



Christmas in the Shadows

(The Shadow Agency #6)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Tex Thrasher has no idea why, after twelve years, his former foster father asked him to come back to his hometown for Christmas. When he returns, the last thing the former special ops soldier expects to find is his high school girlfriend rummaging around the office in his old house.

High school teacher Chelsea Lennox suspects her neighbor—the high school football coach—is up to something nefarious when she notices unusual activity next door during the night. Fearing the man is putting her students in danger, Chelsea sets out to uncover the truth. But someone thinks she knows more than she should, and the threats against her escalate.

With Christmas fast approaching and lives on the line, Tex and Chelsea team up to bring the culprits out of the shadows and prevent further danger and deaths. But as old feelings resurface, they have to decide if they can trust each other—and Tex's foster father—before it's too late.

Total Pages (Source): 25

CHAPTER 1

Tex Thrasher felt the familiar knot form in his stomach as he stared at the dark-green Victorian house in front of him.

Normally when people came home, they felt a rush of warmth. At least that was his impression. However, he'd never truly experienced what home felt like.

Not the home from the feel-good TV shows he'd seen while growing up. He'd always felt a jab of envy as he watched the smiling families interact, enjoying the time they spent together.

To him, home was an illusion.

He never thought he'd be back at this place outside Roanoke, Virginia. But his foster father, the one Tex had lived with from the ages of fifteen to eighteen, had texted him and asked him to come. Said he wanted to spend this Christmas with Tex.

Which was weird considering the fact that he hadn't heard from Gilbert Stevenson in twelve years. Why did he want to see Tex now?

There was only one reason he could think of.

Something must be wrong.

Was Gilbert dying? Was he trying to make amends before he left this earth?

Tex had no idea. Were any of his other foster brothers invited? If not, why just Tex? He and Gilbert had never been particularly close.

Tex almost hadn't come. He had a million reasons not to, starting with the fact he'd never particularly liked Gilbert.

The man had been more interested in the money foster care brought in than he had been in forming true relationships with any of the kids. There was no warmth or nurturing. Only what was required of him.

Gilbert wasn't married, so he had been the only one managing the house. And he'd run the place like a drill sergeant. Even though Gilbert had never been in the military, his father had. Gilbert had always talked about how he was raised right and how he wanted to do the same for the boys in his house. Talked about how those rules had made him into a better man.

Everyone had to be up and out of bed at the crack of dawn. Beds had to be made. Chores had to be done. Every bite on the dinner plate had to be eaten. Curfew had to be strictly followed.

Many of the boys who'd come here to stay couldn't handle it. Some had run away. Others had rebelled and acted out.

Gilbert had even sent some back to social services.

Tex, however, had followed the rules. He figured that by staying here, he'd at least had a warm place to sleep and food in his belly.

And he'd been able to stay close to Chelsea Lennox, the girl next door and the only woman to ever capture his heart.

In high school, staying near her had been the most important thing.

The only thing.

His throat burned, and he pushed those thoughts aside.

Instead, he shifted as he stood on the dark sidewalk. The chilly wind blew over him, sending leaves scraping down the driveway, almost as if they wanted to get away from this house.

Were they warning him?

Tex shook off the errant thoughts. He had to stop staring at the house and get a move on.

He hiked his bag higher on his shoulder and climbed the front steps.

Tex had halfway expected to see the old Victorian rundown and in disrepair. Gilbert always had his foster kids do all the work.

But the place was remarkably well-kept. The siding and flowerbeds looked clean, and the boards beneath his feet felt sturdy. White Christmas lights were strung along the eaves of the house and wrapped around the posts of the porch. Wreaths with red bows hung on each window, and a set of three lit Christmas trees stood cheerfully in the front yard.

As Tex reached the front door, he realized it was cracked open.

His eyes narrowed. Gilbert would never leave his door unlocked, much less open. He was too paranoid for that.

What if the man was in trouble? Was that why he'd called Tex here? So Tex could protect him?

Now that was a theory that made sense.

Tex's gun was tucked into a holster at his waistband. He'd developed the habit first in the military and then through working with the Shadow Agency. When a person worked the missions he'd worked, they were always on guard, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

Without saying anything, Tex quietly nudged the door open.

It didn't even creak as it swung on its hinges.

From the threshold, he scanned the place, which was dark other than some ambient lighting.

The dining room lay to his right and the formal living room—complete with a lit Christmas tree—to his left. A wooden staircase stretched in front of him, leading up to the bedrooms on the second floor. A garland was strung on the banister, and the place looked clean and tidy.

Nothing had changed since he'd been here last, other than the seasonal decorations.

So far, he saw no one.

He took a quiet step forward. He was good at being a ghost. It was what he'd been trained to do.

He walked across the wood floor of the dark hallway, being sure to avoid the one loose board that always creaked. It was two slats from the stairway, right in front of

the HVAC vent.

Tex reached the next doorway. The kitchen. The light over the sink cast a soft glow in the room.

It looked just as he remembered with its olive-green cabinets, white countertops, and dark wood finishes.

He thought he should feel something. A rush of nostalgia.

But he felt nothing, not even a hint of warmth or fondness.

He turned, heading to the other side of the hallway, where the living room was located.

The living room with the wooden beams across the ceiling and a red brick fireplace on the opposite wall. Gilbert had set up a tree in the corner, decorated with white lights and generic red and green ornaments. Nothing personal.

But Gilbert was nowhere to be seen.

Tex wasn't ready to let down his guard yet.

He headed through the living room to a room just off the side. An old sunroom there had been converted into an office. When Tex was in high school, Gilbert had sports memorabilia all over the walls—autographed posters, flags, a framed jersey.

In Tex's opinion, the room had always seemed a weird place to have an office. But he supposed Gilbert was just trying to make the most of the space here in the historic home located in a small town.

Tex paused at the office doorway.

Someone was inside, he realized.

And it wasn't Gilbert.

This person wore all black, all the way up to his stocking hat. The intruder's figure was smaller than Gilbert's robust one.

The man stood with his back toward Tex, thumbing through the desk drawers.

Tex bristled and drew himself up to full height. "Who are you, and what do you think you're doing?"

Then he waited for a response.

Chelsea Lennox froze at the deep voice.

No one was supposed to be here.

And that didn't sound like Gilbert.

Yet the voice did sound familiar.

How was she going to get out of this situation? She would have never come in here if she thought she might be caught.

Too much was at stake.

She glanced at the window in front of her. She could try to open it and make a run for it. But that seemed like a terrible plan.

Or there was a letter opener on the desk. Could she use that for a weapon?

No . . . hurting someone would only make this situation a thousand times worse, especially since she didn't have permission to be here.

What if Gilbert had invited the person behind her to come? What if the cops were called?

Instead of running, she froze, lifted her hands in the air, and slowly turned around.

Her eyes widened at the person standing there like a ghost from Christmas past.

"Tex?" The word sounded like a croak as it left her lips.

Her friend's face went slack with surprise. "Chelsea?"

"You're . . . you're here." She hadn't seen him or spoken with him in so long. "In Holly Ridge."

The last time she'd seen Tex was the day he'd graduated.

He'd left without so much as a goodbye.

That day seemed to prove their friendship hadn't been real—for him, at least.

Chelsea had been devastated. For the first few years, she'd secretly hoped that he would come back. That he'd explain why he left and have a good excuse for it. Maybe he'd been forced to go. Maybe he had amnesia. Maybe . . .

But there were no good excuses.

Later, she'd heard he joined the military. That was respectable. But why would he leave without telling her?

Despite her hopes, Tex had never come back. He'd never called.

He hadn't even sent a birthday card.

Which meant their friendship had meant nothing to him.

The realization still caused a pit to form in her stomach.

"Chelsea?" Tex blinked in confusion and shock. "What are you doing in Gilbert's house?"

His question made sense. But how would she explain herself? The one thing she hadn't counted on when she sneaked inside was being caught. She'd made sure Gilbert wouldn't be here.

There was zero chance she could have anticipated Tex walking in on her. Absolutely zero.

She gripped the desk behind her to keep her balance. "Gilbert told me about some guy he used to do his landscaping. But I misplaced his name and phone number so I came over to see if I could get it."

"And you let yourself into his office to look?" He squinted dubiously.

She knew how this must sound. She really needed to get her story straight.

She forced a shrug, hoping it looked casual. "I didn't think he'd care, and time was of the essence. I need someone to help put my Christmas lights up, and we're only a few

days from Christmas.”

She knew by the look in Tex’s eyes that he didn’t buy her story.

She started to explain more when she heard someone else step into the house. “Hello? Is that your truck in the driveway, Tex?”

Chelsea sucked in a breath. It was Gilbert. He was home.

Her gaze flew to Tex. Would he sell her out? Tell Gilbert that she’d been snooping in here?

Then what would happen? If Gilbert wanted to, he could call the police, and she could be arrested.

How would she explain that to her students? She’d be the talk of Holly Ridge High.

Not to mention she’d be fired.

Tex gave her one last look before stepping out of the office and into the living room. She quickly followed behind, clearing the office just in time.

They met Gilbert in the hallway.

Gilbert Stevenson. Mid-sixties. He had gray hair, a neatly trimmed but longish gray beard, and a broad barrel chest. His teeth were crooked and his eyebrows bushy. But Gilbert had never let those things bother him.

He was too confident for that.

But none of those things really caught her attention. Not as much as his beady eyes, at

least. She'd never trusted the man.

Gilbert's eyes lit when he saw Tex. "You're here. How'd you get inside?"

"The front door wasn't latched, so I just assumed you were home."

"That wasn't very smart of me. It's so good to see you. I wasn't sure if you were going to come or not."

"It is the holidays," Tex said. "And your invitation had me curious."

Chelsea found his words strange considering the fact Tex had never come back to Holly Ridge for the holidays before—or at all, for that matter.

Gilbert's gaze flicked around Tex to her, and heat rose on her cheeks.

"After I got here, I saw Chelsea, and we've been catching up." Tex squeezed her arm, almost in an affectionate manner. Or was it an attempt to reassure her?

She didn't know. But some of the air left her lungs.

Tex hadn't sold her out. Yet.

She'd thank him later. But she still couldn't let down her guard.

It had been years since she'd seen Tex, and though she wanted to believe he was still the good guy she'd once known, she couldn't be certain.

She'd only had a brief glance at him—but it had been enough for her to see his weary gaze. To see a scar at his neck. To see how much more defined his muscles had become.

“It’s so good to see both of you.” Gilbert’s gaze jumped back and forth between the two. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“I’m sure you two do.” Chelsea swung her thumb behind her to the back door. “I should go and let you guys talk.”

“Did you need anything?” Gilbert studied her.

She wanted to cringe, but she didn’t dare do that and give anything away.

“I thought I saw Tex over here, and I just had to come to say hi.” She leaned toward Tex and squeezed his arm, trying to make her story believable.

But her throat went dry when she felt the hard muscles beneath her fingers.

Tex was no longer the boy who’d left home.

He was now all man. He was all muscles, testosterone, and confidence.

“You should come over and have dinner with us tonight.” Gilbert tilted his head as he watched for her response. “Anna will be here.”

“Anna?” Tex questioned.

“I’m actually dating someone,” Gilbert said with a grin. “The guidance counselor at school. She’s a lovely woman, and I think you’ll really like her.”

“Good for you.”

Gilbert turned back to Chelsea. “So . . . would you like to come?”

The offer might have been sincere, but something about his gaze put her on edge. She and Gilbert were colleagues at the high school, but they didn't run in the same circles.

Nor did she want to run in the same circles.

There was something about the man she'd never trusted. Anna, however, seemed perfectly nice.

"I couldn't possibly impose," Chelsea finally said.

"It wouldn't be imposing," Gilbert said. "I'm making my famous spaghetti with garlic bread. I'll have more than enough. You should come."

Spaghetti and garlic bread. Gilbert often made that food for the varsity football team before their big games. All twenty-five players would pile into the house to eat, leaving with full stomachs and a game plan for the next day.

Right now, all Chelsea wanted was to get out of here. If that meant she needed to say yes, she would. She'd figure out everything else later.

"Can I bring anything?" Her voice sounded strained as she asked the question.

"How about a salad?"

She forced a smile, hoping it didn't look too unnatural. "I'd be more than happy to."

"Great." Gilbert grinned. "Then we'll see you at six."

She glanced at her watch. That was only two hours away.

But at least she'd have some breathing room to think things through until then.

This entire situation—from breaking in to running into Tex—had been too close for comfort.

Because if what she suspected was true, Gilbert was in trouble.

Or he was trouble. She couldn't make up her mind which might be the case.

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CHAPTER 2

Gilbert fixed Tex a cup of coffee, and Tex sat at the kitchen table, a place where he'd eaten many meals.

As Tex sipped his drink, Gilbert began to cook some ground beef for the spaghetti. The truth was there was only one homemade meal Gilbert had mastered, and that was spaghetti with meat sauce. Everything else had been prepackaged and frozen, and he'd just had to heat it.

Tex's mind drifted to Chelsea again. He couldn't believe she'd been in the house when he got here.

An image of her long, curly blonde hair and heart-shaped face filled his mind. He'd missed that face. That hair. Her smile.

Still to this day, she remained the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. Not because of her outward looks either. She had an inner beauty that radiated warmth and kindness.

He hadn't talked to her in years, though on occasion he would look for her online. But he'd forced himself to stop doing that several years ago. It was too hard to see how her life had gone on without him.

"I'm glad you came," Gilbert started as the meat sizzled on the stove in front of him. "I had to run back to the school for a meeting, but I managed to slip away a little early."

“You haven’t retired yet, huh? How long do you plan to be the football coach in this small town?” Certainly someone else had to want—and be qualified for—the position.

“Gives me something to do,” Gilbert shrugged. “Especially since I’m not fostering anymore.”

The man seemed to be doing pretty well for himself, Tex mused. This house was one of the nicer ones in town, not one that most could afford on a teacher’s salary. Gilbert had always had a refined taste for designer merchandise, whether it be a luxury car or high-quality leather furniture.

Tex swallowed hard, his throat suddenly tight. He didn’t like small talk. He didn’t want to pretend like this was normal, that being here was something routine.

“Look, you know me,” Tex started. “I’m never one to skirt around the truth. Is everything okay? I was concerned when I got your text.”

“I’ve always appreciated your honesty.”

“You usually go to Hawaii every Christmas,” Tex said. “I guess you’re not this year?”

Every Christmas, Gilbert would scatter his foster kids to various group homes in the area during the holidays. It was the one time of year he wanted to put himself first. That was what he’d always said, making it clear he deserved a break from his saintly actions of taking troubled youth into his home.

But that fact had made Tex dread every Christmas, still to this day.

“Yes, now that Anna and I are together, I decided to stay home this year.” Gilbert

stepped from the stove and turned to him, his gaze heavy. “Truthfully, it’s Patrick I’m worried about.”

“Patrick?” Patrick Day was another boy who’d been here at Gilbert’s with Tex. He was a couple of years younger than Tex and had become like a true little brother to him.

Tex didn’t stay in contact with very many people from his childhood. But he had reached out to Patrick a few times just to see how life was treating him.

The man seemed to be doing well for himself. He’d always been smart, so it hadn’t been a surprise when he’d gotten into medical school. Last Tex had heard, Patrick had graduated and was now working as a general practitioner here in town.

“Is Patrick sick?” Tex asked. “In trouble?”

Gilbert shrugged and then shook his head, his gaze appearing lost. “I’m not really sure what’s going on with him. I’ve heard rumors there’s a lawsuit against him.”

Tex blinked in surprise. “What? Why?”

“Malpractice, among other things. Nothing confirmed.”

“Certainly that’s not uncommon in the medical world. Isn’t that why doctors have malpractice insurance?”

“In theory, yes. But he could still lose his license.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that, and I hope it’s not true.” Tex paused. “However, I’m still not sure what that has to do with me being here.”

“I was hoping you might help him. I know the two of you were close. If there’s anyone he’ll open up to, it’s you.”

Something uncomfortable jostled inside of Tex at the thought. “Of course, I’d like to help Patrick if I can. But we haven’t talked in years, and for me to waltz back in town and somehow try to offer advice . . . I’m just not sure how well that would be received.”

“Don’t you do private security for people?”

Tex gripped his coffee mug. “Do you think Patrick needs a bodyguard?”

“I heard he’s been getting threats. A smashed car window. Cryptic messages online.”

“Did he go to the police?”

Gilbert shook his head. “No. At least I don’t think so. Like I said, this is all word of mouth. But I’m worried about him. He needs someone who will be there to help him. I think you might be the only person he’ll open up to.”

Tex’s first thought was to dismiss the request. But maybe he should think about it. “I can’t make any promises. But I’ll see what I can do.”

Gilbert flashed a smile. “Perfect. I knew I could count on you. Of all the kids who stayed here, you were always one of the most dependable. I didn’t have to worry about you like I did the others.”

Tex couldn’t deny his words. Growing up in foster care wasn’t easy. Trauma played a huge role in each of their lives, causing them all to act out in different ways.

Tex had devoted his time to working out. To playing on the football team, which

Gilbert had loved. He'd been the coach back then also.

But most of the other boys didn't operate the same way Tex did. Some of them snuck out at night. Some did drugs. Others met up with girls. One of them had been responsible for some vandalism in town. Another had been arrested for stealing.

Despite all that, most of them had turned out surprisingly well. On occasion, Tex looked his foster brothers up online. He'd seen that Patrick was a doctor, Wyatt an attorney, Aiden an engineer, and Tex had even heard Pete Lawson was running for state senate.

"We can talk more later." Gilbert raised the wooden spoon he used to cook the sizzling ground beef. "But right now I've got to get this spaghetti done. My neighbor will be over in an hour and a half—and so will Anna."

Chelsea's image flashed through Tex's mind again. He had so many questions about her still living here. If she was married or had kids. How her parents were.

But he didn't want to ask Gilbert for the answers.

No, he wanted to ask Chelsea herself.

She'd been lying earlier about why she was in Gilbert's house. She'd clearly been looking for something. And she'd acted spooked.

Tex tried to think it through.

There was more to her story.

One way or another, he would find out what.

Chelsea had come up with a million excuses why she couldn't go to dinner tonight at Gilbert's place.

For starters, she couldn't stand Gilbert and feared he might be up to something.

Then there was the fact she'd been caught snooping in his house. She didn't trust the situation enough to think those details hadn't been shared.

But perhaps the biggest reason not to go was also the biggest reason to go.

Because Tex would be there.

On one hand, seeing him again today had been thrilling. Chelsea wanted to know what his life had been like in the twelve years since they'd last spoken.

But on the other hand, he'd left without saying a word and hadn't tried to stay in touch. He clearly wasn't the man she'd thought he was. He had shown her his true colors.

Just like her mom. Her biological mom.

She'd left when Chelsea was only six months old. Said that mom life wasn't for her. Chelsea hadn't seen her since then and had no memories of the woman.

Thankfully, her dad had remarried when Chelsea was two. Connie was a wonderful woman who'd adopted Chelsea and taken her in as her own. Sometimes, Chelsea even forgot the woman hadn't been the one to give birth to her.

She'd been truly blessed.

But she subconsciously remembered what it was like to know her birth mom hadn't

wanted her.

Maybe that was one more reason why she and Tex had bonded so quickly. They'd both known rejection at a young age.

Some people bad-mouthed Tex—bad-mouthed all the boys who came to stay at Gilbert's. But Chelsea had always known that people were wrong about Tex. She'd stood up for him when others had started rumors or put him down because of his tough background.

She'd come to his defense when no one else had.

But apparently, she'd been the one who was wrong, and everyone else was right.

As "Jingle Bells" played in the background, she stared at the salad on the kitchen counter in front of her and let out a sigh.

She might as well go. If nothing else, maybe she could find out more information about Gilbert.

She grabbed the salad she'd made using ingredients she had on hand. She'd placed it in an antique bowl once belonging to her grandmother before stretching plastic wrap over the top.

Then she started across the lawn toward Gilbert's house. A hedge of Leyland cypress separated the two properties.

She had to admit that his yard looked so much fancier than hers. The landscaping was impeccable, and he had actual grass instead of weeds that were cut short to look like grass. And he even had Christmas lights strung around the house that made the place look festive.

Her house, on the other hand, was considerably smaller. She really needed to paint the exterior again as the yellow had begun to fade. Her flowerbeds looked plain, with just some shrubs but no flowers. She planned on changing that in the spring.

She simply spent most of her time as a teacher at school with the kids, grading papers, or preparing lesson plans. Since she wasn't married, she could afford the extra time. She loved teaching both classic literature as well as theater.

She cut through the hedges, taking a shortcut to the front porch.

When she reached the concrete steps, she paused, hesitating a moment.

Did she really want to do this?

No, she didn't. But she couldn't turn back now.

She rang the doorbell and listened to the cheerful chime.

A moment later, heavy footsteps pounded, and the door opened.

She expected to see Gilbert.

Instead, Tex stood there.

Her throat went dry at the sight of him. She took a moment to soak in the details about his appearance. The changes he'd undergone in the past twelve years. His shoulders had broadened. His face had become more chiseled. He had the shadow of a beard across his cheeks, but his dark hair still had a touch of curl.

If possible, he was even more handsome than before.

“You came.” He sounded just as surprised as she felt.

