



Elsie's Strong Shelter (Safe Haven Women's Shelter #5)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: In The Chilling Darkness, Only Love Will Survive

Elsie Sweet loves nothing more than to uplift others, especially the women of her small, southern town. From her beloved secondhand shop to the hours spent volunteering at Safe Haven Women's Shelter. But most importantly, she's devoted herself to helping her roommate, and best friend, raise her adorable little boy.

When her roommate doesn't return home one night, Elsie seeks help from the man who's lived rent free in her head for months. The handsome investigator who pulls her into his orbit with every smile but doesn't seem to know she's alive.

After returning to his hometown broken hearted, Dean Kingston enjoys his new job as a private investigator where he buries himself in work. Not always an easy feat when the sexy Elsie Sweet keeps showing up, tempting him from his no romance rule.

He keeps his distance until Elsie's panicked call for help has him running to her side. Dean agrees to help Elsie find her roommate, making his feelings impossible to ignore.

Elsie relies on Dean's strong presence—falling even harder for her handsome protector—as they uncover a crime that runs deep in their community. Together, they must race against the clock before a boy's mother never makes it home.

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The constant hum of the sewing machine was music to Elsie Sweet's ears. Its steady vibration shook her hands, and her heart swelled at the pleasure of feeding fabric into the old, trusty Singer to create something beautiful out of something old and discarded.

Heck, she'd been lucky to make a career finding treasure out of things most people didn't want to mess with.

Her fingers ached as she finished the hem of a black pencil skirt. A donation that needed altered then taken to Safe Haven Women's Shelter, not a piece of clothing to stay in her secondhand store, Sweet Repeats. She studied her work and, satisfied, set it on the floral armchair beside her.

Not like she could see many of the colorful blooms snaking up the light gray fabric. A mismatched variety of clothing was close to toppling off the back of the chair. Time to take a break, bag up the clothes, and figure out when she could deliver them to the shelter. Then she could focus on her actual business for a while before closing time.

She sighed and studied the mess waiting for her attention. Her distressed, vintage desk was buried under boxes overflowing with knick-knacks and accessories. Bolts of fabric leaned against her dusty pink walls and a subtle, tangy scent reminded her a half-eaten yogurt waited to be thrown away.

"Knock, knock!" The sing-song voice of her roommate, Mila Kinsley, turned her

head toward the doorway. Her blond hair was pulled into a tight ponytail with a bright red head scarf and her fair skin was make-up free. Yellow smiley faces dotted her pale blue scrubs.

A tiny tornado of energy ran past Mila and into the office. Jimmy, Mila's six-year-old son, flung his arms wide as he bounced up and down in front her. His blond hair and cornflower blue eyes mimicked his mother's, his grin always filled with mischief. "Elsie, I'm finally here!"

Elsie struggled to keep her expression serious as she shifted on her chair to face Jimmy. The little boy had lived with her since the day he'd come home from the hospital, and she couldn't love him more if she'd given birth to him herself. "I see that. Are you ready to work?"

He gave one big nod.

Mila grinned from her spot in the doorway. "Really? You could have fooled me when you argued about putting away your clothes before we left."

Jimmy dropped his big eyes to the floor. "Sorry, Mama."

Elsie tucked her thumb under his chin and lifted his eyes to hers. "You promise to listen to your mama next time?"

"Yes."

"And help me at the store until it's time to leave?"

A tiny smile slipped through his forlorn expression. "Yes," he said again.

"Good, because I need a lot of help." Elsie stood and grabbed the skirt she'd finished

altering. “Can you run out and give this to Amy? She’ll know where to put it.”

Jimmy gave her a big hug, grabbed the skirt, then dashed out of the room.

Mila chuckled. “If only he was so passionate about putting his own stuff where I tell him, but he’s just so darn cute I’ll cut him some slack.”

“He’s six. He does a good enough job. I just wish I checked his hands to make sure they weren’t dirty before handing over a piece of clothing.”

“He finished some chocolate in the car,” Mila said, wincing. “You might want to check the skirt before you put it on the sales floor.”

Elsie made a mental note to double-check the skirt then stacked the rest of the tailored items from the chair over the crook of her arm. “That one goes to the shelter. I think I’ve gathered enough items for the event next week.”

She’d worked for months to promote her latest project to collect interview-worthy outfits for women in the community. Although Mrs. Collins, the owner of the shelter, agreed to let her use the little free store she’d established at the shelter for women staying there, this event was community wide. All women were welcome to stop by and browse the carefully cultivated selection to help them look, and feel, their best for upcoming interviews.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Mila said. “I have a bunch of clothes I found in the back of my closet. I put them in a garment bag and laid them across my bed for you.”

“Thanks. I’ll grab them when I get home tonight.”

“Try and wait up for me, will you?” Mila asked. “I’m craving a glass of wine and some good girl time. It’s been too long since we’ve shared both.”

