll go,” Cole said. “He’s probably in his cabin taking a nap. He’s still used to the weird hours he used to work, and I know he’s been staying up all night to get ahead on his coursework.”

The explanation made it even more likely that Randy was simply in his room, asleep. “Thanks,” Connor said. “That’s all I have. Try to take a few minutes to rest today, if you can.”

They all chuckled. While the ranch duties were lessened in the winter, they never went away completely. Cole stood and shrugged his coat back on. “I’ll let you know what I find when I get out there.”

Connor let everyone leave then he made his way out to the living room. The tree wasn’t lit during the day, but it was still tall and beautiful. After opening gifts the night before, the bottom was now empty. He’d always felt that emptiness under the tree before Christmas was filled with promise, whereas after it had a strange finality. Like his mind knew that the next big holiday would be Easter and though he was thankful for Easter, he wasn’t ever able to find joy in it.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out. Cole’s text made him wish he hadn’t invited his family over that day. He’d be needed.

Randy isn’t here. No one has seen him.

Lacy finished talking to Victoria as she poured her luscious chocolate pudding into two graham cracker crusts. She gently covered them in tin foil and slipped them into the huge freezer along the wall.

Victoria turned around and wiped her hands on a towel then tossed it onto the prep table. “Done. So, you’d like me to visit with Melinda today? I’d love to do that. All my family has moved away from Wyoming, so holidays have become pretty lonely.”

“I’m sorry,” Lacy hoped that didn’t mean she’d leave, but feeling alone was a hard emotion to live with. “Are you thinking of moving too?”

Victoria laughed as she shrugged out of her white chef coat. “No. Not a chance. This is my home. It has always been my home. Do I wish things had been different for me? Sure. But I have my friends, a great job, and a home that’s totally paid off. Those are all blessings I wouldn’t have if I moved.”

“True, and Wayside would miss you.” There wasn’t a single person who hadn’t been thankful for Victoria at one time or another.

She washed her hands and shook them off into the sink, then dried them. “I’ve gotten so used to Randy being in here to help me, I wasn’t sure what to do with myself having the whole kitchen all to my lonesome.” She grinned. “He has promise. I know he’s learning coding, whatever that is, but he has what it takes to work in a kitchen.”

“He told us he was willing to learn whatever he needed in order to live here. I’m glad he’s already found a place where he fits without Connor having to figure it out. I know Teddy hasn’t been able to help you like he used to.”

“I didn’t want him to. After he was shot, I made him stop helping me as much as he wanted to. I miss his help, but I knew it wasn’t good for him to be reaching and lifting like he was.” She carefully loaded the dishwasher with the few dishes she’d

used. “Anyway, there’s food available when you want it. Anyone can come and get what they’d like. I know that means I’ll have a mess when I return tomorrow, but that’s okay too.” She grinned.

“Thank you, Victoria, for everything you do and Merry Christmas.” She hugged her friend.

“No trouble at all. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

Lacy turned off the light as she left the kitchen and found Connor looking pensive in the living room. “What’s wrong? I seem to be asking that a lot lately.”

He waited until Victoria had left then focused on Lacy. “Randy is missing.”

“What?” She hadn’t thought he’d even left since they arrived. How could he be missing?

“Edwyn asked him to do a fairly simple job this morning. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, but he hasn’t come back yet.”

Her chest tightened. “With Tod and Cal still in the area . . .” They could’ve seen him. In fact, the gas station was the only place open for business within an hour’s drive.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we’re concerned about.”

Lacy sat down on the couch. “Your family will be here any minute. What do we do?”

Ferd, Teddy, and Gloria walked in the door with big smiles. Gloria carried what looked like a cake with her. “Hello!” she said with a little too much excitement to be real.

All three of them stopped when Connor didn't greet them with the same enthusiasm.

"Sorry, we just found out Randy is missing."

Ferd's mouth dropped open. "What can I do?"

"Nothing right now," Connor answered. "My men have it under control."

Lacy watched his face, looking for his true feelings and found he was telling the truth. Leaving for a short time had given him the ability to trust his men with this, at least for a few hours. "Victoria just left but the kitchen is stocked."

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Someone knocked on the front door and Teddy turned around to open it. On the other side, three slight variations of Connor stood next to three women. They came inside and shrugged off their coats. Gloria made a beeline for the kitchen with her cake.