She held up her salad and forced a smile. “Of course. Who am I to turn down a free dinner?”

Tex still had that hard look in his eyes. Was it hard? Or was it simply perceptive?

He clearly knew there was more going on with her. But Chelsea didn’t plan on telling him everything.

She didn’t know his character anymore. Didn’t know if she could trust him. Especially after he’d left without a trace.

The one thing she did know was that if she told the wrong person, it could be really bad for her. Dangerously bad.

“Come on in.” Tex opened the door farther.

Chelsea slipped inside, catching a whiff of Tex’s evergreen cologne as she did. She’d smelled it earlier also, but she’d been too frightened to really appreciate the scent.

Now the aroma was so alluring that she wanted to lean into him and enjoy it just a bit more.

But, of course, she’d never do that.

Tex gave her a quick once-over before offering an approving nod. “You’re looking good, Chelsea. It looks like the years have treated you well.”

She glanced at her jeans and red sweater.

Had the years treated her well?

She supposed she had nothing to complain about, especially when she considered others who had it much tougher than she did.

Others like Tex.

At least she'd been raised in a loving home with a stable, secure environment. She'd always had a place to fall back on if she ever needed it.

Tex had never had any of those things.

For a while, Chelsea had hoped she could be that person for him, the one who always gave him a shoulder to lean on.

But that hadn't worked out. It hadn't been her choice, however. She hadn't had a say in the decision.

She swallowed hard and shoved away those thoughts.

"It smells good in here." Now that she was farther away from his cologne, the aroma of ground beef and garlic hit her.

"Gilbert has always been able to make a good pot of meat sauce and spaghetti."

"That's what I hear. Believe it or not, I've never had any of his."

He raised his eyebrows. "Not in all these years living beside him? That is surprising."

Chelsea had never been in Gilbert's inner circle—and she was okay with that. She'd never had him over either.

“I can’t believe that you’re still living here,” Tex said as he walked with her down the hall. “I fully expected you to have spread your wings and found a life somewhere else.”

“I considered it. But my parents decided they wanted to downsize and move into a retirement community. They were going to sell their place, and I couldn’t bear the thought of someone else living in the house I’d grown up in.” She shrugged, feeling self-conscious at her words. “So I bought it. They gave me a great deal, of course. But I’ve made the place my own, and I couldn’t be happier about it.”

Tex smiled, the first real smile she’d seen on him since they’d run into each other earlier. “I think that’s fantastic. There’s nothing wrong with appreciating your roots.”

If anyone knew what it was like not to have roots, it was Tex. He’d gotten his nickname because all the government knew about him when he’d been left outside a fire station at a week old was that he was from Texas, thus the nickname. He’d then been passed around different foster families for years, until finally being placed with Gilbert.

Before they could talk any more, they reached the kitchen—and Gilbert.

Any of the warm feelings that had started to simmer inside Chelsea quickly disappeared, and her nerves kicked in.

This dinner might be a good way to find out more information on Gilbert and what was going on in his life lately, but Chelsea would have to broach the subject very carefully.

“Where’s Anna?” Chelsea didn’t know the woman well, but she seemed nice enough.

“She just called and had to cancel. Something came up at school, and she needs to

oversee the situation.”

“That’s too bad.”

“I was looking forward to meeting this woman who managed to rope the town’s confirmed bachelor,” Tex spoke up.

Gilbert laughed. “She’s a special one.”

Before their conversation could go any further, the sound of glass shattering in the distance filled the air.

In two seconds flat, Tex was in front of her, his broad shoulders blocking her from any incoming harm.

Her heart raced.

What had just happened?

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CHAPTER 3

“Stay here.” Tex hurried toward the front of the house.

The picture window in the formal living room was shattered, with ragged edges of glass protruding like fangs all around it.

There, on the red-and-blue oriental rug, was a brick with a paper rubber-banded around it.

Tires squealed somewhere close.

Before looking at the paper, Tex rushed to the window.

But when he peered outside, he saw nothing.

Even if he tried to follow, by the time Tex got to his truck his efforts would be useless.

Whoever had done this was now gone.

A rock formed in his stomach. What was going on here?

He strode toward the brick and ripped the rubber band off. Then he pulled his sleeves over his hands before he unfolded the paper. He didn't want to mess up any potential fingerprints.

A message had been crudely written in thick, black marker on the white paper.

You're not welcome here.

Tex sucked in a breath at the words. Were they meant for him?

But he'd just arrived, and he hadn't told anyone he was coming. So the thought of this being directed at him seemed strange and unlikely.

"Tex?"

He turned to see Gilbert standing in the doorway behind him. Chelsea peered from behind Gilbert. They both stared at him, waiting for an explanation.

"Someone threw a brick through your window with this message attached." He held up the paper. "Any idea what it means?"

Gilbert flinched as he read the words. "Why would someone do that? Why wouldn't they want you here?"

"Nobody knew I was coming here," he told Gilbert. "So it is a little strange."

"Well, it couldn't have been meant for me." Gilbert threw his hands in the air. "Why would someone tell me I'm not welcome? I've lived here for twenty years."

Tex didn't know what was going on, but whatever it was, he didn't like it.

"Should I call the police?" Gilbert frowned as he stared at his window.

"That's your decision." Tex headed toward the window again. He wanted to double-check that whoever had done this hadn't come back for a second loop.

“What would you do?” he asked, honestly sounding uncertain—not a common emotion for Gilbert.

Tex turned back toward them. “It couldn’t hurt to file a report. The cops could find some fingerprints on the paper. I doubt there are any, but it’s worth a shot.”

Tex didn’t like where this was going. Between the mystery of why he’d been asked to come, finding Chelsea in Gilbert’s office, and now the brick through the window, this wasn’t the start to his visit he’d foreseen.

“I guess I’ll keep it quiet.” Resignation filled Gilbert’s voice. “No need to make a big deal out of it and just give more attention to whoever did this. I was really hoping my time with you while you were here would be peaceful.”

There was definitely more to this story than Gilbert had let on when he’d invited Tex back to Holly Ridge.

Tex nodded to the front of the house. “I should get some wood and cover this window. It’s going to get cold in here fast.”

“I have some plywood in the shed out back.”

Tex headed that way. “I’m sure I can find something.”

Chelsea trailed behind him. “Let me help. To get a piece of wood big enough to cover that window, it’s going to be large. Two people would be better.”

“I can—” Gilbert started.

“I know you want to, Gilbert, but your arthritis has been acting up lately,” Chelsea rushed. “It would be better if you just let me do it instead.”

“I know by that tone that I can’t argue with you.” Gilbert let out a laugh and raised his hands in surrender. “I’ll clean up the glass shards.”

On some people it would sound friendly, but with Gilbert it didn’t quite sound sincere.

Then again, that was just Gilbert. There were two camps of people with him: those who abhorred the man’s every move, and those who fell for his act and practically worshipped the man.

That second group was probably the only way he’d been allowed to have so many foster kids in his home over the years. He knew how to impress the right people. Or maybe the right people just saw what they wanted to see when the details worked in their favor.

Those were questions for another time.

Gilbert handed him the shed key, and Tex headed out the back door, Chelsea on his heels. He didn’t really need her help. But she seemed eager to offer it, so he didn’t argue.

Outside, darkness hung around them and the grass crunched beneath his feet. It had been a particularly dry autumn, and now everything was brown and crispy.

He’d checked the forecast before he left, and meteorologists were calling for snow in a couple of days. There was nothing he loved more than a good snow.

He’d mostly been working out of Florida lately, and he was ready for a break from the humidity.

“Do you know anything about that brick?” he asked Chelsea as soon as they were out

of earshot walking toward the shed.

“Why would I know anything about that brick?”

“Well, you live beside Gilbert. Maybe you’ve seen something.”

Something flashed through Chelsea’s eyes. For a moment, Tex thought she might share something.

Instead, she said, “I have no idea. Gilbert and I both work at the high school, but I really know very little about him. We run in different circles. He’s the athletic guy, and I’m into the arts. The two don’t often mingle.”

Tex wanted to press her more about it, but he didn’t. Not now.

Instead, he took the lock off the shed and threw the wooden doors open as he peered inside the space. Right away, he spotted the wood he could use.

As he grabbed it, he said over his shoulder, “You’re going to need to tell me why you were snooping in Gilbert’s office.”

He glanced at Chelsea in time to see her face go pale.

Now he was really intrigued.

Something was going on here, and he needed to find out what.

Chelsea’s heart pounded so hard in her ears the beat was nearly all she could hear.

Even as she held the wood up to the window and listened to Tex hammer the nails into it, all she could think about were his words. You’re going to need to tell me why

you were snooping in Gilbert's office.

Could he really force her? She supposed, if she didn't fess up, Tex could tell Gilbert. But she could fess up and he could still tell Gilbert.

She hadn't expected Gilbert to be here today. He was supposed to be at the school for an athletics meeting. She'd double-checked the schedule.

Finally, the wood had been nailed in place, and she and Tex stepped back to look at their handiwork.

"That will keep the wind out for a while," Tex told Gilbert, who leaned in the doorway watching them work. "But you'll definitely want to call about having the glass replaced."

"I'll do that."

"It's a shame," Tex continued. "The house looks so Christmassy, and this is going to look like a bruise on the otherwise innocent spirit of Christmas."

"At least it's fixable," Gilbert said. "It could be worse. Now, why don't we try to put this out of our heads and sit down for a nice dinner together? I don't know about you, but I'm ready to eat."

Now that he mentioned it, Chelsea was hungry. The spaghetti smelled wonderful—fresh garlic, tangy tomatoes, and savory beef.

Tex agreed they should eat. At first, Chelsea had thought he might rebel until they found answers. Instead, they headed into the kitchen and washed their hands before sitting at the table. Tex offered to lift up a prayer before they started to eat.

That was new. He hadn't been one for church or God or the Bible back when she'd known him. Even though she'd gone to church and had invited him to go with her, he had always said no.

Once he'd even told her that if there was a God out there He was cruel. Because why else would Tex be in the situation he was if God loved him?

His question had broken her heart, and she hadn't had a great answer. Sure, she'd known everything she'd been taught. But those words had seemed too cliché.

All she'd known to do was to hold his hand.

She remembered the day clearly. She'd expected Tex to pull away. He hadn't.

She kept holding his hand until her mom had walked into the living room a few minutes later. Then they quickly jumped away from each other as if they'd been doing something wrong.

Chelsea knew that day that she loved Tex Thrasher. She loved how protective he was of her. Loved a smile he seemed to have reserved for only her. Loved that she could be the person in his life who brought him a sense of steadiness amidst his turbulent childhood.

She'd continued holding his hand over the next year as he'd learned that his birth parents had been drug addicts who'd both later died of overdoses. Giving him up had been the one smart choice they'd made, even though his life still hadn't been sunshine and roses.

"So tell us what you've been up to for the past . . . how many years?" Gilbert twirled some spaghetti around his fork.

“Twelve,” Chelsea stated, the garlic bread suddenly feeling dry in her throat. “Twelve years.”

Tex glanced at her, questions in his gaze.

He hadn’t expected her to remember the exact number, had he?

She shrugged, trying to play it off. “I was in tenth grade when you left so it’s pretty easy to do the math.”

Tex’s gaze remained on her another moment before he slowly nodded. “I suppose that’s true. After I got out of the military, I went to work for an organization called the Shadow Agency. We do private security for companies and individuals in need of our services.”

“How long have you been out of the military?” Her voice sounded strained as she asked the question.

She hadn’t expected to feel any emotion with the question. But his decision to leave had changed her. It had left her heartbroken.

He shot her another questioning look before saying, “Three years.”

“How did you like being in the military?” Gilbert asked.

Tex shifted as if uncomfortable, like he wasn’t used to being around people who asked him these kinds of personal questions.

“It was a job. In many ways, it was an honor to serve the country. If I hadn’t joined the military, who knows where I’d be right now. It gave me focus and something to strive for.”

The funny thing was, Chelsea had always seen him as a military guy. He had all the right qualities—starting with the fact he was selfless and brave. She understood where it was a good choice for him.

What she didn't understand was why he hadn't said goodbye. Or why he hadn't been in contact since then. He could've come back to visit on occasion.

Had she meant nothing to him? Had he just been biding his time all those days they'd spent together? Waiting for the chance to leave Holly Ridge?

As they continued to eat, they talked about where he'd lived. About the fact he wasn't married.

Then the questions moved to Gilbert. When had he stopped being a foster dad? Five years ago. Why? He was getting too old.

"I do stay in contact with a few of the guys who lived here," Gilbert said. "Mostly the ones who stayed local. I run into them on occasion."

"How many kids did you have in total throughout the years?" Chelsea asked as she finished her meal.

She had one more forkful of spaghetti and just a bite of her garlic bread left. She planned on soaking up some of the remaining marinara with it.

Gilbert could make a mean spaghetti. It was one nice thing she could say about him.

But at school, he was cliquish and a brown-noser. All he cared about was winning and prestige.

Chelsea was fairly certain he'd gone to bat for some of his football players when

they'd been failing certain classes. Their grades had mysteriously improved.

He'd even talked to Chelsea once about a quarterback when he'd failed his literature exam. She'd refused to change the boy's grade, and Gilbert hadn't been happy.

Yet the quarterback had somehow remained on the team. The principal and athletic director had allowed it.

She'd lost a little respect for all those men that day.

"Ninety-six," Gilbert answered as if he always had the number ready in case anyone asked. "I know it sounds like a lot. Some only stayed for a day. Some for a week or a month, and others for years. I'm just glad I could offer a safe place for these kids during the hard times."

Chelsea stole a glance at Tex, wondering what he thought of that statement.

He said nothing.

She reached for her phone looking for a distraction, only to realize she didn't have it on her. She'd left it in the formal living room.

She stood and pointed behind her. "Let me just run get my phone before I forget about it."

The truth was, she needed to be away from Tex a moment. Her emotions were getting the best of her, and her heart had begun to ache.

She hurried into the living room and spotted her phone on an end table. But in her haste to reach it, her foot caught on the edge of the coffee table.

She lunged forward, and her palms hit the carpet.

She gasped as pain screamed from her hand.

She jerked it back, unsure what she'd hurt herself on.

Then she saw the shard of glass.

The edge of it had cut through her skin, and now blood gushed out.

CHAPTER 4

Tex didn't care what Chelsea said. She needed stitches.

He led her outside toward his truck.

"You don't have to do this," Chelsea murmured. "I'll be fine."

"I'm taking you to Urgent Care."

"But you're here to see Gilbert. If you insist on me going, I can drive myself."

"Wrong," Tex stated. "You shouldn't drive yourself with a cut like that. You're losing blood, and you could get lightheaded. It would be unsafe—for you and everyone else on the road."

Chelsea opened her mouth as if to argue, but then she shut it again.

Tex helped her into his black Dodge Ram, closed the door for her, and then ran around to climb inside himself. He cranked the engine and waited a couple of seconds for the heat to start blasting through the vents.

As the evening deepened, the temperature had dropped into the twenties. It was downright chilly.

He tugged his coat off and offered it to her. When she started to refuse, he said, "At least place it around your legs to keep you warm. My truck isn't the quickest to heat

up, and I know you're cold."

She shivered but then stopped as if trying to force herself not to look cold. "But?—"

"No buts. Just keep it. Please. For my sake if not yours."

She opened her mouth again but then shut it. Instead, she stared out the window and frowned when she saw the wood covering the front window of Gilbert's house.

It had been quite the night.

After typing the name of the nearest urgent care clinic into his GPS, Tex pulled away from the curb. His mind drifted back in time.

"Do you still hate needles?" he asked her.

"You remember that?" She let out a self-conscious laugh.

"It's hard to forget. You literally did anything you could to avoid them. You even told the doctor once that you'd take your chances with anemia rather than face a needle."

"Some things you never grow out of." She glanced at the bloody napkin around her finger and frowned again. "Are you sure butterfly bandages won't work?"

"You need to get that cleaned out. The last thing you want is for infection to set in."

She didn't argue.

Silence hung between them for a few minutes.

Then Tex said, “I can’t stop thinking about that brick being thrown through Gilbert’s window. Now that you’ve had some time to think about it more, do you have any idea why someone would have thrown that brick into his house? I mean, you’re his neighbor. Maybe he’s said something to you . . .”

“No, I really don’t know.” Chelsea shrugged. “Nor do I know who it was intended for. What if it’s you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Do you have an enemy who might have followed you here? It sounds like you might encounter lots of dangerous people in your line of work.”

He shrugged, unable to refute the statement. “I definitely do. But I’ve got a pretty good sense for things, and no one followed me here. I would have noticed. Unfortunately, one of the hazards of my job is that I always have to be on guard.”

“Well, whatever’s going on, I hope the person behind this backs off. You know this area as well as I do. It’s usually pretty safe.”

“So nothing’s really changed since I left?” Tex stole a glance at her.

His question had deeper meaning. He wanted to know what had changed with Chelsea.

His impression was that Chelsea wasn’t married. Had she ever been married? She was certainly pretty enough and nice enough to be married. But he didn’t want to ask. The question seemed too personal.

“No, not much has changed.” Yet her voice sounded strained as she said the words. “Life has gone on.”

Why did he feel as if there was an underlying meaning to her words?

They pulled up to the urgent care and parked. A few minutes later, they were inside.

The place was surprisingly empty of patients. Gel stickers that spelled “Merry Christmas” had been stuck to the window, and soft holiday songs played overhead. The smell of rubbing alcohol mingled with Lysol and peppermint—an unusual combination.

The nurse called them back almost straightaway.

Tex thought about letting Chelsea go into the back by herself. But, without asking if it was okay, he decided to go with her instead.

And he was glad he did.

When they got into the small exam room, a familiar face waited for them there.

Patrick Day. Dr. Patrick Day.

He was no longer the gawky string bean he’d been in high school.

This new Patrick Day looked confident in his white lab coat with a stethoscope around his neck and a Santa hat over his blond hair.

Tex remembered what Gilbert had said about the problems the doctor seemed to be having.

This might be the perfect opening to find out some of those answers.

“Patrick,” Chelsea practically stuttered as she paused in the doorway of the room. “I

didn't know you were working here."

Truthfully, she'd been avoiding the man. If she'd known he was here, she would have never come.

"I've been moonlighting here." He shrugged. "Trying to pay off some medical school bills. All those student loans aren't cheap, you know."

"I can imagine." She shifted awkwardly.

Patrick's gaze drifted from her to Tex, and recognition filled his eyes. "Wait—Tex Thrasher? Is that you?"

"Patrick. It's been a long time."

The two did the obligatory part handshake, part hug, part pat on the back.

"I'll get back to you in a minute," Patrick said to Tex before returning to Chelsea. "First, what brings you in?"

She held up her hand. "I cut myself on some glass. I think I need stitches."

Patrick had asked her out several times. The first couple of times, she'd said yes. When they had gone out, their time together hadn't been unpleasant.

But she also hadn't felt a spark.

Her friends teased her all the time, saying she shouldn't be holding out for a spark.

But how could she not? She didn't want to settle.

Sure, she could probably have a happy life with someone she didn't have strong chemistry with. But it wasn't what she wanted for her future. People could call her foolish if they wanted. But she'd rather stay single than marry the wrong person.

Patrick's gaze flickered from Tex to Chelsea again, and questions filled his eyes.

He'd probably assumed they were together.

His attention snapped back to her. "Have a seat on the exam table and let me take a look."

She carefully climbed on the table and sat atop the crinkly white paper there.

Patrick took her arm by the wrist and leaned close as he examined her wound. "That's a pretty deep cut. We're going to have to clean that out, and I'm guessing it will take about five stitches. But I'll take care of you. Don't worry."

Something about the way he said, "I'll take care of you," with the emphasis on the I'll made her uncomfortable.

Was he trying to show up Tex?

Then her thoughts shifted to his words. Five stitches? With needles?

Wooziness captured her at the thought of it.

She could be strong. The last thing she wanted to do was pass out in front of both Tex and Patrick.

As Patrick began pulling supplies from an organizer against the wall, Tex remained near the door with his arms crossed as if he were her personal bodyguard.

“So what brings you back here, Tex?” Patrick asked as he opened a package containing a sterile syringe. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

Chelsea had wondered that herself. He’d never directly answered the question. There had to be more to the story, right?

“Gilbert asked me to come back for a visit,” Tex told him.

Patrick threw him a look with a raised eyebrow. “Gilbert did, did he? That’s interesting. I didn’t think he got attached to any of his foster kids.” A slight edge of bitterness crept into his voice.

Tex shrugged, unemotional. “Neither did I. When I first got the message, I thought he must be dying or something.”

“Is he?”

“I don’t think so,” Tex said.

“So why did he want you to come back?” Patrick paused long enough to observe Tex a moment.

“I’m still not 100 percent sure.” Tex shrugged again. “But I didn’t have any other plans for the holidays, so I thought I’d take a walk down memory lane.”

“Are you sure this is the memory lane you want to walk down?” Patrick cast him another look.

“Believe it or not, out of all my past experiences, living at Gilbert’s place isn’t nearly the worst.” He pressed his lips together and raised his shoulders as if he knew it might sound unbelievable.

Chelsea knew what he'd been through in his childhood. And if living at Gilbert's had been decent, then she couldn't imagine what terrible would be like.