“Everything all right?” Elsie studied her friend. It was true, even though they lived together, they seldom spent much time catching up on each other’s lives or talking about anything beyond Jimmy. Life was busy, and Mila often picked up extra shifts as a home health aide. Elsie never minded contributing toward extra expenses related to the boy she loved so much, but Mila hated asking for money.

“Just miss my best friend. Plus, I need to know how Dean’s doing these days.” Mila widened her eyes, attempting unsuccessfully to appear innocent in her not-so-subtle digging.

Elsie rolled her eyes. “Dean is a friend and nothing more. An acquaintance, really. That’s all.”

“That’s not what Jimmy says.” Mila wiggled her eyebrows and grinned as mischievously as her son. “He gushes about Dean anytime you take him to Jenna’s to play with Oliver and Dean is there, which seems to be more often than not.”

A quick thrill rushed through Elsie’s core, even if it was ridiculous to assume more than a casual friendship with Dean Kingston. “Well, Dean shares Cal’s home office, so yes, he’s there. Besides, Jimmy’s so enamored with Dean’s dog, there’s stars in his eyes that would make him imagine all sorts of things.”

“And I’m sure there’s no other reason for taking Jimmy to Jenna’s place tonight than an innocent play date, right?”

Elsie planted her fists on her hips. “Do you think I’m pimping out your son so I can maybe see a handsome man? You don’t know me at all.”

Mila let out a hoot of laughter. “Honey, we’ve been friends our entire lives. I know you all too well, which is why I want that wine and girl talk tonight. I’m hoping you’ll have something more interesting to share than how Jimmy and his friend rolled

trucks around on an endless track.”

“Don’t set your expectations too high. It’s been a long time since I’ve had interesting news to share about anyone from the opposite sex.”

“You and me both,” Mila said with a wink. “Thanks again for watching Jimmy for me. I’ll see you tonight.”

Elsie was too bogged down with a mountain of clothing to wave before her friend disappeared into the hallway. She sighed, wishing for a moment she’d have better gossip to share with her friend when the time came. But life had taken her down a different path.

One with good friends, a job she loved, and a hopeless crush on a man who’d always be beyond her reach.

Dean sat in a leather bucket seat across from his best friend and business partner, Calvin Spradling. He bounced a tennis ball against the hardwood floor while Calvin finished telling him about his latest case. He’d joined Calvin’s private investigator business the year before when he’d moved back to his hometown of Water’s Edge, Tennessee, with a broken heart and no job.

Since there’d been no openings in local law enforcement, joining forces with Calvin had made sense. An opportunity he’d always be grateful for, especially with how much he’d grown to love working in the private sector. Not to mention how much he enjoyed spending his days with his high school buddy, with his dog Boo usually at his side.

Calvin sat behind the large mahogany desk in his home office. Books lined the built-in shelves at his back, and the fading evening sun sent muted streams of light through the lone window. “Will you throw that damn thing already? Your dog’s about to

jump out of his skin.”

Boo, Dean’s giant German Shepherd, stared at him with big brown eyes. He sat on his haunches and his skin twitched with anticipation.

“You sure you want him running after this thing in here?” He bounced the ball again, and Boo’s head nodded along with the motion. “He’s a moose. Might knock off every book in that shelf if he runs into it.”

“Then don’t throw it far.” Calvin ran a hand through his short, dark hair.

“Not that far to throw it. Space is a little tight, don’t ya think?” Dean tossed the ball high in the air then leaned back in his chair, hooking his ankle over his jean-clad knee.

Boo leapt up and snapped open his jaw, catching the ball then trotting to Dean’s side and laying on the floor.

“Good boy,” Dean said, rubbing a palm over his head.

“Like I was saying, we can close the Peterman case.” Calvin ignored his quip about the cramped office. “How are you doing on the Gilbert file?”

Dean winced and scratched the shallow dent in his chin. “Found the husband. He was holed up a couple towns over with his mistress. Not the news Mrs. Gilbert wanted, but we both know she wasn’t surprised.”

Telling the young wife about her husband’s infidelity had soured his stomach, the sensation still lingering hours later. The way the hopeful gleam in her eye had transformed to anger and sadness would haunt him tonight.

Remind him of his own feelings of betrayal when his wife had left him for another man.

But he'd moved on and his life was beginning again at the ripe old age of thirty-one. If he could put all his baggage in the rearview mirror, so could the young woman he'd spoken with earlier.

"Bastard," Calvin muttered.

"Agreed, but we can't all be as lucky as you and Jenna."

Calvin snorted. "I'm not sure you can call the path Jenna and I took to get back into each other's lives lucky."

"True," Dean said. "More like you're a lucky sonofabitch Jenna would marry you and give you a beautiful family."

Calvin grinned. "Now that I can agree with."

The sourness in Dean's stomach intensified. He'd wanted a family with Gina. Hell, he'd thought they were actively trying to have a baby until she'd blindsided him. Maybe he hadn't moved beyond his baggage as much as he'd thought.