Lacy was torn. Should she follow Gloria or stand by Connor's side? The brother with the most flecks of white in his dark hair came forward and wrapped a meaty arm around Connor.

"Paul," Connor said. "Good to see you."

"Same," he replied.

He hesitated ever so slightly, then did the same with Teddy. Lacy held back tears as the other two brothers did the same. Paul waited until Kevin and Hunter had finished, then he introduced the wives.

"This is my wife, Laura." He indicated which woman was his wife. She waved slightly, but stayed back by the door like she wanted to escape. "This is Kevin's wife, Maggie." He moved his hand slightly over to introduce her. "And this is Hunter's wife, Regina."

"Good to meet all of you," Lacy said and welcomed them in to sit down.

Teddy waited a moment. "I'd also like to introduce you to my daughter, Ferd, and my wife, Gloria." He nodded at each of them.

Gloria came over to stand at his side, though she, too, looked like she wanted to bolt.

None of the three brothers said anything, but each nodded. Connor wasn't much of a talker when he didn't have to, so she wasn't all that surprised at them. "Did you have a good Christmas with your other side of the family?" Lacy asked.

Each of the women looked at each other as if they weren't sure who should go first. Finally, Laura spoke up. "My family is fine. Look, we're only here because we were asked to be. We all agreed on the way here that this meeting wasn't part of our Christmas plan, it was part of theirs." She pointed at the brothers.

Connor tugged on his collar and looked around. Lacy tried to think of something the women would be interested in doing while the men did their talking. Maybe this was exactly why Connor had felt he needed her there.

"Would you like to go out and see the horses?" she offered.

All three again looked back and forth at each other, then Regina answered for the group. "Sure. That sounds great. Hunter, send a text when you're finished." She shrugged her coat back on.

Connor reached for her for a moment and mouthed, thank you, silently to her. She smiled back and put on her coat to lead the ladies to the barn. She didn't want them to be uncomfortable, but she couldn't imagine why they'd agreed to come if they didn't want to.

"So, I can tell you didn't want to come. I mean, you said as much, so why did you?" Holding her tongue was never a strong part of her character.

Regina laughed. "I like you. We don't have to worry about what you're thinking. Honestly, we came because our husbands asked us to. Since Paul said you're in the same boat, I feel like you'd understand. All of us would love to figure out where we went wrong. It seemed like our relationships were good for a while, then they all

fizzled.” She shrugged. “I get it that the spark goes out after a while, but I can’t figure out what happened.”

Lacy swallowed back her immediate desire to admit she and Connor were fine now, better than fine. That’s not what these ladies needed to hear. “If they’re like Connor, they probably feel like their dad cheated them out of part of their lives.”

“Connor feels that way? About his mom, I suppose,” Regina said.

Laura piped up, “I’d wondered if it had something to do with family stuff. He’s always complaining that my family likes to do things. His family doesn’t. It’s like he can’t fathom that some people still like to get together with their parents.”

“I wonder if this meeting will help or hurt the situation?” Lacy almost hated to speculate.

“I don’t know,” Maggie finally chimed in. “All I know is that Kevin and Hunter didn’t want to be here, but Paul asked them to come. Their mother convinced them for years that Teddy had done her dirty and had an affair. She was sure Connor knew about it the whole time because he was so close to his father.” She shrugged. “Unless something pretty significant happens. I doubt it will matter at this point. I’ve tried suggesting therapy and all sorts of things. I’m ready to give up.”

Lacy took a deep breath and tried very hard not to put her own life story on these ladies. They hadn’t lived what she had. “I’m praying that all of you find peace with your husbands and I’m so sorry that this hasn’t been easier for any of you.”

Sin truly did reach through time and destroy when it wasn’t dealt with. Twenty years of hiding what had gone wrong had only made the problem multiply.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“I’m going with you.” Melinda’s words were exactly what Lacy hadn’t wanted to hear.

“But . . .”

“No. He’s my husband and this has to stop. He can’t kill all of us. Randy stood up for me when I needed him. He chased down my husband in the dark and Cal threw him in a back yard to get annihilated by a dog. I will not let him deal with this alone.” She shrugged on her coat. “Are you going to try to stop me?”

She wouldn’t, but Connor might. He’d already told Lacy he didn’t want her there and she’d pushed the issue. “It’s not up to me.”

