



Stalked at Rescue Ridge

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Description: In the war- ravaged terrain of Kandahar, Kade Sturgess and his battle buddy, Zeke, face the harsh truths of combat. With Zeke's impending fatherhood looming, Kade longs for a connection back home. When tragedy strikes, leaving Kade wounded and Zeke dead, Kade is forced to return to the family ranch. Consumed with guilt and shame, Kade reluctantly returns home where he assumes a new role: protector.

Bree Kyndall, pregnant and vulnerable, turns to the one person she can't forget: Kade. Together, they face danger while he wrestles with survivor's guilt. As Kade discovers that the child Bree carries is his own, he'll risk everything to protect both mother and baby. But a relentless killer threatens to shatter any chance of a second beginning.

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Prologue

“After this, I’m getting out.”

With those words, Zeke Akehurst had just cursed the mission.

Kade Sturgess bit back a string of swear words as he wiped sweat from his forehead before more rolled into his eyes, blurring his vision. “Jesus, Zeke, why the hell would you say something like that right now?” Did the man not realize they were about to be in a shit storm? Did he not realize there were snipers on rooftops chomping at the bit to take down an “infidel” like him? Did he not realize the fastest way to leave Kandahar was today, in a body bag?

Zeke knew better. Didn’t he?

“She needs me,” Zeke continued, unfazed by the fact he’d just jinxed the shit out of their mission. “I should be home.”

Kade didn’t want to be reminded of Bree Kyndall’s pregnancy or the fact his best friend was the father of Bree’s child instead of him. Not that Kade wanted kids. An involuntary shiver rocked his body every time he thought about having rug rats of his own running around, causing trouble. But that was just sour grapes. He’d been outdone by his best friend. One minute, Kade and Bree had shared the best weekend of his life, with sex that had raised the bar too high for anyone else to reach, let alone beat it. Then Bree had gone radio silent for weeks after. The next thing Kade knew, Bree was in a relationship with his best friend. The change had happened so fast that Kade’s head was still spinning. The baby news had come a couple of months later.

All that head spinning had turned to stomach bile and nausea.

If Kade and Zeke hadn't been battle buddies since basic training and best friends long before that, Kade would have given the man a piece of his mind. But no one knew about Kade's brief fling with Bree. "Shut up, would you?"

"Do you have a problem with me?" Zeke asked, offended. "Because you've been a pain in my ass for months now."

"Yeah, I gotta a problem with you," Kade said through clenched teeth. He would never tell Zeke about the weekend with Bree. Kade wasn't a jerk. Zeke was under Bree's spell. He'd said he'd finally found the love of his life. Kade didn't have it in him to ask why the two hadn't tied the knot yet. He didn't want to know. He didn't want to be asked to be Zeke's best man. And he sure as hell didn't want to stand at the altar across from Bree and bear witness to her making the biggest mistake of her life, marrying Zeke and not Kade.

So, no, he hadn't pried into Zeke's personal life.

"Right now, my biggest problem is that you're distracted when you should have a laser focus on the many asshats who are doing their job, staring down the barrels of their AR-15s, ready and waiting for this convoy to parade through town like its Fourth of July and we're headed to a backyard barbecue," Kade said, knowing full well the fireworks could begin any moment. "Plus, it's hotter than Hades out here. I have an awful mix of sweat and sand in my eyes, and I need a shower."

"Since when have you ever complained about a free exfoliant?" Zeke's joke and smirk would normally be enough to shake Kade out of one of his dark moods.

"Focus, please," Kade stated, nodding toward the mounted assault rifle his buddy was manning.

Zeke shot Kade a look that was equivalent to a bullet. “You could have had—”

Before he finished the sentence, the barrage began. Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat. Those were the last sounds Zeke heard before taking multiple hits. Kade could do nothing to stop the onslaught.

Eyes wide, his buddy’s jaw dropped in disbelief. Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat. Several bullets scored hits above and below his Kevlar vest. Blood spurted. So much blood. Kade threw himself on top of his longtime friend, knocking him to the floorboard of the Humvee as blood spewed from Zeke’s mouth and his gaze fixed.

No!

“Don’t you go anywhere on me,” Kade demanded, stuffing down his desperation in order to stay positive-sounding for his best friend. “Stay with me. You hear?”

Zeke’s muscles fell limp.

No!

“You’re going to be all right. You hear?” Kade turned Zeke’s head to the side so he could breathe. “Breeneedsyou. The babyneedsyou.” “I need you.”

The sounds of a chopper flying by overhead quieted the tat-tat-tats.

Blood dripped onto Zeke. It was Kade’s blood. Shock consumed him, but he refused to give up hope. He flipped Zeke around and started plugging bullet holes with his hands.

Seconds ticked by as darkness tugged, threatening to suck Kade under. Fighting the urge to close his eyes, Kade managed to locate his radio and call for help.

“Come on,” he begged Zeke. “Don’t you go anywhere on me.”

Kade had no idea how much time passed until rescue arrived. He was lifted off Zeke by hands that felt almost superhuman.

“We can take over from here,” someone said before darkness descended and Kade’s eyes closed.

Bright light made it next to impossible for Kade to open his eyes. He blinked a couple of times through blurred vision. Where the hell was he?

Kade attempted to sit up—and failed.

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Bringing his hand up to rub his eyes, he realized there was an IV in his arm.

“Good to see you finally wake up, Sturgess,” a serious female voice said as a figure dressed in blue scrubs moved beside him.

Nurse. Hospital.

“Do you know what day of the week it is?” she asked.

“Zeke,” he said through a frog in his throat. He coughed to ease some of the dryness as he forced his eyes open and made a second attempt to sit up before being guided back down with hands on his shoulders.

“Be still for me, okay?” the nurse said.

He gave a reluctant nod.

“Do you know where you are?” she asked, checking his vitals.

“Hospital,” he said, figuring he better play along if he wanted information.

The female came into focus. He judged her to be in her late twenties. Her hair was in a loose bun piled on top of her head, and she wore wrinkled scrubs. Her nametag read Sharon. Could he beg her to give information about Zeke?

“I need to know about my friend,” he said.

“Sorry,” Sharon said. “It’s against the rules to give information about another patient without consent.”

Could he sweet-talk her into making an exception?

“Hi, Sharon,” he said with a pleading look, pouring on all the Kade charm he could muster despite the fact any movement made him wince and his head felt like it was about to explode.

“Hi, back,” she said, still focused on the machine next to his bed.

“I need to check on my friend,” he said. “But I’m going to need some help from you.”

“Oh, really?”

Was he making progress? “That’s right.”

“How can I help you?” she asked, stopping long enough to put a hand on her hip. She’d likely heard and seen it all based on her semi-amused expression.

“Like I already said, I was brought in with a buddy.” Once again, he flashed his 100-watt smile. “And I need you to do some detective work.”

“Is that all?” Sharon thumped his IV drip.

“His name is Zeke. He was shot.” Kade didn’t mention how many times or the fact Zeke’s gaze had fixed. Modern medicine worked miracles. And despite recent differences, Kade couldn’t imagine going through life without his best bud or accept the fact a child would lose its father before taking its first breath.

“Come at me one more time with the name.”

“Zeke Akehurst.”

Sharon’s features softened. “Okay. I’ll see what I can find out.”

Sunlight cascaded in from a window next to his bed. Usually, he’d be a fan, but his head hurt, and the brightness only made an ache form behind his eyes. Kade exhaled a slow breath, praying like hell she didn’t return with a chaplain. “Thank you.”

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

“You will.”

Sharon’s sympathetic gaze lingered a few seconds longer than Kade found comfortable. He fought the urge to read too much into it.

The nurse seemed to catch herself. She gave a small headshake and then said she’d be back as soon as she had news. With that, she turned and exited the small, curtained room.

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Kade assessed his own injuries. He wasn't going anywhere anytime soon with his right leg in traction. He forced himself to lean forward to feel around and check out the damage.

He felt his leg, praying it wasn't broken. Although his ankle was the size of a grapefruit, he was relieved to see the damage was superficial. He'd probably rolled it when he'd dove on Zeke. Nothing more. A high ankle sprain?

Kade's hands were fine, and his arms worked okay despite movement making everything hurt. He'd live.

Rolling his shoulders, pain shot down his back on the left side. He moved enough of the paper hospital gown to reveal a bandage the size of his hand where the base of his neck met his shoulder. Shit. That was going to leave a mark.

He needed to get the hell out of here and find his buddy. Zeke had to be in much worse condition and could probably use a friend right now.

Peeling one corner of the medical tape, Kade lifted his shoulder to get a better look. He winced. Any movement shot pain down his back.

From the looks of it, he'd been nicked with a bullet. It wasn't much more than a scratch. His injuries would heal just fine with a little antibiotic ointment and a few bandages.

He gently tapped on the corner of the medical tape and then leaned his head back on the pillow. His mouth was as dry as hot Texas soil in August. From outside the

curtain all around him, he heard groans and moans. No doubt there were half a dozen soldiers, maybe more, in this part of the field hospital.

And then he picked out the nurse's voice. She spoke in barely more than a whisper, but it was unmistakable that she was walking toward him. There was another voice. Male.

Zeke?

A small hand clenched the curtain before drawing it back enough to reveal Sharon's companion.

A knot formed in Kade's chest as his gaze landed hard on Commander Dallas Burns. The commander stood there, his hands clasped in front of him, wearing a solemn expression.

"Lieutenant Sturgess, you're going home," Burns said. He'd never been one for idle chit-chat, but he'd cut to the chase in record time.

At first blush, Kade thought the good nurse had reported him for inappropriate behavior, but he hadn't done anything wrong except try to shmooze her into giving him information.

Kade cocked his head to one side, ignoring the pain. "Excuse me, sir?"

"Someone will be around to pick you up in a few minutes," his commanding officer said.

"What do you mean? I got to get back out there and get those bastards," Kade argued. No way was he going back to Saddle Junction. His injuries couldn't be that severe. Not enough to end his career.

“You don’t understand,” Burns said, dropping his gaze for a second.

Kade motioned toward his leg. “Just a couple of scrapes and bruises. The swelling will be down in no time, and I’ll be ready for—”

“It’s your father,” Burns said.

Kade bit his tongue before he said, What father?

“I’m sorry to tell you this, son. But your father died this morning.” Burns lowered his hands like you would standing graveside in a show of respect.

Normally, hearing news of your parent’s death would be a cause for sadness. As far as Kade was concerned, his old man could go to hell. That was probably where he was headed anyway. Kade was more concerned about Zeke. “I’m not going anywhere except out of this hospital and back to the field.”

“You’ve been named executor of the will, so your family needs you back in Texas,” Burns said. Kade was from a small ranch community in North Texas. Burns was from San Antonio, which had spurred a lot of jokes once Kade’s buddies had found out why the man’s first name was Dallas. Rumor had it he was named after the city where he’d been conceived. No son wanted a daily reminder of his mother’s sex life. The jokes had written themselves. Kade knew better. No one made fun of the commander to his face or anywhere in his vicinity, and Kade was smart enough not to take a chance behind Burns’ back, either. He figured a person had no say in who their parents were and shouldn’t be punished for their mistakes, or Kade wouldn’t just go to hell; he’d be the one driving the bus. Then again, being named after the place your mother had sex didn’t classify as child abuse like the things Kade had endured at the hands of his father.

“As far as I’m concerned, all the family I need is right here, sir.” Kade had a soft spot

for his sister, twin brothers, and younger brothers. He loved them even though he'd skipped his high school graduation to join the military. All told, there were six Sturgess children, with Kade being the oldest. It made sense that his no-good father would name Kade as executor based on his seniority and the fact he had sperm. Beaumont Sturgess believed a woman's place was in the kitchen or the bed, serving her husband. What an asshat!

Taking the helm of the family business wasn't a job Kade could stomach. He'd die before he went back to take his "rightful" place at the family ranch. His father might have grown the Sturgess empire, but the tradition of the oldest male heir taking over the business had died with Beaumont. Period.

"I thought you might say that." Burns studied Kade before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a folded-up piece of paper. He smoothed it out before holding it out.

Kade tensed, looking at the note like it was a bomb about to explode. Had Beaumont believed a note would undo all the years of physical and mental abuse?

"Go ahead and take it," Burns urged, reaching out his arm to bring it closer. Kade must have withdrawn because Burns added, "It's a message from your sister."

Kade forced relaxation into his shoulders as he took the offering and read the note.

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We need you, Kade. Please, come home. Please. Chloe

There wasn't much Kade wouldn't do for Chloe. Could he do this? Could he go home? Face Bree?

All he really had to do was go home and have a conversation with his siblings about selling Sturgess Ranch. Considering the fact not one of them lived on or worked the ranch, there wouldn't likely be much debate about the sale. An annoying voice in the back of his head picked that moment to remind him that he was in no condition to head back out into the field. His injuries needed time to heal. Going back home to Saddle Junction for a couple of weeks should give him enough time.

Dammit. Was he actually considering going back to the town he'd sworn off at eighteen and after he'd renewed that promise after his fling with Bree?

Kade bit back a curse. He lifted his gaze to Burns. "What about Zeke? I'm not leaving here without him."

Commander Burns dropped his gaze and gave a little head shake. "I'm sorry, son."

Those words were the equivalent of a sword being thrust deep into the center of Kade's chest. All the air was suddenly sucked out of the room, and he couldn't breathe. His chest ached with the kind of hurt and loss that created a massive crater. One that could never be refilled.

"Bucket," he managed to get out before the first heave.

Guilt wrapped long tentacles around him and squeezed. Kade's irritation and lack of focus had cost his best friend's life. Jesus. No. Zeke couldn't be dead. He was about to be a father. And it was one hundred percent on Kade that a child had lost its father before taking its first breath.

How the hell was he supposed to live with that?

1

Breanne Kyndall, called Bree by everyone who knew her, could barely breathe. The little bean growing in her stomach had wedged itself underneath Bree's ribcage and decided to test its soccer skills. She rolled off the side of bed, catching herself before she plopped onto the floor. Nearing her due date, every body part felt swollen. How was that even possible?

Upright and on her feet, she waddled into the kitchen because the way she moved could no longer be classified as walking. Bree reached for a mug. At least decaf coffee gave her some sense of normalcy. The smell convinced her body there was caffeine inside the cup. Score one for placebos.

Moving to the fridge, she pulled out a carton of milk and poured in a quarter of a cup. This way, she convinced herself the drink was healthy—mostly. The baby needed calcium.

Taking a sip, the warmth felt good on her throat. Days had passed since hearing the news about Zeke. Days that had become a blur of tears mixed with memories of times with someone who'd become her closest confidant.

The temptation to ask about Kade had gotten the best of her at the post office yesterday. He'd been injured in the attack that had taken Zeke. Guilt consumed her at the relief Kade had lived. Grief was a strange thing. It caused her to feel guilty every

time she found a reason to smile, however fleeting, since learning of the tragedy. And especially every time she hoped Kade would knock on her door.

The way she'd walked out on him without looking back after a fling that had caused her to fall hopelessly in love with the man had sealed her fate. Kade's pride would never allow him to care about her again. His stubborn side would cause him to dig his heels in. Hell would freeze over, and she'd be able to skate on the ice before he would grace her presence again.

What had she done?

Bree needed to find Kade and tell him the truth. Making a phone call wasn't an option. He wouldn't take her calls anyway. Plus, this wasn't the kind of news you left on someone's voicemail.

"I'd rather die than have children of my own," he'd muttered under his breath when the topic had come up during their weekend fling.

Bree had always wanted kids. One child at the very least. Sex with Kade had been an existential experience, spiritual even. But she'd been wasting her time thinking anything between them could be more than an occasional, no-strings-attached relationship. Relationship? Bree issued a grunt. Their one shared experience had been nothing but great sex. Amazing sex. Mind-altering sex.

But still sex.

Since she wasn't a love 'em and leave 'em type, she'd plucked up the courage to shut off her phone and delete his messages. All but one. Call her weak, but she'd saved the one where he'd said they might have something special going on between them, and he thought they were having a good time getting to know each other.

Bree had known Kade since kindergarten. Or, at least, known of him. He'd been angry at the world and, most of all, his father. He'd kept to himself. He'd been impossible to get to know, which was a serious accomplishment in a small town like Saddle Junction.

And then he'd come home on leave, showing her a surprisingly vulnerable side as he'd fixed the flat tire that had left her stranded on the exit ramp leading to town. He'd followed her home to make sure she made it okay.

The pregnancy news six weeks later had shocked the hell out of her. Bree might have seen herself as the family type, but having a baby with someone dead set against fatherhood had never been the plan.

She'd confided in Zeke, who had been a godsend. And now?

Fighting back tears that welled every time she thought about him, she gathered up all the courage she could muster. The Sturgess family lawyer had called a meeting to read Beaumont Sturgess's last will and testament. Bree finally had a chance to be in the same room with Kade.

Face-to-face was the only way to deliver the news that he was going to be a father any day now.

The meeting Kade had been dreading on the day-and-a-half journey to Saddle Junction would take place in an hour—just enough time to grab a quick shower and drive a rental to the ranch until he had time to pick up his truck at Chloe's. There was a chill in the air, typical early December weather in these parts.

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The thought of setting foot on ranch property after making a vow never to return made him sick to his stomach. His siblings were counting on him, and besides, this was their chance to sell off the no-good piece of family history and stick it to a cruel man in the process. Those thoughts reminded him of the reason he'd made the trip. For a bonus, he would get to see his five siblings all in one place. Kade couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

The Sturgess kin were hours away from starting a process that would finally give them their freedom. Kade, for one, couldn't wait to see what it felt like to finally be free.

The tall gene had skipped Chloe. She was a solid foot shorter than Kade.

"How's my favorite sister?" he asked as she greeted him on the porch of the Sturgess home. The place was grand, a showpiece meant to display the family money, money that hadn't trickled down to the children even if Kade would have accepted it. He wouldn't have. But his single mother sister could have used a hand up. As it was, Kade sent half of his pay to her despite her protests, and he had no regrets.

Chloe smiled and rolled her eyes. "Don't you mean your only sister?"

He hugged her and then patted her on the head. "I might mean half a sister." Short jokes always got an eye roll and a laugh out of her. Today, her smile didn't reach her eyes as she gave him a once-over.

Concern lines scored her forehead as her gaze lingered on each battle scar. "What happened to you?"

He motioned toward the boot on his right foot. “This? It’s not bad.”

“It’s bad enough to be medically boarded,” she blurted out before realizing she should have applied a filter. “I’m heartbroken about Zeke,” she said, compressing her lips into a frown as she shifted topics.

More of that guilt slammed into Kade, threatening to consume him. He opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t find the right words.

Chloe threw her arms around him and buried her face. “I’m sorry. He was a good person and a good friend.”

“Lot of good that did him,” Kade bit out through clenched teeth. He would never forgive himself for letting Zeke down. Ever.

“I heard you’re going to receive a medal for your act of bravery,” Chloe continued.

“I’m the last person who deserves to be decorated,” Kade said.

Chloe drew back. “You put your life on the line to save him, according to what I heard.”

Kade shook his head. “What good did it do?”

“I know you’re hurting, I just—”

“Talking about Zeke won’t bring him back,” Kade cut in. He was done talking. Looking over her shoulder rather than make eye contact, he asked, “Should we go inside now?”

His sister stood there for a long moment, studying him. Kade still refused to meet her

gaze.

After a long, slow exhale, she said, “Everyone’s already inside.”

Kade was the oldest at thirty-four years old. Twins Archer and Owen were next at thirty-two. Hudson and Conrad had come in back-to-back years, thirty and twenty-nine, respectively. And then there was Chloe, the baby and only girl, who was twenty-four years old. Her son Grayson had recently turned three. She refused to discuss her son’s no-good father, except to say that he’d been clear about not wanting the responsibility of a kid after she’d delivered the pregnancy news. When pressed, Chloe had said the jerk moved to Santa Fe with his aunt to pursue his dream of becoming a jewelry artist, but something was off about the story. Maybe she was testing out explanations to figure out which one to tell her son later. It would be just like Chloe to want to protect Grayson at all costs so he would never feel less than. Abandonment did bad things to kids’ heads. The Sturgess kids knew that best.

Mostly, Kade figured the dude disappeared to shirk his responsibilities and smoke pot all day. His baby sister deserved much better than a guy willing to walk away from his own child.

His thoughts snapped to Zeke’s unborn child. He knew where the other half of his military paycheck would go if he could figure out how to get Bree to accept the money. She was proud and had an independent streak a mile long. Traits that had drawn him to her. But even she had to realize bringing up a kid was expensive.

Once this meeting was over, Kade needed to find a way to bump into Bree. She’d slam the door in his face if he showed up unannounced. Between now and then, he could only pray the right words would come to him. So far, he had nothing but a sincere apology for her loss.

“Are you coming?” Chloe asked, impatience edging her tone. He’d been lost in

thought, unaware she'd turned toward the door.

Shake it off, dude.

Kade nodded, then followed his sister inside.

The massive tumbled-stone house looked more like the lobby of a fancy hunting lodge than a home. Deer heads hung on walls with cathedral ceilings. There was enough leather furniture to skin an entire herd of cattle. He shook his head at the cruelty and waste that surrounded him.

Stepping deeper into the house spiraled him back to a time when he'd been a defenseless child up against a grown man. Kade blinked, gave himself a mental headshake, and refocused. Compartmentalizing his emotions had gotten him through growing up under the thumb of an abusive father. His mother had finally fled after one beating too many. Now, he understood and couldn't blame her, but as a child, the abandonment had changed him. Made him harder. Made him unable to trust. Chloe wasn't old enough to remember much about their mom. Kade had kept track of the woman the best he could. Before shipping off, he'd tracked her down to a broken-down home in the bayou.

Kade shook off the memory. He needed to stay in the present in order to deal with the reading of the will. No doubt, Beaumont had written in some kind of loophole that would be a PITA, pain in the ass, for Kade and his siblings.

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Inside what had been his father's pride and joy office sat the people he loved most in the world. The twins practically jumped out of their chairs and bum-rushed him first. At six-feet-two inches, they were tanks. Their bear hugs nearly knocked him on his backside. Archer and Owen would make a mean line on the football field. Conrad was followed by Hudson. All his brothers had gotten the height gene, a fact that still rankled Chloe. They were all built, too, whereas she was tiny. Some folks made the mistake of assuming that made her the weak one of the family. Kade almost laughed out loud at that thought.

Chloe could handle herself. Her judgment in men, however, left a lot to be desired. Her daddy issues had caused her to swing the complete opposite way to a floater who couldn't be tied down. Or so the bastard had said. Apparently, he couldn't be bothered to pay child support either. How anyone could turn a blind eye to their own child left Kade scratching his head. Separating from an abusive parent, he understood. But an innocent child?

Another wave of guilt slammed into him for what he'd done to Zeke's kid. Zeke would have been an amazing father, unlike Kade.

After a round of hellos and how're you doings, Harrison Guidry checked his cell. The lawyer had been a lifelong friend of Beaumont's. His pot belly said he sat on his backside most days. Guidry wore a black Stetson and jeans. His stomach hung over the gold belt buckle holding up his pants. Other than jeans, the lawyer wore a button-down shirt and a pair of worn boots. When Guidry wasn't sitting at a desk, he was on a horse.

Taking their seats in the foldup chairs that had been brought in for the occasion,

everyone fixed their gazes on the lawyer.

“Anytime you’re ready,” Kade said when Guidry cleared his throat and checked his watch.

“Not everyone is here yet,” Guidry said, refusing to meet anyone’s gaze. Was that a bad sign? Was there a woman in the background no one knew about except the lawyer? Someone who would lay claim to Beaumont’s estate?

Kade took the lack of eye contact as an omen. Before he could ask Guidry who or what they were waiting for, someone entered the office behind them.

After turning around, Kade’s jaw practically smacked the floor. A person he’d never laid eyes on before stood at the doorway. He was the spitting image of Beaumont Sturgess.

“Welcome,” Guidry said before Kade could pick his jaw up from the tile and form a sentence. “Take a seat.” He motioned toward the empty chair near the door. Kade hadn’t noticed it before, but then he hadn’t counted chairs when he’d walked in.

A low murmur filled the room. Disbelief. Shock. Anger.

“Who the hell is this?” Kade asked the lawyer.

“I’m standing right here,” the stranger said with a smirk Kade would like to wipe off the man’s face. “You can speak directly to me.”

Kade turned in the stranger’s direction. “Fine. Who the hell are you?”

“Beaumont Sturgess, the Second,” the stranger said, folding his arms across his chest as he leaned against the doorjamb. “But everyone calls me Beau.”

“If you’ll be seated, we can begin the reading,” Guidry said.

“Not until we get an explanation,” Hudson countered.

“We share the same father,” Beau said smugly.

From the looks of it, Beau was close in age to Kade. Did he want to know the man’s age? Being the oldest had meant being in charge in Beaumont’s eyes. Suddenly, it mattered to Kade since the eldest would have more influence on voting to get rid of the ranch. Of course, Beau might want the same thing if he had a rightful claim on the place.

Damn. Was Kade questioning whether or not Beau was related? The guy was Beaumont’s clone.

“How old are you?” Kade asked.

“We’ll get to all the details,” Guidry said.

Kade shifted his attention to the lawyer. “Did you know about him?”

Guidry nodded.

“Of course you did.” Kade shouldn’t be surprised Beaumont’s best friend would know all the sordid details of the man’s life, including his mistresses and illegitimate children. “Are you expecting anyone else to show?”

Guidry frowned as he shook his head. The lawyer had always put Beaumont up on a pedestal for reasons Kade would never understand. Beaumont’s infidelity had been common knowledge. The abuse he’d dished out to his children had to be known as well. Beaumont had measured a person by the size of their wallet and ability to

compete in the business arena. He'd thrown away anyone and anything that was broken, in his opinion, including racehorses with no potential. Growing up, the man had proven his point that he only rewarded winners by lining up his kids on report card day at meal times. The one with the highest grades ate first while the others watched. Then, the second highest was served. Scraps were left for the last one to be served. At least, that had been his intention. Once Kade had figured out what was going on, he'd refused to eat until everyone had filled their plate first.

His punishment for rebelling had meant going to bed without supper every report card day. The hunger pangs had been worth the frown his rebellion had put on Beaumont's face. At least until his brothers and sister figured out how to sneak food to him. His siblings had refused to allow Kade to go to sleep hungry. Each would slip a piece of fruit or a dinner roll in their pocket before being excused. Considering he had five siblings, he hadn't gone hungry for more than a couple of hours until they'd safely sneaked into his room.

"Your father requested Beau's presence today." Guidry scanned their faces. His voice jolted Kade out of his reverie.

"None of us should be shocked," Archer said with disgust.

Beau laughed. The haughty sound was like fingernails on a chalkboard.

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Kade was up, across the room, and in the guy's face in two seconds flat. "Is something funny to you?"

"Actually, bro," Beau said without flinching, "it is."

Fists clenched at his sides, Kade fought the urge to knock Beau into next week. He'd been in control of his temper since he could grow hair on his chest. This dude pushed the limits. The cocky smile said he enjoyed pushing buttons. Kade needed to chill.

Besides, he had surveyors coming in an hour, and he needed to finish this meeting so he could get on with plans to sell the place. Kade didn't want a dime from the sale, but Chloe needed the money to bring up Grayson. They'd be able to move out of the shoebox trailer into a house and put away plenty of money for Grayson's education.

"You might not have expected me, but I'm here to stay," Beau said. "And I'm looking forward to getting to know my brothers and sister and divvying up responsibilities so we can finally run this ranch as a family."

What the hell?

Before Kade flew out of his chair a second time, Chloe had a hand on his arm.

"Can I speak to you out in the hall?" she asked. Pleased was more like it.

Kade clenched his back teeth so hard he thought they would crack. "Fine."

Bree pulled onto the shoulder next to the gate leading down the drive to the Sturgess ranch. She checked the time for the umpteenth time. The lawyer meeting should be in full swing at this point. Arrive too early, and Kade might see her and slip out the back door.

Would he, though?

The man had no reason to be in the same room with Bree again. No desire to boot. Those were facts.

She exited the vehicle. Her thoughts became clearer when she walked.

Should she climb back in the driver's seat, bang a U-turn, head home, and forget this whole thing?

Would Kade leave town the minute this meeting was over?

Odds were good that was exactly what he would do. He'd been honest with her about hating Saddle Junction and his family's ranch. There wasn't anything here for him, he'd said. If it weren't for his sister, he wouldn't come back ever again.