Gilbert had no love or affection for any of his foster kids. He'd been a drill sergeant with them, punishing them for the smallest violations. None of them ever had time to relax. They were always working, oftentimes doing things to help Gilbert make more money.

When he'd decided he wanted to start a drop shipping business, he'd used his foster kids as free labor to make it happen.

Chelsea found the man to be despicable.

Patrick raised his eyebrows. "Sounds like you have some stories to tell." He sucked up a saline solution into his syringe and then began to irrigate her wound, holding a plastic container below her hand to catch the liquid.

She flinched as her cut stung. If he hadn't been holding her wrist, she would have probably jerked her hand away.

"I know it doesn't feel great, but I've got to clean this out," Patrick murmured.

"I know," Chelsea said through gritted teeth.

Tex threw her a half-amused look.

Then he quickly sobered as if remembering they were no longer friends. All the memories they'd had together meant nothing anymore.

Chelsea had to remember that herself. It would be way too easy to step back into the friendship they'd once had. A friendship she'd missed deeply for so long.

Now, she needed to protect herself.

Tex was only in town for a few days. Then he'd be gone again, working all over the country protecting the rich, the famous, and the powerful. At least that was her perception of his job.

But she saw his war-torn eyes. Not only war-torn from battles he'd fought in the military. But war-torn from things he'd experienced that had broken his soul. As a fixer, Chelsea wanted more than anything to help heal his wounds.

But she couldn't. It was too personal. She had to stay in her lane.

"And the two of you . . . ?" Patrick's question hung in the air.

Chelsea almost wanted to make a smart remark. But she didn't.

"We happened to run into each other at Gilbert's," Chelsea explained. "Then Gilbert's window broke and?—"

"His window broke?" Patrick paused.

"Someone threw a brick through it," Tex said.

Patrick's face turned a little paler. "Wow. I'm sorry to hear that."

He glanced at her before he reached for the needle he'd set aside.

Then he changed the subject. "I'm going to give you a shot to numb this, so the stitches won't hurt as much, okay?"

Chelsea's throat tightened, but she nodded. Patrick probably didn't expect someone

Chelsea's age to be afraid of needles. She'd like to keep it that way. Her fear was downright embarrassing.

A moment later, Patrick held the needle in his hand and tapped the barrel to get the air bubbles out. Then he plunged it into her skin near the cut.

As he did, everything went black around her.

CHAPTER 5

Tex darted from the door and reached Chelsea before she toppled off the exam table. Her head fell against his chest.

But he'd caught her. That could have been ugly.

"Hey," he murmured. "I've got you. It's okay."

Patrick sprang into action. "Lay her down and give her some breathing room."

Something about his words sounded territorial. Tex had a feeling that the doctor didn't like seeing Chelsea's head against Tex's chest.

But he did as Patrick instructed. He carefully grabbed her shoulders and lowered her onto the table. He stayed close to ensure she didn't fall off.

"Chelsea, can you hear me?" Patrick leaned toward her.

She didn't stir.

"I don't understand what happened," Patrick muttered, a knot of confusion forming between his eyebrows. He reached to the counter behind him to grab something.

"It was the needle," Tex explained. "Chelsea always passes out at the sight of needles."

Patrick glanced at him with surprise in his gaze. “Really?”

Tex nodded. “As you might remember, the two of us were pretty close back in high school. Needles have always been one of her fears.”

Patrick pushed his wire-framed glasses up higher. “I do remember that.”

What was the relationship between these two? Were they dating?

If Tex had to guess, Patrick was more interested in Chelsea than Chelsea was in him.

Why did the thought of the two of them dating make Tex feel a touch of jealousy? It wasn't as if he was interested in dating anybody. Not even Chelsea—although she'd always remained the gold standard in his mind whenever he met somebody. No one else quite ever measured up to her.

Patrick ran a container of something under her nose. Smelling salts, probably.

A moment later, Chelsea's eyes fluttered. A few seconds later, she sat up and moaned. “I passed out, didn't I?”

“It's okay,” Tex muttered. “I caught you.”

Her eyes widened as she looked at him, then her cheeks turned red. He hadn't met to embarrass her.

“Thank you,” she finally murmured before glancing at Patrick. “Any chance you stitched me up while I was out of it?”

The doctor frowned. “Unfortunately, no.”

“Here.” Tex held out his hand. “Squeeze my hand and close your eyes. You can know I’ll be there to catch you again if you fall.”

Something unreadable fluttered through her gaze until finally she closed her eyes as he’d suggested. She took his hand in hers and squeezed—quite hard, considering her petite frame.

Then Patrick got busy.

Patrick . . . the man Tex was supposed to find out information on. To help. To protect.

Maybe this would be a good time to get started.

“So you stayed in town?” Tex asked, watching as the doctor sewed up Chelsea’s wound.

“I did. Dr. Murphy said I could buy his practice from him, and I figured where else was I going to get an offer like that only four years out of med school?”

“True. I’m still impressed you made it through med school. Good job.”

“It wasn’t easy. I won’t talk about the loans I’ll be paying on for two decades. But I did graduate.”

“Congratulations.” Tex pointed at his hand. “I don’t see a ring on your finger. You’re telling me the town doctor hasn’t snagged someone yet?”

“I’m working on it,” he murmured.

Tex stole a glance at Chelsea, but her eyes remained closed.

It was probably better that way.

“Maybe we could get together sometime while I’m in town,” Tex said. “And catch up. Maybe tomorrow? Do you have a lunch break?”

Patrick continued to put the stitches in. “I could probably do coffee. It would be nice to catch up and see what you’ve been up to. I didn’t expect to see you in Holly Ridge again.”

“I didn’t expect to be here again. You ever hear from any of the other guys?”

Patrick fumbled the needle, and Chelsea muttered, “Ouch!”

That was a feat, considering she was numbed up.

“Sorry,” Patrick said. “Not sure what happened just there. But, to answer your question, yes, I do talk to some of them on occasion. You?”

“No, I’ve pretty much stayed out of touch with people.”

It had been better that way. But Tex didn’t say those words aloud. Not everyone needed to know his business. Needed to know what a dangerous position he often put himself in.

With that danger, it also meant that other people around him had to be careful. He never wanted to put someone he truly cared about in the line of fire.

So he’d stayed away. Hadn’t offered any explanations. It had been easier that way.

But that didn’t mean Tex wasn’t full of regrets—and longing, for that matter.

Leaving everything behind hadn't been hard.

But leaving Chelsea behind had been brutal.

"There you go," Patrick announced as he placed a bandage over the stitches. "All done."

Chelsea's eyes popped open, and she glanced at her hand, flexing her fingers.

"Thank you."

"Keep it clean, and if you see any signs of infection, come back to me."

"Will do." As Chelsea hopped down from the exam table, Tex took her elbow to keep her steady, just in case. She had just passed out.

But he had to admit another part of him craved being closer to her. Smelling the peppermint and cinnamon that seemed to waft from her.

Was that a lotion or shampoo? Or had she been baking cookies earlier?

He didn't know, and he didn't care. He was intrigued.

Before he led Chelsea out of the room, Patrick called to her again.

"Don't forget dinner on Friday."

She looked back at him, and her lips parted as if she wanted to refute his words. Then she looked at the stitches on her hand and let out an almost imperceptible sigh. Tex knew her well enough to know what he'd heard.

She wasn't thrilled with the idea, was she?

"Text me," she said.

To Tex, it sounded like Chelsea didn't want to commit to anything.

But he was curious about what was going on between the two of them—and that curiosity had nothing to do with the fact he might feel a touch of jealousy and protectiveness.

He had no right to feel that emotion. No right at all.

Chelsea wished she could rewind today and do it all over again.

If so, she wouldn't have sneaked into Gilbert's house. Wouldn't have been caught by Tex looking in the man's office. And she wouldn't have gone to the urgent care place with Tex where Patrick would treat her and she'd pass out.

But here she was, and now there was nothing she could do about it except grin and bear it.

Tension stretched between her and Tex as they started down the road back to her house.

"So you and Patrick, huh?" he said after a moment.

She'd known the comment was coming. She'd seen the curiosity in his gaze. "It's not what you think. We're just friends."

"Does he know that?" He raised an eyebrow as he glanced at her.

“I’ve told him, but he doesn’t seem to get the message.”

“He was always hardheaded about certain things. Once he set his mind to something, he didn’t change it.”

“I can see that. I’ve known him since high school, but he never really showed any interest in me until recently.”

“He always had a crush on you,” Tex said.

Her eyebrows flew up. “He did?”

Tex nodded. “He did. Then again, a lot of guys at school did.”

Her cheeks heated. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do.”

She cleared her throat, suddenly wanting to change the subject. “Anyway, I . . . I don’t want to hurt him. He’s a good man. But . . .” She couldn’t bring herself to finish the statement. She didn’t want to share too much.

A moment of silence passed before Tex asked, “How’s Patrick been doing lately? He made it sound like his loans were a bit overwhelming.”

Chelsea thought it was strange that Tex was talking about Patrick’s loans of all things. Especially when they had so much to catch up on—things that had nothing to do with Patrick.

“I’m not really sure how he’s doing,” Chelsea said.

Though she had thought Patrick had acted a little strange the past few times she'd seen him. He'd been jumpy and more on edge. She'd wondered about it but had figured it was just because of his job.

More silence passed, and then she asked, "So how long are you here?"

"I'll probably leave the day after Christmas, if not sooner."

"Sooner? I thought you came here for Christmas?"

A frown tugged at his lips. "Gilbert and I . . . we're not close. I hope coming here wasn't a mistake."

Chelsea hoped that Tex coming here wasn't a mistake either, but she didn't say that out loud. It would be rude. And sharing that would make it seem personal.

She needed for him to think she'd gone on without him and done just fine.

She stuffed her emotions down.

Though Tex could have parked at Gilbert's, and she could have easily walked over, he pulled into her driveway instead.

He turned toward her as he put his truck in Park. "Now, are you ready to tell me why you were in Gilbert's office? I know you weren't looking for some landscaper's phone number. You're not the type to break into someone's house to find that information, and you're too much of a control freak to let somebody else do that kind of work for you."

Ouch. But he knew her well.

She licked her lips as she considered what to say. How much to share. As she wondered if she could trust Tex with the information.

Before she could answer, a shadow moved in her backyard.

Then a figure clad in black darted from the back of her house through the yard and into the woods beyond.

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CHAPTER 6

Tex jumped from his truck and took off across the lawn. He needed to catch the person he'd seen leaving Chelsea's house.

As the man cut through the woods, Tex went after him. But the guy had a good head start, and he was faster than Tex had anticipated.

Thankfully, he remembered these woods well. Remembered the slopes and the rocks as the landscape tapered down to the street below.

For a split second, Tex felt as if he were back in high school, and he and Chelsea were exploring.

Then present-day reality slammed back into his mind. This was no time to reminisce.

Instead, he continued pushing himself between the trees.

Just as he cleared the woods, he saw the figure in black jump into a dark-colored sedan. Three seconds later, he squealed away.

Tex stopped on the edge of the road, trying to get a glimpse of the license plate. But the guy was too far away.

His hands fisted as he watched the car disappear around the bend.

Who had that been? And what had the man been doing behind Chelsea's house?

He'd have to figure that out later. Right now, he wanted to check on Chelsea.

He jogged back through the woods, his mind racing through possibilities of what might be going on. Well, at least he tried to race through possibilities. But really, he could come up with nothing. Not without more details about Chelsea's life over the past twelve years.

Was that man some type of scorned lover coming to stalk Chelsea? Had she gotten herself into trouble? Was that why she'd been in Gilbert's house?

He had no idea. But he was going to demand some answers soon.

He strode back to the truck.

As soon as Chelsea spotted him, she climbed out. Her eyes were wide and her motions tense as she hugged her arms across her chest. "Did you catch him?"

He shook his head, his neck muscles tight. "No. He had too much of a head start, and he had a car waiting on the road behind the woods."

Her face fell. "That's too bad. Who was he?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that." Then he glanced at the house. "We need to figure out what he was doing inside. You should wait here."

She grabbed his arm with both of her hands, flinching as her stitches hit his bicep. But she didn't let go. "I should go with you. If anything's out of place, you're not going to know."

She had a point. Tex didn't think anyone was inside. But still, he needed to be cautious.

“As long as you listen to me and stay behind me.”

“Whatever makes you happy,” she said.

Then she sucked in a breath as if she realized what she’d said.

Whatever makes you happy. That was what he’d always told her back in high school.

He’d meant the words. He would have moved heaven and earth to make her happy. The highlight of his day had been seeing her smile.

But those days were now gone, and he needed to remember that.

He grabbed a flashlight from his truck. The one on his phone could work in a pinch, but his Maglite was much stronger. Then he walked around the outside of the house, shining his flashlight on the ground as he searched for clues.

Chelsea still hung onto his arm, her fingers digging into his bicep. He didn’t complain.

In fact, it didn’t bother him at all.

He wanted her close so he could keep an eye on her.

He paused and shone his light on the back of the house. One of the windows was open. That was probably how that guy had gotten in—which was what Tex could only assume had happened.

“You leave that unlocked?” He gestured toward the window.

“Not usually.” Chelsea frowned as she stared at it. “However, I’m not saying I might

not have accidentally left that one unlocked. I mean, this area is pretty safe, and I try not to live in fear.”

“I can appreciate that. But tonight, I need you to check all your windows before you go to bed.”

The fear on her face indicated she would—and that she’d planned on doing that even before he gave her the order.

“You have your key, right?”

She plucked it from her purse. Tex took it from her trembling hands, and they walked to the back door.

It was unlocked.

“I didn’t leave it that way.” Her voice trembled as she said the words.

Tex pulled it open. Then he braced himself for whatever he might find inside.

Chelsea couldn’t stop trembling. Even though she chided herself for the reaction, the shakes kept coming.

Someone had been in her house. Had invaded her space.

Now, she felt violated.

What would someone have been doing in there? It didn’t make any sense.

As Tex entered the house, she continued to grip his bicep. She had no shame in it. Right now, all she cared about was her safety.

She stayed behind him as he stepped farther into the house. She had no idea what they might find. Part of her didn't want to know.

She didn't want her memories of this place to be stained with any painful or horrifying images.

Tex flipped on the lights, and the utility room came into view. It looked as she'd left it with the washer and dryer on her left and honey-oak cabinets above them.

Then they crept forward into a small hallway leading into the kitchen and dining room area.

Those rooms also looked fine.

She let out a sigh of relief. Maybe she was making this out to be more than it was. Maybe that man had started to go inside, but then he'd heard the truck pull up and changed his mind.

"Everything look good so far?" Tex muttered.

"So far, so good." Her voice sounded a little perkier than she'd intended.

But when they stepped into the living room, all her hopes disappeared like well-behaved students during a full moon.

The room had been turned upside down. Her Christmas tree lay on the floor, ornaments scattered and broken. Her bookshelf had been tipped over. Her couch cushions and pillows littered the floor. Anything she'd had hanging on the wall was now crooked, and one of her family pictures had even been smashed.

Someone had definitely been sending a message.

Chelsea frowned. She still wasn't sure what that message might be.

CHAPTER 7

Tex convinced Chelsea that she needed to call the police. He might be able to overlook the brick thrown into Gilbert's house. But he couldn't overlook this.

This break-in made someone look unhinged. And Tex didn't like it.

At the police's request, Tex and Chelsea waited outside while the cops checked out Chelsea's place and looked for fingerprints or other evidence.

As Chelsea and Tex lingered on the driveway, Gilbert appeared through the hedges. A petite woman walked beside him. She was probably in her sixties with light blonde—maybe white?—hair styled in a pixie cut.

"Are you okay?" Gilbert rushed, his brow wrinkled with concern. "We saw the police lights. What happened?"

"Someone broke into Chelsea's place," Tex explained.

The woman gasped, and her hand flew over her mouth. "That's terrible. Is everyone okay?"

"Thankfully, yes," Chelsea said. "And nothing appears to be stolen . . ."

"How strange," the woman murmured, her eyes wrinkling with confusion.

Gilbert must have seen Tex studying the woman and realized they hadn't been

introduced yet. He snapped into a more upright position.

“Excuse my manners,” Gilbert started. “Tex, this is Anna. Anna, Tex.”

“Nice to meet you.” Tex offered a friendly nod. “So you’re the one who captured this guy’s heart? Good for you.”

Anna squeezed Gilbert’s arm. “After my husband passed, I never thought I’d fall in love again. But what can I say? Gilbert was irresistible.”

That just went to prove there was someone out there for everyone.

After a moment passed, Tex shifted the conversation back to the break in.

Tex looked at Gilbert then nodded toward Chelsea’s house. “You didn’t see anything, did you?”

“Honestly?” Gilbert shook his head. “Anna and I were listening to Duran Duran when we saw the police lights flashing outside.”

If the situation had been different, Tex might smile. Gilbert, for all his flaws, had always loved Duran Duran. “Hungry like a Wolf” had been his favorite.

Gilbert looked at Chelsea. “I can’t help but think what happened at my place and yours could be connected. Things like this don’t usually happen around here. Maybe when someone threw that brick through my window, they really intended on throwing it through yours.” He paused. “Is there any reason you can think of that someone might do that?”

Chelsea swallowed hard as she rubbed her throat. She’d been shaking ever since she’d confirmed that someone had broken into her house. Tex wished he could

comfort her, that they had that kind of relationship. But they didn't.

"No, I have no known enemies." Her voice sounded strained as she said the words.

"Not even maybe a student that you've made mad?" Tex suggested.

Something swept through her gaze, but she tried to shrug it off. "Not really."

"Chelsea . . . you don't need to protect anybody."

She let out a breath. "I don't know . . ."

"You can trust me."

Her gaze darted toward him, underlying emotion lingering there. Then it disappeared as she closed her eyes and pressed her fist over her mouth.

The decision was clearly agonizing for her.

"There is this one student . . ." she finally started. "His name is DJ. He's really a good kid deep down inside, but he has a lot of issues going on at home. Sometimes he acts out because of those."

Tex gave her a knowing look. "Go on."

"Anyway, he's failing my class, and he came to me a couple of days ago, begging me to bring up his grade. Said he couldn't fail because then he'd be kicked off the football team and he might not even graduate. Said if that happened, his parents might kick him out too."

"Was he ever a good student?"

“That’s the thing. He was at the beginning of the semester. He claimed he was having headaches. I told him to get it checked out if it was interfering with schoolwork.”

“Did he?” Tex asked.

“I have no idea. But I felt for him. I really did. But I couldn’t change his grade just because he asked me to. He cussed at me and slammed the door when he left my room.”

Tex’s jaw tightened. “We should definitely let the police know just so they can talk to the guy.”

She shook her head. “If the police go to question him, then his parents will be really mad. They might even kick him out—and he might not be guilty. In fact, he probably isn’t guilty. I don’t want to put him in that position.”

Chelsea had always been empathetic. Probably the same rationale she was using with this DJ guy was the rationale she’d used with Tex back when they’d been friends.

She was always trying to see the good in people.

Tex was afraid that one day that very attribute he admired might be her downfall. He didn’t want to see her get hurt.

“Do you guys need anything?” Gilbert pointed at his house. “You can come to my place and wait while the police check this out if you want. It’s a lot warmer, and I could even heat some apple cider.”

“I’d rather stay close,” Chelsea said. “I want to hear what the police have to say. But thank you. I really appreciate the offer.”

“Of course. Do what you need to do.” Gilbert took a step back and placed a hand on his heart. “And if you need me, you know where to find me.”

He and Anna headed back through the yard to his house.

As he did, a police officer emerged from Chelsea’s front door. “We took some prints. We’ll need to compare them with yours. And you should let us know anyone else who’s been to visit over the past couple of days. We’d need to rule them out also.”

Tex listened closely, strangely curious to know if anyone else had been over. He could tell Patrick was interested in Chelsea, and that she wasn’t interested. But that didn’t mean Chelsea wasn’t seeing someone else.

“Honestly, it’s just been me this week,” Chelsea said. “School’s been out, and I’ve been trying to catch up on some things around the house, so I’ve mostly been staying home. Alone.”

“Very well. So, you said you didn’t notice anything was stolen?”

She shook her head. “I don’t really have anything of value that anyone would want to steal. But no, I didn’t see anything missing.”

“I didn’t see any security cameras out here. Is that correct?”

She nodded. “I keep thinking about getting them, but I haven’t done it yet. I usually feel so safe.”

“Anybody you can think of who might have done this?”

Tex waited, curious as to what she might say. This was her call, not his. Would she mention DJ?

After a moment of thought, she shook her head. “No, I don’t know of anyone.”

The officer put the notepad back into his pocket and took a step back. “We’ll see what we can do. But in cases like these, it’s often hard to track down the perpetrators. Make sure you check all your doors and windows tonight. Maybe even think about getting a dog.” He glanced at Tex. “Or a boyfriend.”

Tex slid his gaze toward Chelsea in time to see her cheeks redden. Even if she did have a boyfriend, she wasn’t the type to let him stay overnight. Unless something had changed with her in the years since she and Tex had been close.

He didn’t think that was the case.

“If you think of anything else, let me know.” The officer nodded at them. “In the meantime, I’ll be in touch.”

As he left, Tex turned toward Chelsea on the porch. The light from the small bulb beside the door illuminated her gorgeous face.