“I’ll grab a set of keys and follow you if I have to.” She didn’t blink as she stared at Lacy. Strength infused her stature.

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“Okay, but just know that it’s Connor you have to convince, not me.” Lacy shoved a pair of gloves into her coat pocket and headed for the door.

Connor was already waiting for them in the parking lot with Cole and Edwyn. He looked up and his face immediately clouded over. “Lacy?”

Melinda interrupted her. “I told her I’m going. And I am. No one knows Tod as well as I do. It may not matter, but there are things that I need to say to him before the police take him away.”

“Speaking of which, I talked to Officer Daniels. He’ll be joining us in town,” Cole said. “He has some idea where Tod and his brother might be. He agrees that’s the first place to look for Randy, given the history.”

“Good.” Connor touched his side where his pistol was hidden under his coat. “Cole and Edwyn, take truck 2. We’ll follow in the car.”

Cole gave a nod. “Meet at the gas station. We’ll go from there.”

Lacy followed Connor to the red sedan Wayside had owned for years. She hoped Officer Daniels had already been scheduled to work today and they weren’t taking him away from Family. Officers often had to miss holidays. The idea that Officer Daniels might miss a rare, unscheduled holiday for their needs made her furious.

She buckled in and Melinda sat right behind her in the back seat. She remained silent and Lacy had the impression she was stewing over what to say.

“What if we don’t see them? If Tod and Cal aren’t where Officer Daniels thinks they are, what is the plan?” Lacy asked.

“That will be up to the officer. We’re there in the hopes that Randy will be there, and we can bring him home. I called the gas station, and they remembered him coming in this morning, but the truck is still there. Officer Daniels told them to leave it be and he’d check it out later today.”

“They’re hoping to pull evidence off of it?” Lacy assumed.

“Yes. They did say that there is no damage on the outside, so whatever happened to Randy didn’t happen right next to the truck.”

Melinda spoke up from the back, almost too quietly for Lacy to hear. “He’s not a fighter. Even if he tried to get away, he’s not built to fight back.”

Lacy was of a mind that if someone was trying to take her captive, she would fight back with everything in her, so would Randy. There was no way to know what he was capable of doing. “We’ll take a hands-off look at the truck when we get there, but I’m sure the guy working at the gas station is right. There’s probably no sign of him outside the truck,” Lacy said.

Her fingers tapped the armrest on the car, and she wished the trip to town was faster. Living in that area her entire life, the drive didn’t bother her, until she was in a hurry. She watched for any vehicles on the road. Maybe Randy had gone for a walk, lost track of time, didn’t return calls, and was on his way back home right now. She cringed at how Pollyanna her thoughts had become. Even the stressful year they’d had couldn’t take away her hope that nothing had happened.

Connor pulled into the gas station and parked behind the Wayside truck. Cole and Edwyn had already parked on the other side of the gas station alongside Officer

Daniels in his cruiser. Lacy got out and stood back a few feet as she looked inside the truck as well as around it. All four gas cans still sat in the back. She could see the level of gasoline inside when the sun shone down on them.

“He made it here. He filled the tanks. What then?” she asked.

Melinda crossed her arms at Lacy’s side. “I have to wonder. He wouldn’t have gotten into a vehicle with them. Maybe Officer Daniels will ask for the security footage?”

“I hope he does. Let’s go over and see what he has to say.”

They joined all the men who’d gathered near the cruiser. Officer Daniels was speaking to the group. “It’s our belief that Tod and Cal are with one particular relative who tends to keep to themselves. He’s a recluse and tends to shoot first, ask questions later. We avoid interacting with him unless we have to.”

“I can see why you wouldn’t want to go check for Tod and Cal there before now. Is that our last resort?” Connor asked.

“Yes. The other three family members who live nearby agreed to a search of their residences. Honestly, since we hadn’t seen any vehicles from out of state and hadn’t found them at those more likely homes, we assumed they weren’t here.”

“It’s still possible they aren’t. Not likely, but possible. Right?” Melinda said. “I mean, this could be a horrible coincidence. He could’ve been taken by anyone. Right?”

Lacy bit her lip and closed her eyes. There was far too much hope in Melinda’s voice. As much as she had to agree, it was possible, it wasn’t probable.