The squeak of the front door opening perked Boo's ears. He lifted his head, and the ball dropped from his now open mouth.

"Jenna and Oliver home?" Dean asked.

Calvin glanced at his smartwatch. "Should be. She and Elsie were taking the boys to the park then heading this way with pizza."

Straightening, he dropped his foot to the floor. "Elsie's here?"

"Should be," Calvin echoed and grinned.

The sound of giggling and of footsteps pattering down the hallway announced the two little boys before they burst into the office. Jenna and Calvin's son, Oliver, ran to Calvin and jumped into his lap while Jimmy dropped next to Boo and threw his arms around his furry neck.

Calvin snuggled Oliver close. "Hey, buddy. Did you have fun at the park?"

Oliver nodded and his dark hair bounced with the motion. He'd grown taller in the time Dean had known him, the roundness of his baby cheeks softening and making him look much older than three. "Yep. We played ball."

Jimmy settled on the floor beside Boo with his feet tucked under him. "Basketball," he clarified. "And Aunt Elsie pushed us on the swings. Then we played tag. Aunt Elsie and Jenna didn't want to chase us though."

Dean couldn't help but smile at the excitement that poured from every word. "Hope you two munchkins tired yourselves out."

"You and me both."

Elsie's silky voice turned Dean toward the doorway and his heart leapt into his throat. She'd tossed her auburn hair into a messy bun and her long-sleeved shirt was just fitted enough to show off every curve.

"But I have a feeling they both have enough energy left in the tank to scarf down pizza and get some more playtime in," Elsie continued. "You guys hungry? We brought enough food to feed a baseball team."

“We were just finishing up for the day,” Calvin said. “Unless Dean wants to talk about opening an office downtown. I understand it’s crowded in here. Not to mention all the chaos that comes along with it.” As if to emphasize his point, Calvin tickled Oliver’s sides until he erupted into laughter.

Watching his best friend become a father was the coolest thing, even if it gave him a tiny twinge of jealousy. He glanced at Elsie from the corner of his eye, his chest tightening as she crouched beside Jimmy and Boo. She was like a second mother to the little boy, her kind heart and gentle soul at center stage whenever he saw them together.

Catching snippets of time with Elsie when she stopped by the house to see Jenna had rekindled a desire of things he thought he’d lost. Had shown him the type of future he wanted, and the kind of woman he wanted to spend that future with.

He wanted a woman to love. One he could trust to keep her word and love him back forever—to give him the family he always wanted.

Memories jolted him back to reality. He’d thought he’d found that forever love and had trusted his ex-wife with his entire being only to be burned. He’d be a fool to think another relationship would end any differently.

Clearing his throat, he pressed his lips in a thin line and dipped his chin. “An office downtown would be less distracting and better for everyone. We should find out if there are any available spaces. For now, I need to get Boo home but thanks for the pizza offer.”

He tried not to overthink the flash of disappointment on Elsie’s face as he stood, called Boo to his side, and walked away from the cozy scene and the woman who could break his heart all over again.

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Light snores broke through the pitter patter of raindrops playing on the sound machine, signaling to Elsie that Jimmy was fast asleep. She tiptoed into his room, careful not to wake him, and stared down at the sleeping child who had captured her whole heart.

Blond hair spilled across his forehead, and his gently rising chest moved the superhero-covered blanket. The one-eyed monster nightlight cast an eerie green glow across the room, highlighting the toys still cluttered on the navy-blue rug.

She'd help him pick them up in the morning, so Mila didn't lecture about keeping his space tidy. By the time they'd returned home, and she'd steered Jimmy through his bedtime routine, she'd been too exhausted to go the extra mile.

And now, wine and girl talk called to her much more than tidying Jimmy's room.

"Goodnight, little man. Love you." She blew him a kiss then tiptoed out to the hallway.

A lamp on the end table in the living room lit her way to the kitchen. The open concept of their small three-bedroom home allowed her to keep an eye on the hallway and ears tuned into any noise Jimmy may make while getting out two stemless wineglasses. She found her favorite bottle of chardonnay in the refrigerator, as well as a few snacks, and carried her bounty on a wooden tray to the coffee table.

Like her store, most of the furniture in her house was secondhand. Painted and tended

to make each piece exactly what she and Mila wanted. The result was an eclectic mix of colors and patterns, anchored by the pale blue walls. Nothing matched completely, but the thick stripes in the couch complimented the distressed white of the end table. The bold colors of the framed prints on the walls were a perfect match for the busy pattern on the armchair tucked beside the fireplace.

Throw in baskets filled with solid-colored blankets placed close to the furniture and an abundance of decorative pillows, and no place in this world could feel more like home.

Wanting to chase the slight chill from the air, she built a fire then grabbed a burnt orange throw and tossed it over her lap as she settled into the corner of the sofa. She poured herself a glass of wine and sighed. She'd lied to her best friend earlier. Told her she had no feelings for Dean. But his odd reaction to her pizza invitation earlier hit her with a block of disappointment. Something she couldn't ignore any longer.