Those words stung even now.

Kade had asked her why she'd stayed. What did her answer matter at that point? It was clear to her that he hadn't wanted anything more than a few days of great sex. Despite promising herself she could walk away from her childhood crush, she'd caved when he'd turned on the charm.

What could she say?

Loving Kade had been as easy as breathing air, but one weekend had changed her life

forever. She glanced down at the basketball-sized bump that had become her belly. Was she ready to be a mom? Nope. Did she have a choice? Nope. This seemed like a good time to remind herself that she always met challenges head-on. And who was ever ready for the responsibility of a baby?

Exhaling a slow breath, she rubbed her bump. “Hey, kiddo. Are you ready to meet your daddy?”

“Calm down,” Chloe pleaded.

“I am calm,” Kade said.

Chloe’s fisted hand went to her hip. She’d walked all the way out to the barn with him. “Is that why your nostrils are flaring, and I can almost see steam coming out of your ears?”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

“Is it?” she asked.

Kade issued a sharp sigh. “Are you telling me that you’re not the least bit upset about someone walking into the house claiming to be an heir at the reading of Beaumont’s will?”

“I don’t know what to think,” she admitted. “Our father was a real—”

“Asshole,” he said, cutting in.

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“I was going to say a piece of work, but your word is better,” she said.

“And more accurate,” he interjected.

Chloe took a lap around the small space. “He can’t mean what he said.”

“About becoming cozy with us?” Kade asked, but it was a rhetorical question. He grunted. “I think he means to cause all the pain and harm he can to this family.”

“Which is all the more reason for us to stay calm and focused,” she said.

His sister was right. Letting Beau get under Kade’s collar was a mistake. The man was likely to keep poking the tender spots. He sighed. “When did you get so grown up?”

“The day I became a mom.” She relaxed her hand and dropped it to her side. “Babies have a way of forcing maturity on a person.”

Kade smiled.

“Bad news always travels in threes,” she said. “Ever since hearing the news about Zeke, I’ve been waiting for a shoe to drop.”

“Forgive me, but I don’t consider Beaumont dying bad news.” It was true. Kade saw it as freedom.

Chloe shot a look that said she wasn’t talking about dear, old dad. “First Zeke. Now

Beau. What's next?"

"I still have a surveyor coming out to meet me," he checked his watch, "in roughly forty-five minutes."

"When did you have time to organize that?" Chloe asked with genuine surprise in her eyes.

"You can use the money, right?"

"I mean, yes, but I'm not going broke tomorrow thanks to the money you send."

"Everyone will be on the same page about the sale," he said. "Plus, I planned to talk to everyone before making any real moves. Setting up a surveyor can be done online, so that's what I did while I waited for my flight. It took two seconds."

"I guess you can get pretty much anything done in ten minutes or less using the internet," Chloe said.

"Beau might complicate things." Kade shoved his hands in his pockets. "He could block the sale for years. Tie up funds."

"I'd be okay, Kade. Plus, we really don't know how Conrad feels. He's so quiet when we talk about the ranch." Chloe shrugged before touching Kade on the arm. "And you can stop sending me your hard-earned money."

"Making money is easy in the military," he said.

Chloe stared at the boot on his right foot. "You call that an 'easy' way to earn a living?"

“That wasn’t supposed to happen.” His thoughts turned to Zeke. “If I hadn’t been distracted that day, then—”

“Don’t tell me you blame yourself for what happened?” Chloe interrupted. “Because I spoke to your superior officer, who said you earned a medal.”

Kade wasn’t having this conversation. “We better get back inside before all hell breaks loose.”

Chloe didn’t immediately move. She stood there, tapping her toe, looking like she was about to say something. She must’ve thought better of arguing or trying to force a talk that would be like pulling teeth out of him.

“Okay, fine,” she conceded. “But this isn’t over. You hear me?”

“Let’s focus on getting this place sold.” That task would put enough on their plate.

A yellow tabby peered down at him from the beam above. Kade smiled. “Tabby is still kicking?”

“She must be on her eighth life at this point,” Chloe said with a smile.

“I thought Beaumont got rid of her years ago,” he said. They’d named her Tabby for lack of imagination on their part. Kade could have sworn Tabby smiled at him as she wagged her tail. He’d been the one to pull her from the creek where he’d found her wet and nearly drowned after Beaumont had tossed her into the rushing water.

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“She’s alive, thanks to you,” Chloe said.

Too bad Zeke couldn’t say the same.

Kade’s smile faded as he stepped out of the barn and into the sunlight. He blinked as the bright sun practically scorched his eyes. His sister was right about one thing. Bad news traveled in threes. What the hell was going to happen next?

The walk back to the office was quiet. Kade opened the back door, letting his sister walk in first. He followed, closing the door behind them. Chloe gave him a look of solidarity before heading toward the hallway that led to Beaumont’s favorite room.

The low hum of chatter hit him the second he stepped onto the tile. He searched for the right way to come at this discussion about selling the ranch, in case he needed an angle. Then again, knowing Beaumont, he might’ve written an ironclad will that would make selling impossible.

Still, there had to be a loophole. A way to undo any damage Beaumont intended to inflict from the grave.

Guidry wiped sweat from his forehead with an embossed handkerchief. His gaze widened the second Kade entered the room. He did his best to slip in behind Chloe. “Once everyone is seated, we can proceed with the reading.”

Kade bit back the urge to ask if they should expect any more surprises. He sized Beau up out of the corner of his eye. There was something to being the oldest in Beaumont’s eyes. Was there any way Beau had been born first?

Guidry cleared his throat before picking up the thick envelope on top of Beaumont's desk.

Here we go.

"I have a copy of the last will and testament to give to each of you along with a letter from your father," Guidry stated.

Beaumont was no father. Hearing the word come out of Guidry's mouth left a bitter taste in Kade's. Besides, wasn't this supposed to be a reading? Like now?" "Maybe I misunderstood why we were made to drop everything and show up here at the same time."

Guidry nodded. "Your copy of the will is for your records. I've been instructed to read a statement from your father."

Kade shifted in his seat, uneasy at hearing the word father for the second time.

After everyone had their copy along with an envelope addressed to each one in Beaumont's handwriting, Guidry continued. "It is my last wish for my children to take their rightful places at Sturgess Enterprises."

Not happening, asshole.

"Anyone who refuses to obey these wishes condemns the others by causing everyone to forfeit their inheritance."

Sonofabitch.

"Where would the money go instead?" Kade asked as grumbles sounded.

“To the Sturgess Foundation,” Guidry said.

“You mean to funnel money that continues to destroy parks in favor of development.” Kade used his fingers to put air quotes around the word development.

“Creating housing for the population boom has always been important to your father.” Guidry needed to stop throwing around the word fatherso freely. Beaumont had been a taskmaster, a manipulator, and an abuser, but he’d never been more than that to Kade. If he took a poll, he figured the others would have the same opinion. Though, no one had felt safe to speak those words out loud while Beaumont had been alive.

Beau leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, and smirked. “Looks like we’ll be one big happy family after all.”

Kade wouldn’t cause Chloe and his brothers to lose out on their inheritance because of his own stubborn streak. He pulled out his cell phone and canceled the meeting with the surveyor. There had to be a way around this clause. Until then, he’d lay low on moving forward with the sale. The other call he’d made had been to accept a job in Alaska. He’d planned to leave the minute the boot came off. “Does it stipulate a timeframe?”

“All the details are in your copy of the will and specific instructions, along with a personal message, are in the envelope,” Guidry said, setting the paper down. The lawyer looked a little too comfortable behind Beaumont’s massive Brazilian Rosewood desk as he steepled his fingers. “Kade, as the eldest, has been given the honor of being named executor. However, I’ve been retained to stay on to ensure the spirit of your father’s wishes is carried out.”

Kade grunted. “First of all, you can refer to your client as Beaumont, Mr. Sturgess, or asshole, but you need to stop referring to the man as our father.” Kade couldn’t help

himself. He'd been a teakettle about to boil over since stepping into the office. His question about who was the eldest had been answered without having to interact more than necessary with Beau, which was a bonus. "And second of all, don't I have the power to decide who represents the family?"

Guidry looked momentarily thrown off, hurt even. "Wh-wh-why would you want to change representation? I've been with your f..."

Kade shot a go-to-hell look.

"Mr. Sturgess for most of your life," Guidry finished, flustered.

"Exactly my point," Kade stated. "It's time for fresh blood around here. If we're going to do this together, we need to put our handpicked resources into place." It was also the best way to use the ranch profits to pay for a change in representation. To his knowledge, none of his siblings had taken a dime from their father. Nor had Beaumont offered to help, which was the reason Kade had gone into the military, Chloe had worked in a bar at night as a waitress, and the others had jobs from the age of eighteen. Beaumont had believed college a waste of time, so he'd been clear from day one—earn a scholarship or pay your own way.

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Kade hadn't been the bookish type, so the military had been his best option.

"The will does allow for changes as long as the vote is unanimous," Guidry said. "I'd caution you to read through your copy and your letter before making any decisions."

A loophole? Hot damn. It appeared Kade had found a way to get rid of Guidry. He glanced around the room. His gaze landed on Beau; the smug look on his face said he wouldn't cooperate.

Kade needed to play his cards right. "Good idea about breaking off to read the will." He could use some of his savings to hire a lawyer to review the will to see how ironclad the rest of it was. If he'd found one loophole, there had to be others. Kade glanced around the room. "Does anyone else have a comment or question?"

Heads shook. All except one. Beau sat there looking like the cat who'd caught the bird. Maybe the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree when it came to Kade's half-sibling. Didn't those last two words leave a bad taste in his mouth?

Could there be others? Would they climb out of the woodwork now that Beaumont was gone? There could be any number of heirs.

Kade shut those thoughts down for now. DNA tests could prove paternity, and there was enough money from the ranch to go around if financial reports could be believed. Kade needed to dig deeper into the finances. He had a few weeks before he needed to report to duty in Alaska. Working a rig sounded hella good right now when compared to sitting behind a desk scouring numbers.

“This meeting is concluded,” Guidry said. He stood and collected the folder on top of the desk.

“Do you mind leaving your copy here?” Kade said to the lawyer as the others filed out. His siblings couldn’t get out of the office fast enough, and he didn’t blame them. Since the financials were most likely on Beaumont’s computer, Kade might stick around for a little while at least.

The dark cloud hanging overhead feeling that Chloe had mentioned rang true. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but his sister was right. Bad news traveled in threes.

The knock at the front door barely registered as Guidry excused himself, taking the file with him.

The hair on the back of Kade’s neck stood up when he heard a familiar voice in the entryway. A knot formed in his chest. This day just got a whole helluva lot worse.

Kade was met at the office door by a very pregnant Bree. He forced his gaze away from her belly, a belly that somehow made her even more beautiful. It might be the glow. He’d heard about pregnancy glows before. The dark circles cradling red, puffy eyes said she was in mourning.

He sucked in a deep breath. “I’m sorry about—”

“From what I hear, you almost died, too,” Bree cut him off. She exhaled, which did little to calm her pounding pulse. The base of her neck gave her away; she was nervous to be here. Did she have something to say to him? Did she want to give him a piece of her mind?

“It should have been me,” he said. “And then your family would still be intact.”

An expression crossed her features that he couldn't quite read. A second later, it was gone.

"About that..." she started.

Kade readied himself for the anger and accusations that were sure to come. He was Zeke's best friend. Kade should have protected the man who was about to become a father. Kade had no ties, no reason to live other than a nephew who was too young to remember Kade. Chloe would have been distraught, as would his siblings, but Kade hadn't had anyone else depending on him.

Bree placed her hand on top of the baby bump. Did she realize she'd made the protective move? Or was it sheer motherly instinct?

"Zeke was my best friend," she said. Her gaze fixed on a spot over Kade's left shoulder as though the right words could be found there.

Zeke was more than that. Kade probably shouldn't point out the fact right now.

"He was there for me, stepping up in a way I never could've expected," she said.

"Because he loves you." Loved, he should say. It was impossible to think of Zeke in the past tense despite the knowledge he was gone. "That's a good foundation for—"

Bree put a hand up, stopping him midsentence. "I'm not saying this right, so I'll just spit it out." She blew out a breath. "I am absolutely broken, devastated by the loss of Zeke. But he wasn't the father of my child like everyone believed."

Kade's hands fisted as anger roared through him at the thought she'd cheated on Zeke. At least he would never know because it would have broken his heart. "Then, who?" Anger laced the accusation.

Bree blinked a couple of times like she couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "You, Kade. You're the baby's father."

A whoosh sounded in his ears, blocking out all background noise. A mix of emotions slammed into him as the knot in his gut tightened. All he could say in response was, "I need fresh air."

3

Bree stood silent as Kade blew past her and out the front door. A cramp nearly knocked the wind out of her, causing her to take the nearest seat. She realized she should get out of here and far away from Kade.

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What had she expected? For him to pull her into his arms and welcome the news?

Kade had been clear about never wanting a wife or children, especially children. He'd brought the point home so clearly that she'd been shocked into silence after missing her period and realizing the reason.

She hadn't just dropped the fatherhood news on him like a truck falling out of the sky; she'd busted his trust in the man who'd been his best friend. It had been Zeke's idea not to tell Kade about the baby. Zeke had proposed to her, but she hadn't accepted. Why would she? He had argued that the baby needed two parents and that having a father around would be best. Zeke had always wanted a family. Even through all the barrage of hormones and mixed emotions, she'd wanted to tell Kade about the baby.

Why had she listened to Zeke?

Because you were scared out of your mind. True. Bree had been freaked out and agreed to a pretend relationship with Zeke to protect the baby, and Kade. At least, that was the lie she'd told herself when, in reality, she was hurt.

After a couple of months, reality had dawned. She'd lied to Kade. Not outright. She'd done it in the worst way. She'd hidden behind Zeke. She'd allowed him to pretend the two of them were a couple. She'd granted permission to lie to Kade about Zeke becoming a father. She still wondered why Zeke had jumped at the chance and offered himself up so readily. Was it because Zeke and Kade had grown up together and been best friends? He'd told her that this was his chance to repay Kade for all the times he'd saved Zeke's skin on a mission and going way back to when they'd been

kids. It was Zeke's turn to step up and return the favors. It was twisted logic to commit to raising someone else's child now that she was thinking more clearly. A human was a lifetime commitment. There was no return policy when times got tough, and they would. No one got out of childhood or teenage years without a few battle scars. Zeke's heart had been in the right place, and she'd convinced herself that hers had been, too. They'd both been protecting Kade and the baby.

Those words had sounded awful and deceitful once she'd come to terms with the pregnancy. There'd been no way she would marry Zeke and commit him to a lifetime with her and her child.

Bree had never been one to take the easy way out, which was the reason she sat in Beaumont Sturgess's office right now. Was she betraying Zeke by being here? Because, for the first time since the pregnancy news, she felt like a thousand-ton weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Grief over Zeke would take months, maybe years, to process. She would never get over losing her best friend. Her relief had nothing to do with him and everything to do with finally doing the right thing by all parties involved. Looking back, it had been selfish to agree to the lie, to allow Zeke to step in for his buddy and shortchange himself in the process. And what if she'd gone ahead with the marriage proposal as he'd pressured her to do?

If he'd lived, she would have been denying him the one thing he'd deserved most...someone to spend his life with who was in love with him.

Bree would always see Zeke as a best friend, a confidant, and the person who'd been there for her during her most confusing times. His plan might have been misdirected, but it had come from a place of caring. She wouldn't fault him for stepping in to help, offering himself up in the process.

Waiting for Kade to return was the second hardest thing she might ever do when all her survival instincts urged her to run, to get as far away as possible.

Instead, she planted her backside in the chair, lifted her chin, and readied herself for whatever came next.

A few minutes ticked by that felt like hours before Kade's broad frame darkened the doorway again. He stepped inside and took an empty seat, one removed from her. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his thighs and clasped his hands together.

"We need to talk," he said.

Bree had a whole lot to say but clamped her lips shut and nodded. Hear him out.

"I think we both know that I'm not father material," Kade said. Bree loved Zeke. They'd planned to get married. Had his buddy known about the paternity before he'd proposed? Before he'd died? Had he cared? Bree must have hit a low point when she'd found out Kade was the father and not the man she'd been crazy about. "And I'm moving to Alaska in a matter of weeks. But I fully intend to take financial responsibility for the child."

Bree crossed her arms over her chest, resting them on the bump that was about the size of a basketball. From the corner of his eye, he couldn't stop checking it. Had it moved?

"You need a minute to process this news," Bree said. Her breathing said she was working hard to remain calm. "Since you'll be around for a few weeks, why don't you take whatever time you need and then get back to me."

"I have one question," he said, not ready to let her out of the room.

“Okay,” she said.

“Why am I hearing this news now?”

“What? Are you suggesting that I did any of this on purpose?” Bree asked. “Like, I got myself pregnant and then deceived you after you made it clear to me that you wanted nothing to do with kids or having a family, ever.”

Kade pushed off the chair and stood up. He raked his fingers through his hair. Words clotted inside his throat. None would surface.

“Fine,” Bree said. “Don’t answer. I need to go anyway.”

With that, she stood up with a wince, put her hand out to stop him from coming to her aid, and then waddled out of the office.

Shit.

Following Bree when she needed space would be a mistake. He’d made a fool of himself once by texting her more times than he cared to count, asking what he’d done to get the sudden cold shoulder after the time they’d shared. He’d convinced himself they’d started something special between them while she hadn’t been able to wait for him to ship off before she’d moved on to the person she’d really loved, Zeke.

Chloe stuck her head inside the office, interrupting his heavy thoughts. “Want to come back to the trailer with me? I need to get back to Grayson.”

“Yes.”

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She studied him. “Everything okay?”

“We can talk about it once we get to your place.” Would he, though? He clenched his back teeth hard. Right now, he wanted to keep the news to himself while he figured out how the hell he was supposed to become a father in a matter of days. “Let’s get out of here. This place is getting inside my head.”

The drive to Chloe’s took the full forty-five minutes. Saddle Junction was short on population and long on ranch land. He managed to get ahead of her, so he parked in a visitor spot and waited. How had his life blown up so fast?

Chloe parked in her spot. She waved for him to join her as she exited the vehicle and walked to the porch and then her front door. Kade was already making a mental list of everything he needed to do before leaving for Alaska. Beau showing up had complicated the sale of the ranch. But that didn’t hold a candle to the shock of learning Kade was about to become a father.

Stepping inside the small trailer on the outskirts of town, it was painfully obvious Chloe needed more money. She barely made enough to make ends meet.

Her roommate Annmarie put a finger to her lips, telling them to keep quiet. She tiptoed to the first door down the hall and gently closed it before returning to the living room.

“Grayson’s taking a nap, finally,” Annmarie said. She was five-feet-five inches with long brown hair that was barely controlled by a hair clip. “He’s been cranky all afternoon, the poor baby.”

“Do you think he’s coming down with something?” Chloe asked, worry lines etching her forehead as she started toward the bedroom door.

“He’s fine for now,” Annmarie said. “I’d let him sleep. It was hard to get him to go down. He woke three times.”

Chloe stopped, calculated her next move, and then turned toward the kitchen. She glanced at Kade. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” he said as Annmarie came over and gave him a quick hug.

“I heard you were coming back,” Annmarie said. “Thank the heavens you’re in one piece.”

He nodded, then frowned before joining his sister in the kitchen. “What can I do to help?”

“I got it.” Chloe pointed to the kitchen table as she popped in one of those pods. “I’ll join you in a sec.”

Kade took a seat opposite the coffee machine.

“I’m sorry,” Annmarie said. “I didn’t think about how that came across. What happened to Zeke is the worst. I’m just thankful those bastards didn’t take you both from us.”

“I appreciate your good wishes,” Kade said. Not a day would go by without him wishing Zeke had been the one to come home. “Didn’t mean to make you think otherwise.”

Annmarie smiled, then turned to Chloe. “Miguel gave Grayson the sweetest hug

when he realized his best buddy was in a bad mood. You should've seen the two of them together, like brothers."

"They are brothers as far as I'm concerned," Chloe said as she handed over a cup of black coffee to Kade, then went to work making one for herself.

"I hope they stay close," Annmarie said. "After all, neither has a father figure in their life." Annmarie's former boyfriend had said he was taking a job in construction in order to support her and their unborn baby. When he made enough money, he was supposed to buy a ring and come back to make them a family. The man had disappeared without ever making contact. Last she'd heard, he was living in a small town in Ecuador.

Neither has a father figure in their life. Annmarie's words were the equivalent of a physical blow.

In retrospect, Zeke couldn't possibly have known the baby wasn't his. Had Bree deceived him? Would she do something like that?

"Hey," Chloe said, snapping her fingers to get his attention as she joined him at the table. "Beau showing up today really has you inside your head, doesn't it?"

Annmarie shot a confused look.

"I'll explain later," Chloe promised before Annmarie excused herself, no doubt to grab a few hours of sleep. Chloe worked late nights at a bar so she could spend as many waking moments as possible with Grayson while Annmarie worked early mornings at The Bean Counter. The two worked opposite shifts so one could always be home with the boys.

Kade had witnessed the changes in his sister after having a child. Those little carpet

crawlers possessed magic like no one when it came to wrapping folks around their little pacifier pinkies. There wasn't much Kade wouldn't do for his nephew.

Shit.

Since Chloe had brought up the subject of their half-sibling, Kade didn't see the harm in letting her think Beau was the reason he was distracted.

"His presence complicates things," Kade said.

"As do his rights to the ranch," Chloe agreed. "The group chat has been blowing up since we left the ranch property."

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Kade reached for his cell and realized he'd turned off notifications after hearing back from the surveyor. "I didn't realize." It had been quiet on the ride over. This explained why.

"Everyone is upset." Chloe picked up her mug and rolled it around her palms.

"Understandable, given the circumstances," Kade said.

"I wonder if Mom knew about the other woman," Chloe said with a sigh.

"It wouldn't surprise me if she did," Kade said, thinking how marrying the wrong person could devastate a person. He wouldn't do that to Bree. He wouldn't ask her to marry him out of duty. He wouldn't bind her to him in that way since she didn't love him.

"Beaumont was a terrible human and being back in the house where we grew up reminded me of all the awful things that happened there," Chloe said. Her trailer might be old and small, but it was clean and, more importantly, hers.

"The more you know, the worse he gets," Kade said. He took a sip of coffee, enjoying the burn in his throat. "And I agree. Stepping into that house threw me."

"Have you talked to everyone individually about selling the ranch?" Chloe asked.

"I thought we were all in agreement already," he said. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Ever notice how quiet Conrad gets when the subject comes up?"

“He’s never voiced opposition,” Kade pointed out. He clamped his mouth shut as reality dawned on him. “But I’ve never heard him agree, either.” He paused long enough to take another sip of coffee. “Has he said something to you?”

“No. Not specifically.” She studied the rim of her mug. “He’s always been a quiet observer. Gone along with the majority. But no one has ever asked him point blank.”

“Everyone has the same right to speak up when we discuss anything as a family,” he said, defensively.

“True,” she said. “It’s just that...have you heard our conversations?”

He shot her a look.

“I’m just saying the loud voices in the room take over, and everyone else has to fight for the floor,” she said. “Conrad is the quiet one of the group.”

“Some might use the term brooding,” Kade said with a half-smile.

“If we’re going to mount a fight against Beau to sell the ranch, I think we should ensure everyone is on board before we take any action.”

“When did my kid sister get so smart?” he teased, appreciating a few moments of levity after he’d been hit with shock after shock today. Beaumont’s passing should have been good news, but ever since Kade had returned to Saddle Junction, the dark cloud had burst into a full-on electrical storm, complete with thunder to boot. Chloe had made a good point, though. Everyone deserved to have their voice heard.

“Should we call a meeting later?” he asked as Annmarie came tiptoeing into the room wearing pajamas.

“I have to work tonight,” Chloe said, biting back a yawn. “Can’t afford to lose a whole Friday night’s worth of tips, especially if I need to pitch in for legal fees so we can sell the ranch.”

There had to be a way to funnel money to her and the others while Kade cleaned this mess up. It also reminded him of the promise he’d made to a soldier while in the field hospital together. “Speaking of complicated, I need to find a home for a military dog about to be released from duty.”

“What?” Chloe asked.

“I know, it’s random,” he admitted. “However, I made a promise to a guy in my unit who rescued it that I’d help find a permanent home once the dog is released.”

“I’ll ask around,” Chloe offered.

“I gave your name and number as a backup to get a hold of me,” Kade said. “I hope that’s okay.”

“No problem,” she said. “I’d be happy to help arrange transportation, or whatever needs to be done.”

Kade thanked his sister after sharing the contact information. She would understand the special needs of an ex-military dog. Speaking of taking care of something. His thoughts shifted to Bree and the baby. How the hell was he supposed to become a dad in a matter of days? Weeks?

“Why don’t you give Annmarie the night off with Grayson,” Kade said.

“Why would I do that?” Chloe asked, surprise widening her eyes.

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“Because I could watch him instead.” Kade figured he would have to get the hang of being alone with a kid at some point. Plus, he’d had his head up his butt before. Kids needed two parents. Being in Alaska would complicate visitation, but he could talk to Bree and figure out a way to make it work. As long as Chloe lived in Saddle Junction, he’d return.

Chloe reached over the table to touch his forehead with the back of her hand.

He pulled back. “What are you doing?”

“Checking to see if you have a fever,” she quipped.

Kade faked being offended. “What? I can’t spend quality time with my nephew without raising suspicion?”

His sister was perceptive. The way she studied him meant something was clicking in that brain of hers. Had she been talking to Bree? Because he wasn’t ready to share the news.

Chloe took a sip of coffee. “Can I ask a question?”

Shit. Here it comes.

4

“Are you dipping out of town soon?” Chloe asked, and relief washed over Kade.

“As a matter of fact, I’d planned to,” he said, figuring one lie of omission was enough deception for today.

“Can I ask where you’re headed to next and why you’re in such a hurry?”

“Alaska,” he said, “but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell any of the others just yet.” Kade stared at his blond-haired, blue-eyed baby sister from across the table. Everything about Chloe came from the light. No matter how difficult the circumstances were, she always managed to turn on a smile and brighten a room. He would never know how she pulled off bringing up a kid on her own with very little resources while staying so damn positive.

At twenty-four, she had no college degree, no partner, and no reason to believe life would get any easier as a single parent. She worked in a bar late at night, slept a handful of hours, and got up early in the morning to be with her kid and Miguel.

“Are you listening to me right now?” Chloe snapped her fingers as she tried to catch his attention. All he really wanted to do was forget this day had happened. Except the weird part was that he didn’t hate the idea of having a kid with Bree. Forcing her to be tied to someone she didn’t love was a whole different story. Had his mother ever loved Beaumont? Or had she been tricked by his charm when he’d turned it on? The “off” switch must have come early on during their marriage. All of Kade’s memories of his mother were of her being miserable.

He rubbed the two-day-old stubble on his chin and took another sip of coffee as his three-year-old nephew, Grayson, belted out a loud cry from his bedroom.

Chloe was up and making a beeline toward the hall in two shakes. Grayson had a set of lungs on him. The heartbreaking cries made Kade wish there was something he could do to help. He’d probably just make things worse, so he sat there feeling helpless.

A few minutes later, the cries hushed, and Chloe came walking back into the room, carrying a boy who'd sprouted since the last time Kade had been here. Guilt smacked into him for not doing more for his sister.

"Do you want me to hold him?" he asked, but Grayson was already shaking his head and clutching his mom tighter.

Kade's nephew didn't even want him. The kid's instincts must have told him just how unfit Kade was. How was he supposed to know what to do with an infant?

Chloe mouthed, I'm sorry, while gently bouncing as she moved to the fridge and pulled out a juice box. She fumbled with the package, using the counter as leverage to hold Grayson in place on her hip.

"Here, let me," Kade said, standing up and coming around the table. The least he could do was open a damn drink box.

Grayson's cries intensified as he buried his face.

Kade backed away.

"He's just being grumpy," Chloe said with an apologetic look. "Let me get him settled. It'll take two secs."

His sister was right. Grayson calmed down after she turned on his favorite cartoon and then set him down on the couch with the juice and a threadbare blanket that looked like it had done a tour overseas.

"There," she said, sitting down and picking up her coffee mug. One drink caused her face to wrinkle. "Cold."

Kade was out of his seat faster than the cartoon settled Grayson. “Let me get you a refill. It’s the least I can do.”