The sight of it made his throat go dry.

He cleared his throat as he tried to shift his thoughts. “You doing okay? If you don’t want to go back inside tonight and want to find somewhere else to stay, no one would blame you.”

“No.” She shook her head, her adorable chin jutting out. “I want to stay here.”

“Do you mind if I go inside with you and help you clean up some?”

She hesitated again. For a moment, Tex was certain she’d say no.

Then she nodded. “Yes, I’d love some help if you don’t mind.”

Chelsea should have told Tex to go home. Why hadn’t she?

But she knew the truth. Though he was dangerous for her heart, she didn’t want to go back inside her house alone. She welcomed the company, especially when that company was a big, strapping man who would scare away any intruders that might decide to come back.

Plus, she was still curious about him. She was kicking herself, however, for feeling the emotion. She didn’t want to be curious. But she was. She wanted to know more about the past twelve years of Tex’s life.

She hesitated before opening her front door and pushing herself inside. The sight of her destroyed living room made her stomach clench.

“How could someone do this?” She had meant it when she said she didn’t know who would want to cause her harm.

She really didn’t think DJ was responsible. She couldn’t throw him under the bus for no reason.

“Good question.” Then Tex quietly added, “I plan on finding out.”

Had she heard him correctly? Or had she just imagined those words?

She frowned as she said, “I don’t even know where to start.”

Tex glanced around. “It looks like the bookcase made the biggest mess. Why don’t we start there?”

“Good idea.”

On the way over, he reached down and carefully put the Christmas tree back on its stand. Numerous ornaments lay scattered on the floor. He picked several up and put them back on the evergreen branches.

Chelsea met him at the bookshelf, and they pushed the furniture upright. Then they began to put the books and trinkets—the ones that weren’t broken—back in place.

“Any particular order you want to keep these in?” Tex asked.

She shook her head. “I can worry about that later. For now, I just want to get everything put away.”

“Very well then.”

They worked in silence for several moments.

Then Tex paused and held something up.

It was a dogwood flower that had been pressed between the pages of her favorite book.

Her cheeks heated.

“Is this . . . ?” he started.

She licked her lips, not liking the uncomfortable feeling in her chest. “If you’re asking if it’s the flower you gave me when we took that hike to the lake, it is.”

It had been a wonderful day. A perfect day, for that matter.

It had been the first time Tex had kissed her.

“You kept it.” He stared at her another moment.

She laughed it off, took it from his hands, and put it on the shelf.

Quickly, she said, “I forgot it was even there.”

He stared at her another moment before finally placing more books on the shelf.

Once they had everything back, Tex looked at her, and Chelsea knew there was something else on his mind. Hopefully not the flower.

She didn’t want to tell him it had been one of the best days of her life.

She totally knew the flower was there. She just couldn’t admit it.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” Tex asked. “I’ve been sitting here playing dumb, acting like I believe every word you’re saying. But I know the story you’re telling me isn’t true. Whatever’s happening, I can’t help but think that you’re in over your head.”

Chelsea raked a hand through her hair as she considered her response. At this point, she was beyond the point of wondering if she could trust Tex or not. He was already deep in this with her. And she didn’t think he had anything to do with what had happened, although it had all started after he arrived in town.

Was that a coincidence?

She licked her lips before asking, “Can I trust you?”

“Of course, you can trust me.” Tex’s words came out fast, like the answer was a no-brainer.

She sighed. Raked her hand through her hair again. Then she leaned back on her legs and turned to him.

“I think Gilbert has been up to something,” she admitted. “I didn’t mean to spy on him. But he does live next door. I’ve seen some things that have made me uncomfortable. But just like with DJ, I don’t want to accuse anyone of something illegal before I have some proof that they’re actually doing something wrong.”

“That’s why you were in Gilbert’s office today?”

She nodded, a wave of guilt hitting her. She’d never broken into someone’s home before. But it was the only way she could think of to find answers.

Tex’s jaw tightened as he nodded. “Why don’t you tell me what you think is going on? Or what you’ve seen. Maybe I can help you sort through it.”

CHAPTER 8

Tex patiently waited for Chelsea to start. Hesitation stretched over her features. From the way she kept licking her lips. To how her gaze darted all over the place. To how she kept tucking her hair behind her ear.

Finally, she let out a sigh and glanced at him as they sat on the floor together. Her legs were crossed, her fuzzy red-and-green Christmas socks looking warm and cozy. Meanwhile, Tex leaned against the couch, his arms propped on his knees.

“The truth is that I’ve suspected something is going on with Gilbert for a while,” she started. “It’s no secret I’m not the man’s biggest fan. But cars have been coming to his house late at night. I’ve seen him meeting with a man dressed in all black on his porch. Their conversations looked heated. One night I thought it was going to turn into a physical altercation.”

Tex nodded slowly, trying not to jump to any conclusions. “I know that might be suspicious, but Gilbert could have an explanation for it.”

“I know.” Chelsea raised her hand as if to stop his thoughts. “Believe me, I’ve tried to think of this from every possible angle. But a conversation I overheard the other day really confirmed to me that something was going on.”

Tex shifted back, settling in to listen. “Tell me what you heard.”

“I was cutting some evergreen branches from my trees outside so I could decorate for Christmas.” She pointed to the greenery that had once been on her fireplace but now

lay like a garland corpse on her floor. “I don’t think he saw me there. In fact, I’m sure he didn’t know I was there. At least not at first. I thought about announcing my presence. But . . . well, I guess you’ll understand why I didn’t when I tell you the rest.”

She paused again and licked her lips.

Tex waited for her to continue. He could see this was hard for her.

Finally, she drew in a deep breath and started again. “I didn’t see the face of the man he was meeting with. And I didn’t necessarily recognize the voice except that maybe the guy sounded younger. When I say younger, I’m not sure if he was a teen or in his twenties. It was hard to tell.”

Did she suspect it was one of her students? He kept the question silent for now.

“What were they talking about?” Tex asked instead.

“They were arguing about something. I heard Gilbert say, ‘I don’t know what else to tell you.’ Then the man with him said, ‘I can’t keep doing this.’ Gilbert replied with, ‘You don’t have much choice.’”

“So what do you think that means?” Tex asked.

“I only have assumptions, but no proof.” She hesitated.

“You can tell me your theories.” He could see that Chelsea didn’t want to start trouble, didn’t want her guesses to be incorrect. “I’ll listen with caution.”

She nodded as if his words had appeased her. “A lot is riding on the success of the school’s football team. It’s important that they win the championships again. I know

some parents are banking on their kids getting football scholarships to pay for college. It has to place a lot of pressure on Gilbert.”

“So you think he’s doping them?” Tex cut right to the chase and filled in the blanks.

Chelsea opened her mouth. Closed it. Then she shook her head as if in an internal battle with herself. “I know the team lost the first couple of games they played this year. After that, they had a wild turnaround and won every game. The whole town was so ecstatic that they literally threw the football team a parade.”

Tex’s eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t know people got that excited over high school football these days. It wasn’t like that when I played on the team.”

“I didn’t know either.”

He continued to sort through what Chelsea had told him. “But football season’s over. Why would Gilbert still be doing these deals?”

“You know how it goes with drugs. You open the door to one, and people want more.”

“But if any football players are caught doing drugs, then they’ll be kicked off the team.”

She shrugged. “In theory. Unless there are people involved willing to turn a blind eye to what’s going on.”

He frowned at the thought. “That’s possible, I suppose.”

“I can only imagine that Gilbert is feeling panicked anyway,” she continued. “One of his star players got into a fight with a cop, of all people. He was kicked out of school.

Everyone was in shock.”

“I bet. Too much testosterone, huh?”

“I guess.” Chelsea shrugged. “I told you it doesn’t make a lot of sense. I just have a feeling Gilbert is up to no good, and I’m afraid someone is going to get hurt. If it was only Gilbert putting himself in danger, that would be one thing. But if he’s somehow messing up the lives of high schoolers who have their whole futures in front of them, then I feel compelled to do something.”

Her motives were righteous. But Tex still didn’t like the position she was in. “You shouldn’t sneak into his house.”

Her expression tightened. “I know.”

He imagined what Gilbert might do if he really was doing something illegal and he caught Chelsea in his house. Tex didn’t want to think about the repercussions Chelsea might face. Even so, anger burned in him at the thought of anything happening to her.

“What should I do?” Chelsea looked up at him with wide eyes. “I can’t go to the police with this information. It’s all speculation. But I don’t want to sit back and watch this happen either, especially if my suspicions are correct.”

Tex didn’t say anything a moment. He wanted to give her advice. But it needed to be the right advice.

For that reason, he lifted a prayer before he opened his mouth. He was going to need some divine wisdom with this one.

Chelsea stared at Tex, curious about what he’d say.

The thing was, even after everything that had happened between them, she still trusted his counsel. Even though she hadn't seen him in twelve years and couldn't begin to imagine what he might have gone through in that timespan.

His eyes appeared haunted, proving that his military experience and everything he'd been through hadn't been easy.

Plus, she'd seen a scar on the side of his neck earlier. There were more on the top of his arms.

She wanted to ask questions about them, but she didn't. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Maybe it wasn't her business.

"Let me see what I can do," Tex finally said. "I'm staying with Gilbert for the next few days. Maybe I can find out something for you."

Concern raced through her gaze. "I don't want to put you in that position."

"You aren't. I asked you what was going on. I'm putting myself in this position."

She nibbled on her lip a moment before saying, "Tex . . . if any of my theories are true, then I have no doubt about the lengths Gilbert will go to keep his secrets silent."

"I get that. But I can do this."

She still stared at Tex, wondering if his words were true. Would he help her? But what if he was hurt in the process?

"Chelsea . . . I worked Black Ops for the military. I can handle Gilbert."

Her eyebrows shot up at his words. "Black Ops?"

He nodded. "I don't tell many people that, but I know I can trust you not to say anything."

Her heart caught in her throat. "That sounds dangerous."

"You could definitely say my job was dangerous."

"Is that how you got this?" She touched the scar on his forearm, tracing it with her finger.

Tex quickly pulled away and tugged his shirt sleeve down.

"I'm sorry." She'd crossed a boundary she hadn't intended on even tiptoeing toward.

What had she been thinking? The action had been instinctive, natural. For her, at least.

Clearly not for Tex.

Before any other words could leave her lips, he stood. "I should get back."

Great. Chelsea had scared him away. Maybe it was better this way, however.

He paused. "But I really hate to leave you here alone."

"Don't worry about me. I'll make sure I lock up. I think someone just wanted to scare me. Unfortunately, it worked."

"Put my number in your cell phone." He paused as if realizing how bossy he sounded. "Please."

She pulled out her cell and as he rattled off the digits, she typed them in.

“Call me if you need anything. Anything at all. It won’t be a bother to me.” He locked gazes with her.

“Thank you, but I should be fine.”

At least, Chelsea prayed that was the case.

CHAPTER 9

Guilt pressed on Tex.

He shouldn't leave. Yet he couldn't stay either.

Because as soon as Chelsea had touched his arm and electricity had zapped through his blood, Tex had been sent reeling back in time.

Back to when he had to leave town.

It had been one of the hardest days of his life. He'd known if he had to tell Chelsea goodbye, that he wouldn't leave. That he'd stay in this area for as long as Chelsea wanted. That he'd do whatever it took to make her happy.

But that wasn't a good plan.

He needed to get away from Gilbert. He needed to figure out a way to support himself. To find a respectable job.

That was why, when he'd been approached about enlisting, he'd said yes.

He knew that wasn't the traditional method used when the military recruited people. At the time, he'd found it odd that they'd come to him and asked him to join. But on the other hand, it had been a relief. He'd felt honored.

Little did he know at the time exactly what the military had in store for him. He'd had

no clue about the experiments they wanted to put him through to make him into a super soldier of sorts. They'd even gone as far as to implant devices in his body, devices he'd only recently had removed.

He was still trying to comprehend all of it.

He took one last glance back at Chelsea's house. Saw her in the kitchen window waving to him.

A pang shot through his heart.

Chelsea was one special girl. Too special for him. He was too messed up, and Tex had always known it.

Maybe another part of him had wanted to go to the military just so he could make himself into someone worthy of someone like Chelsea. But after what he'd been through, he wasn't sure that would ever be possible. Maybe he'd come out even more messed up than he'd been when he'd left.

He made his way to Gilbert's house. He went to the back door, which Gilbert had left unlocked for him.

After stepping inside, he paused and glanced around.

He halfway expected to see Gilbert sitting at the kitchen table having a late-night snack. He used to eat Golden Stuffed Oreos with a tall glass of milk there after games.

But everything was quiet around him. It was quite the change from when Tex had lived here as a foster kid.

Back then, there'd always been something going on in the house. Though Gilbert liked order, sitting around in their rooms wasn't an option. All the guys had helped around the house. When they were done with their chores, they were expected to be outside tossing around a football or taking a jog or doing something constructive.

Gilbert had pushed too hard at times, however. He'd been harsh with them. Insulted them if they failed his expectations. He'd never given them time to rest.

Tex saw a piece of paper on the kitchen table and picked it up.

It was a note from Gilbert.

I've gone to bed. Help yourself to anything in the fridge. You can stay in your old room. I changed the sheets so they're clean. If you need anything, let me know. Otherwise, I'll see you in the morning.

It was signed simply with a G at the bottom.

Tex glanced at the time. It was just past midnight.

If Gilbert were sleeping, was this the opportunity Tex needed to snoop in the man's office? This might be one of his only opportunities to do so since Gilbert was now home for Christmas break.

That settled it. If Tex was going to do this, he needed to do it now.

He stepped from the kitchen, through the hallway and into the living room. He paused on the area rug in front of the couch and stared at the door to the office. It was closed.

Tex could easily slip inside. He knew how to be quiet, knew he could look through the files and see if anything was there that could give him a hint about what was

going on.

But even if Gilbert was doping the kids on the football team, that didn't mean there would be any proof of it in the office. Gilbert was too smart to keep receipts—not that drug dealers offered them.

Still, what did Tex expect to find?

He needed to figure out what to do before the opportunity passed.

Chelsea had tried to sleep but couldn't. She had too much on her mind, and her adrenaline was still pumping after the break-in.

Though she'd assured Tex she'd be fine here, she felt anything but fine. If someone had been able to get in before then they could get in again. It didn't matter that she'd checked all the windows and doors three times.

She'd read her Bible, and she'd prayed. That had helped some. It always did.

But she was wired.

She was about to get up and check the locks for the fourth time just to try to soothe her anxious thoughts.

Finally, she got out of her bed and padded through the house. She walked to her kitchen and shoved the curtain aside to look out the window at Gilbert's house.

The lights were all out, at least on the side of the house facing her.

What was Tex doing inside? Were he and Gilbert catching up like old friends? The thought made her stomach churn.

But she couldn't see Tex doing that. He wasn't the type to put on a facade for people. She'd always liked that about him. Though Tex's rough edges had bothered him, they'd never bothered her.

Her parents, however, had been a different story. She was nearly certain they'd been happy when he'd left. They'd hoped she'd find someone with a background more like hers—stable and loving.

A few years ago, they admitted to her that they'd been wrong.

She figured they said that because she was still single. Her mom desperately wanted grandkids. Maybe their only chance of having grandkids had left when Tex did.

Both her mom and dad had changed a lot after her mom had been diagnosed and then overcome cancer. Their perspectives on many things had been altered.

What would they think if they saw Tex now?

She was fairly certain they would let her make her own decisions without trying to influence her.

Just then, a buzz sounded. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

She let out a breath when she realized it was just her phone. Someone was calling her.

She nearly laughed at the jump scare.

Except it was after midnight. Why was someone calling her so late?

When she saw the number on her screen, she knew why.

She swallowed the lump in her throat as she answered.

Chelsea hoped this person wasn't calling for the reason she assumed.

But she was about to find out.

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CHAPTER 10

Tex stepped closer to the office door.

He should go inside now while he had the opportunity. Though he might not find anything, maybe he would. Maybe this didn't all go back to doping those athletes after all. Maybe Gilbert was up to something else.

But just as his hand gripped the office door, movement out the side window caught his eye.

A car went by on the street.

He'd recognize that pale-yellow Volkswagen Bug anywhere.

Chelsea.

Where would she be going at this hour? And why hadn't she told him she was leaving?

Unless something was wrong.

That had to be it.

Tex abandoned the office and grabbed his keys from his pocket. He hurried outside to his truck. If he left now, he could follow her.

Was he overstepping by doing this? Maybe.

But he couldn't help but think Chelsea was in trouble.

He eased onto the road, keeping his headlights off so he wouldn't attract any attention.

Then he turned after her, only flipping his lights on once he merged onto the highway cutting through town.

It took several minutes, but he finally spotted Chelsea's Volkswagen Bug ahead. He kept a safe distance behind her so she wouldn't know she was being followed and freak out.

He glanced over as he drove and saw a Christmas star shining brightly from the top of the nearby mountains. It was the Mill Mountain Star, lit year-round and an icon in the area. Seeing it brought him a rush of memories.

Several minutes later, Chelsea turned off the road. Tex followed her as she wound through a neighborhood and stopped near a park.

He pulled to the curb the next block over so he wouldn't be spotted.

Then he watched as Chelsea parked, climbed out, and glanced around as if skittish.

What was going on? Why was she here right now?

A moment later, she took off in a fast walk down the sidewalk.

Tex waited until she rounded the corner, then he climbed out also. He needed to catch up with her, just in case something was wrong.

Before he reached the corner, he paused and ducked into the nearby woods, careful with each step and motion.

He didn't want Chelsea or anyone else to know he was here. Not yet.

He peered from behind a tree. From his position, he could see Chelsea standing on the sidewalk, her arms crossed over her chest as if she tried to stay warm.

She appeared to be waiting for someone. But who? And why at this hour? In this location?

A moment later, a figure strode toward her.

Tex tensed. Who was that?

He waited, not wanting to act too soon.

A man appeared. He wore all black and had a baseball cap pulled low over his head.

Chelsea didn't touch him. Didn't offer a hug.

Instead, she handed him something in an envelope.

Whatever it was, the man slipped it into his back pocket.

The two of them talked several minutes before pausing. The man touched her arm before turning and jogging away.

What had that been about? Tex wondered.

If the meeting was on the up-and-up, then why was Chelsea meeting this man so late

at night? And in such a secluded location?

Tex didn't know. But unease jostled inside him at the possibilities racing through his mind . . . none of which were good.

Chelsea heard a stick crack from inside the woods.

Goosebumps popped across her skin. Was someone watching her?

She glanced around, searching for any signs of trouble.

But it was too dark to see anything.

Maybe it had been a bad idea to come out here. Especially after that break-in. She was so isolated here.

What if she was in danger?

She quickened her steps as she headed back to her car. She didn't want to break into a run, but she would if she had to. Once she was there, she'd feel better. But right now, she only felt exposed.

Then she heard another stick crack, followed by rustling noises.

Suddenly, she knew with certainty that coming out here hadn't been a good idea.

Her fear wasn't just paranoia.

Someone was out there. Someone who was watching her.

Oh, God . . . help me!

She burst into a run. She couldn't get to her vehicle fast enough.

Get your keys out, she told herself. She couldn't waste any time once she reached her car.

She jerked them from the purse at her shoulder as she ran.

But her hands trembled so badly that she dropped them.

What? This was what people did on TV shows when they were being careless. Why was she dropping her keys now?

As she reached to pick them up, footsteps sounded behind her.

She looked up just as a man in black appeared. He came at her so fast she had no time to react.

He slammed into her. Threw her back against her Volkswagen. Pressed his arm against her throat.

The ski mask he wore over his face concealed his identity.

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into," he growled.

Fear shot through her as the air was cut off from her lungs.

She couldn't breathe. Panic filled her.

Was this man going to kill her?

"Hey!" a deep voice yelled in the distance.

Her attacker froze. Looked over. His eyes widened.

The next instant, he darted in the opposite direction of the other man.

Chelsea nearly sank onto the asphalt, her knees no longer able to hold her up.

Then she saw another figure running toward her.

Her heart rate climbed again.

Wait . . . was that . . . Tex?

Had he just come from the woods? What . . . ? How . . . ?

He paused and leaned down in front of her, touching her face as his concerned gaze assessed her. “Chelsea—are you okay?”

Chelsea nodded. At least, she thought she nodded. “Yes . . . I’m—I’m fine.”

“You sure?” His gaze pinned her down, forcing her to tell the truth.

“I’ll . . . I’ll be fine. I’m just shaken right now.”

His eyes darkened. “Get in the car and lock your doors.”

He helped her stand and slip inside. Waited until he heard the lock click.

Then he was gone. Chasing the person who’d just attacked her.

Her head spun.

What was going on in this town? And how had she ended up in the middle of it?

CHAPTER 11

Tex hadn't intended on revealing his presence, but he'd had no choice.

One minute he'd been watching Chelsea as she hurried back to her car. The next moment, that man had appeared out of nowhere.

The guy had moved so quickly it had taken Tex a moment to realize what was happening. To realize the man already had Chelsea pinned against her car.

Then Tex sprang into action.

He darted down the road in the direction the man had gone. But the guy had disappeared from sight.

A small suburban neighborhood surrounded them, full of houses built close together with street parking.

There were only so many places the man could go.