She took a sip of the cool white wine. Whatever. She'd talk it all through with Mila and hopefully get the scoop on what her bestie had going on. Tomorrow she'd wake up lighter and with more clarity. Setting her glass on the end table, she opened a book on her phone and waited.

Elsie woke with a jolt. A touch of cool air skimmed her cheek. The light from the end table shone bright, and she blinked against its attack. The fire had gone out and the chill from the dark night outside rushed down the open flue.

Groggy, she reached for her phone and stared wide-eyed at the time.

4:32 am.

The wine bottle and snacks still sat on the table, untouched except the single glass she'd poured before she must have dozed off.

Weird. Mila always woke her and encouraged her to go to her room if she fell asleep on the couch. Her meticulous roommate most definitely would put away the food so it wouldn't spoil or attract rodents.

A rush of alarm mingled with fatigue and pushed her to her feet. Mila's name sat on the tip of her tongue, but she held it in. She didn't want to wake Jimmy. Jogging down the hall with her phone clutched in her hand, she swung into Mila's room and flipped on the light.

A neatly made bed greeted her.

Anxiety squeezed her chest. Mila should have been home hours ago. She checked her phone. Maybe she'd missed a call or text, explaining her delay.

Nothing.

Her hands trembled, and a lump formed in her throat.

Calm down. It's probably a big misunderstanding. Just call Mila, she'll laugh and explain everything.

Blowing out a shaking breath, she dialed Mila's number and pressed the phone to ear. Her heartbeat pounded harder with each ring.

"You've reached Mila. Leave a message and I'll call you back as soon?—"

Elsie disconnected before the voice message ended and quickly shot off a text.

Mila, call me asap. Wondering where you are.

She hit the send button then stared at the screen. "Come on, Mila. Write me back.

Call me. Anything to let me know you're all right."

Seconds turned into minutes, each one causing increasingly horrifying scenarios of what was keeping Mila from her phone—from her home—to spiral in her mind. Maybe she'd gotten into a car accident and was hurt or scared. Maybe she'd been taken to the county hospital, and no one had thought to call her roommate.

Unable to wait for a response to her text, she called again.

"You've reached Mila. Leave?—"

Frustrated tears clouded her vision. This wasn't like Mila. She wouldn't just not come home after work. Wouldn't not call or text or let Elsie know what kept her out later than expected. Not when they'd made plans to chat. Not when her son waited in his bed.

Not knowing what else to do, she called 911. She tapped her foot against the carpeted floor while waiting for the dispatcher to answer.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"My roommate hasn't come home from work, and I can't get ahold of her. She won't answer her phone. Won't text me back. I don't know what to do." Not wanting to wake Jimmy, she shut off the light and hurried back to the living room.

"Okay. When was she due home?"

"A little over five hours ago." She wrapped her free arm around her middle, praying she wouldn't get sick.

"And you said she was working this evening?"

“Yes,” Elsie said, irritation sharpening her voice.

“Could she have stopped somewhere else after work? A significant other? A diner or bar? A friend’s house?”

“Not without calling to tell me. I know her. Her son is asleep in his bed and will want to see his mom before school. She wouldn’t leave me to worry. Wouldn’t go some unknown place and chance not seeing her son when he wakes up.”

“Ma’am, I can understand why you’d be upset, but at this time there’s no reason to suspect anything is wrong. If she hasn’t come home by tomorrow evening, contact the sheriff’s department.”

“Are you serious?” Elsie shrieked. “You can’t do anything?”

“I’m sorry, but at this time, there’s not anything I can do to help. I’m sure it’s just a big misunderstanding.”

Disgust swirled in her stomach as Elsie disconnected. No way this was a damn misunderstanding. Something was wrong. She could feel it in her bones, and she wouldn’t sit around and wait to do something to help her best friend. If the police couldn’t help her, she’d call someone who could.

Scrolling to Dean’s information, she pressed his number and held her breath.

“Elsie? Is everything all right?” Grogginess coated his words, but nothing could hide his concern.

“Something’s wrong. Mila hasn’t come home. I need your help.”

Darkness swallowed the world outside Dean’s truck as he sped toward Elsie’s house

in Pine Valley. He cut the time in half, his racing heart keeping his foot pressed on the gas pedal. By the time he reached the house tucked in a quiet neighborhood, he'd spoken with everyone he could think of and still had no idea where Mila was.

Not the news he'd hoped to deliver to Elsie.

Turning into the driveway, his headlights bounced off the front picture window and highlighted Elsie's slender form. His entire body hummed with a need to gather her in his arms and comfort her. Tell her everything would be all right and he'd do whatever he could to find Mila.

As soon as he cut the engine, he jumped out of the truck and jogged up the sidewalk. The front door flung open before he reached the top step of the porch.