“There is always a possibility we’ve got it wrong,” Officer Daniels confirmed. “Innocent until proven guilty. I just have to look at the facts as I have them and right

now, they are our prime suspects.”

Melinda’s jaw hardened and she nodded her agreement.

“Because of the danger inherent in driving up the driveway, I’ll have all of you wait parked beside the road. I’ll notify you if I find Randy and when you can come in to get him. Understood?”

Connor nodded and looked at Melinda for confirmation. Lacy touched his arm, letting him know he was scowling at Melinda. He immediately relaxed his features. “Are you good with that?” he asked Melinda.

“I’ll have to be. I’m not going to go rogue on you or anything. But if it comes down to negotiating with Tod, I’m the one who can do it.”

Officer Daniels frowned slightly. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I’ll drive up, ask if I can look around his place. If I see the vehicles you described parked anywhere near the house, that will be evidence I can use to call a judge and get a warrant. Hopefully, I won’t need to.”

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Lacy cringed inwardly. These two were not masterminds. They were greedy and narcissistic. Those things alone made them believe they were smarter than anyone else. In some ways, that made them more dangerous too.

She climbed back into the car and Connor followed the cruiser out along a dirt road, past farms, fields, and fences. When Officer Daniels turned on his blinker, Connor pulled off the road and parked. Edwyn parked directly behind him, then called.

“This is Connor.”

Edwyn answered, “I thought it would be good to have an open line of communication. Before you came over, I gave Officer Daniels Lacy’s phone number. That’s who he’ll be calling if we need to come up.”

Lacy tugged her phone from her pocket and made sure the volume was turned up. It had been less than reliable after getting soaked and there had been no time to replace it. “Hopefully my phone doesn’t let us down. I almost feel like it would be better for you to call my number and have him text Connor.”

“I’m sure it will be fine and he’s already driving up the driveway. I can’t really have him change now. Just keep an eye on your phone,” Edwyn answered.

Connor turned the phone to mute, “Are you sure you’ll get a call?”

She shook her head. “I’ve missed at least two calls that I know of.” If they relied on her phone, there was a chance everything could go very wrong.

Three shots went off in rapid succession and Officer Daniels quickly backed out of the driveway. He yanked onto the road and pulled onto the other side of the road. As he rolled down his window, more shots came from the house hidden in the trees.

“There are two cars up there matching the description. Do not engage. Head back for town.” He pulled back onto the road and drove off.

Connor shifted the car into gear as Melinda opened the door and ran out. Lacy screamed for him not to leave her. He watched as Melinda raced up the driveway where Officer Daniels had just been chased out of.

“What in the world?” Connor couldn’t imagine what she hoped to accomplish but he couldn’t let her run in there alone. “Don’t move.”

“If you think I’m letting you go in there alone, you’d better think again.” She unbuckled her seatbelt.

“Lacy, I can’t lose you. Please. Stay in the car so I don’t worry about you.”

She shook her head. “And leave me here to worry about you?”

“Blast it, woman. I love you. You can’t do this to me.” He’d die before he let her get shot.

“Blast it, Connor, I love you too. Come on.” She opened her door and headed down the driveway after Melinda.

Cole yelled at him as he got out. “What are they doing?”

“Apparently, taking over.” He wasn’t sure what else to say.

With that, Edwyn and Cole joined him as he jogged after the women. At least the shooting had stopped for now. He slowed down some as the house came into view. A man sat on an old wooden rocker on his front porch. A long barreled pistol lay across his lap, though he didn't immediately aim at Melinda and Lacy.

"Who you looking for?" he asked.

Melinda stopped about forty yards from the house and yelled her answer. "I'm looking for Randy."

"He the stringy young guy with his pants too big?" the man asked.

Melinda didn't answer directly. "Can I see him?"

"Don't think so. He's busy right now."

Lacy made it to Melinda's side. "So you admit he's here?"

"I didn't say nothing of the sort."

"But you did," Melinda pushed.

Tod came out the front door and stood behind the seated older man. He held a rifle. Connor cringed at the sight. That gun had a much longer range than the pistol. He jogged faster to reach the women.

"He didn't say anything. What do you want?" Tod sneered.

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“Randy,” Lacy answered. “We know you took him.”

“You don’t know anything.”