“You’re fine,” Chloe said. She knew better than to argue, so she handed over her mug.

A few short minutes and a couple of pods later, they both had refills.

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“Sure is cold out today.” There was no mistaking the mischief in Chloe’s eye. She was trying to make a point.

“Yeah.” Best to let it play out and see which tact she’d decided to take this time. Not that he really wanted to go down that road again, the one that led to his own guilt trip about abandoning her.

“Winter’s almost here. Farmer’s Almanac is predicting a nasty one.” No road signs were needed to figure out the argument she was about to put up. Best to nip it in the bud.

“All my furniture is about to be sold.”

“When?”

“Put it on an app. Folks will start showing up tomorrow to pick up their items,” he said.

“That fast?”

“I put them up on a neighborhood for sale site the second I was told about Beaumont,” he explained.

“You work fast,” she quipped.

“It’s a helluva lot easier when you only have yourself to think about.” Kade regretted saying those words out loud. “Grayson is amazing, and I wasn’t—”

Chloe cut him off with a snort-laugh. “I get it. Life is easier when you only have to consider your own needs.”

“Don’t listen to me. I’m a selfish sonofabitch.”

“You’re not,” Chloe argued. “I just wish you’d stay around. It’d give Grayson a chance to get to know his uncle.”

Those words stung. “I took the job. What do you want me to do, Chloe? Quit? Talk to my old landlord and see if I can rent my old place after it’s already been committed to someone else? What exactly would I be coming back to Saddle Junction for?” He took a sip of coffee to stop himself from continuing down that road. “And since when did you start following weather patterns?”

“You’re not the only one who knows how to use an app.” Chloe nodded toward her phone on the countertop. “It just feels like I barely get to see you, you’re barely home, and you’re already leaving again—”

“Not leaving. Not shipping out. Moving. There’s a difference.” His tone came out harsher than he’d intended, and he felt even worse when Chloe winced like he’d knocked her off balance.

“Can I ask what’s so great about living in Alaska?”

“The wildlife. Three million lakes. The open plains—”

She studied him. “Did you know that in January, it’s not uncommon for it to be minus one degree? There isn’t a sweater warm enough for that, and you don’t even own a winter coat.” A smug smile crossed her lips. “You’ve hated the cold your entire life.”

“It’s better than the desert.” Anything was better than the fucking Middle East. Even

sixty degrees below zero, freeze his balls off and hibernate in the winter, cold Alaska. “And there are bears. When do we ever get a chance to see those?” He’d seen a helluva lot of things overseas but never bears.

“When did you become so fond of bears?” One look at his sister said she was cooking something up in that overactive brain of hers.

“Who doesn’t like bears?” he fired back, trying to lighten the mood.

“Salmon, for one.” She had a point there. He laughed, and it was a good break in tension.

“Did you know that Alaska accounts for twenty-five percent of all oil produced in the United States?” He was going for the job, the fishing, and the fact that it was away from everything familiar.

“Since when do you hate Texas so much?” she asked, her tone softer now.

“Never said I did.” He hated what it represented. He couldn’t stand Beaumont. As much as he loved the land, the ranch was Beaumont. A man who used the catchphrase, “If you can’t use ’em, shoot ’em.”

“Sure seems like you’re in a hurry to put it in the rearview mirror.” She had a point. Coming home on a plane while his best friend rode in a casket had made him ready to shake the dust of this town off his boots as fast as possible.

“I wouldn’t say that.” Kade needed to be alone. Alaska would give him time to get his head on straight.

Selling off his possessions had been easier than he’d imagined, not that he had much. Nothing came to Alaska that didn’t fit into a nineteen-by-thirty-inch suitcase. Kade

wasn't ready to "integrate" back into society after sixteen years of military service.

"I'm guessing you can't re-enlist." How many times had he heard Chloe's speech that joining the military had been about him dropping out of society? Moving to Alaska fueled her stance even more.

Was he?

“Nope, and it wouldn’t be wise to go back in now that I have a defect.” He’d medically boarded. He’d taken the honorary discharge and was no longer property of the U.S. Navy. In short, he was a free man now despite wishing he’d been able to go back and take care of the bastards who’d killed Zeke. Free to go anywhere and do anything he wanted while his best friend had come home in a casket.

Alone sounded pretty damn good to Kade.

“You loved serving your country,” she said quietly.

“True. Now it’s time to love doing something else.” He picked up his cup and brought it to his mouth. This time he didn’t drink. Instead, he cocked an eyebrow. He set it down instead. “And now, I’m done.”

“Why not get a job around here then?” She put her hand up to stop him when he laughed. “You could have your pick of work once your ankle heals. Plus, you might need to stick around long enough to wage war against our new half-brother.”

“I already have a job.” Kade might need to deal with Beau. A fight of this magnitude could take years to resolve. “We need to do some digging into Beau’s background to see if there’s an amount of money that will make him go away.”

“It’s a shame how easily most people can be bought off,” she said, nodding in agreement.

“In this case, it might work to our advantage,” he said.

“What if he was being honest? What if he really does want to get to know us?” Chloe bit down on her bottom lip. “Are we being assholes for not being open to the idea?” She paused a beat. “I mean, he is our brother. Beaumont wouldn’t have invited him to the will reading or left anything to him if the claim wasn’t true.”

“From what I could tell so far, the apple didn’t fall far from the tree when it came to Beau.” Which meant they were in for a dogfight.

Grayson was standing up now, dancing. Out of nowhere, the kid took off running, zipped past, and tripped and fell on the hard kitchen floor.

Chloe was there soothing Grayson in a heartbeat.

In the next minute, the kiddo rebounded, dried his tears, and was off to the races again with an ear-piercing squeal. Kade loved the little tyke without a doubt; he just wished there was a mute button.

Chloe blew out a sharp breath as she pushed off her knees and straightened her legs to stand. “I just wish you’d stick around. You know. Grayson never gets to see you, but he does love you.”

“Are you stooping to using your kid as a weapon against me?” he teased.

“Would it work if I did?”

“No. Sorry.”

“Tell me what will, Kade. I don’t want my brother lea—”

The speed racer made another circle, chasing something...an imaginary animal? Hell if Kade knew what had captured the boy's attention, but he sure looked like he was having fun chasing whatever he was after.

"I'll visit." He motioned toward the blur of blond hair and rapturous giggles blazing past. "Using Grayson is a low blow." One he'd expected when she got desperate. He checked to see if the defensive guilt trip was working on her.

And that's when he saw it. The one thing he had no armor for. Chloe trying to sniff back a tear. Her waterworks weren't theatrics like some people who could just turn it on like they'd flipped a switch. Chloe never cried. She turned her back to him and walked over to the fridge, pretending to get a glass of water.

Hell on a stick.

"Hey, they have Wi-Fi in Alaska, and I'll figure out this new phone I bought so we can use that Face app."

"FaceTime?"

"Yes, that one," he said.

"Why haven't you used it so far?"

"Knowing and doing were two different things," he teased. Had it been easier to block out his guilt when he couldn't see the dark circles cradling his sister's eyes?

"You brat." Her tone was lighter, and Kade breathed a sigh of relief. Upsetting his baby sister wasn't high on his list of things to do during his last stint in Texas for a while.

There was no structure or amount of distraction that could keep out his demons.
Being home made them worse.

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All of Kade's life needed to fit into a suitcase—a suitcase he had every intention of unpacking in Alaska in a couple of weeks at most.

First, he needed to figure out what he was going to do about becoming a father.

Bree pulled over to the side of the road onto the shoulder as another cramp caused her to double over. These Braxton-Hicks contractions were a beast. She could only imagine what the real thing would feel like. An involuntary shiver rocked her body.

Wouldn't you know it, her old truck picked that moment for the engine to gurgle, shimmy, and then give up. She was midway on her way back to let Kade know that she and the baby would be just fine without him when the pain struck. The vehicle that had been on her tail since she'd left downtown parked behind her.

A bad sign? Or a guardian angel?

She reached for the tire iron underneath her seat. As safe as Saddle Junction had always been, hormones had her protective instincts on full alert. Plus, being a woman meant always playing it cautious.

It was dark outside. High beams from the vehicle behind her made it impossible to see who was walking toward her.

And then she saw something that made her crawl over the bench seat and make a play for the passenger door to escape—a crowbar.

A quick glance at the crowbar-wielding man caused her to realize she wasn't going to

make it in time. The cramp intensified, but she could only breathe through it. Despite her due date looming, the baby hadn't given any signs of being ready to make an appearance in the world. At this moment, she couldn't blame it. Not all of humanity was worth seeing.

At this point, all she could do was lock the doors and then put up a fight.

The next thing she heard was the crack of the crowbar against her back window. It fractured. Crowbar was on the driver's side, so she jumped out the passenger door, ready to fight. There was no way she could outrun the attacker. The high beams made it impossible to take note of the make and model of Crowbar's car. It was a sedan based on the height of the high beams.

Feet apart in an athletic stance, Bree readied herself for a fight.

The world stilled. The whoosh sound in her ears drowned out everything else. The attacker was suddenly behind her. A hand covered her nose and mouth. No, wait, a cloth with a distinct and awful smell.

"Think you can fight me?" Crowbar mumbled. Bree tried to place the voice but couldn't.

The words, Let me go, died on her lips as she succumbed to the overpowering scent that caused her eyes to close and her mind to drift. The bastard's arms kept her from slamming into the gravel as she summoned the strength to jerk away.

Then, darkness.

5

An hour before Chloe's shift, Grayson popped a fever. Kade nursed a cup of coffee as

Chloe called her boss, then asked him to hang out through dinner to keep her company. He agreed. Two hours ago, he'd texted Bree, asking if they could meet up and talk later that evening. He tried not to take her lack of response as an insult. Then again, she'd been the one holding onto a devastating secret for the past nine months, or however long it took to cook a kid and then drop the bomb on him.

Did she have a right to ghost him?

Not in his book.

Dinner came and went. Kade cleaned the dishes while Chloe gave Grayson a bath. Three-year-olds went to sleep early. By eight o'clock, the kid had his Spiderman pajamas on. Not a half hour later, he was tucked in and on his way to Dreamland. Good. Kade wanted to run a few things past his sister. Maybe even talk to her about what it was like to become a parent. Could he without giving himself away?

The minute Chloe returned to the kitchen, where he sat staring at a beer, not in the mood to finish it, her cell buzzed. She walked over to the counter and glanced at the screen. "It's Hannah. I can call her back."

"Go ahead and take it," he said. "Dishes are already done." A distraction would give him a few more minutes to consider his approach to the parenthood topic.

"Okay," Chloe said before taking the call and putting it on speaker. "Hey, what's up?"

Hannah started right in. "Have you heard from Bree? My dad said her truck was found on the side of the road and asked me to call around to see if anyone has heard from her."

"What makes you think I would know anything about Bree?" Chloe asked. Concern

caused her face to wrinkle. You never had to wonder what Chloe was thinking. Her face gave her away.

“Her truck was abandoned on the farm road headed toward the ranch, the back window was cracked, and the passenger door was left wide open,” Hannah said. “My dad called her cell to check on her, but Odin said she left in a huff, saying something about heading to the Sturgess ranch. She’s not responding to anyone’s texts, either.”

Hearing Bree’s name at the start of the conversation had caught him off guard, but the rest of the information was a sucker punch to the solar plexus. He tried not to give away his reaction. Instead, he studied Chloe’s face as she responded. His thoughts were all over the place, everything from the possibility of her being stranded and hurt to having jumped out of the vehicle after a teenager threw a rock.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Chloe said.

Kade set the beer down and gripped the side of the table. “Am I on speaker?” Hannah asked.

“Yes,” Chloe said.

“Take me off, please,” Hannah said.

“Sure.” Chloe covered the phone’s microphone with one hand. “This doesn’t sound good at all.” His sister moved her hand as panic seized in his chest. She said, “I don’t have any idea why she would’ve been headed to the ranch. She was there earlier to speak to my brother, though. He’s here right now. I can ask what she wanted.” Chloe paused for a few beats. “Okay. Hold on a sec.”

Then she tapped the screen, no doubt placing the call on mute, and turned her full attention to Kade. He was still trying to process the word missing.

“Do you know why Bree was returning to the ranch?” Chloe asked.

Kade shrugged. He didn’t specifically know the reason. “Could’ve been to talk to me. We left our conversation...unfinished.”

He waited for Chloe to ask why Bree had stopped by to speak to him in the first place. Instead, she returned to the call. His relief was short-lived. Something had happened to Bree.

Or was everyone blowing this out of proportion? Was it possible she was simply out of cell phone range? Knowing Bree, she could have stopped because a deer was on the road. She might have chased it away, following it into the woods to make sure it was far away from the road, and then got turned around.

No. The smashed window meant something bad had happened. Right?

Kade picked up his phone and checked to make sure she hadn't responded. Still nothing.

"He doesn't know," Chloe said into the phone and then listened. "I'll be sure to call if I hear from her. Please let me know if she turns up."

"I have to go," Kade said to his sister as he stood and picked up his cell phone. He then fished for his keys.

"I'm sure she's grieving the loss of Zeke," Chloe said. "Probably just turned her cell phone off."

"At this late stage of her pregnancy?" he asked as he made a beeline for the door. "And with damage to her back window?"

"You're right, except you know how old her truck is," Chloe said. "The crack might have already been there. You know?"

He hadn't seen it earlier at the ranch, so he couldn't say one way or the other. "I guess."

Chloe's face twisted with concern. "I'd go with you, but I have to stay here with Grayson."

"There's a lot you can do from home. Like reaching out to everyone Bree knows to find out the last time they heard from her."

Chloe nodded.

“Let me know if Hannah calls back, okay?”

“Of course,” Chloe said. She shot a sad, knowing look. One that said he wasn’t responsible for the pregnant girlfriend of his dead best friend.

Chloe had a lot to learn about this situation.

But she’d been right earlier. Bad news always traveled in threes.

“She’s been dealing with a lot,” Chloe said, stopping him at the door.

“More than the obvious pregnancy and death news?” he asked.

“Ever since her father’s diagnosis, she’s been stressed. Maybe she headed out early for Round Rock to spend extra time with her extended family before the holidays.” She didn’t make eye contact, which meant she was essentially throwing ideas against the wall to see if one stuck. Plus, they both knew she wouldn’t have abandoned her truck on the side of the road.

“What?” He hadn’t heard anything about her father having a medical problem. Then again, Zeke wouldn’t have talked about Bree or her family any more than absolutely necessary. He had enough respect for Kade not to constantly throw the relationship in his face.

“She’s been upset, understandably so,” Chloe reiterated. “Go find her and make certain she’s okay.” Chloe clamped her mouth closed before adding, “If anyone can locate her, you can.”

“I’ll let you know when I do,” he said before stepping out into the cold night. He probably should have worn a coat since he had a feeling he was going to be outside for a while.

The thought of anything bad happening to Bree or the baby, or both, sucked the air out of the universe.

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He hopped into his truck, figuring he could return the rental by morning and headed toward the ranch. Rather than let his mind churn over what might have happened to her, he focused all his energy on tracking her.

Would she still be in the area?

The temperature had dropped fifteen degrees once the sun descended. It would take forty minutes to get to the farm road leading to the ranch, where she might be.

His brain snapped to wishing this was all one big misunderstanding. Shock was a liar. It tried to trick the brain into thinking a situation wasn't real. That there was some other logical explanation. Compartmentalizing his emotions had been his survival mechanism growing up and during his military service. The skill helped tuck emotions into a box reserved for opening later. The stash in his head said it would be more like an explosion, but he'd deal with the consequences when they came.

Right now, he needed all of his powers of concentration to find Bree.

The forty-minute drive to her truck took twenty-five at his rate of speed. The sheriff was gone, so he slowed down as he passed the truck and parked fifteen feet ahead. What had she named it? Weezie.

The damn thing looked like it broke down more than it ran. The busted-out window sent a jolt of anger through him. Weezie was a piece of junk. Why hadn't Zeke given her a vehicle to use while he'd been overseas?

The answer came almost immediately. Bree was proud. She wouldn't have accepted

it, which didn't make sense, considering they'd planned to marry. Would she stick to her guns until the wedding day? Only then allow her husband to do things for her? Wouldn't she want to drive a safer vehicle while pregnant?

Weezie had earned her name. She chugged and coughed worse than a forty-year, two-pack-a-day smoker. He remembered the sound vividly because it had signaled her showing up to the borrowed fishing cabin during their fling. It had also alerted him to the fact she was leaving.

A thought struck. Zeke might have loaned his vehicle to Bree. Once she'd received news of his death, she might not have felt right taking his property.

Damn.

Bree couldn't see a thing through the darkness enveloping her, shrouding her, making her feel like she couldn't breathe. Moving made her head hurt as she tried to blink her eyes open. A few more unsuccessful attempts to push out of the mental fog were worthless.

And then she heard the scuff of a boot loud and clear. The panicked feeling inside her grew like tree branches on steroids.

Washeback? Had he come to kill her as promised? Or toy with her a little while longer in his twisted game?

When she'd first noticed the sedan stopping behind her, she should have taken note of the license plate and called the sheriff. What the hell had she been thinking?

You were upset. You weren't thinking straight. Plus, the high beams were blinding and folks stopped to help each other out in this town.

Nothing sinister had ever happened in Saddle Junction to her knowledge. Did her town have its problems like every other small town? Of course. Was it perfect? No. But murderers and serial killers didn't even make the list.

So, yeah, she'd let her guard down.

And now? She feared she might be dealing with the serial killer she'd read about who'd been traveling around the state racking up victims. A man dubbed Razorblade Reaper had carved so-called art pieces into his victims before...

Bree shuddered at the thought of why they'd called him the Reaper. She forced her mind away from that grisly topic. Her first thought needed to be figuring out a way to save the baby. The thought that followed was what this might do to Kade. He'd lost a best friend. And now he was about to lose the baby he'd just found out belonged to him. Had he freaked out? Absolutely. But he was a good person. He was honorable. And once he made peace with fatherhood, he would have stepped up. There was no doubt in her mind, only regret that she hadn't realized it sooner.

She'd been torn, then, about tying him down. About forcing him to be connected to her for the foreseeable future.

Now?

All she could think of was how awful the news would come down if this was Razorblade and he carried out his intention. The urge to bolt overwhelmed her, but lifting her arms felt as possible as uprooting a hundred-year-old oak with her bare hands.

Nothing happened when she tried to move her legs, either. Frustration grew inside her until she felt like she might burst if she couldn't get to her feet and run the hell out of there.

Her life couldn't end like this.

Determination took root inside her. She had to calm down or risk going into labor. Since she had no idea where she was, she couldn't tell if there was any form of help nearby. A house. A hospital.

A face—well, not so much a face but more a shadowed figure—popped into her thoughts. It was fuzzy and blurry, and she couldn't make out any distinct features. Had he been wearing a mask?

Could she scream? She desperately needed to let someone know she was here. Or would that give her away and tell him she was awake and alert? Perhaps it would cause him to give her more of the substance on the rag that rendered her unconscious. She couldn't risk that happening.

She commanded her arms to move. Why didn't her body obey? The foggy haze tugged at the edges of her mind. It was trying to suck her under. She'd be damned if she could fight against it let alone stop it altogether.

Another face broke through the cloud in her brain. Kade.

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Bree fought to stay awake as darkness descended around her. She needed to get out of there to find Kade before it was too late.

Fight, she thought. Break free from the weights pressing down on her limbs and making them so heavy that she couldn't so much as wiggle a finger. Kade would help her.

Do something, she thought.

No amount of mental cajoling seemed to work. Dusk crashed down on her anyway. And just before she closed her eyes for what she feared might be the last time, the scuffing sounds came closer.

6

The night air chilled Kade to the bone as he exited his pickup. Tucking his chin to his chest, he walked toward Weezie, careful not to step on any tracks. Chloe had all but forced him not to sell his own truck while he'd been in the service, and as much as it burned him to admit, she'd been right. She'd promised to drive it once in a while and keep it parked next to her trailer ready so he could drive when he returned to Saddle Junction. She'd said it would be safer for her that way because strangers would always think a man was home. Kade had almost laughed out loud. Did strangers ever come to Saddle Junction, he'd teased. Not on purpose. The only folks in town either lived here or had a relative who did. Others traveled through, not to, the small Texas town.

This knowledge should reassure him in Bree's case, but the hairs on the back of his

neck pricked, and he had a bad feeling as he approached her abandoned vehicle. A tow would be here soon, no doubt. Time moved slower in a place like this. Folks weren't in a hurry like in big cities. This frustrated him most times but benefitted him in this case because it gave him an opportunity to check out the scene before evidence could be disturbed.

Kade walked the perimeter, palming his phone with his flashlight app lighting the way. He gave a wide berth so he didn't plant his boots on top of other tracks.

Based on tire track marks, a vehicle had pulled up behind hers. He snapped a pic of the tread marks in the gravel. A person had most likely gotten out on the driver's side. On the road, gravel was spread thin making it impossible to grab an imprint, unlike on the shoulder where it was at least an inch thick.

He came around the front of Weezie after examining the back. Again, he took note of the busted back window. There were the usual nicks and dings but nothing that signaled recent damage to the bumper.

From the looks of the gravel, an altercation had occurred here. And then...

Hells bells.

There were drag marks leading down the side of the vehicle and running a couple of car lengths behind it. A snapshot of Bree being dragged to—what? a trunk?—flitted through his mind. Flames of anger licked through his veins.

Even to a civilian, it was obvious what had happened here. How had the sheriff missed this? Or was he downplaying the scene so no one would panic?

Kade raked his fingers through his hair and released a pained, guttural groan. His first thought was for Bree to come home safely. His second was for the baby to survive. In

a matter of hours, parenthood had been given and possibly taken away.

Another thought struck. Bree could go into labor if she was put under too much stress. Being abducted certainly qualified. Trying to deliver a baby while being held captive could take both her and the baby's lives.

Standing here wouldn't do a lick of good, so he took another slow lap around Weezie. Bree's handbag was inside, so he collected it. A question struck. Why hadn't the sheriff or one of his deputy's done the same? Wouldn't a law enforcement officer collect the purse along with anything else useful as evidence?

Kade navigated back onto the gravel road toward town. The sheriff's office was a good twenty-minute drive, according to his navigation system. He'd only had one beer, not even that much, so he was good behind the wheel.

He turned onto Farm Road 12 a few minutes later, his headlights illuminating a patch of road in front of him. Trees and underbrush lined the road due to recent rains.

A deer shot out of nowhere. Kade swerved and heard a thud. He was out of his truck and around to the passenger side in a heartbeat. The deer took a couple of steps back before regaining its senses and sprinting in the opposite direction.

Kade fished his cell from his back pocket and flicked the flashlight app. No harm. No foul. And the deer didn't seem worse for wear. Lucky buck.

Climbing back into the cab, he shut the door and buckled in. There'd only be black-tailed deer where he was heading in a few weeks. It was strange to think of calling another state his home. Part of his soul would always be in Texas. So would all his memories, and many of those he could live without.

Being in Saddle Junction made him think of Zeke. The two had grown up together.

They'd met in football practice, and Zeke had hated Kade the first time they'd met. Kade had strolled into the head coach's office freshman year at six-foot-four-inches and with muscle to back up his tall frame. Having someone cut in on Zeke's starting spot during freshman year in a town where Friday Night Lights was the way of life had seemed to set Zeke off.

From day one, the pair had butted heads, literally and figuratively. Then, one night, Kade had drawn the fury away from Chloe and had taken a beating from Beaumont.

The next morning, Kade had walked into the dressing room at five a.m. The welts on the backs of his thighs had made walking hard as hell. He'd made up an excuse before refusing to change out for football practice. Coach had bought the excuse too easily. No one seemed to want to rock the boat or risk losing the star quarterback if the state pulled him from Beaumont's home. Plus, there was the added bit about no one wanting to go up against Beaumont. Teachers and administrators had turned a blind eye. Not Zeke.

Zeke had stood in the opposite corner of the dressing room, arms folded, staring Kade down as usual. An emotion had flickered across his face when Kade winced as he sat down.

Zeke walked over and sat down beside Kade. Neither spoke right away.

Kade leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees with his hands clasped. He readied himself for the insults Zeke should've hurled about Kade's dedication to the team and how the star quarterback couldn't afford to take a day off.

Instead, he bowed his head and closed his eyes. "My dad likes to use the belt buckle on me he won during his rodeo days. Says he's making me a man."

The words sat thickly between them. Kade didn't do emotion. Not then. Not now. If he

did, he would've thanked Zeke for sharing what Kade knew firsthand was rough to talk about openly.

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A few more minutes had passed as Kade tried to find the right words. He'd never told a soul about what he'd suffered.

"He started to go after Chloe again." His sister had screwed up royally in the man's twisted mind. "She got behind on her chores. He walked in hot from the barn." Kade shrugged. "Figure I'm a better punching bag than a little girl. That's all."

One look from Zeke and Kade knew he didn't need to explain further. Zeke nodded, stood up, and walked toward his locker. He finished getting dressed before half-turning his head to say, "You want to grab a bite after class today?"

"Sure." Kade had played the whole beating off like it had been no big deal, but it had been.

The two had been inseparable ever since that day. Zeke had signed up for the military on the same day Kade had. They'd gone through basic and special operations training together. Zeke said it had been his plan all along, but somehow Kade doubted it. The two had made some ridiculous teenage pact to always have each other's backs.

Kade veered left at the fork in the road. The wrong direction for the sheriff's, he knew. There was something he needed to do first, a place he needed to go. It was close enough to the abduction site to make him wonder if it would make a good place to park and hide until any heat blew over.

After cutting off the engine and locking his truck he walked the short path brought back a whole mess of memories. The first time Zeke had shown Kade this place. The first time Kade had drank a beer. The first time Kade lost his...hell, he didn't need to

continue that walk down Memory Lane. Thinking about sex always brought him back to his weekend fling with Bree. She'd pretty much ruined him for casual sex ever since. Moving on after mind-blowing sex had never been an issue before her. He'd chalked it up to nostalgia or history.

She belonged to Zeke. And he was gone.

If Kade had told his buddy about the weekend he and Bree had shared, would Zeke have dated her when it had been his turn to come home on leave?

Probably not. Zeke never would've made a move on someone Kade was interested in. And vice versa.

Bree must've realized what a huge mistake she'd made in sleeping with no-commitment Kade and had decided to move on to the stable friend. Zeke had said he loved her and wanted to make things permanent, while Kade had made it clear to her that he didn't do repeat performances.

The news about Zeke and Bree had come as a shock, though. Zeke would've worked his butt off to make Bree happy. Kade had nothing to give except disappointment and pain.

Case in point, look how much he was hurting his baby sister by moving away. Was it stopping him? Nope. He was a bastard who was only capable of hurting those closest to him, those who cared about him the most.

He shoved those thoughts down deep as he stood on the water's edge, looking across the pond. There were no other vehicles here, so he started to turn back and head to the sheriff's.

A noise jerked him from his reverie. An animal? Was it hurt? The sound echoed

through the barren cornfield. Kade glanced toward his truck before taking off in the direction of the cries. It would be fine parked there since he'd cut the engine and pocketed the key. There was no one else around for miles. It was night. If he could help the poor animal, he felt a responsibility to try.

He fished his cell phone from his back pocket and flicked on the flashlight app to steer the way toward the sound.

After a couple of minutes of jogging through an empty field, he stopped and listened. He listened carefully but didn't hear the noise again. He stood still for a minute.

Nothing.

His flashlight app gave him a field of vision of roughly seven feet, give or take. Not much to go on. Kade increased his pace, a wave of frustration crashing into him that he couldn't find the hurting animal.

A jolt of anger blasted his chest. The accompanying feeling of helplessness brought him back to that transport, to watching his best friend as he'd been shot.

Kade dropped to his knees. Unbridled anger fired holes through him like rounds shot from an AR-15—rapid, random, and relentless.

A scream tore from his throat as he pounded the unforgiving soil with both fists.

And then he heard the sound again. It could be an echo of his own cries or his mind playing tricks on him. In the next second, he was on his feet, with his boots moving in the direction of the wounded animal.

Determination and focus had him stalking through the darkness. An old barn came into view. Was the animal trapped inside? Hurt? Kade doubled his pace.

As he neared, he saw that a word had been scribbled backwards in the dirty window. He mentally rearranged the letters to read...H E L P.