Elsie stood in the doorway with her arms wrapped around her middle and fear in her eyes. Tears fell down her cheeks. "Did you find her?"

The hope in her voice tightened his throat. "Not yet."

Closing her eyes, she inhaled a deep breath and her body trembled.

"Hey, now." He stepped forward, guiding her into the house, and closed the door behind him. "We'll find her. I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation for why she hasn't called or come home."

Elsie melted against him and sniffled, her tears soaking through his long-sleeved t-shirt. "What do I tell Jimmy if she's not home by the time he wakes up?"

Dean rested a hand against her spine and moved his palm in a small circle. "We'll figure that out when the time comes, but let's hope it doesn't come to that."

She pulled back and stared up at him with wide eyes. “We?”

He lifted the side of his mouth. “I’ll stay here with you as long as you want. No one should be alone when they’re scared and worried about someone they love.”

“Thank you,” she said falling against him again.

His arms went back around her, and he breathed her in. A combination of citrus and earth tightened his stomach. “Let’s take a seat. We didn’t get a chance to talk much on the phone.”

She led the way to the white and blue striped sofa and the loss of her body against his was almost painful. He gritted his teeth and opted for the frilly armchair in the corner. As much as he wanted to be close to her, self-preservation warned him to keep a little distance.

“Looks like you had quite the night planned,” he said, nodding in the direction of the wine and snacks on the coffee table.

A whisper of a smile touched her full lips. “We planned to have some long-awaited girl talk when she got home from work. That’s how I know she didn’t go to some guy’s house I don’t know about or stop by a bar. She wouldn’t have left me waiting for her. Knowing I planned to stay up so we could hang out.”

He leaned forward and nodded along with her words. She’d already told him most of this on the phone, but nervous energy poured off her in waves and he understood she needed to say it all again. To feel as if she was helping in some way—if only by repeating information.

Elsie wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Something happened. I just know it. Why wouldn’t the police help me? Why isn’t someone out there looking for Mila

right now?”

“Mila needs to be missing longer than a few hours before law enforcement will step in. In this case, she hasn’t returned from work yet, which doesn’t seem alarming if you don’t know the situation.”

A flash of irritation pinched Elsie’s face. “That’s ridiculous. It’s the middle of the night, and I can’t get a hold of her. What else has to happen to show the police something’s wrong?”

He rubbed his palms up and down his thighs, hating the bureaucratic bullshit tying everyone’s hands. Having the freedom to act as he saw fit was one of the things he loved most about giving up his badge and becoming a private investigator.

“They know something’s wrong. I promise you that. I put in a call to the sheriff’s department on the way here. We lucked out. Sadie’s working.” Sadie Pennel was not only a smart and respected deputy, she also volunteered at the women’s shelter with Elsie and Jenna. She’d taken what he had to say very seriously and assured him that she’d do whatever she could—both on and off duty.

“You talked to Sadie? What’d she say?” Elsie scooted to the edge of the couch as if ready to leap into action herself.

“She’d head out and search the roads for accidents or anything else suspicious. If you know where Mila was working tonight, it’d help to pass that information along. Give her a better idea of where to look.”

Elsie lifted her hands then let them fall on her lap. “I have no clue. We could call the agency she works for, but chances are low anyone is in the main office to take our call. I know she travels a lot. Helps folks in Pine Valley, Water’s Edge, and places in between. She could be anywhere.” Sobs shook her shoulders, and she covered her

face with her hands. “Oh God. She could be anywhere. ”

Unable to stay away a second longer, he hurried to the couch and sat beside her. He folded her hands in his and lowered them, pinning her with his gaze. “Listen. We will find her. I promise you. Do you know the name of the company she works for?”

“Hometown Healers. Her boss’s name is Tamara, but I don’t know her last name.”

“Perfect. I’ll put in a call to the company and see if I can get anyone on the phone. If no one answers, I can at least leave a message and give them a heads up. Why don’t you make a pot of coffee? We can brainstorm a little. Keep calling Mila and even speak with Sadie again. How does that sound?”

Elsie blew out a long breath and stood. “Okay. I feel better having you here. Thank you again for coming.”

He smiled up at her. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be right now.”

Watching her walk into the kitchen, he winced at how true his words were.

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The alarm on Elsie's phone cut through the tension in the kitchen, setting her on edge. As she rubbed the fatigue from her eyes, it was like grains of sand scratched against her eyeballs. "I have to wake Jimmy for school. What am I supposed to tell him?"

Dean sat across from her at the table, a fresh cup of coffee in his mug. He frowned as wisps of steam curled into the air. "Tell him his mom got caught up at work and will be home later. Hopefully, that's the truth."

"Okay." She stood and her chest tightened. She held on to Dean's words. She wasn't lying to Jimmy. With any luck once they touched base with Mila's boss, they'd discover that's exactly what had happened. Maybe her phone had died, and she couldn't call. Or one of her clients had an emergency and she was helping them. "I want to make this morning as normal for Jimmy as possible. He doesn't need to worry about his mom all day."