Tex slowed his steps to get a better look. He needed to be on guard.

Because Chelsea's attacker hadn't just disappeared into thin air. He was around here somewhere.

Tex paused in the middle of the road and glanced down the dark street in front of him. Two streetlights stretched above him, but one of them was dark. The sky was

cloudy, so the moon didn't offer illumination.

He soaked in all the details. It was a middle-class, blue-collar type of neighborhood. Lots of old trucks and even older sedans were parallel parked on either side of him.

That man could be behind any of them. Hiding. Just waiting to strike.

He slowly began to walk down the street, noting the Christmas lights on many houses and the large blow-up figures adorning lawns. Santa. Frosty. Reindeer.

It was a shame that danger had to dampen his spirits.

As he passed a truck, movement caught his eye.

The next instant, a man lunged toward him, trying to tackle him to the ground.

The attempt was a foolish one.

This guy clearly didn't know who he was dealing with.

Tex braced himself. As the guy flew into him, Tex was ready.

He stood firm, blocking the man's momentum.

The man's eyes widened in surprise when he bounced back as if he'd hit a wall.

He stumbled. Then he took off in a run.

Tex was on his heels.

As they reached the sidewalk, Tex grabbed him.

Threw him onto a nearby lawn dotted with Christmas decorations.

Plastic crunched beneath the man's body as a string of colorful Christmas lights broke.

"What do you think you're doing?" the man grumbled as he scrambled to his feet.

"I'm stopping you," Tex muttered.

The man raised his fists in an awkward attempt at self-defense.

Tex faced him, wishing this guy would just give up.

"Leave me alone," he muttered.

Those weren't exactly the words of a tough guy.

"You just hurt someone I care about," Tex told him. "That's not okay. Why don't you take off your mask?"

The man didn't say anything.

Tex shrugged. It wasn't as if he'd expected the guy to listen. "Have it your way. I'll take it off myself."

But the next instant, the guy turned to flee again. And ran straight into a giant inflated Santa, knocking the figure over.

Before Tex could reach him, the man released Santa—and Santa bopped Tex in the face.

“What the . . . ?” Tex pushed the half-deflated Santa away.

He started to go after the man when he heard a knocking sound. He paused long enough to look over at the house beside him.

A little girl, probably eight years old, had her face pressed to the window, watching everything.

Tension gripped his heart.

The last thing he wanted was for a child to witness Tex ripping into this guy—especially with a giant blow-up Santa between them.

He looked back at Chelsea’s attacker.

But he’d already jumped into a car down the street—a car that looked very much like the one that had been nearby when Chelsea’s house was broken into tonight.

He fisted his hands.

That guy wouldn’t have gotten away if it hadn’t been for the girl in the window.

Next time, Tex would be more careful.

But right now, he needed to check on Chelsea.

Chelsea kept her gaze trained behind her as she waited for Tex to return.

Too much time had passed. What was taking him so long? What if he was hurt?

Maybe she should start her car. Head in the direction he’d gone. Maybe she should

find him. Help him.

At once, an image of him lying in the road injured by her attacker filled her mind. She could hardly stomach the thought.

But what if Tex came back looking for her and she was gone?

The dilemma tugged inside her.

Five more minutes, Chelsea decided. That was how long she'd wait until she'd go check on him. It was the least she could do, especially since he'd put his well-being on the line for her.

But what was he doing out here anyway? Had he followed her?

She nibbled on her bottom lip. She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

The minutes crawled by. Finally, a dark figure appeared down the street.

Her breath caught.

Was that Tex? Or was it the man who'd attacked her?

Her throat tightened until she could hardly breathe.

The shadow came closer. Closer.

She gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white. Should she drive away? Flee from potential danger?

She pressed the brakes, then shifted the car into Drive.

If she had to, she'd press the accelerator and get away.

Then the man's features came into view.

It was Tex.

Relief swept through her. He was okay.

He tapped on her passenger door, and Chelsea hit the button to unlock it. As Tex folded himself inside, she threw the car back into Park.

Before she could talk, Tex rushed with, "Are you sure you're okay? Did he hurt you? Do I need to get you to the hospital?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

He studied her as if he were a human lie detector who could spot the truth.

Chelsea cringed and touched her neck where the man had pressed his arm into her windpipe.

She wasn't sure if her skin would bruise or not. But his touch had definitely left an emotional scar on her.

"I'm fine. Really." She paused and studied Tex's face.

He still didn't appear to believe her.

"He could have killed you," he finally said.

"Thankfully, you were close."

“But what if I hadn’t been?”

All the fluid left her face again. “But you were. By the way, what were you doing here?”

“What were you doing here?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip, not sure she was ready for Tex to turn the tables on her.

“You followed me, didn’t you?” she countered. “Why would you follow me?”

He frowned but kept his eye contact with her. “I was afraid you were in trouble, especially after the break-in earlier. I just needed to know you were okay. Right now, I’m glad I decided to follow you. It could have been ugly.” Tex paused. “What’s going on? Chelsea? Don’t push me out. Not now.”

She pressed her eyes shut, wishing she didn’t have to dive into this with him. But he had saved her. It seemed like the least she could do was to offer an explanation.

“Ryan needed my help,” she stated. “So I came out here to meet him.”

“Who is Ryan?”

“He’s one of my cousins. He didn’t live here when you did. His family moved back this way probably four years after you left.”

“And why did you need to meet him so late at night? Why out here?”

She licked her lips. “He’s been having trouble making ends meet, and he and his wife have a newborn baby at home. I like to help him out when I can.”

Tex continued to stare at her. “That still doesn’t explain the secrecy of it all.”

Chelsea pushed out a long breath. “His wife doesn’t approve of handouts—and I respect that. But they’re having trouble keeping their heat on. I can’t let Regina’s pride put the baby in harm’s way. So I slip him some money whenever I can.”

Tex said nothing.

“He works,” she continued explaining herself. “At a factory in Roanoke, and he doesn’t get off until midnight. That’s why we were meeting at this hour.”

“And the location?”

“It’s on his way home, so it’s not going to look funny if his wife checks his location online.” She frowned. “Part of me hates to be sneaky. But if I can help them, then I want to.”

“That’s admirable of you. But considering everything that’s happened, you shouldn’t have come out here alone. I would have come with you if you’d asked.”

“I can’t get used to depending on you. You won’t be here long before you leave me again.” Chelsea swallowed hard after the words left her lips.

She hadn’t meant to say it like that. But she knew her statement went much deeper than today.

It went back twelve years.

“Chelsea . . .” His voice sounded hoarse with emotion.

She feared Tex might say something in an effort to make the situation better. But

there was no making the situation better, and the last thing she wanted was to hear his excuses.

“I’m sorry.” She pushed a stray hair behind her ear. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m just feeling all out of sorts right now.”

“You can talk to me, you know.”

The way he said those words made Chelsea want to believe him. But she’d be wise not to do that. “I should probably get back.”

“I’ll follow you home, just to make sure there’s no more trouble.”

She knew that arguing with Tex would be useless. So she nodded. “Okay.”

“When we get there, I’m going to walk you inside again and make sure that everything is okay. There’s no other option.”

“Okay,” she said again, a touch of relief in her voice.

Tex looked almost surprised she’d been so compliant. With one last long glance at her, he climbed out. He strode down the street to his own truck.

Why hadn’t she seen the vehicle there? She thought she’d been observant when she drove out this way. But maybe she wasn’t as street smart as she wanted to believe.

She put her car into Drive and took a U-turn on the street. She headed back to her little house, one that suddenly didn’t feel quite as safe as it once had.

Today had certainly been unexpected.

Part of her didn't even want to know what tomorrow held.

CHAPTER 12

Tex didn't want to feel angry. But if he were honest with himself, that was the exact emotion pulsing through his blood.

Anger.

It wasn't even anger toward Chelsea. It was anger toward himself.

How would things be different right now if he hadn't gone so many years without keeping in touch? Maybe Chelsea wouldn't be in her current situation.

But the other part of him knew he'd been in a tough position during his military career. If he'd stayed in touch with Chelsea, there was a chance she wouldn't even like him anymore.

The truth was, he couldn't go back in time. He couldn't change anything.

He could only try to make things better right now.

He followed Chelsea home and pulled into the driveway behind her. If he could, he wouldn't let her out of his sight for even a moment until he knew she was safe.

She climbed out of her car, and he met her, taking her elbow, and leading her to the front door. Then he waited as she unlocked it.

He pushed inside and instructed her to wait by the door.

He went through every room and searched every place someone could hide.

There was no one. He found comfort in that thought—but he still couldn't relax.

First, he double-checked all the windows and doors for her to make sure they were locked.

He met her back in the living room. "Everything is safe. Please tell me you'll be in for the rest of the night."

She rubbed her throat, her face still pale from her earlier encounter. "I will be. I promise. I don't think I can handle anything else happening."

"And if you need me?—"

"I'll call," she reassured him.

He paused, more words playing on the tip of his tongue. Words he wasn't sure he should say aloud.

But maybe he needed to get them off his chest. "You know you could have been killed tonight."

She nodded slowly. "I guess God had His angels watching out for me."

Tex raised an eyebrow. "No one has ever called me an angel before."

She started to say something, but then just smiled up at him instead.

"I don't want to impose—I really don't—but I'd feel better if I stayed close," he told her. "How would you feel about me staying on your couch tonight?"

Chelsea didn't argue. "I'll get you a pillow and a blanket."

Chelsea couldn't believe it, but she'd actually gotten some sleep despite everything that had happened.

She knew it had everything to do with the fact Tex was sleeping on her couch.

He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

But she hoped and prayed that today wouldn't be like yesterday.

However, the only way she could see herself getting past this danger was if she found resolution on the Gilbert situation. It was the only thing that made sense.

Gilbert or one of his cronies must somehow know Chelsea was onto them.

Now someone affiliated with that messy situation was trying to silence her.

A shudder rippled through her at the thought.

How would she find any answers without getting herself killed?

She didn't know.

She got out of bed and took a little more care with her appearance than usual. Normally, she'd throw her hair into a ponytail and wear her pajamas while she retrieved her coffee from the kitchen.

But knowing Tex was out there, she brushed her hair and teeth. Put on some leggings and a red sweatshirt exclaiming "Merry." She even dabbed some concealer under her eyes.

Then she wandered into the living room.

To her surprise, Tex wasn't there. The blanket was neatly folded and stacked on top of the pillow on the couch.

She didn't want to feel disappointed, but she did.

Where had he gone?

Then she saw the paper on top of the pillow.

She gingerly picked it up and read the words.

Getting coffee with Patrick. I'm only a phone call away if you need me. Let's talk later, okay? I'll be in touch.

Chelsea glanced at the time. It was already 9:30. She supposed it made sense that he'd already be gone, especially if he had other things to do.

Now Chelsea needed to sit down, clear her head, and come up with a plan. She had to figure out a way to find the answers she needed. Her life depended on it—and probably the lives of some of her students as well.

She frowned and swiped a hand over the top of her head.

The person coming after her had left her no choice.

CHAPTER 13

Tex looked up as someone walked into the coffeehouse.

Patrick. He'd shown up just like he said he would. Tex wasn't sure why he'd been doubtful.

Tex had hated to leave Chelsea this morning, but when Patrick had texted and said he had some time to meet for coffee, Tex didn't want to miss the opportunity.

But he couldn't help but wonder if Chelsea was safe. If she were out of danger.

He'd never forgive himself if he left her alone and something happened to her. He prayed that wouldn't be the case.

Patrick slid into the booth across from him. "Morning."

"Morning." Tex pointed to the coffee in front of him. "I ordered you a black, just like you said you preferred."

Patrick smiled and took the cup. "Thank you. I appreciate that. I only have about thirty minutes before I've got to get back. Sorry to be so rushed."

"I'm just glad you could meet at all. I know you've got to be busy."

"We're definitely understaffed. General practitioners are becoming a thing of the past. Everybody wants to be a specialist nowadays so they can make more money."

“I can only imagine how difficult it must be for you to see and treat all your patients.”

“It can be a lot, but I love what I do.” Patrick paused and glanced at Tex, something shifting in his gaze. “You wanted to meet? Is everything okay?”

Tex tried to keep his voice casual. “I was hoping to catch up with you. It’s been a long time, and I wanted to see how things are going. It seems as if you’re doing well for yourself.”

“I can’t complain,” Patrick said. “I never thought I’d stay in this town. But here I am. I guess Holly Ridge is where I’m meant to be.”

“Do you ever talk to any of the guys we grew up with?”

“A few.” He shrugged. “You heard Pete Lawson is running for senate?”

“I did. He was always a smooth talker.”

Patrick chuckled. “Yes, he was. But I heard his campaign has run into some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I’m not sure. It’s all rumors, I suppose. But someone on a local news podcast said he was considering dropping out of the race.”

“That’s too bad,” Tex muttered. “What about Gilbert? From the way you talked yesterday, I have the impression the two of you aren’t in touch much.”

“We’re not.” He shrugged. “Maybe I should be grateful because he gave me a roof over my head and food in my stomach. But I resent my time in his home, to be honest.”

Tex tried to keep his expression neutral. “I know it wasn’t the best of times. Gilbert could be hard on us.”

“Everyone knows he just took in foster kids for the money—money he was supposed to spend on us but that he spent on himself instead. Fostering wasn’t something he did out of the goodness of his heart. I, for one, was relieved when he decided not to do anything with foster care anymore. It was time.”

Tex raised his eyebrows. Patrick’s words were strong. He’d obviously thought a lot about this.

“He does seem a bit more friendly now that he’s dating Anna.”

“Yes, tell me about Anna. Do you know her well?”

“Well? No. But she seems nice enough. Moved here about a year ago to work at the school.”

As much as he’d like to engage in small talk, he needed to get to the heart of the matter.

He shifted with his ceramic coffee mug in front of him before meeting Patrick’s gaze. “You seem like you’ve got it all together. But why do I feel like you’re not happy? You know I’ve always felt like you were a brother to me. If you need to talk, I’m here.”

Something flickered in Patrick’s gaze as if he were considering Tex’s words. But an edge of caution remained. “I’m fine. Just tired.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Back in school, Patrick had never been one of the cool kids. No, he'd been one of the smart ones. A mathlete, as they were now called.

Tex had become accustomed to taking up for him when other kids got rough with him. Tex wasn't exactly one of the "in crowd," but he'd been on the football team, and that had given him some social status.

"If you ever need to talk, I'm here," Tex finally said.

Patrick still hesitated but finally nodded. "I appreciate that. Everything hasn't been totally rosy."

"Is there anything I can help you with? I know I've been largely absent, but I'm trying to change that. I'm trying to do better. I'm now working here in the States, and I don't travel as much as I did."

Patrick still hesitated. Finally, he licked his lips and said, "Maybe you could give me some advice."

Tex's breath hitched, but he was careful to hide his excitement. "Sure. What do you need?"

Patrick leaned closer as if about to share a secret. "The truth is, there have been some things happening lately that?—"

Before he could finish the statement, his phone rang.

Disappointment ripped through Tex.

What had Patrick been about to say?

As much as Chelsea might want to stay inside with the doors locked where she could know she was safe, that wasn't an option. Whatever was going on wouldn't disappear on its own. She needed to figure out some answers if she ever wanted to live in peace again.

She gathered up all the courage she had inside her and opened her front door.

But everything outside was peaceful. The sky was cloudy. There were rumors around town that they might even get some snow. It would be the first for the year.

A memory of one particular snowfall hit her. It had taken place probably thirteen years ago.

It was after Tex had kissed her. When they'd been "dating," even though she wasn't officially allowed to date.

Tex had come over and they'd built a snowman together. Afterward, they'd had a snowball fight.

The day had ended with hot cocoa in front of the fireplace and making sugar cookies.

The sweet memory filled her with warmth.

Back then, she'd been sure that she and Tex would be together forever.

She'd been wrong.

Chelsea launched herself from the door toward her car, looking for any signs of trouble as she did. Reaching her VW, she quickly scanned the back seat before scrambling inside and locking the doors.

Her breathing was heavier than she wanted as she started the engine and turned the heat on.

Everything is okay, she reminded herself. No one is in the car with me. I'm going to be fine.

If only she believed those words. She had too many thoughts going through her head to let her guard down.

Several minutes later, she started down the road. She'd given the situation a lot of thought this morning, and she had a couple of possibilities on how she might start finding out some answers.

Her first stop would be at Holly Woods, a gift shop owned by a woman named Diane Woods in the downtown area of Holly Ridge.

Sofia Smith, the girlfriend of one of the school's football players, worked there. Sofia had always liked Chelsea, and Chelsea liked Sofia. The girl was also pretty chatty, the kind who couldn't keep a secret.

She seemed like Chelsea's best bet for finding out any information.

Several minutes later, Chelsea found a parking place on the street of the historic downtown area. Holiday flags hung from the streetlamps, and evergreen circled every pole in sight. A banner stretched across the street, welcoming everyone to town. Many of the storeowners had decorated their windows for Christmas, and on weekends in December carolers walked around town singing.

Holly Ridge really was a great place to live.

Usually.

Chelsea hurried inside the store.

She spotted Sofia right when she walked in, and relief swept through her. She hadn't been 100 percent sure the girl would be working today, but she suspected she would be.

Sofia was petite with long, dark hair and a quick, easy smile. She seemed to dance everywhere she went, almost like a Disney princess might.

Chelsea paced to a display of gourmet popcorn and waited for Sofia to finish helping another customer.

She was rewarded a few minutes later when Sofia spotted her and bounced toward her.

"Ms. Lennox. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I just thought I'd look for some last-minute gifts. I hear this caramel corn is really tasty."

Sofia's eyes widened. "Everyone loves it. I think it would make a great gift."

"Wonderful. I'll take two then."

She grinned. "I'd be more than happy to ring you up."

"So, how are you?" Chelsea started as they walked toward the register. "Anything new?"

The other employee was helping another customer, so this was a great time for Chelsea to talk to Sofia. She only hoped they had enough time.

Sofia shrugged, pausing before slipping around the corner. “I’m trying to work some extra shifts so I have money to buy everyone Christmas gifts. My mom says I’m old enough to use my own money this year.”

Chelsea nodded. “Sounds wise. And what is Alex up to today?”

Alex Moulton was the school’s star quarterback and a person of influence among his classmates. Chelsea, however, wasn’t sure if he used that influence for good or bad.

“He and his friends are doing some training,” Sofia said. “They’re trying to stay in shape so when football season starts up, they’ll be ready to win the state championship again.”

“I have to say, I don’t know a lot about football, but the team was pretty impressive this year.”

“They were thrilled to do so well. Alex really hopes he’ll be recruited for a D1 school. It’s his dream.”

Chelsea leaned against the counter and tried to sound casual as she asked, “Say, has Alex been okay lately? He hasn’t seemed like himself in class.”

Something raced through Sofia’s gaze, and Chelsea knew there was more to this.

“He hasn’t, has he?” Sofia admitted. “I’ve thought the same about him and some of his friends.”

“I’ve been a little concerned about the situation. Is something going on?” Chelsea held her breath as she waited to see if Sofia would talk.

Sofia twirled a strand of her hair as if contemplating how to respond. Then she

glanced at Chelsea and seemed to sense she could trust her because she nodded and said, “Honestly, I do think something is going on.”

“But you don’t know what?” She tried not to sound overeager as she asked the question.

Sofia glanced around before stepping closer. “I wish I knew. But Alex won’t open up to me.”

“Do you have ideas? Any guesses even?”

Sofia frowned and glanced around again. “I shouldn’t be saying any of this. You’re a teacher, and I don’t want to get Alex or anyone else in trouble. But at what point is it more important to help someone rather than worrying about if you’ll get them in trouble?”

“If the person’s life is on the line, that definitely takes priority over getting in trouble.”

Sofia blew out a breath. “You want to know the truth?”

Chelsea’s lungs froze. Yes, that was exactly what she wanted to know. But she didn’t want to look too anxious either. “You know you can talk to me at any time, Sofia. I only want to help.”

She glanced around again. “I’ve got to wonder if the football team is doping.”

Chelsea blanched as if she were surprised.

The truth was, even though Chelsea had suspected something like this might be going on, hearing it out loud still felt shocking.

She swallowed hard before calmly asking, “Why do you think that?”

“I’ve overheard some of their conversations.”

“Well, if that’s what’s really going on, then who are they getting these drugs from?”
Chelsea waited, anticipating that Sofia would say Gilbert.

But the girl nibbled on her lip. Then she said, “I’m pretty sure they’re getting them from Dr. Day.”

CHAPTER 14

Whatever Patrick had been about to share with Tex, the moment had passed.

After the interruption, Patrick had quickly finished his coffee and then stood. “Well, I’ve got to get back to work. I’m sorry to cut this short. But maybe if you have time while you’re in town we can get together again.”

Tex forced a smile, suspecting that wouldn’t happen. Despite that, he said, “That would be great.”

“I’ll text you.” Patrick gave him a nod. “And thanks for the coffee.”

Then, just as quickly as their meeting had started, it ended.

Tex downed the last sip of his own coffee and stood. At least he could get back to check on Chelsea now.

When he left the coffeehouse, surprise washed through him when he saw her car parked across the street.

She’d come downtown also? Where might she be?

The VW Bug was parked in front of a gift store. On a whim, Tex jogged across the street and peered in the window.