Kade mumbled a slew of swear words. Going inside without thoroughly casing the place first or collecting intel could be a costly mistake. He had no idea what waited in the barn. All he knew was the strangled cry would haunt him if he didn't act fast.

He crouched low. His pulse pounded as an all-too-familiar surge of adrenaline thumped through him. He felt alive again. Coming out of his old life—the only life he'd known for well over a decade—and into the real world after sixteen years of service was a bigger shock than he'd expected.

With the swipe of his thumb, he cut off his cell's flashlight. One more swipe and the volume control was muted. He crawled toward the building, keenly aware of every noise. The cool wind gusted and blasted against the windows.

He hadn't expected to need to rely on skills gained in the military here in Saddle Junction. This entire situation had caught him off guard.

Instinct took over, and he prepared to face an unknown enemy. This he understood. This had been his life for the past sixteen years. This made him feel like blood pumped in his veins again. A lot of good any of this would do. Soon enough, he was getting the hell out of Saddle Junction and moving on to a new life.

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After waiting silently for minutes that ticked on, Kade moved to the barn. The building itself was old and abandoned. Wood siding had splintered and yielded to the harsh elements.

The creaky door threatened to give him away as he opened it enough to slip inside. It was pitch black. Kade's eyes had adjusted to the night a long time ago, but the moon provided some light out there, unlike in here.

He swiped in front of his face in case of cobwebs. Spiders gave him the willies. He moved left, slowly and methodically, checking one corner and then the next. On the third, he touched a leg. The ankle he found was feminine. Whoever she was, she didn't budge. And then it struck him who this might be.

Bree.

Was she alive? Kade located her wrist—which was far too cold—and, thankfully, found a pulse. There was no way Bree would come to a place like this of her own free will, let alone abandon her vehicle and personal belongings. The fact that she wasn't moving even after he'd touched her sent his thoughts spinning. What had made the noises?

He swept the area, checking the final corner until he knew for certain no one else was inside the barn. Senses heightened, he moved back to where she lay in the third corner. Taking out his phone and shining the flashlight on her was a risk, but he needed to see what he was dealing with before he moved her. If she was injured, he could do serious damage.

He cupped his hand over the screen and dimmed the light on his phone. Bree was curled on her side, arms and legs limp. He watched her chest for signs of breathing, relieved when he saw it move in a steady rhythm. He touched her stomach, praying for movement.

“Bree,” he whispered, not wanting to scare the life out of her if she stirred. She was dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt, and socks—no boots, which was odd for her. Then again, nothing about this situation was right.

Kade moved the light to her face, ignoring the inappropriate attraction stirring in his chest at seeing her again. Seeing her like this was a shock to his system. Hannah had said Bree had been missing for hours. Thank heaven she was still alive.

There were bruises on her face. Cuts. A knot tightened in his gut at the thought of someone knowingly doing this to her.

“Wake up, sweetheart,” he said in a low voice.

When Bree didn’t so much as bat those pretty eyelashes, the knot tightened another notch. Dried blood was caked on her neck. The person who’d done this to her would have the upper hand if Kade were caught unaware. The twisted sonofabitch could show at any second. This wasn’t the time to regret leaving his shotgun locked in his truck back at the pond. Moving her was a risk he had to take.

Kade hit 911 on his keypad and the speaker button, then tucked it inside his jean jacket pocket. Scooping Bree up, she was dead weight in his arms.

The dispatcher’s voice came on almost immediately.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?” He recognized the voice as Holly Corden’s.

“I found Bree Kyndall in a deserted barn near the Hollow. She’s breathing but unconscious. Physically, she seems fine. Legs and arms are in order. She’s been doped, maybe. She’s not responding to my voice, and I’m currently carrying her, running through the cornfield toward my vehicle, which is parked at the mouth of the path to the pond out at the Hollow.”

“Confirming this is Kade Sturgess on the line.” Holly’s voice was all-business.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, good.” Even through the jeans pocket, he could hear her typing. “I’m sending emergency personnel your way, Kade. I’m alerting the sheriff’s office right now.”

“Get ’em here fast.” It wasn’t a good sign that Bree didn’t so much as stir while he jostled her around. He didn’t have time to be gentle and still book it out of there.

“Can you stay where you are?” Holly asked.

“Once I get to my vehicle. I don’t know who did this to her, but he might still be in the area. I’m sure he planned to come back for her.” Kade wasn’t breaking a sweat. His training kicked in, and he was used to carrying heavier soldiers plus eighty pounds of gear. He was vulnerable while she occupied his arms and his only weapon was inside the truck.

“Can you stay on the line with me, Kade?”

“I’m here. At my truck.” He reached his truck on the passenger side and managed to retrieve his keys from his pocket. He clicked the key fob to unlock the door. A few seconds later, he tucked Bree inside. He crawled over her and slammed the door shut, immediately locking them both inside. He started the engine to get some heat going. “She’s cold.” Too cold.

“Are you inside your vehicle?” Bluetooth picked up, and Holly’s voice boomed through the speakers.

“Yes.”

“Do you hear sirens yet?”

Kade strained to listen. It took a few seconds, but he heard them. “Yes.” He grabbed the fleece blanket he always kept tucked behind the seat and unfolded it before covering her. He checked her pulse again. It was weak, at best.

“Do you see lights, Kade?”

Swirls of light brightened the night sky. “Right on time. Thank you, Holly.”

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Bree was in trouble. The fact she'd been missing for hours in the cold wasn't lost on Kade. Her belly was still big, so she hadn't gone into labor.

"Come on, sweetheart." You can't die on me, too.

Bree blinked. Movement hurt. She heard a familiar voice, a calming voice, his voice. Kade. Was it a hallucination? She had no idea what day it was, and her head hurt. Everything hurt.

Her heart wanted the voice to belong to him even though, logically, she realized it was impossible. The memory of being assaulted while heading to the ranch crushed through her thoughts.

Then, the silence.

She'd felt strange ever since. Bits and pieces came together. When she'd come to—she had no idea how long she'd been unconscious—her brain had been fuzzy, off balance, and it had been that way to varying degrees ever since.

Bree couldn't seem to break the heavy fog coating her brain.

The baby? Was her child still alive?

There'd been a man. Icy fingers gripped her spine as she remembered him. They squeezed. Her body shivered. It had been so cold. She was so cold. Lying on her back hurt.

Her thoughts bounced back to the man who'd attacked her. Did she know him? He'd seemed familiar. She couldn't put a finger on how she knew him. His face had been hidden the whole time.

She racked her brain, trying to pull a description. Nothing. Only blankness and blackness where there should be something besides fear. Blackness and pain. Her heart still hurt. Her ankle felt raw.

Bree had summoned enough energy to scream before she'd blacked out again.

And then there'd been warmth and lights. Voices.

A warm, masculine—familiar?—hand held hers, tethering her back to reality. It felt like a lifeline and kept her a notch below panic. She tried to move her fingers, to connect to the life force she felt so strongly against her fingertips.

Sirens made her skull pound.

Bree tried to force her mouth to move, to form words, but exhaustion dragged her under again. And, again, everything faded to black.

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Kade stood guard outside Bree's door, arms folded across his chest. No one was getting in or out without going through him.

He fished his phone from his pocket. His first call was going to his sister. Chloe answered on the first ring.

“Sorry, I know I've been gone longer than I expected—”

“Are you okay?” The concern in her voice gutted him.

“It’s Bree. I found her and not in good shape. I’m at the hospital.”

An audible gasp came across the line. “What about the baby?”

“Seems okay so far,” he said.

“What happened?” Chloe asked.

“She was unconscious in an old barn not far from the Hollow. I stopped by the old spot to say my goodbyes when I heard a scream.” He kept the rest of the details to himself, but the desperate sound Bree had made would haunt him for a long time to come.

“Oh, God. That’s awful. Is she...? Will she...? Have you spoken to a doctor?” Chloe was trying to process. This kind of thing never happened in a bedroom community like Saddle Junction.

“I’m sticking around until I find out. Doubt I’ll be back tonight.”

“Of course. I’ll get Annmarie to watch Grayson and meet you—”

“There’s no reason for both of us to be here all night, and Grayson needs you. I’ll text you with updates.” Chloe was grown, but that wouldn’t keep Kade from trying to shield her from being exposed to the pure evil that was possible in the world. The pure evil that had somehow made its way to Saddle Junction. Thinking about what had to have happened to Bree for her to end up in that barn in that condition caused him to white-knuckle his phone out of lack of a better outlet for his anger.

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Chloe issued a long pause before a slow sigh. “This is awful. Bree doesn’t deserve this. She’s already been through so much.”

And most of it had been his fault. More of that guilt slammed into him.

“Promise you’ll keep me posted?” Chloe finally asked after a few moments of silence.

“On the hour. Scout’s honor.”

“Thank you.”

“Chloe. Lock the doors tonight.”

She seemed to catch the undercurrent of what he was saying. “I’ll do it right now.”

“Good,” he said, waiting to hear the telltale snick of a lock.

“Done,” she said.

“Get some sleep. I have things covered here,” Kade said.

“I’ll be waiting for an update. I doubt I’ll be able to sleep. It can’t hurt to close my eyes and try.” Chloe paused. “Did you see Conrad and Beau huddled up in the hall today? I meant to mention it earlier but got distracted with everything going on.”

“No.” He’d missed it. His world had been shattered by the news that he was going to

be a father. His thoughts had been too focused on Bree, and before that, the contents of the will. “What were they saying?”

“I couldn’t hear,” she admitted. “They caught me off guard, though.”

“Do you think they knew each other before today?” Kade asked.

“I doubt it,” she said. “Conrad seemed genuinely shocked when Beau strolled into the room.”

“I can think of a reason Beau would make nice with Conrad,” Kade said. Was the dude making the rounds to get a pulse on who might side with him on keeping the ranch versus selling?

“Fishing for allies,” she said.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Like I said before, I honestly don’t know how Conrad feels about Beaumont or the ranch,” she said.

“I’m certain he supports selling.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked.

“I was until you started questioning me about his intentions,” he admitted. Those seeds of doubt were taking root.

“It’s just that he’s so quiet. You know? I can’t tell if he agrees or simply isn’t speaking up.”

Kade did know when he really thought about it. It was easy to forget because Conrad was quiet. "I'll give him a call and see if I can get a read on where he stands."

"Try not to be so...you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kade asked.

Chloe hesitated like she was searching for the right words. Then she said, "You have strong opinions that sometimes come across as non-negotiable statements."

"Goodnight, Chloe."

She exhaled a slow breath. "It's bad, isn't it? What happened to Bree...?" she asked so quietly he almost didn't hear it.

"It's better now. She's safe and recovering." He had no idea about the baby and surprised himself with a deep sense of loss if anything had happened to the little nugget.

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“I’ll watch for your texts. Otherwise, I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Kade.”

Or sooner if there was any news, but he didn’t want to say those words out loud. Instead, he ended the call after saying goodbye. His second call was to his new boss, Brendan Sudaki. Kade explained that getting on a plane anytime in the near future would be impossible due to circumstances outside his control. Sudaki had said he understood, but Kade was smart enough to realize this wasn’t the best way to start a new job.

Working on a rig was a tough gig to get, and he needed this career to pan out because there was no Plan B. This was it. Work the rig for three years, save every dime he didn’t absolutely need to live on, and then buy a cabin on a lake, along with a bait and tackle shop. An annoying voice told him nothing could stop those relentless nightmares that woke him in the middle of the night, his lungs clawing for air, his forehead soaked as he watched while his best friend was filled with bullet holes.

The door opened behind him, and the doctor emerged, breaking into his heavy thoughts.

“I’m Dr. Miller.” The doctor shook Kade’s outstretched hand. The man was a solid six-foot-two-inches and youngish, in his late thirties if Kade had to guess. He had sandy-blond hair and blue eyes. No band on his wedding finger.

“Kade Sturgess. How is she?” His first concern was for Bree. The image of her lying helpless in his truck a little while ago assaulted him. The face—her face—that had the ability to light up the day with a smile had been so lifeless.

“We won’t have labs back for another hour or two. We’ll know more then. Are you her next of kin?”

Kade positioned his feet in an athletic stance and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Close enough.”

“Deputy Barrett said the two of you were connected. I wasn’t sure how. She’s lucky you found her when you did.” Dr. Miller shook his head. “She has contusions. There’s edema to her—”

“Plain English, please.”

“There’s head trauma. We won’t know how severe it is until she regains consciousness. A nurse will come by in a few minutes to take her for an MRI, but I’ll caution you not to expect too much this early.” Dr. Miller spoke with his fingers steepled and his shoulders strong. “I think there’s every reason to remain hopeful. A patch of her skin has been cut on her right shoulder.” His left eye twitched. The man had probably seen a lot in his medical career. He had the stance and bearing of an ex-military man, which caused Kade to wonder if Miller had gone into the service for his medical training. “The area is red and irritated, but we should have caught it early enough with antibiotics to keep infection at bay. That’s it for major concerns. She’s dehydrated and needs nourishment. The IV is replacing fluids.”

The question that had been bottled in his throat broke free. “And the baby?”

“There’s no immediate signs of distress,” Dr. Miller said. It seemed to dawn on him that he was most likely speaking to the father. “We’ll keep a close eye on both mother and child.”

It was too soon for relief.

“Is the head trauma the reason she’s unconscious?” he asked, still very much concerned about Bree’s condition.

“I suspect the labs will give us some indication as to whether or not she’s been given something to make her more compliant.” An apology was written all over Dr. Miller’s features as he spoke but a stiff, almost detached expression quickly covered. Kade knew a thing or two about creating emotional distance. Hell, he’d become one of the best.

“I’m guessing any drugs in her system would affect the baby,” Kade reasoned.

“From what I’ve been told, you found her within hours of the abduction,” Dr. Miller said. “Because of that, we have every reason to hope for a good outcome.”

Not exactly reassuring, but Dr. Miller came off as a straight shooter. Normally, Kade found a kinship with those who’d served, but Miller didn’t give off those vibes. Medical personnel were a different breed. He chalked it up to those who’d seen action versus those who’d patched folks like Kade up. “Thank you for the update, sir.”

“You can go in to see her now. Deputy Barrett is already waiting inside the room. He said you’d most likely spend the night. It might be a long one in an uncomfortable chair. I’ll make sure you’re kept abreast of any developments,” Dr. Miller said.

“I appreciate it, sir.” Kade almost saluted. He noted scars on Miller’s hands. Had he been in the field?

Kade walked into the room where his childhood friend stood, looking out the window. It had been long since dark, and the lights inside were low. There were two beds, and Bree occupied the one closest to the door. A curtain between the beds was left open.

Kade moved to the window where he could keep an eye on the door and Bree's bed.

Travis turned around. Worry had etched a deep groove in his forehead.

"Travis Barrett, how have you been?" Kade asked, keeping his voice low.

"It's good to see you, Kade. Didn't think I would before you took off again."

"I'm here now," Kade said with a glance toward Bree. He and Travis greeted each other with a bear hug.

"She's gonna be okay, man. You got there in time." The optimistic tone sounded forced. Kade appreciated the sentiment anyway.

"The doc said something about an MRI," Kade said.

"It's precautionary. He doesn't want to miss anything." Travis was close to Kade's height and build. The two of them went way back. Back to high school sports. Kade figured the two of them would've been friends to this day if he'd stuck around Saddle Junction.

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“She doesn’t deserve this, Travis.” Bree was a good person.

“No. Which is why we’re going to catch the bastard who did this to her and prosecute the hell out of him. That’s a promise.” Travis had been one of the best running backs that Kade had ever seen. An injury had kept him from playing college ball, but he’d always planned to go into law enforcement anyway. Kade wasn’t surprised he’d become a well-respected deputy.

“I know you will.”

Travis pulled out a notepad, and his demeanor changed. He was going into work mode. “Tell me everything you remember, every detail.”

Kade gave his statement.

“I’ve got a deputy at the barn and another with Weezie. Sheriff told them not to do much tonight. He doesn’t want to risk trampling evidence, so he’s roping it off until first light. Said we might have to wait until daylight to see what’s actually there.”

“Wait a minute,” Kade said. “You folks didn’t have anyone on the scene before now?”

Travis shook his head. “We’re down personnel as it is. I came here, and the sheriff took off, chasing a lead in the case.”

Kade figured it was probably too early to tell how or why this had happened, but he asked the question anyway.

Travis rubbed the scruff on his chin. “Sheriff’s on his way to the hospital now. Said he wants to be around to talk to her once she wakes. The lead didn’t pan out.”

Kade would rather Travis handle the case. He knew Bree. He would care the most about catching the bastard who did this to her.

“What about you? Do you have a plane to catch?” Travis asked.

“No. For one, Beaumont’s affairs got messy today. Did you hear about my new half-brother?” News traveled fast in small towns.

Travis caught Kade’s gaze. “Are you surprised?”

“That there’s only one, yes,” Kade stated.

They exchanged knowing looks. Beaumont’s activities hadn’t exactly been a well-guarded secret.

“You make a good point,” Travis said.

“I’ll be here as long as it takes.” Kade needed to see this through with Bree. Make sure she’d be okay, then decide what to do about having a baby together. Kade glanced over at her while she slept. Her normally shiny, long blond hair stuck together in stringy clumps. Not even the bruising and cuts on her face could detract from her beauty, though.

“I cleared it with the doc for you to be here for now. My boss won’t like my decision.” Even in the low-lit room, Kade could clearly see the look of apology on Travis’s face.

“Maybe he doesn’t get a say,” Kade fired back. He’d never liked Sheriff Halston

Carr. The man had never earned his keep a day in his life. His wealthy aunt had used her considerable influence to ensure he'd been elected. As far as Kade was concerned, Carr had always been a freeloading jerk. Of course, being sheriff in Jackson County was easy work, considering most crimes consisted of cow-tipping and running rowdy teens out of places like the Hollow.

"You don't want to go against him," Travis warned.

"I think I've got a good handle on what I want to—"

"Don't," Travis warned. "I know you're still dealing with Zeke's...with the fact that he's gone. Trust me, you don't want to make enemies here, especially with Carr. He has more influence than you realize."

"Thanks for the advice, but I'm not walking into this blind."

"He could make life hard for your sister."

Damn if that didn't get Kade's attention. "Why do you work for such an asshole?"

"I don't. I care about the people of Saddle Junction. That's who I work for and why I do this job." Travis was third-generation law enforcement. Most thought he should've been sheriff. Kade wouldn't disagree. The man was a saint and a damn good deputy, a damn good person.

"Fair enough." Kade moved to Bree's side. "I'm still not leaving. Not unless she wakes and tells me to go."

He took her hand in his—hers was so small in comparison—and he felt a twitch in her right index finger. It was probably just a reflex, but he hoped it was something more, like maybe she liked the fact he was here and planned on staying until she

could say what had happened. No way did he plan to leave her vulnerable and alone.

The door opened, and the sheriff walked in. He was in his late forties with a ruddy complexion. Tall and big-boned, he strolled in like he owned the place. He wore jeans and a tan shirt with a cowboy hat and gun belt. His weapon rested on his right side, and his hand hovered over the butt of his department-issued Glock.

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Kade zeroed in on the weapon, making sure the sheriff damn sure noticed.

Carr's gaze landed hard on Kade, and his eyes narrowed.

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Travis spoke first. "Kade is the primary witness in the investigation. He was just giving me his statement. The victim is Breanna Kyndall, as you know."

Carr made a show of crossing his arms over his chest. Kade wanted to point out that the man should most likely be taking notes instead of leaning back on the heels of his boots. Make no mistake about it, Carr was as strong as an ox. He might not be agile, but he had big, meaty hands with a whole lot of strength to back them up once he grabbed hold of something.

Bree's hand tensed at the sound of Carr's voice. Involuntary reaction? Kade's gut told him not to mention it to the sheriff. Carr had always rubbed Kade the wrong way. This time was no exception. The man's entitlement to the sheriff's position and the authority—authority he hadn't earned but had been given to him by his wealthy aunt—that came with the job bothered Kade the most. It always had. Personal feelings aside, Kade thought the sheriff was underqualified and incompetent, even for a county like Jackson.

"Has she been conscious?" Sheriff Carr's back was ramrod straight as he surveyed the room.

"No, sir," Travis said. "A nurse will be by to take her to get an MRI soon."

Travis filled the sheriff in on everything they knew so far.

Carr listened, nodding every so often. “I’ll take over from here.”

Bree’s finger twitched again.

Without drawing attention to himself, he slanted his gaze toward her face, searching for something...movement. A flutter of her eyes. Anything that might tell him this was more than just reflex.

“Yes, sir.” Travis sounded resigned.

Carr turned to Kade. “Thank you for your statement. I’ll take over from here, son.”

Son? That word was fingernails on a chalkboard to Kade. “I’m the closest she has to next of kin. I’m sticking around.”

Kade sized up Carr, expecting a fight. He was surprised when he didn’t get one. There’d been rumors, hushed conversations, about the man’s childhood before his aunt had taken him in. Not that Kade didn’t have sympathy for all abused kids. There was nothing worse than a person taking advantage of someone weaker. Kade could relate, even. He’d dealt with his past by going into the military and becoming the best damn soldier he could. Carr seemed to have taken a different route—one of rumored abuses of authority.

The abused becoming an abuser—no matter how seemingly small the infraction—had never been an option for Kade.

“Her dad moved away a couple of years back if memory serves.” Carr looked down and to the right, a sign he was being shifty.

“That’s right,” Kade murmured.

“Do you have a number where her next of kin can be reached?” Carr was focused on Kade now, looking him up and down like they’d had words in a bar. Was he sizing him up?

Didn’t Carr? “No, I don’t. My sister might. I’ll ask her.” He had no intention of breaking physical contact with Bree. Her fingers tightened around his.

The door swung open, and a pair of nurses entered with a gurney. “My name’s Millie, and this is Adrienne. We’ll be taking Ms. Kyndall to get an MRI.” Their tones left no room for argument.

Kade was grateful for the break in tension. He also intended to accompany Millie and Adrienne. There was no way Bree was being moved out of his sight.

“Call me when she wakes...?” Carr pulled a business card from his front pocket and held it out to Kade.

Kade took the offering and stuffed it in his back pocket.

The nurses managed to shift Bree onto the gurney.

“We’ll have her back in a few minutes,” Millie started, but Kade was already shaking his head.

“I’m going with you.” The words came out with so much measured certainty Millie seemed to know better than to argue. She nodded.

Carr followed them out and then disappeared down the hallway with Travis. Kade stood guard outside the X-ray room, his back against the wall. His cell buzzed. He

checked the screen and saw that his sister was calling. “What’s up, Chloe?”

“I can’t sleep, and I wanted to check on Bree. Any updates?” It was late or early, depending on one’s point of view, and his sister’s raspy voice sounded like she was having a rough night between this situation and Grayson not feeling well.

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“She’s still unconscious. The doctor said she might have been given something to make her more compliant.”

Chloe drew in a sharp breath.

“She took a few hits to the head, and the sick bastard carved her skin with a knife. Those are the main injuries. The doctor is optimistic about her recovery.” That was as much as Kade knew and it said a lot about the sicko they’d be looking for.

Chloe sucked in a burst of air. “Ohmygod!”

“What is it?”

“Have you read anything about the twisted bastard who has been traveling the state, killing women?”

“I’m not up on news,” he admitted.

Chloe told him about the Reaper. “Sounds like his work.”

Kade muttered a string of swears.

The sad truth, Kade had read, was that a woman’s biggest threat was her husband or boyfriend. But that clearly wasn’t the case here. “Has she been spending time with anyone after finding out about Zeke?”

“No one that I know of,” Chloe admitted. “It was a shock to hear that the two of them

were in a relationship, to begin with. I kind of thought...”

Those words struck harder than Kade knew better than to allow. He had no designs on her. He hadn’t made any promises to her. A voice in the back of his head reminded him it was his loss. “What?”

“Nothing. I guess I thought the two were an odd match. But what do I know?” Chloe admittedly didn’t know Zeke well considering she was eight years old when he left for the military.

“Zeke’s a good guy,” Kade defended.

“He is...was...the best. That didn’t come out right. I’m just saying that I didn’t realize the two of them were even a thing.”

“They dated in high school for about two seconds.” Kade figured the two had realized they still had feelings for each other and had decided not to waste time. It was game over when a man figured out who he belonged with. An annoying inner voice returned, reminding him that figuring it out too late had cost him the win.

“Even so. I always thought of them as best friends, brother and sister.” She sighed heavily. “You’d know better than I do. You guys were so much older than me. Plus, what do I know about relationships.”

Something in her voice caught his ear. “Everything okay with you?”

“Yeah. You know how it is. I left Grayson’s dad before our son was born and he had no qualms about it. I have no idea what I’m going to tell him about his father when he gets old enough to ask.” She paused a beat. “Not that I’m all that jazzed about dating or rushing into a relationship, but there are days when I wonder what it would be like to have a husband around to help. You know, someone who shares kid duties and

kisses me every night before we go to bed.” Another beat. “Is that weird to want those things?”

“Believe me, I understand.”

“I only think about having someone around when Grayson is sick or during times like these. You know, the holiday season is upon us, and it gets so busy sometimes I’m ready to pull my hair out. And then there are those times when I think having to compromise with one more person might shove me over the edge.” A pause. “And yet, I miss being in a relationship. Seeing that look in someone’s eyes and realizing he misses me as much as I miss him when we’re not together…” She paused. “Those moments make everything else worth it.”

Kade had never been one for looking at the flip side of a coin. His life had been black and white, which was most likely why he was so good at being a soldier and not so good at relationships. “When did you get so grown-up and smart?”

“I’m not so sure about the grown-up part, but I’ve always been smarter than you.” Chloe snort-laughed, a definite sign she was exhausted.

She was smarter than him, even though he’d never admit it. “Someone sounds delusional.”

Chloe’s voice reclaimed a serious note when she said, “I’m grateful you found Bree in time.” Those last two words were spoken with quiet sincerity. “We’ve never been close because of our age difference, but I like her and, for some reason, thought I saw a spark happening bet—”

“Same here.” The door behind him opened. He sidestepped to allow the nurses’ passage. “I gotta go. Get some sleep. I’m not sure when I’ll be back.”

“I’ll stop by the hospital in the morning and bring decent coffee and some bagels.” His sister could always be counted on. She had been one of the few constants in his life.

“See you tomorrow.” Kade followed the nurses back to Bree’s room. Dr. Miller filed in just as she was being settled into her bed.

“Lab results are in.” He held up an opened file and scanned the page. “Her numbers look good.” He hesitated. “She tested positive for ketamine.”

“The date rape drug?”

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Dr. Miller nodded. "I'm feeling even better about a full recovery." He glanced at her in the bed. "At least physically."

Kade didn't ask what sort of horrors she might've endured that she'd be reliving for the rest of her life.

"I'll take a look at her X-ray and see you in a few minutes with hopefully more good news." Dr. Miller excused himself after Kade thanked the man for the update. He truly appreciated being briefed so quickly on the situation. He texted his sister with the good news. He also needed to call Bree's father before the sheriff did. Kade was just thankful he'd shown up to the Hollow when he had. The alternative sent more of that fiery anger racing through his veins.

Kade texted Travis with a request the deputy be the one to call Bree's father.

Travis responded almost immediately. Planned on it. Good. Travis knew Bree and her father personally. The news would come across better from him than Carr.

Kade texted back with an update about the labs. Afterward, he reclaimed the seat next to Bree's bed and took her hand in his. Her index finger twitched against his palm. It probably wasn't more than a reflex. Still, his heart beat a little faster, and warmth spread through his chest. "I'm here, sweetheart."

There was no more movement from Bree after that twitch.

For the next few hours, he kept a vigilant watch on the door as he fought the urge to sleep. When it opened, he sat up straighter, keeping Bree's hand safely in his.

Travis walked in, his expression grim.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Seeing that look on his friend’s face meant bad news.

“I’ve been digging into the case.” Travis rubbed the day-old stubble on his chin. He glanced at Bree before nodding his head toward the door. “You want to take a walk?”

“I’d rather be here when she wakes.” She would wake. She would be fine. There was no other option in his mind.

“Mind if I sit?” Travis motioned toward the chair close to Kade.

“Go ahead.” Whatever news was coming, Travis seemed like he needed to give Kade a minute to brace himself for it. Or maybe Travis was trying to find the right words. Either way, Kade didn’t figure this was going to be good news.

Travis nodded and took a seat close to Kade. He leaned forward and dropped his shoulders down.

“Tell me what’s going on.” Travis didn’t look like he’d slept either.