"Agreed. Is there anything I can do to help?"

His offer warmed the icy fear encasing her heart. She'd grown up with two loving parents who'd always done what they could to help one another. Who both pulled their weight and didn't conform to typical gender roles. Some mornings her mom made breakfast for her and her siblings, some mornings it was her dad.

Jimmy had his mom and his adopted aunt to shower him with love and guidance daily, but he'd never had a strong male role model. Didn't have a father figure to

show him how a man should behave.

“Mila usually makes him something light to eat for breakfast. If you wouldn’t mind getting that started, I can wrangle him out of bed. Little man’s a pretty sound sleeper so it’s not always easy to wake him.”

Dean took a sip of coffee then rubbed his palms together. “I’m on it.”

She couldn’t dwell on her appreciation as she padded down the hall. The pitter patter of rain from Jimmy’s sound machine filled the room, and streams of muted sun filtered through the thin curtain. Dread anchored her feet to the plush carpet in the doorway. Jimmy wasn’t the type of kid to accept something at face value. If his routine was disrupted, he’d want to know why.

Especially if that meant his mom wasn’t home to get him ready for school.

Okay. She could do this. Paste on a smile. Get Jimmy on the bus and off to school so she and Dean could figure out their next steps.

Moving into the room, she switched off the sound machine and sat on the edge of the twin bed.

Jimmy laid on his stomach, his head facing the wall and legs extended. He’d gotten so big, his features maturing so fast, but the fitted pajamas with video game controllers confirmed his little boy status.

“Good morning, buddy,” she whispered and skimmed her fingertips against the soft skin of his neck.

Stretching his arms above his head, he groaned and twisted onto his back. “Mama?”

She smiled at his groggy confusion. He hadn't opened his eyes, but no doubt he could tell her voice was different than Mila's deeper tone. "It's Elsie, honey. Time to wake up and get ready for school."

He blinked open his eyes and wrinkled his nose. "Where's Mama?"

The question landed like a missile square in the chest. "Your mom got stuck at work. She'll be home later. For now, let's get you up and around. The bus will be here soon."

He rolled back over and burrowed under the blanket. "I don't want to go to school. I want to sleep."

The pitiful whine tugged at her heartstrings. A part of her wished she could let him stay home, but that wasn't a good idea. Not today. "I'll give you another five minutes while I get your clothes out. How does that sound?"

"Fine," he said around a yawn. "Don't pick out baby clothes though."

She held back a chuckle and walked to the long white dresser with dinosaur heads as knobs. "It's supposed to be pretty chilly today. Windy and overcast. How about a hoodie and joggers?"

"Okay," he said.

She found his favorite superhero hoodie and a pair of gray pants and laid them on the foot of the bed. "Do you need me to pick out your socks and undies, too?"

"No!" Jimmy giggled and sat up.

"Just checking. Get yourself dressed then come meet me in the kitchen for breakfast."

He sighed but swung his feet over the edge of the mattress.

“Ten minutes,” she warned and closed the door after stepping back into the hall.

She followed the smell of something yummy back into the kitchen, and what she found was almost enough to make her forget the terrifying reason Dean was in her house first thing in the morning. He stood in front of the stove and stirred eggs in one pan while sausage sizzled in another. Toast popped up from the toaster on the counter. A jug of orange juice and three glasses sat in the middle of the table. “What did you do?”

He turned toward her with a grin and shrugged. “Made breakfast. Scrambled eggs, sausage links, and toast. Hope that’s okay.”

“Are you serious? Jimmy usually gets a bowl of cereal and I’m lucky to grab a protein bar on my way out the door. This is a feast. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Grab me a plate for the sausage?”

She crossed over the tile floor and found a serving platter in the cabinet then pulled out three plates. She slid the platter on the counter next to the stove and set everything else on the table.

“I’ll scoop the eggs on the plates, so we don’t dirty more dishes then necessary,” Dean said, carrying the hot pan to the table.

“Great plan. What do you like on your toast? Butter? Jam? My mom makes the best homemade jelly. Jimmy calls it Nana Jelly.”

“Then I’ll take Nana Jelly.”

She grabbed the rest of what was needed for their breakfast as Jimmy walked in the room wide-eyed and mostly dressed except his socks and shoes.

“Mr. Dean? You came to my house to make me breakfast?”

Dean’s grin widened, showcasing the dimples beneath the scruff on his face. “Sure did. Hope you’re hungry. I made you all my specialties.”

“Where’s Boo?” Jimmy asked.

“Had to leave him at home this morning. Sorry, bud.”

Elsie’d been so wrapped up in her worry over Mila she hadn’t thought about his dog. Boo went everywhere with Dean. The poor pooch was probably lonely and needing to be let out soon. “Is he all right by himself?”

“He’s fine. Besides, if he were here, he’d try to steal all the sausage. Come on and eat before everything gets cold.”