Connor put himself in front of Lacy, but Melinda pushed in front of him. “You have no right to take anyone. Randy didn’t do anything to you.”

“Oh, but he did. He set off the fire alarm. That one action put Cal in the hotseat, you see, the way he had the doors set to unlock in a fire alarm isn’t legal. Investigators found out about it and now he’s facing an investigation. Mostly though, we knew you’d come to look for him.” Tod laughed.

Cal’s voice came from behind Connor, and he realized a serious error. He’d assumed the old man had been the one firing on Officer Daniels. It was probably Cal out in the woods. Now they were stuck and couldn’t leave.

“So, you decided to come all on your own. How nice of you.” Cal flipped open his revolver and slowly refilled it.

“You don’t have to do this, Tod. You wanted me. Trade me for Randy.” Melinda slowly put her hands up and took a few steps forward.

Tod aimed his gun at her. “You aren’t enough anymore. Honestly, without the money your death would’ve brought in, you aren’t worth anything anyway.”

“That’s what you say, but it’s not the truth,” Melinda stood taller.

“You don’t get to decide how I feel about you.” Tod closed one eye.

Connor found his footing, ready to tackle her. Instead, the old man yanked the barrel of the gun down. “What do you think you’re doing? It’s one thing to shoot at someone when they don’t know who it is. If you think you can take care of all five of them without a chance anyone will get away, then by all means, fire away. But I don’t want to go to jail for you.”

Connor took the distraction as a chance to pull Melinda back closer to him. There had to be a way out of this situation that he wasn’t seeing. If he reached for his own gun, either of them could scattershot, and take out any of them. He didn’t want anyone getting shot.

Edwyn and Cole backed up until they formed a circle, all of them facing outward so there could be no surprises. He heard someone behind him calling someone. Very quietly, he heard someone answer.

Cole taunted Cal, “You missed that officer. He made it out.”

“You won’t be so lucky!” Cal’s voice seemed to get closer.

Connor wouldn’t turn around and risk missing something from the men in front of him. He had to trust his own guys watching his back. “Tod, you need to let us go. That officer was supposed to meet us back at the gas station. Within a few minutes, he’ll see that we aren’t there. A few bullets won’t stop him if he knows there are five people held hostage in here. He’ll probably call in reinforcements.” Connor hoped he could force these guys into a little critical thinking.

Cal’s voice was now very close. “Let’s get them inside. Without a warrant, they can’t prove we have anyone and by the time they get a warrant, they’ll be gone and so will we.”

“Oh, you planned to leave me holding the bag, huh?” the old man said. “That’s just like you two to run away. You ran off to the south when you were about to get arrested before, and now you’ll do it again. I’m not covering for you.”

Tod aimed his gun to the back of the old man’s head. “I don’t think you realize you were going to be the fall guy all along. Cal, gather them up and bring them up here.”

Connor held tight to Lacy’s hand while trying to protect Melinda from Cal’s grasp. Edwyn pushed back against Cal, and a tussle broke out between the two of them. Connor drew his pistol and aimed for Tod while Cole and Edwyn worked to immobilize Cal.

Melinda took off running toward Tod. Lacy screamed for her to stop. Time stood still. He pulled the trigger, and a wide pool of red opened over Tod’s chest. He looked momentarily surprised as his aim faltered, then he fell to the porch. Still.

Melinda stumbled to her knees with a gut-wrenching cry. Lacy took off after her while Connor kept the old man in his sites, just in case things took a turn.

“I always hoped I’d be good enough. I always hoped that eventually, he’d love me like he said he would.” Melinda’s sobs filled the air.

Officer Daniels pulled into the yard and got out of his car. Connor held his gun in the air, knowing that he’d have to answer for what he’d done. Even though Tod had been pointing his gun at Melinda, there were still questions to be answered.

Cal was taken into custody as Connor called in for the ambulance that was likely to determine he was dead on arrival. The old man didn’t move from his chair until Officer Daniels came to take him into custody. Once that was handled, he came over to Connor who was waiting outside the house to look for Randy.

When Melinda approached him, he turned her away. This part he'd be doing on his own. If Randy hadn't made it, he didn't want Melinda to see that. It worried him that they hadn't heard any noise from the house during the arresting process.