“The carving in Bree’s shoulder kept bugging me. The area had to be a choice, and why carve into it? Did this guy like a souvenir? Did he like to mark his victims? Did he leave a signature? Plus, there has been a guy who fits the profile. He took five victims before disappearing two years ago. We believed he was arrested on a different charge and that’s why the killings stopped. I didn’t say anything about it before because I wanted to be certain. So, I input the information into a Department of Homeland Security database.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I input her description—blond hair, brown eyes.” Travis studied his hands. “The fact that she lives in Texas. Is pregnant.”

“I’m guessing it was a match.”

Travis looked up. “How did you know?”

“Chloe put two-and-two together and was afraid the Reaper had resurfaced,” Kade said.

“Sure enough, I got a call from a friend of mine with the San Antonio Police Department. I told him what we knew, and he immediately asked how long she’d been missing before she was found. Then, he asked if it was a rescue or recovery. I told him she was still alive. My friend said, if this is the same guy he’s thinking about, she’s damn lucky.”

“How many victims?” Kade cocked a brow at his longtime friend.

“There’ve been five others, all blonds, all from Texas in a triangle between Dallas, San Antonio, and Houston. All the victims were close to the same age as Bree. Similar physical descriptions. One other was pregnant.”

“Jesus.” Kade stabbed his fingers through his hair. “And what about the others? Were they able to give a description—”

Travis was already shaking his head. “There are no other survivors. She’s the only one.” Travis mumbled a few choice words before continuing. “One of the vics escaped only to be hunted down and punished twice as much.” He stopped for a few silent moments like he needed to gather his strength before continuing. Travis cared. What he’d just said confirmed Chloe’s suspicion and told Kade the killer would come back for Bree. And keep coming back until she was “punished.”

“Usually, the victims go missing for six or seven days before he kills them. He has a ritual the FBI has been trying to piece together. Suffice it to say that no one has

figured out the pattern in the carvings. This goes back at least eight years. The task force, including the FBI and all three major police departments, dubbed him the Razorblade Reaper for the carvings and...”

“Go on,” Kade urged.

“The moniker ‘Reaper’ comes from the way he likes to deliver the fatal blow.”

At the same time Travis spoke, Bree’s index finger twitched. Kade muttered a few choice words as he focused on her, and her eyes blinked open.

Travis hopped to his feet. “I’ll get the nurse.”

Bree tried to search out the sound of Kade's voice. The only tether to reality was his strong, masculine hand holding her steady. "Kade."

"I'm here, sweetheart...Bree."

A few more blinks, and his dark features started coming into focus. That face, strong and chiseled. Those eyes, dark and intense. Those lashes, thick and black.

"Where am I?" She tamped down the panic rising inside her as she glanced around. The room was fuzzy, the lighting dim.

"You're at Saddle Junction Memorial Hospital. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere." His voice was laced with a mix of anguish and relief. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you awake."

"How long?" A headache threatened to split her head in two. She pushed past the pain, trying her best to focus her thoughts.

He glanced at his wrist. "Ten hours, give or take."

She tried to sit up, winced, and then eased back down.

A young brunette scurried in with Travis on her heels. "I'm Cybil, and I'm your nurse this morning."

A kind face came into focus, and Bree couldn't help but notice the relief on the nurse's features. The fog coating her brain was starting to lift, and panic struck her as she remembered what had happened to her. She gasped, and her free hand immediately dropped to her stomach. "What about the baby? Is my baby all right?"

Kade's grip tightened on her hand.

"Yes. The baby is just fine," Cybil reassured her. "How about you? Is there anything I can get you to make you more comfortable?"

"My throat is dry. Water?" Getting that many words out was a struggle. She tried to shake the fog and the current threatening to pull her under. The room was quiet save for the beeping noises coming from the monitors.

"Sweetie." Cybil touched Bree's arm. "The doctor will be in shortly to talk to you. You're safe now. This fella has been with you since you arrived. He found you. You're going to be okay."

Those last two words, repeated, brought on an onslaught of emotion that had been bubbling up. Bree released the sobs building inside her. She was safe. The man who'd told her she was as good as dead couldn't touch her here. She gripped Kade's hand tighter, linking their fingers. She was going to survive. The baby wasn't hurt. And Kade was there beside her.

A cell phone buzzed.

"Sorry." Travis pulled out his phone and checked the screen. "Dammit."

"What is it, man?" Kade asked.

"Both crime scenes were set on fire. Any evidence we might've gotten from there is

up in smoke.”

“I was there,” Kade said, fishing for his cell. “I took pictures.” He pulled them up and sifted through them one by one. “I assumed someone from your office had already examined the scene since her purse was missing.”

“My cell,” Bree said under her breath.

“Grabbed it for you along with your purse,” Kade said, pointing to the drawer where it was being stored.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’d be lost without them.”

Travis was all business now as he took a seat next to Bree and pulled out a notepad.

“Do you have any idea who did this to you?”

Bree shook her head. “I never saw his face, and his voice wasn’t more than a whisper in my ear. He didn’t say much. Just that he planned to kill me.” She paused long enough for her body to recover from the shiver that rocked her. Talking about her ordeal couldn’t be easy for her.

Kade squeezed her hand to reassure her. She was safe. He wasn’t going anywhere until this sick bastard was castrated or behind bars. At that point, Kade didn’t care which one.

“The only thing I remember clearly was his boots. They were work shoes, the steel-toed kind.”

Travis’s eyes widened like he’d had some sort of epiphany, but he seemed to have second thoughts when he refocused on the pad of paper and made the note. Steel-toed boots weren’t the norm in this area. The only ones Kade had ever seen were worn by

an out-of-town construction crew brought in to build the convenience store by the highway last year when he'd been home on leave. He made a mental note to ask Travis what his reaction was all about later.

“Do you remember what color?” Travis asked.

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“Yes. Tan with black scuff marks.”

“Let’s back up. Tell me everything you recall,” Travis said.

“I was upset and wanted to find Kade. We’d had an...exchange earlier that was upsetting, so I wanted to clear the air.”

That statement tore at his gut. More guilt and shame nearly suffocated him.

She looked up at Travis. “What do you know about the person who did this to me?”

“Very little,” Travis said. “In all honesty, we know more about his victims, but a task force is being resurrected, folks who’ve been on the hunt for him eighteen months already.”

Bree looked like she needed a minute to let that sink in.

Chin up, she took a deep breath and continued. “I had a contraction that was painful enough to force me to pull over and wait it out. Weezie picked that moment to give me a hard time.” Weezie needed no explaining. The whole town knew Bree’s truck.

Bree blinked her eyes and tightened her grip on Kade’s hand.

It sounded to Kade like the man might have followed her for some time before making his move. Had he memorized her routines? Taken note of any time she’d be vulnerable? Of course, that was probably how serial killers worked. He remembered reading about a few over the years, like the BTK killer who’d referred to his victims

as “projects.” Kade would’ve liked ten minutes alone in a locked room with that sicko. Show him what it was like to deal with someone bigger and stronger. But right now, all he could think about was the Reaper and how close he had come to losing Bree and the baby at the hands of the twisted individual. And how much it’s my fault she was in that position in the first place.

“Have you noticed anyone hanging around your street lately? Any strange vehicles parked on the road?” Travis jotted down a few notes on his notepad.

“No. Just you guys patrolling. My neighbors. Nothing that stands out.” Travis’s eyes did that thing again. Kade made another mental note to ask about it when the two of them were alone.

“Earlier, when you were talking to Kade, you said he’s done this before,” Bree said. Damn. Kade had hoped she’d been asleep during their conversation.

Travis nodded.

Bree stayed quiet for a long moment. “He was inside my house. He had to be. My back door was ajar one day. I didn’t notice until I was chasing a bee out of my kitchen. At the time, I chalked it up to a bad memory due to pregnancy hormones, but I’m certain a few items are missing—and I didn’t misplace them.”

“Which ones?” Travis asked, taking notes.

Bree listed her face powder, a deodorant stick, and her favorite lotion.

His mind still reeled from the news that Bree was pregnant—that nugget of information had rocked his world. So many unexplained events from the past few months clicked together in Kade’s mind. A wedding date that had come out of the blue. The reason Zeke had seemed so intent on rushing to the altar. Kade couldn’t

think of a better reason to tie the knot in a blaze of hurry other than having a child on the way.

She glanced over at him, their gazes locked, and need welled up inside him as an ache hollowed out his chest.

It would be easy to forget that Bree wasn't his to take care of while his protective instincts flared. It would be easy to pull her against his chest and tell her everything would be okay now. It would be easy to get lost in those dark-roast brown eyes of hers. Kade reminded himself that he was with the person his best friend intended to marry. He might've had one sizzling hot weekend with Bree, but she'd obviously loved his best friend. She was off-limits, and that wasn't something he normally needed to remind himself of.

"Have you been in a fight with anyone?" Kade shot Travis a look. "Although unlikely, we have to take a copycat into consideration to rule it out."

"No."

"Could anyone you know wish you harm for any reason?" he continued.

"Her? You can't be serious." Kade probably shouldn't interject his opinion, but who would want to hurt Bree?

"I know." Travis brought his free hand up in the surrender position. "I have to ask. You'd be surprised how often a routine question can change the course of an investigation."

Bree took a sip of water. "There's no one I can think of. That doesn't mean there isn't anyone, I guess."

Travis rounded out the interview with a few more questions. “I want to get back to the office and get this information into the database as soon as possible. If you think of anything else, you call me. Okay?”

Bree nodded and offered a weak smile.

“Are you staying in town indefinitely?” Travis asked Kade.

“Had a flight planned in a few weeks.” Bree’s hand tensed, and her eyes darted around. He squeezed her fingers. “But I already called to let my new boss know I’ll be here for a while.”

Travis stopped at the door. “I can reach you anytime?”

“Yes,” Kade said.

As soon as Travis was out the door, Bree said, “Are you planning to miss your flight because of me?”

“It’s no big deal. Being here for you seems more important, and we have a lot of family drama to sort out at the ranch.” Kade’s head still reeled from the baby news. Zeke and Kade had made a pact to have each other’s backs in high school. Kade had every intention of honoring the agreement. And yet, he couldn’t help but feel betrayed, considering he’d been tricked by his best friend. Zeke hadn’t given so much as a clue that he wasn’t the father. Again, the question of whether Zeke had known he wasn’t the father surfaced.

But this wasn’t the right time to ask.

The next couple of hours were a parade of doctors and people who wanted to check on Bree to see for themselves that she was okay. Kade kept watch, clearing the room when she couldn’t hold her eyes open so she could rest.

It was nightfall by the time the room finally quieted. He’d been twenty-four hours without a shower or a toothbrush. Thankfully, his sister had dropped off a few supplies earlier in the day when she’d brought good coffee and bagels. It was time to use them.

Kade moved to the bathroom, leaving the door open in case someone decided to stop

by unexpectedly. As long as he was around, no one would get through that door uninvited.

He brushed his teeth and splashed cold water on his face. Looking in the mirror was the worst of bad ideas. There he stood, staring into tired eyes. He wasn't exhausted from last night. That wasn't what had jolted him out of bed in the middle of the night more times than he could count. If not for him, Zeke would be alive, finishing up plans to marry the woman in the next room—a woman Kade hadn't been able to get out of his thoughts since their fling.

Stubble darkened his chin. A haunted face stared back at him.

So much for looking in the mirror. He reclaimed his seat and took Bree's hand in his, where it felt right.

Another hour passed when a floor nurse, Harley, ducked her head inside. "I'm here to help with a shower."

Bree opened her eyes. The sleepy smile she sent Kade's way was a shotgun blast to the center of his chest.

"A shower sounds like heaven." Her throat was still scratchy-sounding, which gave it a low, gravelly effect. And that was a shot somewhere else he didn't need to think about right then.

Harley moved to her bedside. "We can do it right here or in the bathroom, whichever you prefer."

"A real shower." Excited brown eyes blinked up and then at him.

"Would you mind giving me a hand to get her in the bathroom?" Harley's gaze fixed

on Kade.

“Not at all.” His body was stiff from all the sitting anyway.

Kade bore most of Bree’s weight as he helped her across the room. He stopped at the bathroom door. End of the line. “I’ll be in the hallway if you need me.”

“Thank you.” Bree caught his gaze and held it. “For everything.”

After stepping into the hallway, he checked his phone. He must’ve dozed off earlier because he hadn’t heard his cell buzz. There were several messages from Travis. The gist was that all available personnel were on the hunt for the Reaper. A BOLO had been issued, and all law enforcement departments in Texas were aware of the recent attempt on Bree’s life. Considering signs pointed to this case being linked to the serial killer, the FBI had touched base to offer resources. Travis’s friend from San Antonio PD wanted to speak to Bree personally. Amidst all the chaos and news, Travis couldn’t seem to get ahold of Sheriff Carr. He asked Kade to call if the sheriff showed up at the hospital.

Kade called Chloe next. She picked up on the first ring.

“How is she?” his sister asked.

“Shaken. She seems a little disoriented. The drug he gave her seems to be wearing off, though. She’s awake and alert enough to take a shower. The nurse is helping her now. Baby seems fine, too.”

“That’s all very good news.” The relief in Chloe’s tone was palpable.

“It is.” He held onto the information that Bree’s child belonged to him. It wasn’t his news to share without discussing it with Bree. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything. You know that.”

“Stay indoors as much as possible. When you’re home, make sure the doors are locked and the alarm is set. Even when you’re awake.”

“This whole thing has me rattled, too,” she admitted. “I’ve been checking to make sure my car doors are locked. Did she say how he got to her?”

“Her truck broke down on the road and he kidnapped her, but she thinks he was inside her house before. He might’ve been watching her for weeks before the attack.”

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An audible breath came through the line. “That’s really creepy.”

She didn’t know the half of it.

He paused a beat. “Suffice it to say if you see anyone suspicious hanging around your house or in the bar’s parking lot, call 911 immediately. Don’t second-guess yourself. Don’t confront the person, either. Just get to a safe place with other people around and call it in. Then text me immediately.”

“I will,” she promised.

“Good.”

“I’ll deliver dinner to the hospital. One of the other waitresses said she’d cover for a little while so I could bring you something to eat.”

“Don’t linger in your car and you should keep the rental for the time being, just in case you’d rather drive it than yours. Watch out for any suspicious-looking persons hanging around.” Was he being overly cautious? This was Chloe, and he’d made a life’s work out of protecting his baby sister. And you failed many times, the annoying voice in the back of his head pointed out.

“Got it, Kade. Don’t worry about me, okay?” Chloe asked. “What are you going to do about your furniture sales?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “I forgot all about that.”

“I’ll send Conrad,” she said. “Might be good to get him away from Beau for a little while in case the two of them are still hanging out together.”

“That would be a huge help,” he said. “Thank you.”

The door behind him opened, and the nurse signaled for him to come back inside the room. “She’s asking for you.”

The announcement shouldn’t make warmth spread through him like it did. He chalked it up to residual attraction to Bree and nothing more. The cuts and bruises on her face couldn’t mask her true beauty. She had that rare kind of smile able to light up even the worst day. He’d been an idiot to voice his desire to keep his life as uncomplicated as possible. No wife. No kids. No family.

He was paying for those off-handed remarks now. And so had Zeke.

The minute Kade walked into the room, Bree motioned for him to sit next to her. Her hair was pulled off her face, and her creamy skin practically glowed. Her eyes brightened when he sat next to her and linked their fingers. He shouldn’t have brought hers to his lips to kiss them, but that’s exactly what he did. He chalked the emotion hammering his chest to being grateful she was alive. Bree had always been smart and beautiful. Her heart-shaped face and full pink lips stirred the attraction he shouldn’t allow, along with another shot of guilt.

The nurse finished refilling a water mug and set it on the tray table next to the bed. “The doctor signed your release papers for tomorrow morning. Someone will be here early with paperwork.”

“Thank you.” The nurse excused herself as Bree tightened her grip on Kade’s hand. He could feel the tension radiating from her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I can’t go back home.” Her chin quivered, and she bit down on her bottom lip. “Not alone.”

“Would it help if I came with you for a few days until you get your bearings?” She needed to know where he stood.

Bree pinched the bridge of her nose and leaned her head against the pillow. “I appreciate the offer, Kade. I do. You already have enough on your plate with everything going on in your family.”

“Plans change.”

10

Bree needed to talk to Kade about the baby and explain her relationship with Zeke. She didn’t even know where to start. However, she didn’t want to do it here, not like this. “Me not wanting you to go is selfish. I don’t want you to rearrange your life for me.”

“I’m not leaving you alone while that...” he seemed to be biting his tongue, “sick jerk is out there.”

A shiver raced down Bree’s spine thinking about him. About the fact that she’d most likely been right about him being inside her home. That he’d slipped inside her neighborhood unnoticed. How could she ever go back there? How would she ever feel safe again? “I’ll get an alarm and a dog. Something big and protective. A Rottweiler.”

“Dogs take time to train.” It was hard enough to turn Kade down with him there,

being her support. She feared he was going to resent her when she told him the truth that Zeke knew Kade was the baby's father all along.

"I can't imagine going back there." She hated the shakiness in her voice. "You've already done so much for me. I wouldn't be alive if not for you, Kade. I can't ask you to give up your future to babysit me. I'll stay with a friend until I get my sea legs back."

The look—of protectiveness? determination? possessiveness?—he gave her sent tingles of electricity swirling through her.

"You didn't ask, sweetheart." He squeezed her hand. "And I'm not leaving unless you tell me to."

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She couldn't. Not when there was so much left unsaid between them. "Then okay." A couple of days might give her time to find the words that had escaped her up until now. Despite Zeke's adamant warning otherwise, Kade deserved to know the truth. All of it.

Bree had no idea how many hours had passed between waking up and being cleared to leave the hospital. It was seven o'clock in the morning when the nurse brought in a wheelchair and announced Bree had been cleared to go home. Kade had insisted that he be the one to drive her.

Pulling in front of her house—the place she used to feel like was home—Bree's chest seized with panic.

Kade stopped his truck and turned to her. "You'll be fine. You know that. Right?"

There was no feeling behind Bree's nod of agreement. He was trying to offer reassurance, and she appreciated him for it. Her heart thundered in her chest.

The air thinned, and Bree gasped. It was like she couldn't breathe. "I can't do it."

"You don't have to." Kade shifted the gear into reverse and backed out of the driveway. Silence sat between them as he navigated onto the farm road.

"Where are we going?" Bree asked after a long silence.

"Considering I'm in the process of selling all my stuff and my apartment is a wreck, I thought it might be best if we borrowed one of my buddy's fishing cabins instead. It

shouldn't be a problem this time of year. I know the code to get inside, and he said I could use the place whenever I wanted. He knew I might need a place to escape for a few days and recoup. Does that sound okay?"

"I don't care where we go, as long as it's not my place." Those words sounded foreign. Her home had been sacred ground. It was the first place she'd rented on her own with money she'd made.

"Deal. We should stop off and buy some necessities on the way out of town. Do you mind grabbing my phone and texting my sister to let her know where we're headed? No one in the family will suspect anything when I'm suddenly not around. I'm known for my disappearing acts. And people will most likely think you went to stay with your family."

"My dad." Bree gasped. In all the exhaustion Bree hadn't thought about calling home. Her father was dealing with so much already with the medical diagnosis. "I should call him."

"Travis called last night, and my sister has been in contact ever since. Your dad wanted to drop everything and come. Chloe reassured him that nothing else could be done here except sit and watch you sleep."

"Did Chloe say how my father sounded?"

"He was upset but grateful you were found in time. I'm supposed to pass on the message that he loves you." Hearing those last two words from Kade stirred a reaction in her chest—a reaction she couldn't afford under the circumstances. He was the one person who could shatter her heart into a thousand tiny specks of dust.

"He requested that you call when you're up to it. He also said not to come home unless you were ready to travel. He volunteered to come here to take care of you, but

Chloe promised that wasn't necessary."

"My dad took your sister at her word?" Surprising.

"Chloe told him I planned to stick around to make sure nothing else happened until the guy was caught." He white-knuckled the steering wheel. "Now you see my problem. I already promised your father, and I'm a man of my word." A cocky grin upturned the corners of his mouth.

The break in tension was a much-needed relief. Bree allowed herself a small smile. "You're right. You win." It was probably the stress of recent events that caused her to break out laughing. She sounded a little hysterical, even to herself. But it was like she was sighing relief for the first time. "I'll let your sister know where we're headed so she doesn't worry."

Bree located his phone and sent the text. A response immediately came back. "She said she'll drop off the dog you told her about. She just picked him up from the airport and will redirect so she can drop him off at the cabin. Said she his name is Kimbro, and he has food."

"She doesn't fight fair." He shook his head in mock disgust. "He's being retired from his military service, and one of the men in my unit rescued him. If you're thinking about a pet, and I use that term loosely because he's a trained fighter, maybe he's the right one."

"Sounds like it would save me the work of training a puppy. I'm willing to give him a try if you think it might be a good fit."

"All I know is that he's a seven-year-old German Sheppard named Kimbro. He's been through a lot. He lost hearing in one ear." Kade's deep baritone washed over her, bringing to life parts of her body she ought to ignore.

“Sounds like he deserves a good home.” One she could provide. Kade making sure she would be okay brought on a reaction she couldn’t afford...comfort.

He glanced over at her stomach. “At least until the baby’s born. Young kids and highly trained military dogs don’t usually mix well.”

“We can take a wait-and-see approach.” Bree settled back in her seat and fixed her gaze on the patch of road before her. She needed to remind herself he was only there because she was in trouble, not because he wanted to be with her. After what she considered the best weekend of her life, she’d been devastated when he’d been clear that he had no desire for anything more to develop between them. She’d never been one-night-stand material. It worked for some, but not for her. She needed to feel an emotional connection with someone. She’d been embarrassed to realize that had been a one-way street with Kade.

To be fair, Kade hadn’t made any promises. She’d known what she was getting into. Sort of. He’d been crystal clear. No commitments. No strings. Just mutually agreed-upon, great sex. Why had she thought it would be different with her? She’d been naïve to think there could be more between them than smokin’ hot sex. And, damn...it had been the best sex of her life. Which would’ve been fine if her heart hadn’t gotten in the way, sending her confusing desires.

Her feelings for Kade dated back to high school when they’d started spending time together with the group. She thought maybe things were going down a path where the next logical step would be for him to ask her out. He hadn’t. Instead, graduation had come, and he’d signed up for the military. She’d figured that was that. Life moved on. She’d seen him a few times when he’d come home on leave to visit his sister. He’d rented a small apartment—big enough for one—over the Huckabee’s garage. Even in high school, there’d always been something unreachable, something distant about him. Was that the attraction?

And then he'd come home a few months ago. He'd saved her on the side of the road. The two had talked, and the next thing she knew, it was one o'clock in the morning. She'd invited him over for coffee, which had turned into three days and nights of the best conversation and food—and the most incredible sex both at her house and the fishing cabin. He'd disappeared just as quickly.

One of her closest high school friends, Zeke, had been there to pick up the pieces when she'd realized she was pregnant. She'd loved Zeke. He'd loved her but in a different way. She'd quickly realized his love was the kind that led to a proposal—the words she'd wanted to hear from Kade. Tears welled, thinking about Zeke being gone. An ache formed in her chest at his life being cut short. She thought about never seeing his smiling face walk through the front door, where he'd drop his rucksack and crack a joke that made her belly laugh. The loss was too much. The stress caused by thinking about him was probably bad for the baby, so she carefully tucked away those memories for a time when she could really grieve.

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What she'd had with Zeke was totally different from what she felt for Kade. But then, she'd never felt that for anyone but him. She'd dated around and had almost gotten engaged once. But then Kade had come home to visit his sister, and she'd bumped into him at the park. Chloe had just had her child, and he was holding her son in his arms. The sight of that man with a baby in his arms had released a thousand butterflies in her stomach. He had—still had—one of those devastating smiles that proved lethal when it came to seducing her. One look from Kade sent her pulse racing. Not feeling anything close to that with the man whose proposal she'd been considering had made her realize she would never be able to take his ring.

Glancing at Kade now, her heart stuttered. She needed to let him in on the secret Zeke convinced her to keep from his best friend. She only prayed she could find the right words and not shatter his world a second time. Finding out his best friend had lied would add insult to injury.

She had to find a way to tell him.

When the time was right.

Bree had been quiet most of the way to the fishing cabin. Kade couldn't tell whether she was too tired for conversation or at a loss for words. There was so much he needed to know about her, her and Zeke's relationship, and about the child she was carrying. He wasn't usually much for words when spending time with the opposite sex, but it had always been different with Bree.

He pulled into the convenience store parking lot and parked. "I'd rather you stay in the truck. I'll lock up. It's best if no one sees you."

“Okay.” She leaned the seat back.

He hesitated.

“I’ll be okay.” Even with her chin up, her voice said the opposite was true. He admired her courage, and his heart took another hit at her bravery.

“This won’t take long.” Kade hopped out of the truck and hit the key fob to lock the doors. He gathered a few necessities: coffee, milk, that blueberry parfait yogurt she liked. He picked out something to make for dinner before checking out in record time and returning to his vehicle.

For those few minutes Bree was out of sight, his heart thundered in his chest, and he could hardly breathe. Leaving town at any point in the future didn’t seem like the best idea anymore. Maybe he could stay through the holidays until Bree got settled again, and he had enough time to spend with Chloe before moving on. It would give him a chance to figure out this co-parenting arrangement that needed to happen.

“That was quick.” Bree sat up and glanced around at the parking lot, which was thankfully empty.

“Got enough to get us through the night.” The thought they’d be spending the night under the same roof hit him. It should seem odd, especially under the circumstances, but it felt like the most natural thing. Seeing the vulnerability in those beautiful eyes of hers and how much his heart ached being with her again reminded him just how much of a jerk he’d been when he’d had the chance with her months ago. He’d blown that all to hell, which wasn’t a shock. Kade handled serious relationships about as often as a hot stove. He didn’t touch either one. However, this feeling of regret was new to him. Kade had always stayed in the now. He didn’t look back, didn’t regret—not until her.

Kade navigated back onto the farm road. Twenty minutes later, he pulled up next to the cabin.

“Are there any other cabins nearby?” Bree asked.

“Not for miles. The lake is a ten-minute walk, and my buddy owns three acres. We have no neighbors, which should give you and Kimbro a chance to get to know each other without other distractions.” He hopped out of the cab and hurried around to the passenger side to help her out. Bruised and cut, her face was still as beautiful as ever. Her shiny blond hair cascaded down her back. Her eyes were his favorite color of brown—dark, rich—and they faltered when she took his outstretched hand. She was smart and successful. Funny when times were lighter. And she had this smile that beamed and made him think the world was a better place than it was. Made him think he was a better person than he was when it was aimed at him.

The proof he was losing what was left of his mind came in the form of the fact that he had feelings—real feelings—for his dead best friend’s fiancée. To make matters worse, she was pregnant with Kade’s baby even though her heart belonged to Zeke. And here, Kade believed he didn’t “do” complicated.

After helping her out of the vehicle, he walked her to the door and punched in the code to unlock it. “I better go in first, just in case Kimbro isn’t happy to see us.”

Bree was practically glued to his back as he linked their fingers together. He flipped on the light and took a couple of steps into the open-concept living, dining, and kitchen, all the while searching for Kimbro.

A low growl sounded from a dark corner of the living room. Kade led Bree into the kitchen where his sister had left some dog food and treats.

“He’s in a new environment. His injury most likely makes him feel vulnerable.” Kade

noticed his sister had put out a water bowl. The food bowl was on the counter, empty.

He poured the kibble into the bowl. The dry chunks made a chink, chinknoise against the metal bowl. He lifted the bowl to his nose and took a sniff. "That's God-awful. We can do a helluva lot better than this."

He retrieved the food bags from the truck and cooked up some of the ground beef he'd bought. He sprinkled the beef on top of the dry food as he scanned the room.

The dog had stopped growling but was in a defensive posture curled up in the corner. He looked tired and a little scared. From what Kade could tell, Kimbro was a beautiful animal. He had the markings of a German Shepherd, an all-black snout, and serious eyes.

"Easy, boy," Kade summoned his most calming voice. Any sudden movement might put the dog back on guard. He glanced toward Bree, who was putting away food items. She moved fluidly and easily despite the basketball-sized belly she carried around.

"He needs a new name." Bree had stopped and was studying the animal. "For a new life."

"Good idea." The animal was alert and had that concerned look on his face that Kade figured came standard with German Shepherds.