Jimmy sat and grabbed a link from the platter. He kicked his legs and took a bite then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “So good. We have to save some for Mama.”

His innocent request erased Elsie’s appetite. She forced a smile. “You’re a thoughtful boy.”

He shrugged and took a drink of juice. “Will Mama come with us to the shelter after school? It’s Tuesday so she usually doesn’t, but since she’s workin’ late maybe she can help us with donations. You said we have lots to do so the ladies have pretty clothes for their new jobs. Then we can get ice cream. Do you like ice cream, Mr. Dean?”

Dean stilled, mouth partly opened, as if trying to keep up with the constant stream of thoughts pouring from Jimmy's mouth.

Elsie chuckled but struggled with how to respond. Hopefully Mila would be home long before the school day let out and all of Jimmy's plans would happen. But she didn't want to make promises she couldn't keep.

"Can I call Mama? I want to say hi before I get on the bus," Jimmy said before she could respond.

All the air left her lungs. She cleared her throat to buy herself a few more seconds so she said the right thing.

"Your mom's awfully busy," Dean said, stepping in and saving her. "She really wishes she could talk to you before school, but I don't think that's gonna happen today. But Elsie and I will get you that ice cream to make it up to you."

Jimmy's eyes lit with excitement. "Two scoops of chocolate?"

"Make it three. Are you done eating?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Then go finish getting ready so Elsie can get you on the bus."

Jimmy jumped from his chair and ran to the hall. He stopped suddenly and turned back to face them, frowning. "Do you think Mrs. Pauly's all right?"

His question knocked Elsie off center as she struggled to put a face to the name. "Who's Mrs. Pauly?"

“You know. The lady she helps sometimes. Mama says we have to look out for those who can’t help themselves. That’s what she does for Mrs. Pauly.”

His matter-of-fact statement brought tears to her eyes. She sniffed them back. “I’m sure she’s just fine.”

Taking her word, he nodded then continued to his room.

Dean rested a hand on her shoulder and gave a little squeeze. “Do you know who he’s talking about?”

“No,” she said, grateful for his presence.

“As soon as I clean up, I’ll make some calls. Maybe Mrs. Pauly knows where we can find Mila.”

Dean wiped his hands on the kitchen towel and tossed it on the counter. Dishes were washed and put away, leftovers stored in the fridge. Elsie waited outside with Jimmy for the bus. Now was the perfect time to make a few calls.

Grabbing his phone, he dialed Mila’s workplace again. Someone may be in the office now. After four rings he feared he was out of luck, but at the fifth someone finally answered.

“Good morning. Hometown Helpers, this Ana. How can I assist you, today?”

“Hi, Ana. I need to speak with Tamara. Is she in yet?”

“One second please.”

Elevator music blared in his ear. He rummaged through a few drawers and searched

for a pen and paper. Finding what he needed, he refilled his mug with fresh coffee and sat at the table.

“Hello, this is Tamara.”

A twinge of irritation muddled the relief at finally touching base with Mila’s boss. He’d hoped the woman would have called him immediately after hearing Mila hadn’t come home once her shift had ended. “Hi. My name is Dean Kingston. I left a message for you.”

“Yes, I was just about to return your call. I pulled up Mila’s schedule from last night and personally spoke with all her clients myself. She visited each one and completed her shift. As always, no complaints.”

Resting his elbow on the table, Dean sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “When you spoke with the last client Mila saw, did they mention if she planned to stop anywhere after work? Was she upset or irritated? Acting strangely?”

“The man I spoke with only said Mila had arrived on time and left on time.” A beat of hesitation pulsed on the line. “Has she still not returned home?”

“No, and we haven’t heard from her at all. Her roommate is extremely worried, and I’ve spoken with a deputy at the sheriff’s department. Any information you can give might be helpful in locating her.”

Tamara released a shaky breath. “If I knew anything, I’d tell you. I promise. Mila is a great worker and a sweet girl. I’d hate if anything happened to her.”

“Is it possible for me to speak with the last person she cared for?” He tapped the tip of his pencil against the pad of paper, needing something he could use to start a trail.

“I’m...I’m sorry. I’m not allowed to give out that information.”

Damn red tape. He’d been around long enough to understand the bureaucratic regulations around the medical field were better left to badges and warrants. “I get it, and I don’t want you to do anything to get in trouble.”

Elsie walked into the room and leaned against the counter. Her body was rigid, her fears written all over her face as she stared at him and chewed her thumbnail.

He offered her a weak smile. “I have one more question for you,” he said, continuing his conversation with Tamara. “Did Mila visit Mrs. Pauly last night?”

“Umm, Mrs. Pauly is no longer one of our clients. She hasn’t been in Mila’s rotation for the past month.”

“Since she’s not one of your clients anymore, can I get her address?” He held his breath, praying for some breadcrumbs.

“I’m sorry, but that’s still not allowed.”