Officer Daniels told Melinda and Lacy to head back to the car along with Cole and Edwyn. He would take Connor inside to look for Randy. The whole scene had changed. Whereas just an hour before, he'd been sure he would get shot, now the house felt oddly haunted, dirty, and lonely.

Both men had out their pistols in case someone they didn't know about was waiting to ambush them. There was no way to know if the house was empty until they cleared it. They'd looked through all of the rooms and had almost given up when Officer Daniels saw a narrow door in the living room that seemed to lead up to an attic.

Cobwebs hung from the corners, and something scurried near the top of the dark staircase.

"Got a light?" Connor asked. "All I have is my phone."

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“By the way, thank Edwyn for the idea to call dispatch and leave the line open so they could hear what was going on. They radioed me right away and I was able to head back. I thought you had followed me out.”

“That was my plan. It didn’t work out so well.”

Officer Daniels pulled a flashlight from his duty belt, and they slowly crept up the rickety staircase. In the far corner, near a single pane window, lay Randy. He was unconscious, but Connor could see the rise and fall of his body.

“Praise God. He’s alive.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Aweek later

Connor sat in his office with Lacy, Ferd, and Brendon on New Years Eve. Snow swirled outside the window and the scent of the wood fire from the fireplace in the living room carried to his office. He glanced quickly at the documents Dad had drawn up with his lawyer the day before, and hoped Brendon wouldn’t feel cheated.

Ferd took a deep breath. “Is this about my brothers?”

She was far too knowing for her own good, but that would make her great working for Wayside if she chose to. “Yes. My brothers appreciated what we have going on here and would like to join in and help the cause. We had a really good talk, and they now know Mom was wrong in her assumptions about me. They’re still unsure about

Dad. They know I don't have any children to pass this on to."

"Yet," Lacy said with confidence.

He grinned, unable to help himself. "Right. I may, at some point in the future have a child but for now, the shares of Wayside are split into fifths with each of Theodore, also known as Teddy, Kincade's children getting equal portions. I feel this is fair and we can discuss any change to that if any of us have children."

Brendon cleared his throat and Connor held up his hand. "I don't want to leave you out. You've been at my side since the beginning. I wish I could make you an honorary brother and give you a portion, but Dad's trust goes into effect when he passes. As of right now, nothing has changed with the working of Wayside."

"I know," Brendon said. "Once Ferd came back, I assumed the way the trust was written would be changed. Unless we adopt, Dee and I will not be able to have children, I won't have anyone to give a portion of Wayside to. It's better to rely on Ferd or Hunter for the next generation."

Lacy waved her hands. "Or us. I mean. I'm not exactly old yet." She crossed her arms.

"You two aren't married yet, either," Brendon joked.

Connor bowed his head slightly. He hadn't told the guys, but he'd already asked Lacy to pick a date. They would be married in May, in the spring. He only had to wait through one more winter before his bride would be legally part of his family again.

Lacy looked at him, prodding him to answer.

"Lacy and I will be getting married in May. You all are, of course, invited."

Brendon snorted. "Took you both long enough."

"Thanks," Connor deadpanned.

Now that dividing up the land or at least telling everyone about the division was complete, he let them go off to their other duties. Lacy stayed in place and tucked her feet up on the chair as she had done every day in the morning when they talked about work or life. She was a beautiful fixture in his life that he never wanted to lose again.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"You. Always you." He grinned. "Sorry you asked?"

"Never." She stood and held out her hand. "I heard you get the whole day off."

"Who told you that?" He laughed.

"The boss." She grinned.

"I thought I was the boss?" He took hold of her hand and kissed it.

"How about I be the boss today and give you the whole day off?" She pulled him closer.

"I like that idea. What should I do with my day off?" He wrapped his arms around her waist.

"I think we should make popcorn and watch crime documentaries. All day long."

"Hmm, that's very dark for a day off. Any other ideas?" He was kidding, he'd spend the day doing anything.

She tilted her head back slightly and he zeroed in on a particularly soft looking spot right by her ear. He kissed her there and she squirmed in his arms, giggling.

“That tickles.” She pushed him away playfully.

“That makes me want to do it even more.” He chased her around his office for a minute until she let him catch her and in the next heartbeat, he lifted her off her feet and into his arms. “If my boss says we watch documentaries, then that’s what we’ll do.”

She hugged his neck as he carried her up the stairs, thankful for a year of second chances.