Halfway across the room, Kade crouched low on his heels. The dog had started his low growl again, and Kade didn't want the animal to feel cornered. That's when a frightened dog became a dangerous one. Growing up in Saddle Junction, he'd spent his childhood around animals. He knew when to push and when to back off.

Kade set the food bowl down and slid it toward the seventy-five-pound animal.

Hungry eyes stared back at him, taking in Kade and Bree with caution. “I know, big guy. You’ve had a long day. But you’re fine now. You’re gonna be okay.”

“He’s beautiful. I can’t help but think he looks so dignified and regal. I’ve always thought German Shepherds were the most beautiful dogs. What do you think about calling him Rinty after Rin Tin Tin?”

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“Wasn’t he rescued during a World War by an American soldier?” Kade asked.

“That’s the one,” Bree said. “Then, he became famous in the movies.”

“Rinty.” Kade let the name sit on his tongue. He rocked his head. “It’s a good name with an even better history.”

“I thought so, too,” she said with a satisfied smile that brightened the damn room.

Slowly, purposely, Kade leaned back on his heels as Rinty inched forward toward the bowl. “That’s right, Rinty. Come on and eat. No one’s going to hurt you here.”

Rinty kept his gaze on Kade, who slowly backed away to give the dog space. Returning to the kitchen, he joined Bree. “I’d planned on making burgers with that meat.”

“I’m not hungry. I saw yogurt in the bag. I’ll probably just grab some of that.”

Kade crossed the kitchen until he was standing in front of Bree. Her hip was leaning against the counter, her hand planted behind her. And when her gaze locked onto his, all rational thought flew out the window. He brought the back of his hand up to her cheekbone. “I should’ve told you this before, but I couldn’t stand it if something worse had happened to you.”

She stared up at him with those beautiful dark roast-colored eyes that he wanted to get lost in. “I’m here now because you saved me.”

He ran his finger along her jawline, noticing how husky his own voice had just become. He'd thought of her too many times since that weekend. He'd wanted to be here, holding her, lying in bed in a tangle of sheets instead of in the desert. The only thing that had stopped him from contacting her had been the fact he'd known on a bone-deep level he would end up hurting her. She deserved better.

He could feel her rapid pulse as he traced his finger along her jawline and then down the tender skin of her throat. He cupped the nape of her neck and rubbed circles with the pad of his thumb. "I think about you, about us—"

A mix of emotions played out behind those brown eyes. Frustration? Sadness? "You were pretty clear about what you wanted, Kade. Or should I say what you didn't want—me."

"I never said I didn't want you." Only that he didn't "do" more than a weekend here and there. Only that she deserved better.

Bree's full pink lips parted. Her tongue darted across her bottom lip, her nervous tell. And her eyes blinked up at him. "Kiss me, Kade."

He shouldn't. All rationale for why this would be a bad idea went up in smoke the minute his hungry lips touched hers. He pressed his mouth to hers, gently at first, afraid he'd hurt her. But then her hands came up to his chest, and she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt, pulling him closer to her soft, curvy body.

His muscles strung so taut he thought they might snap from contact. Breathing in her clean, flowery scent caused his body to ache for her. When she deepened the kiss, teasing his tongue inside her mouth, Kade's self-control detonated. He pulled her to him, remembering how sweet her creamy skin felt under his rough hands. How much he wanted to drive himself deep inside her and forget the world around him. How much he wanted to go back in time and act differently after the weekend they'd

shared. He'd tell her he could change if it meant hearing her voice next to him when he went to sleep at night.

It might be a lie, but it felt so true, so real when he got lost in that sweet kiss and her flower bouquet scent. He brought his hands up to her face to position her mouth for better access. How many times had he thought about doing this very thing in the past few months? Too many?

A lightning bolt of guilt slammed into him for what was happening between them, for what he was helpless to fight. This tide, this current was too damn strong.

Guilt fought and won.

Kade took a step back. He could think more clearly when he wasn't breathing in the woman he loved.

Loved?

Shit. He needed to erase that word from his vocabulary when it came to Bree. Her heart still belonged to Zeke, and Kade was being the worst possible friend right now. Selfish.

"Not a good idea," he said, forcing his gaze away from the hurt and confusion in Bree's eyes. "I just can't."

11

Embarrassed, Bree took a step back and brought the back of her hand up to her lips. It was too easy to get lost in Kade, to get lost in feelings that threatened to overwhelm good judgment. How could being with the man she loved be wrong? This little one growing inside her picked that moment to execute a kick that knocked the wind out of

her. She bent forward, grabbed her stomach, and bit down on her bottom lip. Point taken. Her life was no longer about what she wanted. She had a child to consider, a child who deserved a full-time dad. Those were the exact words Zeke used.

Kade made a quick move toward her, and a low growl came from the corner of the room. Rinty. Was he being protective? As much as Bree appreciated the gesture, and she did, hurting Kade would only aid a killer. An involuntary shiver rocked her at the last word.

“It’s okay, Rinty,” she soothed as Kade froze mid-step. “He’s not going to hurt me.”

“This is a good sign,” Kade admitted. The man was an expert at not giving away his emotions. In this case, a hint of admiration mixed with a healthy dose of fear laced his tone.

“That he sees me as weak and needing protection?” Bree asked.

“In your current condition, it would be very difficult to outrun a killer and he didn’t like me moving too fast,” he said. His honesty hit her square in the chest. “And you’re not weak; you’re vulnerable right now. There’s a difference.”

He made good points.

Her self-control had taken a momentary vacation a few minutes ago. Rinty hadn't made a peep when Kade had kissed her. She'd welcomed the contact. This was different. She was in pain and he moved too quickly.

She said a few more words meant to soothe the dog when he got up and moved beside her. Did he have a sixth sense about the pregnancy? Did his training kick in when he perceived a threat?

Either way, she wouldn't complain because it meant he had her back. Between Kade and Rinty, she was beginning to feel like she might make it through this nightmare in one piece. She rubbed her belly as she said to Rinty, "You're going to be a good guard dog, aren't you?" He'd already wormed his way into her heart.

The rigid way in which he stood, ears forward and gaze intent, said he would bite if provoked. This could cause a problem if he viewed the baby as a threat—or as the baby got older—his or her playmates. She filed the information under the category of future problems. Right now, she would take him for the gift he truly was and, for once, not overthink the situation.

Rinty deserved the best possible life. He'd served his country, and now it was his turn to be spoiled.

As the pain relaxed, so did he.

"Guter hund," Kade said. "Sitz!"

Rinty sat.

“Impressive,” Bree said. “Since when do you speak German?”

“I learned a few words when I was on a mission with a K9 and his handler once,” he said. She knew better than to ask for details. Kade wouldn’t be able to share that part of his life. When she thought about it, asking someone to go on life-and-death missions without ever being able to talk about them afterward must take a toll, mentally and emotionally. She understood the need to keep the information secret but wondered about the burden military personnel carried long after the fighting was done.

“Thank you both for your service,” she said, and she meant it.

Kade’s gaze intensified for a split second, causing warmth to spread through her. The man was easy on the eyes and had the kind of focus that made him good at everything he did. Very good. Exceptionally good. His hands had done things to her body that she...

This seemed like a good time to shake those thoughts out of her mind.

“You’re welcome.” Those words came out with a smirk that almost convinced her that he could read her mind. Almost.

As for Rinty, he had obedience training. They could build on that.

Kade’s grin faded as he motioned toward Rinty. “You should be the one to feed him next time. It’ll get him used to the idea that all good things come from you.”

“Aren’t you worried about how he reacted to you a few minutes ago?”

“Not really. He was doing his job, protecting you. That’s all I care about right now.” Rinty had, in fact, been ready to take a bite out of Kade. “I’ll give him treats and sit with him. He listened to my command, so that’s a good sign he won’t act aggressively toward me as long as he thinks I’m not hurting you.”

Kade went to work fixing a pot of coffee in an old-fashioned machine that was straight out of the nineties. It spit and sputtered, making an entire pot at one time. “Would you like a cup?”

Bree rubbed her belly. “Yes, but I can’t have one.”

“Damn,” Kade said, twisting his face in sympathy. “How long has it been since you’ve had caffeine?”

Before pregnancy, she hadn’t imagined her life without coffee, either. She realized he was keeping her talking about anything unrelated to what had happened to put her in the hospital. Then, there was Zeke. A mental break was not only welcomed but also needed for the sake of the baby.

“Too long,” she said. “Counting the exact number of months would be too depressing.”

Kade gave a knowing look. She smiled at the thought of him attempting to go an entire day without caffeine. He must have. Right?

“Surely you’ve gone without caffeine,” she said.

“Coffee. Yes. Caffeine. Hell no.”

“How?” She moved to the table and took a seat across from the one he claimed. Given her body’s reaction to him, she needed to put as much distance and space

between them as possible without being obvious. The man didn't need to know just how warm certain parts of her became when he was in proximity.

He pulled a tin out of his pocket. "These are magic."

"I should have known you would have figured out a way to always have caffeine on hand." Again, she laughed. It had been far too long since she'd smiled, let alone had a reason to laugh. And losing Zeke had convinced her that she might never laugh again.

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“You know me too well.” Those words had barely left the man’s mouth when he shot a look that said he regretted being too familiar with each other. Keeping an emotional distance was not only smart but necessary. The baby shifted as if punctuating the sentence with an exclamation mark.

She must have winced because Kade’s face morphed into outright concern.

“Everything okay?” he asked, white-knuckling his coffee mug.

“The baby moved,” she said. Then, she added, “Do you want to feel it?”

Much to her surprise, Kade came around the table in a heartbeat. “Can I?”

“Give me your hand.” Touch was necessary even though it counted as mistake number two.

He did. She placed the flat of his large palm over the spot on her belly where the baby could be felt.

As though responding to its father’s touch, the baby shifted again.

“Whoa!” Kade’s eyes were saucers.

She forced her gaze away from the pale blue irises hooded by thick, raven-colored eyelashes. Black hair with pale blue eyes couldn’t have been sexier on that carved-from-granite face. The man was perfection. Even the new inch-long scar above his eyebrow made him more beautiful. There were other marks on his hand. Raised,

white skin that would forever remind him of missions with Zeke.

“That’s amazing,” he whispered with reverence in his voice. And then he focused those baby blues on her. “Boy or girl?”

“I don’t know yet,” she admitted.

“You haven’t found out the sex? Why not?”

Could she tell him it hadn’t felt right to know without the baby’s father standing beside her? Could she admit that it somehow seemed unfair? That she hadn’t been able to say yes to finding out?

That she’d wanted it to be Kade in the room with her and not her best friend?

The admission caused a wave of guilt to crash through her.

“What happened?” Kade asked.

She shot a questioning look.

“You just tensed up like crazy,” he said. “Was that a contraction?”

“No.” She didn’t want him to worry. She also couldn’t tell him what she’d been thinking that had caused her body to react. “It’s okay. Happens sometimes.” How was that for a generic response?

“Is that normal?” he asked, a line wrinkling his forehead.

Nothing about this was normal. Normal wasn’t on the table. If life were normal, she wouldn’t have a serial killer hunting her.

“Tell me more about what Travis said about the victim who slipped out of Reaper’s hands,” she said, hoping he didn’t call her out on the change in topic.

Kade moved back to his chair. His absence next to her was felt immediately.

It’s safer this way. The baby kicked harder this time.

Bree would smile if the conversation hadn’t shifted to the person who wanted to kill her.

“Travis said the bastard stalked the victim and then punished her for slipping out of his hands once.” Kade’s grip on the mug was so tight by the time he finished the sentence that he had to force his fingers to relax before he broke the ceramic piece and burned his hand with hot coffee.

Bree shivered.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be.” She recovered a casual look after rolling her shoulders. “I need to know what I’m facing.”

She didn't need to be facing a serial killer at all.

"I'm due any time now."

"Yes," he said, uncertain where this was headed.

"What do you think about taking the baby when he or she comes until this case is resolved?" She didn't say until the bastard was locked behind bars or until she was safe. Had she resigned to the Reaper finding her?

"It won't be necessary."

Bree shot him a look that said he wasn't being reasonable.

"I'm not leaving your side, Bree. Not unless you specifically ask me to. I thought we were clear on that point."

"We are, but—"

"I'll do whatever it takes to keep you and the baby safe." It was a promise he intended to keep even with that all-consuming guilt returning. No, especially because of that guilt. He might not have been able to keep Zeke alive, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be able to protect Bree. "You're smart, and we know what we're faced with. Together, we can do this. Besides, I think it would be bad for the baby not to be with its mother in the hours and days it first enters the world."

Kade knew all about mothers who abandoned their children for their own safety.

Even when it was necessary, a kid was still devastated by what he or she would see as a choice to leave. It wasn't until years later that Kade had realized there'd been no real decision to make. It had been a matter of survival. He couldn't blame his mother for needing to go.

"You're probably right. I just want to do everything I can to keep this little one safe."

"I'm not sure if anyone has already told you this, Bree. You're going to be an amazing mother."

She blinked a couple of times like she was trying to keep tears from leaking from the corners of her eyes. Hells bells. He hadn't meant to cause her to cry.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked.

"You just are. Look at how protective you are over the baby before it's even born. You would sacrifice yourself if it meant keeping the little one safe."

Bree didn't speak for a long moment. Then, she said, "Thank you, Kade. I was so afraid to tell you about the pregnancy."

"Am I such an awful human being?"

"No, it's not that," she quickly responded. "I was afraid you'd think I did this on purpose to trap you or something."

Kade cracked a smile. He couldn't help it. "No one in their right mind would give up coffee to trap me."

Bree laughed. The sound broke through the tension that had suddenly been building.

“Besides, you’re the one doing all the heavy lifting with the pregnancy. You didn’t do this to yourself. That’s not how babies are made.” He paused. “I have to admit, in the blissful haze of making love to you, I was afraid I’d forgotten to slip on a condom once. The fear was confirmed after hearing the news I was becoming a dad.” Another pause. “I didn’t bring it up at the time because I thought, What are the odds this one time will yield a pregnancy?”

“Same here,” she admitted, more of that tension eased on her beautiful face. “Turns out, neither of us should spend all our money at the racetrack.”

Now, it was his turn to laugh.

“I’ve never been much of a gambler,” he said.

“Still don’t like losing?” she asked. “I remember that time you lost in freeze tag on the playground in first grade. You quit the team.”

“I might have been a sore loser as a kid.” He could give her that. “I’m a grown man now. And there’s no way I would consider that child a loss.”

He surprised himself by saying those words out loud.

They were true. No denying it. But the momentary look of relief on her face stirred places he’d rather leave dormant.

Could he protect her and his own heart at the same time?

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A crash outside caused Bree to jump out of her skin. Rinty hopped onto all fours, ready for action as he aligned his entire body in a way that made it look like he was pointing at the spot the noise had come from.

“Let’s go,” Kade said to him as Bree moved to the kitchen drawer and pulled out a knife.

Kade reached into his rucksack that sat just inside the front door and retrieved a handgun of some kind. Bree might have grown up in a ranching community in a small Texas town, but she’d always shied away from guns aside from the stun gun her dad had once placed inside her handbag. Just in case, he’d said. At that time, her biggest threat had been a teenage boy he thought might decide the lines of consent were blurry when she’d told him no.

Gripping the handle of a carving knife, she followed Kade into the living room, Rinty by his side. Had the dog realized Kade was ex-military at some point? After the commands? Because watching the two of them now, they could be mistaken for partners to her untrained eye.

Outside the window, rolling gray clouds blanketed the sky. The chill in the heavy air promised a weather front was on its way. She’d been too distracted to check the report. Being out here in a cabin if a storm hit wasn’t exactly her warm and fuzzy right now.

Kade stepped onto the small concrete steps, his head shifting as he swept the area. A hand came back to stop her from following. “Stay inside and lock the door, okay?”

The thought of being separated, even for a few minutes, caused her shoulders to tense up.

Pain doubled her over as another cramp stole her breath.

Kade turned his head and muttered a few choice words—the exact words she was thinking.

How could this be happening now?

The contractions had been coming all morning.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Kade said.

“Leaving the hospital might have been a huge mistake,” she said, cradling her bump.
“This baby might be ready to meet the world.”

“Right now?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so,” she said, sitting on the step.

Kade tucked the weapon behind him into a holster. She hadn’t realized he’d been wearing one earlier. His cotton shirt covered it. He helped her up and inside the door before grabbing his rucksack. “Are you ready?”

She nodded as another contraction hit. When had they started coming closer together?
“I need to call my OB.”

“Your what?”

“Doctor,” she said as she breathed through the next one.

“What do I do?” he asked, sounding lost. It was the first time Bree had ever seen a chink in his armor.

“Grab my handbag,” she instructed. “My cell phone should be inside.”

“Okay.” He had her purse in a matter of seconds. Whatever threat was outside would have to be dealt with on their way to his truck.

Kade glanced at Rinty before helping her to her feet. “I’ll call my sister and see if she can arrange for one of my brothers to pick him up. He can stay at the ranch until I can pick him up and bring him home.” She liked the sound of those words a little too much.

This seemed like a good time to remind herself that she needed to keep perspective. They wouldn’t just be hurting each other if they tried to have a relationship and failed. They could damage the little one. No way was she allowing that to happen.

Besides, she was seriously jumping the gun. Kade hadn’t mentioned the possibility of the two of them together. No matter how incredible the kiss they’d shared had been, it couldn’t happen again. There was too much at stake.

“Can you walk on your own to the truck?” he asked.

Something dawned on her. “You can’t leave Rinty here alone.”

“What?”

“Someone might be out there, watching,” she said. “He could poison Rinty or outright shoot him.” Another cramp. Bree glanced down at Rinty. “You’re coming with us, boy.”

Kade wrapped an arm around Bree, shielding her with his own body as they moved to the truck. Two steps away, he clicked the button to unlock the doors. Swiftly, he helped her into the passenger seat. Rinty had already jumped inside and taken a position in the backseat. Determined brown eyes scanned the area, searching for any sign of movement.

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Wind whipped through the trees.

The second Bree's backside touched the seat, Kade closed the door and circled the front of the truck. In two seconds flat, the man was behind the wheel.

On the drive to the hospital, Bree's contractions came three minutes apart. Thank the stars for cell phones because she was able to call her OB, and Kade managed a call to his sister. She would meet him at the hospital to take Rinty to the ranch.

"I'll be back for you," Bree said to him in between contractions. Did he understand her? She had no idea. Did her words soothe him? She could only hope. The last thing she wanted was for Rinty to feel abandoned again. He must after being plucked out of the only life he knew.

"How long before the baby comes?" Kade asked, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

"I have no idea," she admitted. "I've been warned that first pregnancies generally mean longer labors."

"As much as I don't want you to be in pain, I'd prefer this kid not pop out on the drive to the hospital."

She couldn't agree more.

"I've seen and done a lot of things, but I've never felt so helpless in my entire life," he said. "You're amazing to have made it through the pregnancy this far. It couldn't

have been easy.”

At this point, Bree was focused on her breathing but the compliment burrowed into her heart. Responding wasn't much of an option, so she stored it in a place she could easily find it when she needed a boost. She nodded, knowing he could see the movement from the corner of his eye as he sped down the highway with his emergency flashers on. Rinty wasn't the only one on full alert.

By the time they arrived at the hospital, Bree's contractions were too close together for her to think about anything else.

It would be just like her to go from zero signs to go-time in a matter of a couple of hours, considering she'd just been released from the hospital hours ago.

The cramps made it impossible to speak. Kade called the hospital to let the staff know they were about to arrive.

“We're here,” Kade said as he roared up to the ER bay, as instructed. A look of sheer panic crossed his features as he searched for Chloe.

A nurse came rushing out along with two orderlies.

Before Bree was whisked out of the truck, she managed to say, “I'm safe. Wait for Chloe. Don't leave our boy.”

“Okay,” Kade said, looking torn. “Rinty is safe.”

Before Bree could say anything else, a contraction hit accompanied by a strong urge to push. Not two seconds later, she was in a wheelchair and being rushed inside.

Kade tapped the steering wheel with his thumb as he moved the truck out of the ER

bay. Guilt struck with the force of a rogue wave at not being able to go inside with Bree while she was delivering his child. Being stuck between a rock and a hard place was the perfect way to describe this trip home. Not only had he discovered that he was going to be a father, but the baby's mother was in love with someone else.

Long, lean fingers squeezed his chest until he thought his heart might burst. His feelings for Bree confused the hell out of him because he'd never wanted a family before. His stubborn side wanted to have a baby with someone who was in love with him if he was going to go there at all.

A few things were certain. Kade wouldn't abandon his child. He knew all too well what that did to a kid—even when circumstances were complicated and dictated it. Kade wouldn't leave Bree to raise the child on her own. First of all, he had more honor than that. Secondly, he'd seen Chloe's struggles bringing up Grayson on her own. He wouldn't wish that on another person. And he sure as hell wouldn't do that to Bree.

Could he stick around Saddle Junction? The traitorous thought he could head up the family ranch punched him in the solar plexus. Would he be giving Beaumont Sturgess exactly what he'd always wanted?

The same stubborn side that wouldn't let Kade walk away from Bree and his child dug its heels in on giving the family's patriarch what he wanted. Kade had made a commitment to himself that he would never run the ranch.

Could he step aside and let the others have it?

No, that would mean leaving the second oldest in charge. Beau. He'd been a class-A jerk at the will reading. Did he really want to get to know his siblings? Or was he planning to worm his way into taking over the ranch? Kade had been preoccupied since the meeting. He had no idea what was going on with his brothers or what they

were thinking. Had any of them changed their minds about how to handle the ranch?

As far as Kade was concerned, they should stick with the plan of selling the horses, then breaking up the land, piece-by-piece, before tearing down the house they'd been raised in. He'd used the term "house" instead of "home" on purpose. A home was a place you looked forward to going to at the end of a long day. A home held the people you loved inside, keeping them safe from the elements. A home was a place where celebrations occurred.

Sturgess Ranch housed nothing more than pain inside of pillars and sheetrock. Good riddance. The way Beaumont treated non-performing racehorses should be criminalized.

Annmarie pulled up, breaking into his heavy thoughts. She pulled her sedan alongside his and exited as he did the same.

"Where are Chloe and Grayson?" he asked.

"She had to get ready for work, and she didn't want Rinty in the same vehicle as the little kids," Annmarie said. She wore a miniskirt that left little to the imagination and a tight shirt that looked a size too small. Her stomach showed, revealing abs and a belly button piercing. She wore makeup and fresh lipstick.

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“Do you have plans tonight?” Kade asked, wondering if a stranger should be left alone with Rinty. Technically, Annmarie was a stranger, but she would have been prepped about the risks of Rinty around small children. He trusted that she would take the warnings seriously.

A smile spread across Annmarie’s hot pink lips. “I was hoping you’d stop by later.”

Shock didn’t even cover his reaction. He almost slipped and said his child was being born in the hospital behind them, then realized Annmarie didn’t know that.

She ran her finger along the top of her door before giving him a seductive stare. “Thought I might help you figure out a few reasons to stick around town once the will is settled.”

Annmarie was an attractive woman. She was his sister’s roommate and his nephew’s sometimes caregiver. She was nice. But there was no chemistry. Not on his side.

“Bree needs me to stay here,” he said before coaxing Rinty out of the passenger side and into Annmarie’s vehicle. Other than that, he didn’t know what to say to Annmarie. This wasn’t the time for a long conversation or to search his brain to find a way to let her down easy. So, he stayed all business. “She’s about to have a baby alone.” That should ring a bell, considering Annmarie had been in the same position once.

“Right. Zeke.” Annmarie flashed sorrowful eyes at Kade. “I forgot.”

Kade would never forget, any more than he would forgive himself, for not saving

Zeke. It should be Zeke at this hospital with Bree, no matter how much the voice in the back of Kade's mind argued the baby's father had more of a right than anyone else. However, Bree was in love with Zeke. They'd been about to marry and raise the baby together.

Why did the thought burn a hole in the center of Kade's chest? Zeke didn't know the baby wasn't his. The news would have shattered him, broken his heart. Zeke had been head over heels in love with Bree, and a piece of Kade had wanted her for his own.

"I gotta go," he said, cutting off those heavy thoughts before the unfairness of the situation could take root in his soul.

"Okay," Annmarie said. "Maybe I'll see you around then."

Considering the fact that she lived in the same trailer as his sister, she could bet on that fact. "See you soon."

Annmarie smiled, waved, and then reclaimed the driver's seat. Rinty sat dutifully next to her. He did fine with adults. Most of the time. Would he do as well with an infant?

Kade couldn't abandon Rinty any more than he could walk away from his own child. Like it or not, Rinty was stuck with Kade.

Now, though, his family needed him, and he intended to be there for Bree.

After racing through the ER and being directed to the maternity floor, Kade took two steps at a time. He flew out of the stairwell.

"Hold on, sir," an orderly said as he practically bum-rushed him. The husky worker

blocked Kade. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“My...”Hell, what?“Bree Kyndall is in labor. I’m with her.” He did his best to look around the big guy and get a peek down the hall.

“Are you next of kin?” the orderly asked.

“Technically, no,” he admitted, not ready to share with the world that he was the father of Bree’s child. Not until the two of them had a conversation about what that meant, what his role would be, and how they would tell everyone the baby belonged to Kade and not Zeke.

“You can wait for her in the room over here.” The orderly motioned toward a door across from the nurse’s station.

Should Kade blast the truth? That he had every right to be in the room where his child was being born?

Saddle Junction was a small town. Rumors spread like vines.

He raked his fingers through his hair in frustration as his gaze landed on a tall male wearing scrubs and some kind of head cover hovering in front of a doorway down the hall. “Is that Bree’s room?”

The orderly followed Kade’s finger as it pointed. Scrubs immediately turned his back to them and quickly disappeared down the hall.

“Who was that?” Kade asked. For a split second, he thought about throwing a punch, but what would it accomplish? Kade might knock the big guy off balance, and he might even throw him to the tile floor, but Bree’s room was being protected. He should probably be happy about the fact.

The orderly shrugged. “Probably someone doing their job.”

“I won’t keep you from doing yours then,” Kade said, realizing he might be endangering Bree and the baby by distracting the orderly who’d been assigned to keep everyone, including him, away from her.

What use was Kade to anyone, especially to those who needed him most?

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Bree started to ask where Kade was when her OB told her it was time to push. “How? This is fast.”

“Your baby is coming,” Dr. Rosa Perez said, her voice calm. “You made it here in time, but this little one is done waiting.”

Grabbing both knees, Bree pushed through the next contraction. There’d been no time for the epidural she’d planned on having. As it turned out, babies made their own plans.

Puuuuuush.Puuuuuush.Puuuuuush.

“Here comes the head,” Dr. Perez said. “You’re doing great. Keep pushing.”

Bree wasn’t sure she had anything left, considering the pain had been relentless. Digging deep, she repeated the nurse’s instructions several times before her baby appeared.

“Would you like to meet your daughter?” Dr. Perez asked.

“A girl?” Bree asked, tears pricking the backs of her eyes. She’d only cared about having a healthy child. Nothing was more important. So, she hadn’t let herself get attached to having a boy or girl.

And yet...

“Yes,” she said before the baby was wrapped and placed on her chest. This little

angel was perfect.

The doctor finished in a matter of minutes as Bree noticed the little girl's breathing was unsteady. Was that normal?

She summoned a nurse to come closer and take a look. The nurse almost immediately took the little bundle. "We're going to check her weight and other vitals."

"Is she okay?" Bree asked as panic mounted.

"We'll do a full exam and return her as soon as possible," the nurse said. The name sewn onto her scrubs was Michelle.

Bree took note of the fact Michelle had dodged a direct answer to her question. "Someone drove me here. A man."

"I'll check on him," Dr. Perez said after announcing she'd finished.

Bree's legs were out of the stirrups now, and the rest of the bed appeared to support her legs.

"Let's get you to your room first, where you'll be more comfortable," Dr. Perez said.

"What about my baby?" Bree asked as more of that panic gripped her.

"Michelle is going to take her to NICU so she can be warmed up," Dr. Perez said after a quick huddle with the nurse. "Does baby have a name?"

"No, not yet," Bree said. She'd been planning to wait until she could run ideas past Zeke. A little voice reminded her that she'd been dragging her feet for a totally different reason. She'd been desperate to tell Kade that he was going to be a father.