He spotted Chelsea near the register. She took a gift bag from a clerk and stepped

back.

As she did, she glanced up as if she sensed someone looking at her. When Tex saw the fear cross her face, he instantly regretted it. He hadn't meant to scare her.

A moment later, she met him outside, a look of confusion on her face. "Tex . . . I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Same here. I saw your car and decided to see if you were close." Tex paused. "How are you doing today?"

"I heard something." Chelsea glanced around. "Are you hungry? Maybe we can grab a bite to eat and talk."

The thought of doing so thrilled him entirely more than it should. "That sounds perfect."

They walked inside the Ridge Runner Café, and the scent of bacon greeted them. He hadn't thought he was hungry, but now that the tantalizing scents of fries and toasted bread floated around him like the spirit of Christmas temptation, all he wanted was to eat.

They were seated at a corner booth, and a friendly waitress named Debbie waited on them. He ordered a club sandwich with candied bacon, and Chelsea got a winter salad with cranberries and grilled chicken.

Once the waitress disappeared and as they waited for their food, Chelsea turned to him. "Well? Do you want to go first or shall I?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have that much to share. Patrick was just about to open up to me when he got a phone call from work. They needed him back in the office."

Chelsea frowned. “That’s too bad.”

“Tell me about it. Did you have more luck?”

“Maybe. I talked to the girlfriend of one of the football players. She suspects the team is doping and that they’re getting their drugs from Dr. Day.”

Tex raised his eyebrows. “I wondered about that possibility, but I hoped it wasn’t true. But we can’t prove it, and I doubt anyone on the football team will own up to it.”

Chelsea nibbled on her bottom lip. “Maybe. I’ve been thinking about it since my talk with Sofia. There is one kid on the football team who doesn’t tend to fit in. Every time I see him, I think he looks guilty—like maybe he knows what’s going on, but his conscience is bothering him. I wonder if I could get him to talk.”

He leaned closer. “You know what the stakes are, don’t you? There are people willing to kill to keep this quiet. If this is the conversation you overheard and someone now feels threatened, then that explains why someone broke into your home then later attacked you. I don’t think you should keep pushing this, Chelsea.”

Tex was honestly concerned about her.

He wasn’t sure if Chelsea would argue. If she’d insist she could defend herself.

But her gaze remained soft. “I know. I don’t want to get in over my head either. But I can’t look away. I have to do something. One way or another, this is going to end, and I don’t want it to be with me hurt. But I also don’t want it to be with one of my students being hurt.”

“I can see that.”

She raised her palms up in the air. “So what am I supposed to do?”

Before Tex could answer, their food was delivered. The sandwich and fries looked just as scrumptious as he’d imagined.

“Do you mind if I pray?” he asked.

Surprise—and approval—filled Chelsea’s gaze. “I would like that.”

He reached across the table for her hand, and Chelsea hesitated only a moment before slipping her fingers in his grasp.

He lifted up a prayer of thanks for the food and a prayer for wisdom as they tried to navigate this situation.

Half of him wanted to draw out the prayer a little longer just so he wouldn’t have to let go of her. But he didn’t do that. It wouldn’t be right.

However, as soon as he said amen and released her hand, he instantly missed the feel of her fingers in his. He lifted his sandwich and took the first bite. It was just as tasty as he’d hoped.

Before he could take his second bite, his phone buzzed. He glanced at it in curiosity.

When he saw the text message there, all the warm feelings he’d been feeling earlier disappeared like Santa on the day after Christmas.

Chelsea saw Tex’s face change as soon as he looked at his phone, and she knew something was wrong.

“Tex?” She put her fork down, kale and chicken still stabbed between the prongs.

Would he share? She wasn't sure. Tex had always been private. Had anything changed?

He frowned as he stared at the phone again, and then he lowered it onto the table. After a moment of thought, he lifted it again and showed her the message. "I just got this."

She read the words there.

I know what you did in Afghanistan. I'll tell everyone unless you do what I say.

"Someone's trying to blackmail you?" Her question came out louder than she intended, and Tex leaned forward and shushed her.

"That's what it appears."

"Who would do that?" she whispered.

His expression tightened. "I've made a lot of enemies in my day. A lot."

"What does this person want you to do?"

Tex glanced at the screen again and frowned. "I'm not sure yet. I'm assuming he'll send a follow-up message to let me know."

Chelsea stared at him another moment, and then what was perhaps the most important question of all hit her. "Tex . . . what did you do in Afghanistan?"

As soon as she asked the question, she regretted it. She wished she could take it back. Because Tex's whole face tightened, and his body tensed.

“It’s complicated.”

“I can understand complicated.” She didn’t know if she should push or not. It probably wasn’t her business. But now that the information was out there, she wanted to know.

“Let’s just say some of my missions required me to make some morally gray decisions,” Tex finally said. “At times it came down to saving the life of the men I worked with or taking out a bad guy. One decision. Two very different outcomes. And it was never an easy choice to make. But there was never a doubt in my mind that I had to protect my team members above all else.”

Chelsea’s heart ached. She could only imagine how tough those choices had been. Taking another life—even if it was that of an enemy—should never be taken lightly. It made her respect Tex more to know that he struggled with the decisions he had to make during the unofficial war he’d been fighting overseas.

“I’m sorry you had to do all that,” she finally said, picking at the rest of her lunch.

“It was my job. We were trained to do what we were told. Looking back, there were things I would have changed knowing then what I know now. My colleagues and I became something similar to robots to the people in charge of us. I do regret that, especially since I now know their motives weren’t always pure.”

“That’s got to be a hard pill to swallow. But it sounds like you’re in a better place now.”

A stormy look passed through his gaze. “I am. But to be honest, Chelsea, I don’t really exist on paper. Sometimes I’m asked to do assignments I’m uncomfortable with. If things go wrong during those assignments, there’s no one who will take up for me. My boss likes me to be nameless and faceless. In other words, disposable.”

She wasn't expecting the tears to press on her eyes, but they did. But she tried to pull them back, to not show Tex how much his words had affected her. Most guys didn't want people feeling sorry for them.

And it wasn't that Chelsea felt sorry for Tex. It was entirely more complicated than that. She only wished she could take away some of his pain.

"It's been better lately," he continued. "We had some come-to-Jesus moments recently, and there have been a lot of changes. But I guess I'm still trying to find myself."

"You could walk away from your job, right? You're not locked in to working for this agency for the rest of your life, are you?"

"No, I'm not." He paused. "The guys on the team have become like family to me, I suppose. We've been through a lot together. And now that we've had some changes, now that leaders have been honest about several things, it's gotten better."

"I'm glad for that, at least."

She licked her lips and tried to find the right words. But before anything could pass over her tongue, horns blared outside. Brakes squealed. Someone screamed.

Then people began running toward the street as if something terrible had happened.

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CHAPTER 15

Tex jumped to his feet and ran outside. He pushed through the crowd until he saw what everyone was staring at.

Someone lay on the ground.

Not just someone. A teenage boy, probably sixteen or seventeen years old.

He clutched his heart before going deathly still.

Tex rushed toward him. Checked his pulse.

It was barely there.

Tex placed his hands on the boy's chest and began CPR.

After several compressions, he checked his breathing.

Barely there.

He checked his pulse again.

Still barely there.

He continued with the compressions.

Thankfully, someone called 911, and the ambulance arrived and EMTs took over within minutes.

Tex stepped back with the rest of the crowd and let them have space to do their job.

But something was wrong here.

Teenage boys shouldn't have sudden heart problems.

Chelsea wasn't sure if it was her place, but she wanted to go to the hospital. She needed to know if Mikey was going to be okay.

She wanted to talk to his family. To see if anything seemed odd lately.

Tex had insisted on going with her. On driving his truck.

Which was fine with her, because her hands were trembling so badly that she wasn't sure how focused she'd be on the road.

"Do you know him?" Tex asked quietly as they headed the short distance to the hospital.

"He's one of my students. Super nice kid."

"I know this can't be easy on you," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I tend to feel like each of the students I teach are my own. I only want the best for them."

"Hopefully, the doctors will have some answers."

But both of them knew what the most likely scenario was here.

This had to have something to do with what was going on with the football team.

They arrived at the hospital and hurried to the emergency room. Mikey was already in surgery.

Chelsea recognized one of the nurses behind the desk, and the woman ushered them over. “You’re here to see Lindsey?”

Chelsea nodded. “I am.”

“It’s usually only family in this waiting room, but she shouldn’t be alone right now.”

“No, she shouldn’t.”

“It’s the room on the left after you get past the doors.” She buzzed them through the locked doors.

Chelsea and Tex stepped into the dimly lit waiting room. Chelsea’s gaze went right away to Lindsey, Mikey’s mom.

The woman was a former classmate who’d gotten pregnant with Mikey at fifteen. She’d had to drop out of school and get her GED. She now worked at the hospital doing insurance claims, which was one of the reasons she’d been able to get here so quickly.

Though they were the same age, Lindsey had aged ten years in the past hour. Her eyes were red with purple circles beneath them. Her chin-length brown hair hung limply. Her skin was pale and blotchy.

“Chelsea . . .”

Without missing a beat, Chelsea pulled Lindsey into a long hug. “How’s Mikey doing?”

“I don’t know anything yet. I just know they’re doing surgery.” She sniffled. “I just don’t know what I’ll do if something happens to him. Christmas . . . it will never be the same.”

Another sob escaped, and Chelsea held Lindsey tighter.

When Lindsey pulled away, her gaze drifted behind Chelsea, and she blinked. “Tex?”

“It’s been a while.” He nodded stiffly. “I’m sorry about Mikey.”

Tex and Chelsea sat on either side of the devastated mom.

Lindsey wiped beneath her eyes with a crumpled tissue as she shook her head. “I knew something like this was going to happen.”

Chelsea stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“Something’s been going on with him. With that entire football team. Then I found some pills.”

Everything went still around her. “What kind of pills?”

“I’m not sure. Mikey said they weren’t his, but they were in a bag that had been stuffed between his mattress and box spring. He flushed them down the toilet before I could do more research and begged me to forget I’d seen them.”

“What else did he say?” Tex asked.

“Nothing. So I decided to question some other people at school. But whenever I speak up, I keep hitting roadblocks. I’m shushed. People treat me like I don’t know what I’m talking about, and I don’t appreciate it. I’ve stayed silent for far too long.”

“Who have you tried to talk to about it?” Tex asked. “Who are these people you mentioned?”

“Who haven’t I tried to talk to about it? I’ve talked to the coach. To Steve, the athletic director. To Markus, the principal. They all act like I’m out of my mind. Then they talk about how wonderful it is that the team won the state championship and how all the students will have a bright future because of it.” She frowned and shook her head. “It makes me sick to my stomach. I don’t even know who else I can talk to.”

Chelsea exchanged a look with Tex. “Maybe we can help you. But let me ask you something first. Has there been anything strange happening to you since you raised these questions?”

Her gaze widened. “Now that you mention it, I guess. I mean, I tried to dismiss it. To pretend like I was just reading too much into these things. But someone stole the catalytic converter from my car. Then a small fire started in my shed—thankfully it was quickly put out before more damage could be done. Then there’s been this feeling that I’m being watched.”

Chelsea had more questions she wanted to ask. More she wanted to know.

But just then, more people flooded into the room. Lindsey must have okayed it.

One of those people was Anna. A few other teachers were there also.

But the football players were the ones who caught Chelsea's attention. Almost the entire team had shown up.

Chelsea's lungs tightened. Any conversations they were about to have would have to wait.

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CHAPTER 16

Tex wasn't going anywhere. This was exactly where he wanted to be. In the room with the football players.

He glanced at them. They seemed like your typical jocks with their broad shoulders and built-in camaraderie.

Had Tex once been like them? He didn't want to think so. He wanted to believe he'd been his own person.

But he wasn't sure anymore.

He definitely hadn't been his own person once he'd joined the military. In fact, his commander had wanted anything but that.

But no more. He was tired of letting other people call the shots.

He glanced at Mikey's friends again and paused, noticing something new.

They all seemed . . . squirrelly. Like they were nervous.

They talked in low, frantic tones.

Tex felt certain that none of them would want to admit to what was really going on.

In other circumstances, he might go into interrogation mode and pummel them with

questions. But not in front of Lindsey. She already had enough on her plate without Tex making the situation worse.

As the conversation turned to football, Tex glanced at Chelsea.

The way she'd handled seeing Lindsey had been touching. She hadn't hesitated to reach out. To offer a hug and listening ear.

People like her were rare. At least, in his life they were.

Chelsea represented all there was good in this world. She always had.

His mind drifted to that text he'd received.

I know what you did in Afghanistan. I'll tell everyone unless you do what I say.

His stomach tightened.

Who had sent that? And what would this person demand? Why hadn't the sender given the demand right away?

Tex hadn't recognized the number—not that he'd expected to. But the area code was out of town. West Virginia, if he remembered correctly.

As everyone talked around him, he texted the number to one of his friends at the Shadow Agency, asking him to check it out.

Gage Pearson replied right away saying he'd look into it and that, if he couldn't help, he'd ask his fiancé, Nia, if she could. Nia owned a tech corporation that had developed some amazing programs.

The minutes ticked by at the hospital, and no one made an effort to move. They were all just passing time until they heard an update.

Finally, the surgeon strode into the room.

They all seemed to hold their breath as they waited to hear what he had to say.

Chelsea held her breath as she waited to hear what the doctor had to say.

“I have an update,” the doctor announced before finding Lindsey’s gaze. “Would you like to talk in private?”

Lindsey stood. “No, you can tell everyone. We’re all here for him.”

The doctor nodded stiffly. “Mikey suffered a heart attack, which is unusual for someone his age. It was caused by an increase in low-density lipoprotein and a decrease in the level of high-density lipoprotein in the blood. High LDL and low HDL levels increase the risk of atherosclerosis, a condition involving a buildup of plaque inside arteries. In turn, this increases blood pressure and can disrupt blood flow.”

“What’s all that mean, Doctor?” Lindsey asked.

Chelsea rose and stood beside Lindsey, taking her hand.

“We had to do surgery—an angioplasty with stenting. I’m happy to say that Mikey made it through just fine.”

A cheer went up.

“However,” his face remained grim, “we’re going to need to keep him in a medically

induced coma until his vitals level out. It's looking better for him, but he still has a long road ahead."

Lindsey sobbed some more—tears of both joy and grief—and leaned into Chelsea. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Can I have a minute alone with you?" he asked her.

"Of course." Lindsey stood and followed him.

Chelsea couldn't help but wonder what this talk was about. But, if she had to guess, it had something to do with whatever the test results showed. Something like steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs showing up in Mikey's bloodwork—things that needed to be asked privately.

She and Tex exchanged a look. When Lindsey returned a moment later, she had a stoic look on her face.

Chelsea wanted to ask her questions. But she couldn't. Not here.

Not with the other football players nearby.

She needed to find the right moment.

Ten minutes later, Lindsey's parents arrived to sit with her. With her support system in place and no other updates coming, people slowly began to trickle away. Lindsey probably needed some privacy as she figured out how to navigate things. Since her parents were here, this felt like the right time to leave.

Chelsea stood. "I'm going to head home. I'd be happy to bring you dinner or anything at all that you need."

“My parents will stay with me now, so I think I’m okay.” Lindsey attempted a smile, but her eyes were too glassy and her expression too listless. “But I’ll call you if I need anything.”

Chelsea gripped her hand and patted it. “I love you, Lindsey. And I’m so sorry. I’ll be praying for this situation.”

“Thank you.” Lindsey’s voice cracked as she said the words.

She and Tex slipped from the waiting room.

“Those boys know more than they’re letting on,” Tex whispered to Chelsea as they headed down the hallway.

“I agree. If they’re not careful, they’re all going to find themselves in a similar situation.”

They stepped back into the waiting area of the emergency room, the same place they’d entered the building.

As they did, Chelsea practically ran into Steve Strober, the athletic director, and one of Gilbert’s closest friends.

“Chelsea.” He paused, perhaps the most unathletic athletic director she’d ever met with his paunch and double chin. “How is Mikey?”

“He’s stable for now,” she told him. “But it’s going to be a rough road ahead.”

“Do they know what happened? I heard it was his heart.”

“That’s what I heard also.” She decided to take a gamble. “There are murmurings that

maybe he took something, and that's what caused this reaction."

It was a bit of a stretch, but her words weren't untrue either.

"Really?" He rubbed his chin. "You really think that's the case?"

She shrugged "I thought you might know more than me."

His eyes widened. "What are you implying?"

"You're the AD. I just thought you might know more details about what was going on."

His gaze darkened. "I don't appreciate those implications."

She shrugged innocently. "I think you're reading too much into my statement."

The man was definitely on edge.

Instead of saying anything else, he stormed off, leaving a trail of questions in his wake.

CHAPTER 17

Unease sloshed inside Tex as he and Chelsea headed outside toward his truck.

All these events were connected. They had to be. Now there were innocent victims to think about. Whoever was behind this needed to be held accountable.

“He knows something,” Chelsea murmured.

“I know. Far too many people are trying to keep this quiet, if you ask me. This should already have been stopped.”

“I have to wonder if these guys are being pressured to take these drugs.” She frowned as she said the words.

“We’re never going to get any answers from Gilbert—or that guy back there,” Tex said. “Steve, right?”

“Right. He and Gilbert are tight. And you know Gilbert. He’s the type who can get anything he wants.”

As they reached his truck, he paused and let out something close to a low growl.

“What is it?” Chelsea murmured beside him.

He pointed to his tires. “They’ve been slashed.” He circled his truck, checking out all the tires. “All four of them. Someone definitely wants to send us a message.”

Chelsea stared at Tex's flat tires, her heart pounding harder. Was she really seeing this? But she knew she was.

"Oh, Tex. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault." He fisted his hands at his side as he stared at the vehicle.

"Someone is taking this to the extreme, wouldn't you say?"

"I'd most definitely say so—but more because of Mikey than over this."

Chelsea couldn't deny that statement. But something else bothered her also, though she tried to pinpoint what.

Then it hit her.

Steve. He'd just come into the hospital.

He would have been in the parking lot recently. Could he have done this?

And his voice . . . she couldn't be sure, but he almost sounded like the man she'd overheard Gilbert speaking with. She'd assumed it was a young person—maybe even a high schooler. But Steve's voice had a higher pitch to it, making him sound younger.

How had she not realized that before?

"Chelsea?"

She pulled herself from her thoughts and turned to Tex, who stared at her.

“What are you thinking?”

She hesitated only a minute before sharing her theory.

“You might be onto something,” Tex said. “Having a winning football team would look good for his career.”

“But what about Gilbert?”

“Look, I’m not his biggest fan. But what if he’s a victim in all this also?”

“It’s a possibility . . .” She glanced around. “What are we going to do now?”

Tex stared into the distance, clearly thinking things through. Finally, he said, “We could call for a ride. But your car is probably only parked about a mile from here, and it’s not terribly cold outside. How do you feel about walking?”

“I’m okay with that.”

With one more glance at the truck, they headed from the parking lot to the sidewalk leading from the hospital.

Chelsea stuffed her hands deep into her pockets as they walked. “I know this isn’t the way you envisioned your visit going. I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. And I really had no expectations of what was going to happen when I got here. I was mainly curious. I hadn’t talked to Gilbert in years, and I was surprised that he’d contacted me.”

“I can imagine.”

They walked a few more minutes in silence before Tex asked, “Say, where are your parents? I’m kind of surprised they haven’t popped up since I’ve been here.”

“Ever since my dad retired from the railroad, they’ve decided to live life to the fullest. They’re actually vacationing in the Mediterranean right now.”

Tex’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“Really.”

“I’m surprised they left you behind at Christmas.”

Chelsea sighed, a weight pressing on her at the thought. “They invited me to come with them, but I thought they should do this trip by themselves. They deserve to pamper themselves some.”

“So you’re going to spend Christmas alone?” Surprise laced his voice.

Chelsea shrugged. “I’ll be okay. I thought about volunteering at the homeless shelter. And I have friends who’ve invited me over, but that feels intrusive since they’ll all have family visiting—although I know they’d welcome me with open arms.” She shrugged again. “I guess I’m just still trying to figure everything out.”

“That makes sense. But I’m sorry. I know how much you enjoy Christmas. And even though you’re being very understanding, I know this has to be difficult for you.”

“If spending Christmas alone is the most difficult thing I experience this year, then I’ll be okay.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “I’ve always liked that about you, you know.”

She stole a glance at him. “What’s that?”

“You’re always so positive and optimistic. You want to believe the best in people. I admire that. I really do.”

“I try to look for the best in situations. Honestly, it makes life so much better.”

“I can see that.”

They reached Main Street, and Chelsea subconsciously slowed her steps.

There was something about this town that was meant to be enjoyed and not rushed through. Which seemed crazy considering everything that was happening. But maybe she needed a moment to catch her breath.

“Listen, Gilbert insisted I have dinner with him tonight,” Tex stated. “And I do feel bad because he invited me for Christmas, and I’ve hardly seen him.”

“It makes sense that you’d want to eat with him.”

“Have dinner with us.”

She inwardly cringed—both because she wasn’t sure she’d be welcome by Gilbert and because Gilbert wasn’t her favorite person. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll be there with you. Believe me, I wouldn’t want to put you in a situation where your safety is compromised. But we’ve got to find out some answers. Maybe if you’re there, the two of us can ask the right questions.”