Bree could let other people assume Zeke was the father of her child, but she couldn't outright lie to the baby and had been holding off because she'd been hoping to write Kade's name on the birth certificate instead of Zeke's, despite his protests.

She'd left their last conversation with, I'll think about it and let you know.

Zeke! An ache formed in her chest. Her best friend would have loved to have been by her side while she'd delivered her daughter.

Dr. Perez pulled up a stool and sat next to Bree. The doctor smiled. "Your daughter is seven pounds, seven ounces. Congratulations, Bree."

"Thank you," she said, waiting for the "but" because there always seemed to be one after good news.

"The nurses are taking her to NICU because she needs more time to regulate her breathing," Dr. Perez said. Her bedside manner always had a calming effect on Bree. Not this time. Not while a team of nurses surrounded her minutes-old baby.

"Will she be okay?" The words rushed out of Bree's mouth.

"There's every reason to believe she will," Dr. Perez reassured. "This hospital has an amazing unit."

An orderly knocked on the door before entering. He motioned for Dr. Perez to meet him.

"I'll be right back," she said before standing up and meeting him halfway across the room.

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The two whispered. The orderly stepped out. The doctor returned.

“There’s a man by the name of Kade Sturgess demanding to see you.”

“Yes,” Bree said, wondering where he’d been. “Did someone stop him?”

The doctor nodded. “We’re under orders to restrict all visitors except law enforcement while you’re on the floor unless they have your express permission.”

Travis must have arranged it. She appreciated the idea in a broader sense, just not when it came to excluding Kade from the birth of his daughter. He must not have admitted to being the father of her baby, or he should have gotten a free pass to enter.

Everyone believed Zeke was the father. She hadn’t corrected the rumor because she’d been so unsure telling Kade was the right thing to do.

“Please, let Kade in,” Bree said.

Dr. Perez nodded before disappearing into the hallway along with the NICU team and her baby. Bree had to fight every instinct inside her not to force herself out of the bed to follow her daughter.

A second later, Kade came rushing in. His forehead creased with concern. Worry lines bracketed his mouth—a mouth that had imprinted her.

“Are you okay?” he immediately asked.

“Yes.”

When he took her hand to comfort her, warmth spread through her.

“They took her to NICU,” she said.

“Her?” He glanced around. Was he checking to see if anyone was in earshot? Was he embarrassed to admit to being the father?

Bree took her hand back. For a split second, Kade looked devastated. He seemed to mentally shake it off.

“We have a daughter,” she supplied.

“Why did they take her?” he asked, his voice laced with emotion.

“She’s having trouble breathing on her own,” she said, folding her arms over her chest to create a barrier between Kade and her heart. It was a little too easy to let her emotions run wild when he was this close and looking this concerned.

“She’ll be okay,” he reassured in a voice that said he was trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to persuade her. And then came, “She has to be.” Those whispered words were spoken with a rare vulnerability.

“Hold onto the belief,” he said.

“What about Rinty?” she asked.

“He’s safe and I’m here now.”

Bree shouldn’t let herself find comfort in those words, in him. Comfort was a slippery

slope when it came to Kade. Comfort made her want to believe their situation wasn't complicated.

But it was.

"I'm sorry that I let you down," Kade said to Bree as more of that guilt tried to consume him. "I should've been in this room with you."

"It wasn't your fault," she said. He wasn't so willing to let himself off the hook for abandoning her in a time of need. "The hospital had instructions not to let anyone near me."

The image of the man in scrubs hovering around her door while Kade was forced to wait in the hall stamped his thoughts. Was the man a hospital employee? Or had the Reaper slipped in by stealing scrubs? If the man had been inside Bree's home like she believed, would he have been able to enter someone else's in order to take work clothes?

Bree wasn't getting out of Kade's sight. The baby was safe as long as she was away from her mother. Could he convince Bree to leave the hospital without their daughter? Daughter. He tried to let that word sink in.

Before he could find the words to begin the other conversation, the orderly from earlier entered the room.

"I'm here to take you to your recovery room," he said.

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Kade stood up, ready to argue if the man said he was taking Bree alone.

The orderly must've been a mind reader because he quickly added, "You're welcome to come, too."

Kade nodded. Was there ever another option? No.

He followed the worker as he wheeled Bree into a semi-private room with two beds. The second was empty. More requests by Travis? Either way, Kade was grateful for the privacy. It would be easier to watch over Bree without the distraction of visitors for another patient.

"Word on the street is that you're being released soon," the orderly said as he helped her onto the other bed.

"What?" Bree asked. Her stern gaze said, Not without my daughter.

A daughter.

Kade's heart practically melted. And yet, he couldn't allow himself to think too much about the baby while Bree's life was still in danger. Last he checked, the Reaper was still on the loose. His pattern was to punish the ones who got away. Was he here, studying Bree? Studying the environment? Biding his time until he could sneak into her room and prove he could do what he wanted? That no one, not even the law, could stop him?

Arrogance. Would it be this bastard's downfall?

Once Bree was settled into bed and the hospital worker was gone, Kade said, “I know you don’t want to leave her here, but it might be safer for now.” There was no use mincing words. The same thought would likely have crossed Bree’s mind anyway.

“How can I do that?” she asked with a determined set to her chin. “How can I abandon my newborn baby?”

“What if I promise to get you back to the hospital every day to check on her for as long as she’s admitted?”

“I don’t know.” She wrung her hands together. “What if he comes for her to get back at me?”

“All my family is in town to sort out the inheritance mess. I could get my siblings to take shifts at the hospital to keep watch,” he said. “He wouldn’t get past them.”

“Would they do that for me?” she asked.

It dawned on him what she was saying beneath the words. “I haven’t told anyone she’s mine since everyone believes she’s Zeke’s and I didn’t know how you felt about spreading the truth right now. They would do it for him.”

“Oh,” she said. “Right.”

“I’m not against the idea of spreading the news about who the real father is, except with everything that’s happened, I just...”

“Thought it might be better for Zeke’s memory if we didn’t make any announcements anytime soon,” she said, finishing his sentence for him.

“That’s right.”

Bree pinched the bridge of her nose. Stress wasn't good for her. Kade wanted to be able to ease her tension. He wanted to be the one to put a smile on her face. He wanted to be the one to...

Never mind. This wasn't the time to let his brain go down the path of how desirable she was or how much his broken heart believed those pieces might just find a perfect fit with hers. She belonged to Zeke. He would repeat those words like a mantra until they were burned in his memory.

Zeke couldn't have known the baby was Kade's. His buddy wouldn't keep a deception like that one.

"Think you can get some rest?" he asked Bree, figuring she needed to keep up her strength if she was going to be released.

"How can I with my daughter in NICU?" she asked, working her fingers into a knot.

"Would it make you feel any better if I could assure you that..." He didn't know his own daughter's name. Score another point for being a failure as a father. "What did you decide to call her?"

"Assure me of what?" Bree skipped right over the last question.

"That my family will guard the little girl as one of their own," he said.

Bree sat there for a long moment without saying a word. She untwisted her fingers and smoothed the comforter with the flat of her palms. "Okay." The look she gave left no doubt Bree would be an amazing mother.

He stood up and moved to the window. His sister was at work, so he texted her before putting a message in the family group chat. Much to his surprise, Conrad had added a

name to the group. Beau.

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Kade wasn't sure he wanted that man to know about family business, but it was already done. Removing him now would cause a scene. Was there any chance Beau actually wanted to get to know his siblings? Or was he simply his father's son?

Where Kade took great pride in being nothing like his father, he wasn't so certain Beau held the same belief. Conrad trusted the man. Could Kade? Could he put him on a short leash instead? Keep an eye on Beau? The saying, Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, came to mind.

He shook off the reverie, focusing on setting up a guard for Bree's daughter. His daughter, he corrected. Being a parent would take some getting used to. Once they put this ordeal behind them, they needed a sit-down conversation about what the future would look like.

Again, the question as to whether Kade could consider staying in Saddle Junction for the long haul surfaced. Was it even possible?

Because when he let his guard down, being with Bree made him feel dangerously close to finding home.

He fired off a message in the group chat asking for the favor. Wouldn't you know Beau was the first to respond? He'd take a shift first if no one else wanted it. Was he jumping in to be kind? To get to know his siblings and prove he had pure intentions? Or was he volunteering so he could keep his enemies closer?

Time would tell.

He gave the message a thumbs up as others chimed in, setting a schedule that worked for them after a little back and forth. When all the time slots were filled for the next week, Kade glanced up at Bree.

She was studying him a little too intently for his liking.

“What is it?” he asked, ready for another shoe to drop.

“She doesn’t have a name yet,” Bree said quietly.

“Why not?”

“Because I wanted her father to help decide.”

Those words cracked more of the protective gear around his heart. The hardened shell splintered just enough to let peeks of light in.

Damn.

They were about to name their daughter.

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“Thank you for waiting.” Kade’s words gave Bree the courage to consider moving to the next step. Deciding the right time to tell the world he was the father.

But right now, she needed to wrap her mind around leaving her newborn in the hospital. She caught Kade’s gaze. “You’re welcome. It seemed like the right thing to do.” Could she walk out without the baby in her arms? “How do I leave her here?”

“You have no choice, Bree. The baby needs you. She needs you to stay alive and

watch her grow up, be there for her in the ways our mothers couldn't be for us."

Those words struck a chord. He was right. This wasn't a choice.

"Okay," she said, still unsure she could force her legs to walk out of this building when the time came.

"We'll wrap up something in a blue blanket in case the hospital is being watched," he said. His idea would throw the Reaper off the trail of the baby staying in the NICU. She could see where that would help keep her under the radar.

She nodded. Choice or not, she'd be walking out of this hospital on rubbery legs.

It was late. Hours had passed. How many?

A nurse entered the room, holding a food tray. "Thought you might be hungry."

Whatever was on that tray didn't smell horrible. Or was she that hungry?

After setting down the tray, the nurse wheeled the cart over and positioned it so Bree could eat comfortably.

"How do you feel?" the nurse asked.

"Surprisingly good," Bree stated.

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“There’s talk of your being released tonight,” the nurse said.

“Is that too fast?” Kade asked.

“Not when the mother is healthy,” the nurse stated. “You usually get a better night of rest at home anyway.”

“And the baby?” he continued. “How is she?”

“In good hands,” the nurse said. “Sometimes, we keep them a couple of days just to be one hundred percent certain everything is working the way it should. Some babies just need a little extra time.”

Bree couldn’t help but wonder if all the stress had caused her to go into labor before the baby had been ready to come out.

They needed to name her because the generic label ‘the baby’ didn’t fit after Bree had held the little angel in her arms, not to mention needing to put something besides Baby X on her birth certificate or however these situations were handled.

“How soon can we see her?” Kade asked.

“NICU is open for parents during regular visiting hours.” The nurse eyed him up and down. Recognition dawned. Was it a bad sign she’d caught on? “They’re over for today, but you can come back first thing in the morning.”

Kade nodded. If he was disappointed, he hid it well. Or was he being strong for Bree?

It wouldn't surprise her if he were. He was also used to stuffing his feelings down deep in order to go on a mission. Zeke had explained compartmentalizing to her. Said he did it just like everyone else in the unit. Kade would be no exception.

The nurse checked Bree's vitals. After being satisfied, she said, "Eat while it's warm if you can. Someone will be here before you know it to bring release papers to sign."

Tears pricked the backs of Bree's eyes at the thought of walking out of the hospital tonight.

"Sleep will be good for her," Kade cut in. "What about an early morning release after we visit the baby?"

The nurse pursed her lips. What was she holding back? Did the insurance company want to kick Bree out? Or was it something else? Was the hospital concerned about the Reaper coming around? Were they rushing her release out of fear?

"I'll make a call and see if I can get her release pushed back a few hours," the nurse conceded. Then again, the stubborn set to Kade's jaw would be enough to persuade anyone the man wasn't going anywhere until he damn well pleased.

Bree made a mental note to thank him later. For this. For being here. For everything.

The door barely closed behind the nurse when Kade urged her to eat.

"When's the last meal you had?" she asked after taking a bite of lasagna that wasn't half bad.

"I'm good."

"Kade, you have to eat," she said. "And what happened to the boot you were

wearing?”

“I patched it up myself.”

“Do I want to know what that means?” she asked, offering a bite of food.

Kade laughed. The sound shouldn’t be sexy. But that low rumble in his chest, along with a smile that had been so good at seducing her, caused an ache to form in her chest. Sex was out of the question for many obvious reasons, and especially one big one. Even if it was physically possible, it would complicate matters.

“At least take my Texas toast and dip it in the sauce,” she said.

He studied her with a smirk. “You won’t give up until I do, will you?”

“Nope.”

“Fine, then I better take it,” he said as she handed over the offering. Their fingers grazed, causing electricity to course through her. She pulled her hand back and reminded herself this was temporary. Allowing herself to be pulled into the vortex that was the sexiest, most decent, and most dangerous man in the world would be a mistake. Kade had the power to shatter her in ways she’d never known possible.

Reminding herself of the fact would help put up a wall. Right?

Surprisingly, a couple of hours of sleep was all Bree needed to feel awake. A cup of coffee with actual caffeine kicked her brain into gear and was pretty much heaven on earth. A walk down the hallway to see her baby with Kade was enough to refill the well and remind her just how important it was to protect that little one at all costs. For the same reason, she wouldn’t call her father to let him know the baby had arrived. He’d want to come visit. He would have questions. It was safer to hold off on the

news.

“What do you think of the name Harper?” Kade asked as they stood side-by-side next to their sleeping angel.

“I like it,” she said pensively.

“Something’s wrong with it, though,” he said, echoing her thoughts. “It’s a beautiful name but doesn’t quite fit her, does it?”

A name popped into her thoughts. “A name just came to me.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“What do you think about Aurora?” she asked.

“Like the northern lights,” he said as he seemed to contemplate the idea. Then, he nodded and smiled. “Perfect.”

A nurse who’d been hovering in the background stepped forward. “Is that official?”

Bree looked to Kade, who confirmed with the kind of warm smile that caused all her defenses to melt.

“Yes, it is,” she said.

“Aurora Bee, with two ‘e’s,” he said. “Does that work?”

“It’s different, but I actually love it,” she confirmed. “Baby Bee.”

The nurse wrote it down and then moved to the background, where she entered notes into a computer.

“Leaving you is one of the most difficult things I’ll ever do,” Kade whispered. “I hope you know how much you are loved, Aurora. You are the light, sweet girl.”

Didn’t those words bring tears to the backs of Bree’s eyes? She swallowed the emotion knotting in her throat.

“And the light of my life,” he said before turning to Bree. “I’ll wait in the hallway for you.”

She appreciated the space he was giving her. “Okay.”

Two days passed. Two trips a day to the hospital, early and late. And too many hours of missing Aurora went by while Bree tried to rest.

The body was a miracle. She’d been in the best shape of her life going into the pregnancy and had maintained a workout routine until the days leading up to Aurora’s birth. Her efforts were paying off now.

After walking into the kitchen and giving Rinty a good head scratch, she grabbed a piece of fruit, poured a cup of coffee, and joined Kade at the table where he sat brooding. More than forty-eight hours had passed since leaving the hospital. He’d slept on the couch instead of the bed. That was fine. He’d been inside his head. Giving him space seemed like the right thing to do.

But she couldn’t take much more of the brooding.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked. Okay, wait. Maybe that wasn’t the right question to ask because his gaze flew to her.

He picked up his cell phone and showed the screen to her. An invitation for a celebration of life for Zeke was plastered on the screen.

“I’m sorry, Kade,” she said.

He set the phone down, the screen facing the table. “It’s not that. I keep wondering what the hell is wrong with Zeke’s parents. They haven’t visited Aurora once or checked in with you to see if you need anything. As far as they know, Aurora is their granddaughter and—”

“Zeke swore them to secrecy about Aurora’s real father.”

“Zeke knew?” The look of betrayal on Kade’s face had her wishing she’d found a better way to deliver the news.

And then anger slammed into her at the implication she would have deceived another human being about being the father of her child. “Of course, he knew.” She crossed her arms over her sore chest—sore from pumping breastmilk to drop off at the hospital. “Do you really think I would lie to Zeke? What kind of a person do you think I am?” Tears blurred her vision. How could he think that of her? “In fact, he was the one who convinced me not to tell you even though I never made that promise because I always intended to find a way to tell you. Zeke was my best friend, but I didn’t agree with everything he said.”

Kade’s gaze narrowed as he processed the news. “Why were the two of you planning to get married?”

It was her turn to be shocked. “I never agreed to marry Zeke. I didn’t love him that way.”

Kade pushed to standing. His expression gave the impression much of his world had just imploded inside his brain. “I need a minute.” He called for Rinty and headed out the back door without another word.

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The marriage had never made sense to Kade. Nor had the fact Bree had moved on so quickly after their fling. But to think his best friend had outright lied to him and deceived him hurt the most.

Kade walked. Walking cleared his head. Rinty needed the exercise anyway. The three of them had been cooped up in the fishing cabin for two days now. The only times they left were to check on Aurora.

Aurora.

The little girl already had Kade wrapped around her pinky finger. He could have sworn she'd smiled at him last night even though the nurse said it was probably gas.

His thoughts shifted back to Zeke. How proud he'd seemed of becoming a father. How certain he'd been of there being a wedding.

Zeke would have known that Kade would leave Bree alone if he believed her to be in love with his best friend. What the hell, man? We were best friends. Brothers. Why would you lie to me?

And then it dawned on Kade. Zeke had been in love with Bree. Kade should have picked up on the fact a long time ago. The man's demeanor changed when Bree walked into a room. How had Kade been so blind?

And how had he been such a jerk to Bree?

Would she ever forgive him?

Hell, would he ever forgive himself?

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Day turned to night. By the time Kade returned, his attitude had undergone a major adjustment. He could only hope she could find it in her heart to forgive him.

The second he walked in the door, she stood up and clicked the TV off. “Dinner’s in the fridge.”

He realized that Bree needed actions, not words. It would take time, but he had every intention of doing right by her and his child. “I’m sorry about earlier. About everything I thought or didn’t realize.”

“Me, too,” she said, some of the stiffness releasing from tense shoulders. “By not telling you right away, I put you in this position.” She shook her head. “I should’ve known better. You’re a better person than I gave you credit for because I was afraid.”

“You were right, though,” he said. “I never should’ve believed you were capable of lying to Zeke about something this important. It just never occurred to me that he would be the one to deceive me, considering our history.”

“He said he was trying to protect you,” she said. Those words stung because they had an air of truth to them.

“I didn’t want to have a child of my own,” he admitted. “Things started to change after we were together. I started to look at my life differently. But that didn’t mean I was ready for more than us getting to know each other and maybe seeing where it could go.”

“Okay,” she said, still defensive, and he didn’t blame her one bit.

“I’m trying to be a better person,” he said. “And I’m already head over heels for that little girl.” He had feelings for Bree, too.

“That’s a good place to start.” She looked tired. Like she’d been fighting sleep.

“Think you can get some rest?” he asked.

She nodded, then paused. “Will you stay with me?” He figured she wanted him next to her out of a need to feel safe rather than out of any desire for him.

“Absolutely.” He walked over to her, linked their fingers, and led her to the bedroom.

“I need to brush my teeth. Will you stand at the door?” she asked.

“Yes.” Kade was surprised to realize the thought of raising a baby with Bree didn’t scare the bejesus out of him. The hole he’d felt in the center of his chest for months had filled.

Rinty strolled in and curled up on the carpet near the bed. Bree finished brushing before washing her face. She’d pumped enough milk to feed half the nursery. He saw the jars in the fridge and had been helping transport them to the hospital. Was she stocking the fridge just in case she didn’t get to be around to watch their daughter grow up? Trying to provide everything she could in case the bastard got to her?

“Your turn.” She held out a new toothbrush.

He took the offering and brushed. She stood right beside him, her hip against the counter. The thought of their child growing inside her brought warmth to places that had long since been cold in Kade. She was the light to his dark and deserved so much more from him than he’d given up to this point.

After finishing up, he took her into the next room.

“Come on, boy,” Kade urged Rinty to hop onto the foot of the bed.

Kade lifted the covers, and Bree slid into the sheets. He followed, and she curled her limbs around him. He looped his arm around her and held her tight. Her unique scent, flowers and spring air, filled his senses. All he could think was that he’d finally found the place where he belonged. Home.

It didn’t take long for Bree’s steady, even breathing to tell him she’d fallen asleep. He stayed there, not quite ready to budge, breathing her in. Before he realized it, it was five thirty, and the morning sun would peek through the miniblind slats soon enough.

Kade slipped from the covers and into the adjacent room, leaving the door open. He threw on his jeans and brewed a fresh pot of coffee.

After taking a few sips, he made a call to his boss. The call was short. Kade apologized and explained that his priorities had changed after learning he would be a father. Brendan had taken the news well and joked that he’d rather know now instead of after Kade got settled on a rig. Brendan also brought up the fact that Kade needed a well-paying job now more than ever with a kid on the way, a fact that had kept Kade awake already.

He had money saved. There hadn’t been much to spend it on while at war, and he’d socked half of his paychecks away with the dream of buying the bait and tackle shop.

Brendan had ended the call, wishing Kade the best. He’d take all the well wishes he could get. Surprisingly, he wasn’t freaked out about the baby. He was stressed about time and money—and the fact he’d sold off most of his belongings.

Hours passed while his mind churned. This was the kind of situation Kade would've confided in Zeke about. The two would've gone out for beers. Zeke would've given Kade holy hell about not using a condom—one either slipped off in the heat of the moment or they were going so many times he'd forgotten—and then the good-natured teasing would begin. Zeke would tell Kade everything would work out. The pressure would lift like early morning fog on a sunny day.

The cavern in his chest reopened every time he thought about his buddy.

Kade had been a damn good soldier. Maybe he could call his S.O. to see if it was too late to re-enlist. Joe Mercer would take Kade's call in a heartbeat. He'd told Kade if he ever needed anything to give him a shout. He glanced down at his ankle. Maybe not.

Re-enlisting would only keep him away from Bree. Plus, she might see that as him running away. With the ordeal she'd been through, he needed to physically be here in Saddle Junction for her. The ranch came to mind. How could he run an operation that tossed nonwinners away like yesterday's news, gone and forgotten? Running Sturgess Ranch was out of the question.

What about a new name? What if you took care of all the horses and changed the operation? The ridge had been the spot to go to when Kade was down or needed time to think. Could they call the place, Rescue Ridge?

Running the ranch could keep him in Saddle Junction. Turning the operation around could give him a purpose. It was the complete opposite of the way Beaumont had run the place. That alone might be incentive enough.

Also, he'd had a front-row seat to Chloe having to take care of the trailer, the kid, and pretty much everything. She said she didn't mind. It was probably Kade being selfish, but he wanted to be around to see his kid grow and help his sister.

Would the others agree to changing the ranch operation?

Going back into the military would be living a life he'd walked away from. He'd served his country, been damn proud to do it, but it was time for a change. He'd check the Want Ads or whatever people did when they looked for a job nowadays if the ranch idea fizzled out when he called a meeting. He'd been out of the market for work since graduating high school.

He poured another cup of coffee and pulled his laptop out of the backpack he'd brought in from the truck along with the shotgun. He sipped the black brew and booted up the computer at the kitchen table.

Bree had been through a lot in the past few days. Hell, months. He needed to show her how serious he was about being there for her and the baby. She most likely wouldn't trust him right away. Trust would take time. Time was something Kade had in spades.

First things first, he needed a permanent place to live. He checked out one of those real estate apps that had all available homes listed. He could rent a small place and fix it up. A small voice in the back of his mind picked that moment to pipe in, What about the bunk house?

He dismissed the idea as premature.

How far away from Bree and his child did he want to live? He could stick around at his sister's place for the time being. Or, hell, maybe he could talk to his buddy about buying this cabin. Kade didn't need a lot of room. This place wasn't fancy, but it was plenty big enough for three people and had everything he needed: a kitchen, a bathroom, and a decent living space. It was already furnished. There was cell service and internet. Some adjustments for a little one would have to be made.

Hadn't his buddy mentioned he never used the place anymore? When Kade really thought about it, he might be doing his friend a favor by offering to take the place off his hands. He'd talk to Bree first. Feel her out. See if this was an option that could benefit both of them. If not, there were other places Kade could rent while he considered his next steps. Figuring out employment was another priority.

Bree screamed.

His heart lurched, and he set the laptop aside and quickly pushed to his feet. Kade was next to the bed a few seconds later as Bree bolted upright. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and Rinty stood at attention next to Kade.

"I was there. I was in that awful barn." She gasped for air. "And he threw me against the wall before everything blacked out."

"You're all right," Kade reassured. He kneeled beside the bed and took her hand in his. Her body shook. "You're safe now. I won't let anything happen to you."

Her wide, fearful eyes were a shot straight to the heart. He understood nightmares. He understood battling an invisible enemy—the enemy inside his head.

She blinked at him. "He has a half-moon ankle tattoo. It was the last thing I saw before I blacked out. I didn't remember that before."

Kade slid into bed beside her. She climbed on his lap, buried her face in his neck, and cried. He held her tight to his chest, wishing like hell he could take away her pain. Hot tears dropped one by one onto his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

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“Don’t be. You did nothing wrong.” He just held her, thinking how right she felt in his arms.

“Thank you.” Those two words spoken so softly broke what little was left of his fight. Like it or not, Bree shattered the casing around his heart and bathed his darkness in light. With her, he started to believe he could have a life, areallife with a family of his own.

Would she want the same after his accusations? Would she trust him after he’d been clear about not wanting a family of his own? His home life had done a number on him.

In his opinion, parenthood would be the worst thing he could do to a child. No one deserved to be stuck with him. Even now, he could look into his baby sister’s eyes and see the hurt he’d put there beyond the number Beaumont had done to her. Kade couldn’t be what others wanted orneededhim to be.

Kade would always want to be somewhere else. He would always be just a little bit self-destructive. And he would never be able to live with himself if he put that kind of hurt in someone else’s eyes again.

“Coffee?”

Bree walked into the room the next morning, wearing only Kade’s black T-shirt. Pink was still his favorite color on her, but she looked good in anything. He’d managed to distance himself from his self-destructive thoughts for the time being.

“Yes, of course,” she said.

“Right.” She could finally have caffeine. He walked over to her and kissed her. “There’s milk in the fridge.”

“Did you buy that for me to put in my coffee?” Her smile could light the world in a blackout.

“Yep.” He moved to the fridge, pulled out the quart, and held it up.

One of those genuine smiles he loved about her peeked out. “I missed caffeine.”

“I’m sorry about making you kiss me while I have coffee breath,” he said, one corner of his mouth curving.

“Are you kidding me right now? You tasting like coffee is the highlight of my morning.” She walked over to him and pushed up to her tiptoes.

Kade set the carton on the counter and wrapped his arms around her, pressing her body flush with his.

He sighed against her mouth. “I immediately texted Travis last night, letting him know what you remembered. “

“That was a good idea.” She gave him a quick kiss before picking up the white carton and pouring a glass. “I’ll be here, drinking coffee. And eating...” She walked to the fridge and opened the door. “Blueberry parfait. I still can’t believe you remembered.”

“How could I forget when you made those sexy-as-hell noises while you ate it.” He moved to the kitchen table where he’d left his phone. Still no message from the deputy. “Maybe we should give Travis a call now that you’re awake.”

Travis picked up on the first ring. “Hey, Kade. What’s up?”

“Are you up?”

“No. It’s cool.” Travis yawned. Based on his groggy tone, he’d been asleep. Kade felt bad for disturbing his friend.

Rinty sauntered in and walked straight to Bree without giving Kade much of a second glance. Traitor.

“I texted last night but didn’t hear back. Bree thought of something important to the case. She remembers seeing a half-moon tattoo on the guy’s ankle.” He watched her out of the corner of his eye to make sure she was okay. It couldn’t be easy talking about any of this or hearing any of the details rehashed. One of the many traits Kade admired about Bree was her strength. But she was human.

And his friend had gone radio silent.

“Travis...?” His friend’s quiet set Kade’s radar on high alert. “What is it? What’s going on?”

“I need to make sure I heard you right. Are you saying Bree saw a half-moon tattoo on the ankle of the man who assaulted her? The man who wore tan work shoes. Correct?”

“Yes.” Kade waited for a response but a heavy sigh came across the line.

“Federal agents have gotten involved in the case since my contact in San Antonio and I linked it to those others in the state. The Feds cautioned us that we could be dealing with someone in law enforcement based on the profile of the killer and the other crime scenes.” He paused and cleared his throat. “My boss has an ankle tattoo of a

half-moon—I've seen it myself—which under normal circumstances I might chalk up to coincidence, but Carr's gone missing."