She considered it a moment before nodding. “Okay then. As long as you stick close to me.”

A flash of something swept through his gaze. It almost looked like satisfaction.

Chelsea reached for her keys and unlocked her car. That was when she noticed her hands were still trembling.

Tex seemed to notice at the same time she did and reached for her. "I can drive. I really don't mind. You look like you're still shaken up by everything."

She hesitated only a moment before placing her keys in his hands. "Okay then. If you don't mind."

"Not at all."

He opened the door for her and waited for her to sit inside. Then he climbed behind the steering wheel, his body folding into the small car.

Chelsea had never seen someone look so out of place in her vehicle. But there was nothing about Tex's personality that fit with her Volkswagen Beetle's vibe.

He offered a little laugh as he adjusted the seat back as far as it would go and started the ignition. "Can't say I've ever driven one of these before."

"Maybe you should consider getting one of these as your next car. I think it fits you."

He threw her a look. Then he eased away from the curb and started back toward Chelsea's house.

But just as they reached the outskirts of town, Chelsea noticed his muscles tense and how he kept glancing in the rearview mirror.

"Tex?" She almost didn't want to know.

“I hate to tell you this, Chelsea.” His jaw tightened. “But I think we’re being followed.”

CHAPTER 18

Tex didn't want to alarm Chelsea, especially if there wasn't a reason. But every time he looked behind him, the same car was there.

He'd never seen the dark green sedan before. The person behind the wheel wore sunglasses and a baseball cap, so it was hard to tell any details about him.

Tex glanced back at the road in front of him, his senses on alert. But when he looked in the rearview mirror again, he noticed the car now getting closer. Too close for his comfort.

He pressed on the gas, not wanting to wrongly guess what this driver might be up to.

"Tex?" Chelsea's voice trembled.

"I'm just trying to be on the safe side."

The driver sped up. Came close enough that Texas couldn't see its front grill.

This was the part of the road that was narrower, that was deeper in the mountains with a wooden guardrail on one side. Beyond the guardrail was a cliff that dropped probably two hundred feet.

"What are you going to do?" Chelsea glanced behind them.

"I've got this."

He only hoped this Volkswagen Bug could keep up.

He pressed the accelerator harder as they started up an incline.

The car seemed to moan as the engine was pushed to its limits.

But not the vehicle behind them. It didn't struggle at all.

After a moment, the guy tapped their bumper.

"Tex . . ."

He pressed the accelerator to the floor. The vehicle continued to chug up the mountain.

That was when the driver behind them nudged them again.

This time, they lurched forward.

Chelsea gasped.

Tex studied the road in front of him. Tried to figure out the best plan of action.

One thing was for sure. He couldn't let this guy run them off the side of the road. The cliff was too steep. Too deadly.

But if he remembered correctly, there was a small pull-off coming up ahead. If he could just get there . . .

He pressed the accelerator harder. But it was already to the floor, and the car behind him didn't back down.

The vehicle came at them again.

Tex gripped the wheel tighter.

Where was that pull-off?

Then, just as he rounded the bend, he spotted it.

But he'd have to maneuver the Bug into the pull-off very carefully. At this rate of speed, it would be dangerous. If Tex miscalculated, he'd slam into the side of the mountain.

"Hold on!" he yelled.

Then he swerved into the gravel alcove.

As soon as all four tires hit the gravel, he threw on the brakes.

The car slid, veering dangerously close to the rock wall beside them.

Tex glanced behind him. The vehicle following them slowed.

The next instant, the driver gunned the engine and raced away.

Tex glanced in front of him again as the Volkswagen Bug came to a stop without crashing—but barely missing the mountain.

They were safe.

For now.

He threw the car into Park and turned to Chelsea. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, though clearly frightened, with her wide eyes and shallow breathing. “I’m fine. I think. But Tex . . . how far is this person going to take this?”

That was an excellent question. He wasn’t sure he knew the answer. Or that he liked the conclusions forming in his mind.

Instead of responding, he drew in a deep breath.

Then he pulled back onto the road.

The best thing he could do right now was to get the two of them off this mountain and somewhere safe.

However, was there anywhere that was truly safe?

Chelsea’s heart still pounded out of control as they headed toward her house.

Though she thought the other driver was probably long gone now, another part of her feared he’d show up again, determined to finish what he’d started.

Did this person want to kill them? Or simply scare them?

It didn’t matter. What he’d done was still despicable.

She and Tex were obviously getting too close to the truth right now, and someone was desperate for them to back off.

They cleared the mountain road and reached the small neighborhood where her house was located.

As they drove past Gilbert's impeccable house, she glanced at the front. The wood covering the window was a temporary blemish to the otherwise perfect house.

She thought about how someone had thrown a brick through his window. How did that fit with everything that had happened?

Did that mean Gilbert was a victim here also?

Chelsea mentally replayed that conversation she'd overheard between Gilbert and the mystery man. Could she have misconstrued it? Maybe Gilbert was being threatened as well.

I don't know what else to tell you.

I can't keep doing this.

You don't have much choice.

She didn't know. Too many thoughts rushed through her head right now to make sense of any of them.

Tex pulled into her driveway. Wordlessly, they both climbed out, walked to the rear of the vehicle, and stared at the dent in the bumper. The mark was probably eight inches long.

Her stomach churned.

She would have to get that fixed, obviously. It just seemed so senseless. Like such a waste of her time and resources.

But at least her engine seemed okay. That was always a concern since it was located

in the back of the vehicle.

“There’s nothing I can do to help you fix that damage,” Tex murmured. “You’ll have to take it to a body shop.”

“I can do that. Probably after the holidays.” She paused. “At least it still runs.”

“That is a good way to look at the situation.”

She glanced at him. “What are you going to do about your truck?”

“I’ll need to call someone to tow it into a shop. Hopefully, someone has some of my tires in stock. I have a spare, but it doesn’t do much good when all four of my tires were slashed.”

Chelsea frowned. “That seems like overkill, doesn’t it?”

“For sure.”

They paused in front of each other, a moment of silence passing.

Her pulse quickened.

Was Tex thinking what she was thinking? Was he remembering the good times they’d shared? The sweet kisses they’d exchanged?

He hadn’t given any indication of that, she realized. She was simply being too optimistic.

She cleared her throat, desperate to change her thoughts. “So, what time is dinner?”

Tex stepped back. Was that disappointment on his face? Or was Chelsea just seeing what she wanted to see?

He glanced at his watch. "At six. We've still got an hour."

"I'd like to freshen up in the meantime."

"I'll check out your place first, just to be safe."

"I'd appreciate that," she admitted.

This was no time for her to pretend to be stronger or braver than she really was.

If she were honest, she'd admit she was scared. Really scared.

But also more determined than ever. No one was going to scare her away from the truth, from protecting her students.

She followed Tex inside. Just as before, she waited near the door while he checked out each room.

When he returned, he gave her a nod and told her everything was okay.

Relief swept through her.

He paused in front of her as if uncertain what to say. Finally, he murmured, "I can come back and walk you over closer to the time if you'd like."

The offer was sweet. It really was. But it was probably only a hundred feet between their houses. "It's not far. I should be fine."

But if she'd be fine, why did her voice sound scratchy?

He hesitated another moment. "If you need me, let me know."

It almost sounded as if Tex were trying to think of an excuse to stay.

Chelsea didn't hate the idea of him hanging around.

Then she reminded herself yet again that she needed to keep her distance. It was only wise not to get attached.

Easier said than done, however. She craved his attention, his touch. She missed coaxing a smile out of him and those special looks they exchanged as they communicated without even saying a word.

"I'll see you in an hour," she said instead.

He gave her another lingering look as if waiting for her—silently begging her—to change her mind. Then with a resolute nod, Tex left.

As soon as he was gone, Chelsea missed his presence.

That was how she would feel when he left again in a few days. She had to remember that . . . for the sake of her heart.

CHAPTER 19

Even though Tex knew Chelsea's house was clear, he still hesitated before leaving.

She should be okay. However, given everything that had happened, he knew better than to let down his guard.

He stepped through the hedges toward Gilbert's place. But before going inside, he thought about what Patrick had told him about his other foster brothers.

He didn't generally have the urge to catch up with them. But right now, he did. He wanted to know how they were doing.

Maybe this was God convicting him to stay in touch, to turn over a new leaf.

He glanced at his phone again.

If he were to contact them, who would he start with?

One face came to mind. Aiden Bennett. Aiden had been a year older than Tex and a member of the football team. In some ways, Aiden had been a mentor to Tex.

He stopped hesitating, found Aiden's number, and gave him a call.

His friend answered on the second ring.

"Hey, it's Tex. I know it's been a long time, but you came to mind today, and I

wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Tex? Now that’s a name I haven’t heard in a while. How you doing, man?”

“Doing pretty well, all things considered.” He stared up at Gilbert’s house as he continued to stand outside, a rock forming in his gut. “You’ll never believe where I am. I’m actually back here in Holly Ridge.”

He explained the situation—some of it, at least.

“Wait . . . you said Gilbert invited you?” Aiden let out a chuckle. “Now that’s not something I thought I’d ever hear. I figured once we were gone, he wanted nothing more than to forget about us.”

They chatted a few more minutes. It turned out that Aiden was now a bridge engineer who worked mainly on government projects.

“It sounds like things are going well for you,” Tex said.

“Yeah, I can’t complain.”

Something in his voice made Tex pause. “You sure everything is good?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Just . . . there’s some stuff going on.”

“What kind of stuff?” Tex knew his friend probably wouldn’t answer, but he asked anyway.

“You remember back in high school when I broke into the principal’s office and changed some grades in the computer?”

Tex remembered that well. “I do.”

“You and I were the only ones who knew about it initially—until the principal checked some camera footage and figured it out. Then he got Gilbert involved.”

“But Gilbert had a talk with him, and they decided to keep it quiet in return for community service hours.” Tex recalled the incident.

“That’s what they said at the time. Well, I got this text from some unknown number. The sender said he was going to blast my secret publicly unless I did what he told me.”

Tex’s back tightened. “What?”

“I couldn’t believe it either. I freaked out. I didn’t know if it could affect my security clearance or not, but I didn’t want to take the chance.”

“What did he tell you to do?” Tex remained tense as he waited for his friend to continue.

“I had to leave some cash in a McDonald’s bag in a trashcan in Richmond. Five thousand dollars.”

“Did you do it?”

“I panicked,” Aiden admitted. “I left the money, and I haven’t heard from this extortionist since then. But I know I probably will. I could go to the police, but I really don’t want my past becoming public. I did too many things I wasn’t proud of. Breaking into the principal’s office was just the first. But I’ve turned my life around. People think I’m respectable now.”

Tex's mind raced.

It sounded like the text he'd received. It couldn't be a coincidence that both he and Aiden had received these blackmail requests. Had any of their other foster brothers received them?

He remembered what Lindsey said about Pete Lawson possibly dropping out of the senate race. He remembered the strange look he'd seen in Patrick's eyes as they'd spoken.

Was someone who knew their secrets targeting them?

He stared at the house again.

And was that person Gilbert?

As Tex ended the call, he felt more unsettled than ever.

As Chelsea changed clothes, her hands still shook.

Today had been a lot, to say the least.

And it wasn't over yet.

She slipped into a burgundy sweaterdress and black boots, adding some gold earrings and a necklace. The look was dressy enough while still being casual. Truthfully, she really wasn't sure how she was supposed to dress tonight, but this outfit seemed like a good option.

Thinking about going to Gilbert's made a ripple of nerves sweep through her. Partly it was because of Gilbert and her uncertainty about trusting him. But it was also in

part because of Tex.

Being around him left her feeling unnerved. Her feelings for the man were still there as if they'd been tucked away just beneath the surface all these years. But she had to protect herself, to keep up her walls and not give in to her impulse to pick up where they'd left off.

With one last glance in the mirror, Chelsea decided that this was as good as it was going to get. She slipped on her gray wool coat and a deep green scarf. Before leaving, she tucked her cell phone into her pocket along with her keys.

As she stepped outside, a brisk wind greeted her.

Was it tonight they were supposed to get that snow? She thought it might be. But her days were running together right now.

Pushing aside her hesitation, she started across the crisp grass and cut through the hedges. The scent of evergreen filled her nostrils, reminding her of Christmas—which was usually her favorite holiday. This year would definitely be different.

She hadn't wanted to tell her parents how much she wanted to be with them for the holidays. She feared they might not enjoy their trip if they knew just how sad it made her to be celebrating alone. But she could do this. She was used to being single and independent.

This would be the test of those strengths.

She paused as she passed through the shrubs, the skin on her neck rising.

She glanced around.

Why did she feel as if she were being watched?

Suddenly, all her nerves tightened.

She scanned her surroundings—Gilbert's house. His shed. The street on one side and the woods on the other.

She didn't see anyone out of the ordinary.

But the feeling remained. Maybe she should have had Tex walk her over after all.

Moving more quickly, she scrambled up the steps to the front door of Gilbert's place. She drew in a deep breath then started to knock. Before she could, the door opened, and Tex stood there.

She sucked in a breath at the sight of him. Instead of his well-worn jeans and sweatshirt from earlier, he'd changed into some black slacks and a forest green sweater. His dark hair had been combed, and his face looked fresh, clean.

He flashed a smile. "You're right on time."

His deep voice sent a shiver of delight through her.

He ushered her inside and, as he did, the scent of roast beef and potatoes hit her.

Maybe Gilbert wasn't a one-hit wonder in the kitchen.

"Everything good?" Tex whispered as he stood entirely too close.

Actually, it was just the amount of closeness Chelsea craved, if she were honest with herself. Close enough she could feel the warmth from his body and smell his piney

cologne.

“It’s fine.” Her throat burned as she said the words. “You?”

Something passed through his gaze, and she knew he’d learned something new since they’d last spoken. Her curiosity sparked.

“I’ll tell you later,” he whispered. “Nothing that should affect you now, though.”

She hated having to wait, but she understood.

As she stepped into the kitchen, Gilbert called out a jolly hello to her. He wore a Santa Claus apron as he stood by the stove with a big grin on his face.

He was in a good mood today, wasn’t he?

Anna stood beside him.

Now it made sense. Anna was cooking, and Gilbert was assisting her.

“Hey, any updates on Mikey?” Gilbert asked as he pulled some milk from the fridge. “I wanted to make it down to the hospital earlier, but I was stuck in traffic in Roanoke. So much for my last-minute Christmas shopping.”

“The doctor is hoping he’ll be okay,” Chelsea told him. “I’m praying that’s the case also.”

“Me too.” Anna paused from cooking and turned to face them. “I just hate that this happened. Does anyone know why? Why would someone so young have heart problems?”

Chelsea licked her lips, unsure what to say.

Tex put his hand on her elbow. “I think the medical staff are trying to figure that out.”

Good answer. They didn’t want to share too much.

As Tex’s phone buzzed, he excused himself.

Suddenly, waves of unease washed over Chelsea as she was left alone with Gilbert and Anna.

CHAPTER 20

Tex walked into the living room and checked his phone.

It was another text message.

From the same sender who claimed to know about what he did in Afghanistan.

He glanced at the words on the screen.

Be ready to leave soon.

His pulse beat stronger. How was this happening? Why was someone doing this?

He sent out a couple of other text messages, needing to clarify some things.

Tex was close to finding out the truth. He only hoped the truth didn't come out too late.

He knew he couldn't stay in the living room too long or people would get suspicious. Instead, he shoved his phone into his pocket and returned to the kitchen. Besides, he was anxious to set his eyes on Chelsea again.

She glanced up at him, questions in her gaze when he reappeared.

His heart pounded harder at the sight of her. She was so beautiful—lovely in every way.

It was hard to believe she was here in front of him now. All he wanted at times was to step back in time. To never have left her.

Then he glanced at her more closely. Was that . . . ?

He stared at the necklace around her neck. At the gold dogwood bloom on it.

That was the necklace he'd given her when she turned sixteen. She'd kept it.

His heart lodged into his throat.

He shifted his thoughts back to the present as he realized everyone was looking at him, waiting for him to say something.

"Just a little business I needed to take care of," Tex said. "My apologies."

"No problem," Gilbert said. "Is everything okay?"

"It's just fine," Tex answered with ease.

"Well, you're right on time." Anna lifted up a red ceramic dish piled with steaming roast beef, carrots, and potatoes. "It's time to eat."

They set everything on the table, and Tex had to admit that the food smelled good. His stomach rumbled. It wasn't often he got a home-cooked meal.

But just as they sat at the table to eat, he glanced outside. A shadow moved in the bushes.

Someone was out there.

“Tex?” Gilbert asked.

“Something’s going on outside,” he announced. “And I intend on finding out what.”

Chelsea’s nerves felt like they were on fire.

Who was outside?

Maybe Gilbert really was a victim in all this also. He had had that brick thrown through his window. Now someone might be lurking outside. Maybe that conversation she’d overheard at his place had really been someone threatening him.

She didn’t know. But everything left her feeling uneasy.

And what was taking Tex so long? What if he’d gotten hurt? She couldn’t bear the thought of it.

She needed to talk to him. Even if the two of them couldn’t be together, there were things that they needed to clear the air about. She had been avoiding those conversations, telling herself that they weren’t important. But they were. As soon as she had a moment alone with him, they needed to talk.

“I hope he’s okay,” Anna murmured, rubbing her arms nervously.

Gilbert stood. “Maybe I should go out there and help him.”

Anna grabbed his arm. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Just give him a few more minutes,” Chelsea murmured. “Tex can handle himself.”

“That’s true,” Gilbert said. “If anybody can defend themselves, it’s Tex. All those

Black Op missions he was on trained him to do that.”

Chelsea nodded.

Then she froze.

Had Tex told Gilbert about those missions? She had the impression he didn’t tell just anyone that information. It seemed unlikely that he would open up to Gilbert with those details.

But if that was the case, then how would Gilbert know?

Just like, how had someone known what he did in Afghanistan?

Suddenly, her unease turned into something much stronger.

It turned into fear.

Though she’d tried to give Gilbert the benefit of the doubt, she felt more and more certain he was behind this. The fact he’d invited Tex back here wasn’t a coincidence.

He wanted to use Tex for some reason, didn’t he?

Her throat tightened and she tried to figure out what she should do.

Before she could do anything, she heard a door slam at the back of the house.

Was that Tex coming back inside? Or was it someone nefarious?

CHAPTER 21

Tex stepped back into the house. As he entered the kitchen, he saw the tense looks on everyone's faces.

They feared the worst.

"Everything's good," he assured them. "It was just a family of deer. They ran off when they saw me. I guess I've been on edge lately after everything that's happened."

"Everything that's happened?" Gilbert asked, a lilt of curiosity—and maybe something else—in his voice.

"You know." Tex shrugged. "The brick through the window, someone breaking into Chelsea's house. Then what happened today with Mikey. It's just all been a lot."

"Your house was broken into?" Anna asked with a gasp.

"Yes, I'm not sure why exactly. Of all the homes someone could have chosen, they had to be disappointed once they saw how little of value I had inside mine."

"This whole world is going to pot, isn't it?" Anna shook her head. Then she glanced at Gilbert and beamed. "That's why I'm trying to convince Gilbert to retire so the two of us can move to Florida or maybe the Caribbean."

Tex sat back down at the table and raised his eyebrows. "Oh, really. Are you seriously considering that?" He glanced at Gilbert.

He shrugged. "I'm not sure yet. The idea is very appealing, especially if Anna is with me."

He squeezed her hand.

Things really had changed for the man since Anna had come into his life, hadn't they?

They prayed and then passed the food around. Tex had just taken the first bite of his mashed potatoes when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Part of him wanted to ignore it. He knew he was being rude by taking another call.

But the other part of him knew that this might not be able to wait.

"I'm really sorry for this," Tex said, pulling out his phone. "But there's been an issue at work, and I need to take this."

"I understand," Gilbert said. "The food will be waiting here for you when you return."

Tex escaped again, this time going into the bathroom so he could close the door to have more privacy.

It was a message from Gage. His colleague hadn't been able to track the phone number Tex had sent him.

That wasn't surprising. Most likely, the person who'd been sending out the messages had used a burner.

On a whim, Tex decided to call Patrick. He leaned against the wall as he waited for

him to answer and then he spoke in a low tone.

“Tex? I thought I recognized your number.”

“Hey, Patrick. I’m sorry to interrupt you. But I had a question that couldn’t wait.”

“What’s going on?”

“It appears that several of us who were in foster care together here in Holly Ridge have been getting some extortion threats. I can’t help but wonder if you have been also.”

Patrick didn’t say anything a moment.

Then he said, “You’re being extorted?”

“That’s right. Someone is using the secrets from our past to get us to do dirty work for them. I’m not comfortable sharing all the details. But I don’t think we’re alone in this. Is there anything you want to tell me, Patrick?”

Again, silence stretched. Finally, he said, “As a matter of fact, I’ve been getting some threats also. I’ve been slipping several students some performance-enhancing drugs. I was told if I didn’t that they’d tell everyone that . . .”

“Tell everyone what?” Tex asked.

“They would tell everyone that I used to overprescribe opioids.” He paused. “Before you lecture me, I know I shouldn’t have done it. But some of my patients paid me on the side. I needed the money. I’m drowning in student loans.”