"Dammit." Kade had never trusted the sheriff. There'd always been something off about the man. This was unthinkable. Kade locked gazes with Bree.

"My contact in San Antonio gave me the idea to check Carr's vacation days against the dates of the prior murders." Travis blew out a sharp breath. "They match up, Kade."

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A line creased her forehead, and her head was tilted to one side, listening. She could tell something big was brewing. She bent down closer to Rinty, and he nuzzled against her. Smart dog.

“Do you need to go outside, sweet boy?” she asked, her voice trembling ever so slightly.

Kade hated the fact that he was about to shatter her sense of security. He shook his head, and she cocked a brow at him. He moved his mouth away from the cell and said, “Not a good idea. I’ll take him in a second.”

“Oh.”

“Call me if you hear anything else,” Kade said into the phone.

“I’d like to send someone to keep watch over her. Where are you?” The best defense was a good offense. Travis had the right idea.

“You know I trust you, right? And we go way back...” Kade couldn’t risk anyone else knowing their location, not even a friend.

“Uh-huh. What are you candy-coating?” Travis asked.

“I don’t want you to take it the wrong way when I say that I’m not going to tell you where we are. You aren’t the problem. I just can’t risk anyone else in the department finding out. We have no idea if someone has been covering for the sheriff.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to have backup, Kade. I’d like to offer my assistance. Bree’s safety is important to everyone in the community and especially me.” If Travis’s feelings were hurt, he didn’t show it.

“I appreciate the offer. I’ll keep it in mind.” Kade felt no need to argue his point. He ended the call, closed the laptop, and turned to Bree. “We need to get out of town.”

“What just happened?” Bree suddenly wished she could’ve heard both sides of the conversation between Travis and Kade. Because how could she leave her baby in the hospital and disappear?

“It’s bad news. It’s the sheriff.” Kade was already up and urging Bree toward the bedroom. He grabbed his shotgun on the way.

“Sheriff Carr? He did this to me?” She glanced down at her ankle.

“In the hospital, he came inside the room. You were still under the influence of those drugs. I was holding your hand, and you tensed the second you heard his voice. I should’ve realized what was going on. I’m sorry I failed you. It won’t happen again.” There was so much anguish in his voice. Given his military background, he would take something like this personally.

“You saved me, Kade. If not for you, I wouldn’t be alive right now.” An icy shiver raced down her back at the thought.

“I let you down in so many ways—”

“Maybe we should let the past go. We can’t change it. Let’s focus on our next step. And then the next.” All she could think to do was pop up on her tiptoes and kiss him. He closed his eyes and held her tight. He kissed her back. Hard. Hungry. And it awakened a need from deep inside her they didn’t have time to address.

He pulled back first and linked their fingers as he led her the rest of the way to the bedroom. “It won’t take long to pack up. Grab a few of my sister’s clothes. You two are close to the same size. Grab anything you think you might need and be ready for anything from camping to a hotel.”

“Okay.” Bree filled a small suitcase and grabbed a few toiletries from the bathroom, stuffing everything she could fit inside it.

“We’ll let Rinty do his business on the way to the truck.”

Bree’s mind was still trying to wrap around the fact that a man sworn to uphold the law could do such a thing to her and, worse, to so many other women. Granted, he’d always seemed a little odd. He wasn’t married and lived in a house on his aunt’s estate. But that didn’t necessarily mean he was a twisted psychopath capable of such a demonic act. “What else did Travis say?”

“That Carr has the tattoo. In his job as sheriff, he could move around the state easily, making it easy to find and watch a target,” Kade said, “study a person’s habits.”

“How would he be able to go unaccounted for?” She put a hand on her heart, trying to force it to calm down by sheer force of will

“The murders match up to his vacation days.”

“The Reaper,” she said in almost a whisper. A sick feeling settled over her. The thought of how close she’d come to dying. The thought of the other women who weren’t so lucky. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Kade was by her side a second later. “Are you okay?”

“I will be.” She was also beginning to believe there could be a future with Kade.

“You’re sure everything’s good?” Kade mumbled something low and threatening about the sheriff.

“I am,” she said with more confidence than she felt.

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Suitcase in one hand and shotgun on the other arm, he said, “Stick as close to me as humanly possible when we walk to the truck. Okay?”

“Is it safe to go outside? Maybe we should stay here.”

“Carr saw me at the hospital. He knows I’m helping you. My buddy owning this place is no secret. It’s only a matter of time before Carr guesses correctly. Our best bet is to get you out of Texas until the FBI catches him. They know who they’re looking for. They’ll get him.”

Bree trusted Kade. He’d been in hostile situations before and was most likely pulling on that knowledge now. His sense of calm kept her from panicking. “How can we leave her?”

“Aurora will be fine,” he said. “My family is keeping watch over her. They won’t let anyone slip past.”

Bree hesitated. A noise outside got her moving. “Let’s go.”

“We got this. Okay?” he asked. She nodded before touching her hand on his broad back as she followed him to the back door. Rinty stuck by their side, and she fell more in love with that dog every minute.

“Keys are in my right front pocket. Unlock the doors when I say it’s okay,” he said, his voice reassuring but focused and as steady as his heartbeat. Bree’s was wild in her chest.

She fished keys out of his pocket, palmed them, and waited for his signal.

Kade opened the back door, and she followed him outside with Rinty at their side. Their new companion seemed to understand the gravity of the situation on instinct, and she figured it had to do with his military training. Rinty's ears perked up, his body alert and rigid.

As the three of them rounded the corner of the house, Rinty froze. His snout pointed toward the tree line not twenty feet away from them.

A low growl tore from his throat.

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Kade needed to put as much distance between the three of them and the object of Rinty's attention as possible. For all he knew, Carr was out there, waiting to take a shot.

"Go back inside, lock the door, and call Travis," he said to Bree. "Tell him where we are, and that Carr might have found us."

Rinty's hackles raised as he maintained his position. His low growl was a constant rumble.

"I'm not leaving you out here alone," she said.

"Don't take this the wrong way because it's not personal. You'll be a liability to me because I'll split my attention between watching over you and taking down the threat. I need to know you're safely tucked inside and that help is on the way. Take Rinty with you." Kade set the suitcase against the wall. "If Carr's out there, I'll find him and neutralize the threat."

“I can call Travis from right here.” Her voice shook and her chin quivered even though she was trying to put up a brave front.

“Will you trust me? I’ve been in these situations before. I know exactly what to do.” Kade surveyed the area. He couldn’t see anyone in the tree line from his vantage point or the glint of metal. The person who had Rinty’s attention was hiding to the east with the sunrise at his back.

There was a slight breeze. The air was crisp. Judging the distance, Kade would have a difficult time getting off a good shot.

Rinty’s growls intensified.

Bree quietly made the call to Travis. She touched Kade’s shoulder. “The closest person to us is at least half an hour away.”

Kade considered making a break for the truck. A couple of scenarios crossed his mind. It could be rigged with a bomb. Tires could be slashed. The engine could have been tampered with. Rinty hadn’t made any noise earlier. The truck was parked ten feet from the cabin. With the loss of hearing in one of his ears, Carr could’ve slipped past the trained dog’s radar.

Could Carr have been that quiet? He was calculating. The fact that he hadn’t left any DNA behind at crime scenes said he was criminally smart. As sheriff, he would have had access to files others wouldn’t. He could study how others got away with their crimes.

Carr’s job in law enforcement had given him an insider’s view of all the tricks of the trade. The murders had happened months, sometimes years apart, which said he most likely studied his victims, learned their routines, found a blind spot, and took advantage. Point being, the man was calculating.

Rinty spun around to the west and stood at attention. Was Carr on the move?

The crack of a bullet split the air.

“Rinty,” Bree shouted as Kade blanketed her with his heft.

“Come on, boy,” Kade commanded. He ushered Bree to the back door. He had no idea what commands Rinty was used to or in what language. His hearing loss could mean that he didn’t have any idea he was being called. Kade made kissing noises to get the animal’s attention. He had to try something. “Let’s go, Rinty.”

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Surprisingly, thankfully, the animal darted back to them.

“Stay low and away from windows,” Kade said to Bree as they breached the back door. She was already on all fours, crawling toward the center point of the house. “Keep going until you get to the bedroom closet.”

“Why would he come for us now? What would make him risk getting caught?” Bree asked quietly.

“He seemed like he was sizing me up the other day at the hospital after he told me to leave, and I refused. I thought he’d put up more of a fight then. I was surprised when he didn’t. Now, I’m guessing he was cutting his losses. He had to realize it was only a matter of time before you’d wake and figure out it was him.”

The closet was located on an interior wall next to the bathroom. Rinty would protect her and provide a distraction if Carr showed. Kade scanned the small room, looking for an edge he could get over the sheriff.

Kade bellycrawled around the side of the bed. If Carr came inside, he’d most likely look for them in the closet. Of course, he could rapid-fire shots through the walls to see if he could get a hit. Spraying bullets would be one way to...

A scream sounded from the west. A female voice. A shock to Kade’s system when she shouted his name.

“I have your sister.” With those four words, Kade’s world came crashing down around him. He’d spent his entire life keeping his baby sister safe. And she was in the

hands of a calculating killer. Anger was a rogue storm thrashing around inside Kade.

He moved to the closet.

“No matter what else happens, stay where you are,” Kade said to Bree. “I need to know where you are, and I need to know that you’ll be safe.”

Her front teeth scraped across her bottom lip, which meant she wasn’t on board. He crawled to her, lifted her chin, and kissed her. “I love you, Bree. I think I always have. I need you to do something for me. I know I’m asking a lot. Will you wait for me here? I’ll come back for you.”

“Be safe, Kade. I want the man I love to be around to help raise our daughter.”

“That’s a promise.” He planned to make another one after he took down the sheriff...if Bree still wanted him.

“I’m so sorry this is happening,” Bree said, and there was so much warmth in her voice.

“I know. I have to go get Chloe. I’d hoped we could wait until Travis or one of the deputies arrived. Carr will kill my sister before he lets us go.”

“I know. Go get her and bring both of you back safely.”

“Take this.” He handed the shotgun to Bree. Her eyes widened.

“You need—”

“He’ll use the trees to block my shot. If he comes in here, you’ll be ready for him.” He showed her how to hold the weapon, careful not to accidentally point it at him. He

flashed a quick smile. “Look before you shoot in case it’s me.”

“I pray I don’t have to pull the trigger,” she said.

“Think of that little one of ours just waiting for us to pick her up and bring her home. That’ll give you the courage when you need it.”

“I love you, Kade.”

“Hold that thought. Okay?” One more kiss, and then Kade crawled out the window. Carr would be watching the doors, ready. Someone might die today. Kade made up his mind it would be Carr.

The last time his sister had screamed and Carr spoke, the sounds had come from the west. Kade moved to the tree line facing east, in the opposite direction. The house and truck should block him from view as he made his way into the greenery. He had no idea what kind of shot the sheriff was—he was most likely a decent one—and he didn’t intend to find out in the form of a bullet in his back.

Keeping one eye on the house, he moved stealthily through the thicket, stepping lightly so his boots didn’t get snagged on underbrush. He’d been to the cabin enough times to have memorized the land. That worked in his favor. He’d take all the advantages he could get in this situation.

It occurred to him that any hint law enforcement was about to descend on this place could set Carr off. He could take out his rage on Chloe before disappearing forever. Hell, for all Kade knew, his sister had some kind of booby trap set on her. Moving her could set off a bomb.

Kade’s lungs clawed for air as he continued to think of all the things that could happen to Chloe. By sheer force of will, he redirected his thoughts to the sheriff. One

thing was certain; Carr was toying with Kade's emotions. The sheriff knew how tight-knit the two were. He and Chloe had made no secret of being close. Secrets didn't stay buried forever in a close-knit town like Saddle Junction. Although it had taken far too many years and cost too many lives, Carr's secret was out.

The man was leaving here in a coffin or handcuffs, Kade didn't particularly care which one. He stopped cold near a clearing. All hope that Carr had been bluffing exploded in Kade's chest. Chloe was there. She was tied to a tree, a gag in her mouth.

The fact that she seemed calm—resigned?—shot fireballs through his chest. Hang on, Chloe.

In the past few days, Kade had learned just how much family meant to him. He was starting to realize why he'd had a restless feeling in his chest and what it meant. Between seeing how upset his sister was at the thought of him moving to Alaska and finding out he was about to be a father, Kade had realized that Saddle Junction was home. He would stick around, deal with his new half-brother, and find a way to transform the ranch if that was the unanimous decision.

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Kade surveyed the area. He searched for any signs of a bomb on Chloe but didn't see any obvious ones. Bombs could be small enough to go undetected by the naked eye or placed in a position to make it difficult for Kade to see until it was too late.

Damn, seeing Chloe there was a gut punch. Kade had to fight the urge to run to his sister and cut her away from the tree. That's exactly what Carr wanted. He wanted Kade to react based on emotions. The bastard had put her out there as bait. Most people would take it. The U.S. government had trained Kade to be a better soldier than that.

Scanning the area one more time, he searched for his target. The notion that Kade had been lured out of the house was a brick on his chest. At this point, he couldn't double back. He'd kept an eye on the house as he'd moved through the thicket. He'd had to be careful and methodical.

Carr was here somewhere. Dammit. Where?

And then he saw the glint of metal from a jacket. A button, maybe. Bingo. Carr was positioned behind a tree with the business end of a rifle aimed at Chloe's head.

Kade's shotgun wouldn't have done him any good at this angle. Chloe was too close to Carr to risk a shot just as Kade had suspected would be the case.

Taking the sheriff by surprise was Kade's best bet. Could Kade hook around with a wide enough berth to attack Carr from behind? There weren't a lot of other options.

Carr split his attention between the cabin and Chloe. Slowly, Kade moved through

the trees and underbrush. Ignoring every instinct he had to go straight to his sister, he still made good time.

He was close enough now to see Carr's finger hover over the trigger mechanism, close enough to know a shot at this range would be deadly for Chloe. Even if Kade managed to get close enough to Carr undetected—and that was a big if—his finger could twitch when Kade ambushed him. A slight movement would be enough to fire a shot. Hell, his reflexes would do the work for him. Carr wouldn't even have to consciously make the effort.

A noise sounded from the direction of the house. It was the noise the truck alarm made when it was being disarmed, and the doors unlocked. Kade's chest squeezed as he realized Bree was drawing attention toward the cabin.

“Try it, bastard. You'll never get away.” Carr's voice had an almost hysterical quality to it. He looked down the scope of the rifle, which he'd repositioned toward the cabin.

While his attention shifted, Kade seized the window of opportunity he had to make his move. Swiftly, he started closing the gap between him and the sheriff.

A crash sounded at the back of the cabin. The thud was quickly followed by the shrill alarm on the truck.

Kade darted from around a tree, expecting a clear view of Carr. The sheriff had moved from his position. Kade panicked. Had he made the wrong call?

And then he caught a glimpse of Carr, stalking toward the cabin like a hunter locked onto an unsuspecting doe.

Kade closed in on the sheriff from behind. The truck alarm provided cover for the

occasional twig snapping. Carr slowed his pace, no doubt searching for a target at the end of his scope.

The gravity of this mission slammed into Kade in full force. Being out in the desert, the possibility of personal harm held no weight for him. After all, it was only his life hanging in the balance. He was a betting man and always went with the odds—and odds heavily favored him in a fight. Even if he'd lost, he'd known the risks when he'd joined the military. They were calculated, considering he had what he knew was the best training in the world. If he lost his own life, so be it. This was so far on the other side of different Kade couldn't fathom it. Just the thought of anything happening to Chloe, Bree, or the baby, not to mention Rinty, could bring Kade to his knees and reduce him to a puddle.

He let those thoughts simmer inside him, causing a wave of anger so strong it brought everything into crystal-clear focus.

Carr was in view. Kade inched closer, the hunter and the hunted.

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Kade made his move, diving straight at the sheriff's knees and tackling him from behind. A wild shot fired as Kade spun on top of Carr and wrestled for control of the rifle. Carr had a death grip on the weapon. Kade started peeling the man's fingers from the grip.

"You're going to die right here, right now, or spend the rest of your life in jail," Kade bit out.

"The hell I am." The sheriff drew up his knee, and caught Kade where no man wanted to be hit.

Kade grunted through the pain as he strong-armed the sheriff, turning the butt of the rifle toward Carr's face by sheer force of will. With another grunt and a pull on all the adrenaline coursing through his body, Kade slammed the butt of the weapon into Carr's forehead.

The two battled for control as the faint blare of sirens sounded in the distance. Kade dislodged the weapon from Carr's grip. In the process, Kade lost control of the weapon, and it went tumbling a few feet away.

"They're coming for you." Kade tried to throw Carr off his game. A punch landed on Kade's jaw, causing his head to snap back. Warm liquid filled his mouth. He spit blood.

Kade tightened his arms around Carr like a clamp tightening. The sheriff struggled, desperate to wriggle out of Kade's grasp, but Kade wasn't having any of it.

Using his considerable strength, he clamped his legs around Carr's to render his lower body useless.

An elbow caught Kade in the ribs, and it hurt like hell. The sheriff had serious arm strength. No doubt used to subdue his victims.

Kade thought about all the women who had lost their lives to this murderous criminal. To the families who had lost a sister, a daughter, a friend.

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It was time this scumbag knew he'd lost. Kade reared his head back and then head-butted the sheriff, knocking the man out cold.

A rustling sound drew closer, and the next thing Kade knew, Rinty came charging toward him with Bree close behind, shotgun at the ready.

Much to his surprise, Chloe was there, too.

"I heard a shot." Bree dropped down beside Kade, her gaze searching his.. "Are you okay?"

"Perfect. This asshole isn't doing so hot. He's going to wake up with one hell of a headache and locked away in a cell where he belongs." Kade held tight to Carr, his arms a vise around the sheriff's torso.

Sirens screeched louder, closer.

Chloe stood a safe distance away, tears streaming down her face. "Thank God, you're all right, Kade. I knew you'd come for me...and I thought when I heard the shot that..."

"I'm here. I'm good. No bullet holes. Just a busted lip," he soothed. "And you're going home to Grayson."

"We're all going home," Chloe repeated as sobs racked her. She was shaken but strong. Bree stood up and then walked over to her, taking her in her arms.

“His rifle is right over there.” Kade angled his head a little to the south. “Keep an eye on it until the deputy can tag it as evidence.”

The sounds of the cavalry came in the form of tires on the gravel drive. Kade had no intention of letting Carr out of his grip until a deputy could take the man into custody.

“Stay with Kade. I’ll flag them down.” Chloe was already running toward law enforcement, waving her hands and trying to shout over the truck alarm and sirens.

A few minutes later, she brought Travis back with her. Travis moved beside Kade immediately, pulling zip ties.

“I thought you said half an hour,” Kade teased, trying to shake off the stress and ease the tension of the situation. “That had to be an hour.”

“I’m here now, and this sonofabitch is going to jail.” Travis turned his former boss over and put a knee into Carr’s back as he jerked the former sheriff’s hands behind his back before he zip-tied them. The man was still unconscious.

Chloe hugged her brother. She was trembling. “He came out of nowhere. One minute, I was getting inside my car, the next, I blacked out. When I woke, I was in the trunk of his vehicle.”

Murderous thoughts ran through Kade’s mind, thinking about what his sister had just gone through. It had briefly crossed his mind to snap the man’s neck when the two had been wrestling on the ground moments ago. Kade had stopped himself. He wanted Carr to rot in jail, justice served. Dying would give him the easy way out. At his age, he had a good thirty to forty years to spend behind bars. Prisoners didn’t go lightly on ex-law enforcement officers gone rogue.

“You’re safe now,” Kade reassured.

Travis stood over Carr's slouched body. "I sent a deputy to his aunt's house. She started talking almost immediately. Said she'd been afraid for her own life for years. Carr was the son of her sister. His mother had done some pretty awful things to him during his childhood. One of the men she'd brought home was a tattoo artist. He 'marked' Carr on the ankle, claiming him. Carr was a mess when his aunt took him in as a seventeen-year-old when his mother overdosed. Said she sent him to shrinks to help him get his head on straight. He was smart enough to convince the doctors that everything was okay. She thought he was turning his life around, so she backed him for the sheriff's job that he convinced her he wanted years later. Life seemed good for a while. She always thought it odd that he only tried to date blond ladies—his mother was a blonde. He was rejected a lot and must've tied that rejection to his mother in his twisted mind. The first victim went missing on his mother's birthday."

"There's never an excuse for abusing a child, and I know firsthand how much that abuse can impact a child," Kade said. "It sounds like he had every opportunity to turn his life around and didn't take it. His mind was sound enough to manipulate others, to stalk and kill innocent people."

"Where he's going, he'll need all the skills to keep himself alive," Travis said as another deputy arrived. Travis looked at Kade and then Bree. Kade could have sworn he saw something pass behind the man's eyes when he looked at Kade's sister. But that couldn't be right. The two barely knew each other. "Stop by my office later to give a statement."

"Count on it," Kade said.

"I'll go with you now," Chloe said. "Grayson is safe at the ranch with Annmarie."

Travis nodded. He gave Deputy Hartford a rundown before hoisting Carr up by his ankles. With Hartford's help, Travis managed to haul the former sheriff away.

The woods and the cabin would be marked off with crime scene tape in a matter of an hour. Evidence would be gathered, including the rifle. A case would be made. And the former sheriff would rot in prison.

“Can we get our daughter and go home now?” Bree asked as she locked gazes with Kade. There was an underlying question in those words.

“Are you asking what I think you are?” Adrenaline was the only thing keeping Kade from a splitting headache.

“Yes. Move in with me. I want to start our life together. We have to hit the ground running, but I can’t think of a better partner to raise our child with than you.”

“I can do better than a ready-made roommate.” With effort, he bent down on one knee. “I have loved you for a long time, Bree Kyndall. My life, my heart is empty without you. I was lost before. I thought moving far away could somehow make me not feel so alone anymore. Hell, I’d never felt truly alone until after that weekend we shared. It changed me. You changed me. I’ve known you for the better part of my life. You’re all I’ll ever need. If you’ll have me, I’m asking you to marry me.”

For a long moment, she stood there as though her voice had been robbed. Then, “Yes, Kade. I’ll marry you. I love you with all my heart.” She wrapped her arms around his neck as he stood.

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He kissed her sweetly and tenderly.

When he finally pulled back, he said, “Let’s go home.”

“I’d like that very much.”

Bree put his arm around her shoulders, and his knee almost gave when he took a step.

“You’re hurt.”

“Not anymore.” Kade squeezed her closer before dipping his head to feather a kiss on her lips. “Nothing can hurt me now that I finally found my way to you.”

It had only taken three days for Kade to finally acknowledge what he’d known down deep for months, possibly years. He was head over heels in love with Bree Kyndall.

It would take two people to make their marriage work, and he had full faith they were up to the task. He could hardly wait to walk down the aisle with the love of his life and start the journey together.

It had only taken one pregnancy for Kade to become the man he’d always been capable of being—a family man.

Epilogue

Two months later.

The baby was asleep. Two months had gone by in a flash and she was growing like a weed. Too fast. But Kade was here for every moment since Bree found someone to sublet her house so they could live under the same roof, and that counted for a whole helluva lot in his book. The bunkhouse was temporary until the inheritance was sorted out and a proper home could be built on the property but it kept his family close to him while he worked the ranch and—to be honest—kept an eye on Beau. More importantly, any doubts Kade had had about becoming a husband and father seemed silly now.

Kade walked into the bedroom naked. His wife was wrapped in a towel, still dripping wet from the shower. At this moment, life had never been better, and he counted himself the luckiest person on earth.

“You’re beautiful,” he said to Bree, cutting across the room.

“Kade—” He quashed her protest with a cocked eyebrow and a slanted look in her direction. Bree had complained that her hips were still too curvy the last time they were together and he could tell when her gaze focused there what she was about to say.

“I meant it. You’re beautiful.”

“So are you.” Her words were spoken so quietly that he almost didn’t hear them. But they could’ve been shouted for the effect they had on him.

Kade wrapped his arms around her waist as she looped hers around his neck. His mouth came down hard on hers, and she matched every stroke of his tongue.

He picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around his midsection as their mouths fused. All rational thought was obliterated as he took her to the bed and gently placed her on it. He put most of his weight on his knees and elbows so he wouldn’t crush her

with his left. He guided himself inside her parted legs, dipping the tip of his erection inside her sweet heat.

Bree's fingernails dug into his shoulders as she pulled him down for another kiss. He thrust a little deeper as she bucked her hips.

"Jesus, Bree. Keep that up, and this won't be able to last five seconds."

She laughed—a musical sound—and then bucked him in a little deeper. He started to distract himself again...but couldn't concentrate on anything but the way she felt, the way she tightened around his stiff length as he sank into her. It sure felt a lot like home, which was strange, considering he'd never known a real one.

Kade pumped harder, and Bree matched him stroke for stroke as need overtook them. Hands danced, and fingers grazed as he kissed her.

"Kade," she moaned against his lips. He loved the sound of his name on her lips. He delved his tongue inside her mouth, tasting the sweetest honey.

"Kade," she repeated, breathier this time, and he could feel her body racing toward a climax.

"Kade." The urgency inside her built, and her breath quickened as her muscles tensed before convulsing around his erection. He drove deeper and harder as he rode the wave with her, and they jumped off the cliff together, free-falling.

When he'd drawn the last spasm from her gorgeous body, and they were both gasping for air, he whispered, "Home."

And now it was time to make peace with the past.

Bree hummed as she walked into the kitchen to the heavenly scent of fresh coffee. Kade sat at the table, nursing his cup, a solemn expression weighed heavy on his expression. “Did something happen?”

“I just got off the phone with Zeke’s parents,” he said before lifting his gaze to meet hers. “His dad was a jerk while Zeke was alive. Losing his son without ever making it right is the punishment the man will always live with.”

“How’s his mom?” she asked.

“Better,” he said. “As good as she can be while the loss is still fresh.” He stood up, walked over, and brought her into an embrace. “She asked me to thank you for the pictures you sent of Aurora. Said she’d love to be a bonus grandma if there’s room in our hearts.”

“I would love that and I can’t imagine a better grandma to have for our daughter,” Bree said.

“I thought so, too.”

It was then she noticed the handful of fresh-picked flowers that had been carefully wrapped in a wet cloth.

Kade followed her gaze. “I was thinking it’s finally time for a visit.”

“Are you ready for that?” She’d been to Zeke’s grave a handful of times, bringing Aurora along so Zeke could meet his godchild. Bree would have asked him to play a role in her daughter’s life, just not the one of father as he’d wanted. Their friendship would have rebounded at some point, and she was certain Zeke would have made the most amazing bonus uncle.

Rinty walked over and sat next to her. Bree and Kade would always keep a close eye on Rinty’s interactions with the baby. But he was worth the extra effort. He deserved no less than to be spoiled and loved while he lived out the last of his years.

But he especially loved going to work with Kade. The wide-open Texas skies and fresh air did Rinty good.

He was a good boy who deserved the best life. And he'd found the perfect home.

"Will you come with me?" Kade asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Of course," she said.

"Good," Kade responded. "I'd like to bring Aurora and Rinty, so Zeke can meet the whole family."

Family. Bree liked the sound of that word.

The air was bitterly cold on the early February morning at the gravesite. Kade opened the door for Bree. His heart squeezed as he looked into his wife's eyes. He'd been an idiot before. He never should have let her go.

Rinty hopped out next before Bree worked the car seat buckle. She pulled Aurora out gently, and hugged the little angel snug against her chest where the baby was safe.

"You're even more beautiful than I remembered, and I'm finally home." Home. He liked the sound of that word.

"I love you, Kade," she said. Those words warmed him from the inside out. Not even the nip in the air could affect him.

"You should know that I'm here for the rest of my life and whatever comes next."

"Whatever comes next," she repeated before he claimed her pink lips.

Kade led his family to Zeke's grave, set the flowers in a metal vase attached to the

headstone, and read the name inscribed on the slab of granite. Tears welled.

Taken too soon.

“I’m sorry it’s taken me a while to show up, buddy,” Kade began, struggling through the emotion knotted in his throat. “And I couldn’t be sorrier that I couldn’t save you.” His voice broke.

“But I’m here now, Zeke. And I’ll remember you forever.”