“Patrick . . .” Tex didn’t even have any words for him. The man was clearly in over

his head and making poor choices as a result.

“Please, don’t tell anybody,” Patrick finished. “I’m nearly willing to do anything to make this go away.”

“Someone is banking on the fact that all of us are willing to do anything.” Tension stretched across his chest. “And they’re going to keep on doing this until one of us breaks.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I need to figure out who’s behind this.”

“Gilbert is the only one who makes any sense.”

Tex couldn’t argue with that assessment. “I agree. But we still need proof.”

“Let me know what I can do.”

Tex ended the call, his thoughts still racing. How could they prove who this was? If Aiden went to drop off money again, they could do a stakeout to see who picked it up. But that would take time, and time was something they didn’t have.

Realizing how much time had passed, he reached for the toilet and flushed it. Then he ran the water in the sink, trying to make his cover story believable.

As he turned off the water, he noticed the toilet was still running.

Great.

He took the lid off the back.

When he reached into the basin, he noticed a bag there.

He carefully pulled it out and shook the water off.

A cell phone was inside. When he hit the screen, a generic background with just a few apps filled it. There was no screen lock.

Out of curiosity, he took his own phone and texted back the person who'd threatened him.

Who's this?

The cell phone in the bag buzzed. When he looked at the screen, he saw the message he'd just sent appear.

Chelsea glanced at her smart watch as it buzzed. A text message came through.

Feign an excuse to leave.

She blinked and quickly put her hand down before anybody else could see it.

Tex had sent this. But why? Had he discovered something new?

Whatever it was, it sounded like he wanted her to get out of here. To get away from Gilbert.

When Tex stepped back into the kitchen he sent her a look that made it clear he was asking if she had gotten his message.

She sent him a subtle nod.

Tex sat back at the table and apologized again.

She was desperate to talk to him. To find out what exactly was going on.

But that wasn't going to happen if she stayed here.

She suddenly let out a fake cough.

"Everything okay?" Gilbert asked.

"You know, I've had the feeling that a cold is coming on. I've been sneezing a lot today, and my throat's been scratchy. Now it's hitting me like a ton of bricks." She turned toward Tex. "Do I feel warm?"

He put his hand to her forehead, and his eyes scrunched. "Actually, you do. Maybe you should go home and lie down. I'd hate for you to be sick for Christmas."

She frowned and glanced at her half-eaten plate. "I hate to leave when you spent so much time preparing this meal for us."

"We hate for you to leave too," Anna said. "But if you don't feel well, then by all means you need to take care of yourself. I can give you a box so you can take the rest home."

"That would be fantastic. I guess I shouldn't have come over. I hope I don't get anyone else sick."

"You don't worry about that. Just get some rest and feel better soon."

As Anna went to get a plastic container, Chelsea stood. She picked up her fork to put the rest of her food into the container, but her fork trembled against the plate.

Tex stood and took over for her. “Here, let me help you.”

She was so grateful for him. Grateful for the time they’d had together.

There was a point in her life where she wouldn’t have been able to say that. But now she could see where forgiveness and restoration were needed.

Not that the two of them would necessarily ever go back to where they had been. But at least maybe one day she wouldn’t think of him with such heaviness in her heart.

“I’m going to walk her home, but I’ll be right back,” Tex announced.

Gilbert and Anna nodded.

Tex put his hand on the small of her back and led her outside. As soon as the back door closed, Chelsea turned to him. “What’s going on?”

“A lot,” he muttered.

He kept walking, getting her farther away from the house as if it was going to blow up at any minute or something.

They paused only when they reached her back door. Chelsea wasn’t going any farther until she had some more information.

“Gilbert has been extorting the foster kids who stayed with him years ago. Asking for anything from money to drugs to favors. Otherwise, he’ll spill the secrets he knows about them.”

Her mouth dropped open. “What? That’s terrible.”

“I know. He’s clearly desperate and I don’t think you should be around him a moment longer than you have to be.”

She grabbed Tex’s sweater. “What about you? You can’t be over there either.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“He knows you were Black Ops. He mentioned it when you walked away from the table. Did you ever tell him that?”

Tex’s jaw tightened. “No, I didn’t. But I did find the phone he’s using to send these texts. He hid it in the bathroom. Inside the toilet tank.”

“What? What are we going to do? Is the fact that the phone was found in his home enough to go to the police with this?”

Before he could answer, a stick cracked in the distance.

Chelsea knew they weren’t alone.

CHAPTER 22

Tex pushed Chelsea behind him as he heard the footstep.

He fully expected to see Gilbert there with desperation in his gaze.

Instead, Anna stepped out. “Is everything okay?”

Tex tried to soften his shoulders as to not alarm her. “It’s fine. Like we said, Chelsea’s just not feeling very well.”

Anna stepped closer. “I was worried.”

“We’ll be fine,” Tex told her. “I’ll be back over in a few minutes.”

She didn’t move away. Instead, she took another step closer.

“I actually wanted to catch you alone a moment,” she started. “I’m worried about Gilbert.”

Tex remained tense. “Why’s that?”

“These boys on the football team who’ve been getting sick . . . the one connection they all have is him.”

“You think Gilbert is the reason they’re getting sick?” Chelsea asked.

“It makes sense to me. Do you think I should be concerned?”

“I don’t know,” Tex said. “I have found that situation strange.”

Tex remained on guard, unsure what was going to play out.

“Where does Gilbert think you are right now?” Tex glanced back at the house, worried that Gilbert might become concerned and come looking for her.

“He ran to the bathroom,” she said.

“If you think he’s doing something illegal, then maybe you should feign an excuse to leave,” Chelsea said. “You seem like a nice woman. And I would hate to see you get hurt by being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“But we’ve been so happy together.”

Tex glanced at the house again, feeling uneasy. “There’ll be plenty of other chances for you to be happy.”

Anna withdrew her hand from her pocket. She gripped a gun and pointed it at them.

“You’re right, I will have another chance for happiness. Away from here.”

“Anna . . .” Tex said, making sure Chelsea was behind him again. “What do you want from us?”

“You’re going to help me get out of the country where I can start my new life. And if you don’t, I will shoot your girlfriend first. Then I’ll shoot you. Don’t test me.”

Chelsea’s heart pounded in her ears. She couldn’t believe this was happening.

Anna was behind this? How was that even possible?

“Why did you do all of this?” Tex asked. “Was the only reason you started dating Gilbert so you could pin all this on him?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “But I found that the more comfortable he got with me—and the more he drank, the more secrets he told me. And I knew they were too juicy to sit on. I have worked hard my entire life, and I have so little to show for it. It’s not fair.”

“You knew when you became a guidance counselor that it wasn’t going to make you rich,” Chelsea said.

“But it doesn’t mean it’s right! I saw the opportunity for a better life for myself, and I seized it. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“It is when you put other people’s lives at stake,” Tex said.

Chelsea kept her eye on the woman’s gun. She expected her hand to be shakier. Instead, she looked at ease with it.

“So you’ve been blackmailing my former foster brothers,” Tex said. “You’ve gotten money out of some of them, drugs out of others. I guess you wanted my protection and resources?”

“It only made sense.”

“I have a feeling you’ve been extorting some of the members of the football team as well,” Chelsea said. “And you’ve been using them to do your dirty work for you. You had someone break into my house just to scare me. Was it the same person who cornered me on a dark street and tried to cut off the air from my windpipe? Or the

same person who tried to run me off the road?”

“Don’t be silly. I used Steve Strober for that.” She grinned. “It’s really easy to find out dirt on people when you’re the school’s guidance counselor.”

“You used your position to your advantage,” Chelsea said. “That’s a disgrace to the profession.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s enough talking. I have everything ready to go now, and I just need to get out of here.”

“I’m not sure why you need my help with that,” Tex said.

“Because I need to go somewhere where there will be no paper trail leading back to me. I want to live in the Caribbean, like I said. But if I buy a plane ticket, authorities will be able to find me if things go south. That’s why I need you to use your resources to get me a private jet.”

Tex laughed and shook his head. “I think you’re overestimating the kind of resources I have.”

Anna pointed her gun at Tex. “If you don’t already have those resources, then I suggest you find them.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I’m getting out of here. And I’m taking my daughter with me.”

CHAPTER 23

Anna's words rung in her ears.

The woman had looked right at her when she said daughter .

“Are you . . . ?” Chelsea couldn't finish her question. The thought seemed too absurd.

“Your mother?” Anna raised an eyebrow. “I am. Not that woman you keep calling Mom. Do you understand how hard it is for me to hear you say that?”

Now that Anna mentioned it, Chelsea could see the resemblance between them. They both had the same cheekbones, the same color hair even.

But . . . how could this be?

“You abandoned me,” Chelsea started.

“I had a breakdown. I wasn't in my right mind. I couldn't handle everything. Today they'd probably call it postpartum depression. But that wasn't as widely discussed back then, and I didn't understand it.”

“You could have come back. It's been thirty years. Why now?”

“My life took a lot of twists and turns. I got involved with some of the wrong people. Had to do things I never thought I would just to scrape by. But finally, I made something of myself. That was when I knew I needed to win you back.”

“Certainly you don’t think this is the way to win me back, do you?” Chelsea stared at Anna in horror.

“I know it’s going to take time. But I also know that restoration will never happen while you’re here, surrounded by all these people who love you. I won’t stand a chance. That’s why the two of us are going to start a new life together where we can get to know each other one on one. I want to make up for lost time.”

Chelsea’s throat tightened until she could hardly breathe. Was Anna implying what Chelsea thought she was?

There was no way she wanted to go to the Caribbean with this woman, whether she was her real mom or not. The idea was crazy.

But how would she get out of this situation?

She exchanged a look with Tex. The look in his eyes indicated he had an idea.

Whatever it was, Chelsea prayed that it would work.

“Enough talking!” Anna snapped. “We need to get moving. Don’t make me take things to the next level.”

Whatever happened, Tex could not let Anna take Chelsea anywhere.

He had to stop this.

“Go to the car,” Anna ordered. “You’re going to drive, Tex. And I’m going to have this gun trained on you so don’t try to pull anything.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tex said.

They began walking toward Chelsea's vehicle.

He could get the gun away from Anna. But what he didn't want was for her to accidentally discharge it in the process and end up hurting Chelsea.

He had to plan his moves carefully.

"One of my boyfriends taught me the best way to make a quick buck," Anna explained. "Thanks to him, I now have a million dollars in the bank that we can live off of."

"You got all of that by extorting people?" Chelsea asked.

"It sounds so terrible when you say it that way. All I did was hold them accountable for their actions. Made them pay for things they never should have done to begin with."

"There has to be another way—" Chelsea started.

"There's not. I've already thought this through." Then Anna turned to Tex. "Get in."

Tex kept his eyes on that gun as he began to walk toward the driver's side. Once he got in the car, everything would be entirely more difficult.

That meant he needed to act now.

Just as Chelsea headed for the passenger side and put some distance between herself and Anna, Tex reached back and caught Anna's arm.

Just as he feared, she fired.

But he made sure the weapon was pointed into the air.

Then he twisted the gun from her hands.

In three seconds flat, he had the woman pressed against the car with her hands trapped behind her head.

“Call the police,” he murmured to Chelsea.

But then a deeper voice behind them said, “Wait just a minute before you do that.”

CHAPTER 24

The hair on Chelsea's arms rose as she turned around.

Gilbert stood there, a baseball bat in his hands.

Wait, was he actually in on this also? Or was he a victim?

She wasn't sure.

"What are you doing, Gilbert?" Tex asked.

As he stepped closer, Chelsea saw the blood across his forehead.

Anna must have knocked him out. But Chelsea still wasn't sure whose side he was on.

Then Gilbert looked at Anna, his voice cracking as he said, "I loved you."

Anna looked away without replying.

"She tricked you too?" Tex asked.

"I had no idea what she was up to." Gilbert pressed his lips together and his nostrils flared as he stared at Anna. "She used me. You've got to believe me."

"We'll let the police figure that out."

Chelsea glanced at the ground. At the gun Anna had dropped . . . it lay halfway between her and Gilbert.

If she could only grab it . . .

Her gaze shifted back up to Gilbert, who still held the bat.

“Why don’t you put that down?” Tex said as if reading her mind.

But Gilbert didn’t seem to hear him—he continued to grip the bat. “I didn’t know they were doping.”

Tex twisted his neck dubiously. “You had to have a clue, Gilbert.”

“I did wonder what was going on. I started asking questions. But no one would give me answers.” Sweat spread across his forehead.

“Then what was with all those late-night meetings?” Chelsea asked. “I saw you talking to people outside of your house.”

“Steve stopped by several times and begged me to stop asking questions about the change in the boys. He seemed desperate. I told him I knew something was going on, and I didn’t know what else to tell him. Steve told me he couldn’t keep going back and forth like this, and I told him we didn’t have much of a choice. We had to get to the bottom of things.”

Gilbert’s stress could cause him to do something irrational, Chelsea realized.

She needed to get that gun before Gilbert got any ideas.

An image of him grabbing the weapon and turning it on Anna filled her mind.

Her heart pounded harder.

As Gilbert glared at Anna, Chelsea saw her opportunity.

She dove for the gun.

Her sudden motion seemed to cause Gilbert to panic.

He lunged for it at the same time.

Chelsea grabbed it mere seconds before he did. But then he lunged forward, his fingers grasping the barrel.

Before anything bad could happen, police cars surrounded them. Officers appeared, guns drawn.

They took over the situation, and Chelsea was more than happy to let them do that.

But how had they known to come?

That was when she saw a figure step from the shadows.

Regina, she realized.

Her cousin Ryan's wife. The one who didn't like Chelsea or appreciate her help. Who'd told Chelsea to stay out of their lives.

Chelsea sent her a questioning look. "What are you doing here?"

The woman stepped closer. "Ryan told me that you've been helping us. At first I was angry. But then I realized that you didn't want anything in return. You were just

trying to be a good person. And I came over to tell you thank you. But when I got here, I saw that woman pull the gun on you guys. And I knew the biggest way I could say thank you was by calling the police.”

Chelsea threw her arms around the woman. “Thank you. You may have saved our lives.”

“No, you’re the one who saved our lives.”

As she pulled away from the hug, she saw that the police had arrested Anna, and she was being led away in their custody. Another officer was having a serious conversation with Gilbert.

Chelsea turned to Tex.

The two of them exchanged a look that spoke volumes.

There were still conversations that would need to be had.

But they couldn’t happen until they were alone.

Finally, everything was wrapped up. Tex had been counting down the moments.

The police had arrested Anna. They had taken Gilbert in for questioning. Meanwhile, they taken Tex’s and Chelsea’s statements.

One of the cops had suspected something had been going on, ever since a football player had gotten into a fist fight with one of his colleagues. They’d started looking into things, but they’d never been able to prove anything.

Maybe this was over. Maybe the school wouldn’t win anymore state championships.

But that was okay as long as everyone stayed healthy.

A lot of corruption had erupted in such a short amount of time. It remained to be seen what all of those repercussions would be. Would Patrick be arrested? What about Steve Strober?

There were probably other things that had taken place that they still didn't even know about. But the police would uncover those details with time, and justice would be served.

With everyone gone, Tex and Chelsea had returned to her house. She'd made them some peppermint tea to warm them up.

"Chelsea . . ." Tex started as he stood in the kitchen, Chelsea in front of him.

She lifted her gaze. "We should probably talk."

"I've been wanting to explain myself."

"And I've been too prideful and stubborn to ask you for an explanation. I decided I would rather be angry and resentful toward you."

He hated to hear that. But he hoped he could at least start making things right.

He put his half-drunk tea on the counter and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. Being vulnerable wasn't one of his strengths. But he had to say this.

"I thought it would be better for you if I left," he blurted. "That if I did, you'd find someone worthy of you."

"You didn't think you were worthy of me?" Chelsea blinked in confusion.

“When you come from a messed-up background like I did, everything is skewed. I had been told I was worthless and unwanted so many times that I had a hard time believing I’d ever be worthy and wanted.”

“Oh, Tex . . .”

“I was determined to make something of myself. I told myself one day I was going to come back to you once I’d done that. Then I ended up in that military program that broke me. I realized there might not ever be a time when I felt good enough for you. I figured it was better if I stayed away.”

She tilted her head as she listened, her gaze soft with emotion.

Tex continued. “Then as more time passed, I also realized that that was the biggest mistake of my life. I figured I’d blown my chance with you.”

“I was pretty angry and hurt when you left the way you did.”

“That was never my intention. I couldn’t see things clearly. Or maybe I didn’t let myself. I told myself I was doing what was best for you.”

“You were wrong.”

“I know that now. You’re the only person who’s ever felt like home to me.”

Chelsea stepped closer and rested her hand on his chest. “It sounds like we wasted a lot of time these past twelve years.”

His heart softened. “Yes, we have.”

“When you came back . . . I told myself I didn’t want to get close to you because I

didn't want to be hurt again."

"Hurting you again is the last thing I want to do."

"Then what happens from here?" she asked. "Are you leaving now that everything with Gilbert is resolved? Am I never going to see you again after this?"

"I'd like a second chance." Tex's throat burned as he said the words. "If you'd give one to me. I know I travel with work. But even people who travel need a home base. I'd like to make it here. In Holly Ridge. With you."

Tex could hardly breathe as he waited for Chelsea's reaction.

A grin spread across her face. "I would like that. I would like it a lot."

"Really?" He studied her face, halfway expecting her to say she was joking.

Not that she was cruel enough to do something like that.

"I absolutely mean it," she murmured.

With those words, Tex's arms encircled her waist, and he pulled her closer.

He pointed above him.

He'd pinned some mistletoe there earlier—he'd found it in the backyard. The two of them had become experts at hunting for it as teenagers.

Then, just like he had wanted to do for all of the years they had been apart, he lowered his head until his lips met hers.

EPILOGUE

TWO DAYS LATER

This Christmas had been nearly perfect so far, Chelsea mused. The only thing that would have made it better was if her mom and dad were here.

The day had started with Tex coming over. The two of them had exchanged gifts and eaten a yummy pancake breakfast, all while listening to Christmas music. Snow had fallen outside overnight, and now coated the ground in a layer of glistening white.

They'd also gotten the news that Mikey was out of his medically induced coma and expecting a full recovery.

That phone call was followed by Regina and Ryan stopping by for a visit with their baby girl. They still had a lot of work to do in their relationship, but Chelsea was glad to see some progress.

Ryan and his family had stayed for lunch, and Chelsea had thoroughly enjoyed being with them.

She hadn't even minded when Gilbert had stopped by for dessert.

No, she still didn't like the man. But apparently, he wasn't the one behind the doping, just as he'd said. Steve Strober was.

Gilbert was clearly heartbroken over losing Anna. He'd loved her and had the wool

pulled over his eyes.

Chelsea wasn't sure if his relationship with Tex or any of the other boys in foster care would ever be restored. That process would take a lot of time and effort.

But for today, Christmas spirit reigned.

After lunch was over and before night fell, everyone filed out to do their own Christmas traditions.

Chelsea turned toward Tex as they sat on the couch, thrilled to have him with her. It was a dream come true.

As the song on the radio changed to "I'll Be Home for Christmas," tears welled in her eyes.

"What is it?" He tilted his head as he gazed at her in concern.

"For years after you left, every time I heard this song at the holidays, I started thinking about what it would be like if you actually did come home for Christmas. After a while, I gave up on the idea that it might ever be true. But look at you now. You're here. And we're together."

Tex slid his fingers through her hair before letting his hand settle at her neck. "If I have things my way, we'll be together every Christmas for the rest of our lives."

Her breath caught at his words—words she'd been craving for so long.

A slow grin spread across her face. "I would like that. A lot."

His voice softened as he said, "Me too."

Then his lips met hers again. When they pulled away, Chelsea nestled against his chest.

This was what she had prayed about for so many years. She had waited, and God had answered those prayers. Maybe not in the timing she'd wanted. But in His perfect timing.

She'd just gotten comfortable in Tex's embrace when a knock sounded at the door.

The two of them exchanged a glance. Who could be here?

"Are you expecting anyone?" Tex tensed beneath her fingers.

"No, I'm not."

All the worst-case scenarios fluttered through her mind.

She thought all their trouble was over, but what if it wasn't?

Tex stood and muttered, "Stay behind me."

They walked toward the door, and he peered through the peephole before opening it.

Chelsea blinked in surprise when she saw who was on the other side.

"Mom? Dad?" she gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"We couldn't spend Christmas without you. It just didn't feel right." Her mom's gaze shifted behind her, and her eyes widened in surprise. "Tex?"

"It's a long story," Chelsea told her. "But I'm really glad to have him here."

“Then so are we.” Her dad grinned.

Then they all threw their arms around each other as Christmas greetings went around.

“I can’t believe you came back.” Chelsea glanced back and forth from her mom and dad, still in disbelief.

“I can’t believe we thought it was a good idea to leave you for Christmas,” her dad said. “We were so wrong.”

She had a lot to catch up on with them.

A lot.

Including Tex—and Anna.

But this wasn’t the time for it.

Right now, all Chelsea wanted was to spend time enjoying the people she loved the most . . . the people around her now.

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Thank you so much for reading Christmas in the Shadows . If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review.