He frowned. “Thanks. Please let me know if you think of anything else you can tell me. My number was on the message.”

Disconnecting, he set his phone by the blank sheet of paper and sighed.

“Guessing she didn’t give you much.” Elsie plopped onto the seat beside him.

Dean scrubbed his hands over his face. The rough whiskers against his palms reminded him he needed to stop home to shower, change and let out Boo soon. “Just that Mila made it to every appointment on time last night and left them all when she was supposed to.”

“And Mrs. Pauly?”

“Isn’t a client anymore.” He lifted his hands then let them fall. “Hasn’t been for a month. Maybe Mila’s been checking on her while off the clock, or maybe Jimmy just tossed out her name because he’s a kid and some weird memory stuck in his brain.”

Elsie shook her head. “I don’t think so. What Mila said to him, it was a lesson. She made an example of something happening in her life. My bet is she still sees this woman. Takes care of her any way she can. That’s something Mila would do.”

“Okay. Then sounds like the first thing I need to do is locate Mrs. Pauly.”

“We,” she said, voice firm. “What we need to do. I’m closing the shop for the day, and I have until Jimmy comes home from school to help whatever way I can. With any luck, Mila will be home to get Jimmy off the bus.”

He nodded, hoping she was right. But the sinking pit in his stomach told him Mila wouldn’t be walking through the door soon because of a misunderstanding. He just had to do whatever it took to find her before the worst happened and Mila never made it home.

The October breeze rustled through the trees and whipped Elsie's hair across her face. Anxiety bounced inside her, keeping her on high alert. She tightened her grip on the phone she hadn't set down since they left her house twenty minutes before, as if she could force Mila to call by sheer will.

Boo's excited barks thundered through the front door of Dean's cabin, tucked deep in the woods on the outside of town. She winced, hating how upset the dog was at being left home alone for hours. "Poor guy. You should have brought him to my place."

Dean unlocked the door and shrugged. "Wasn't exactly sure where the night would lead so I thought it'd be wiser to leave him home. Don't let his pathetic whines fool you. He's fine."

The door swung open, and Boo bounded out. His tail wagged like crazy as he jumped on Dean. The dog swiped his tongue against his owner's face.

"Okay, buddy. Good to see you, too. Get down."

Boo dropped his paws then zeroed in on Elsie, running to her side and leaning all his weight against her legs. His tail thumped against her shin, and she had no doubt he'd leave a pound of silky fur on the black material.

"Hey, there, big guy," she said, swiping her hand along his back. "Sorry I took your dad away for so long."

He barked as if to say she'd been forgiven and bolted into the front yard to relieve himself before leading the way into the house.

Dean chuckled and swept a hand toward the door, gesturing her inside. "Follow the boss."

Ducking her head, she stepped into the surprisingly charming home. Dark wood lined the floors, broken up by cozy rugs to designate the different areas—living room, dining area, even Boo's spot complete with a burgundy dog bed and food dishes. The open concept flowed into the kitchen where white marble countertops capped cabinets painted a deep gray.

The sound of crunching gravel turned her toward the still-open door. A deputy's cruiser pulled in beside Dean's truck. "Looks like someone's here."

Boo growled and his body went rigid.

She rested a hand on the top of his head to keep him in place.

Dean took one step over the threshold and squinted. "It's Sadie. I told her to let me know if she learned anything. She must have come straight here after her shift."

Knots twisted in Elsie's stomach. As much as she'd enjoyed getting to know Sadie over the past year while volunteering at the women's shelter, watching her climb out of her car in her uniform caused goosebumps to ripple up Elsie's arms.

Boo barked and trotted out to greet the newest arrival.

Sadie waved and strolled up the porch steps. "Morning. How you doing, Elsie?"

"Not good. Did you find something?" She swallowed past the lump in her throat and

clenched her hands into fists. She'd been on the receiving end of life-changing news before, but the last time she'd been blindsided. This time, her heart stalled as she waited for whatever Sadie had come to say.

"Can we sit down to talk?" Sadie asked, a frown pulling down her mouth. Fatigue etched lines around the corners of her eyes and loose wisps of hair slipped out of her low ponytail.

Nausea swam in Elsie's stomach. Her knees turned to Jell-O.

Dean hurried to her side and steadied her with a firm hand on the small of her back. "Sitting's a good idea." He led her to the brown leather sofa and sat beside her, sliding his palm up to rest between her shoulder blades.

Sadie closed the door behind her and settled onto the oversized chair across from the sofa. "Mila's car was found early this morning."

The information slammed against Elsie like a freight train. She squeezed her eyes shut to stop the threatening tears from falling.

Dean's arm wrapped around her, his free hand reaching for hers. "Was she in an accident? How is she now?"

"She wasn't in the car," Sadie said.

Elsie's eyes flew wide. "What do you mean? Where was she?"

Sadie shrugged. "I don't know where she is. Her car was found in the middle of nowhere with plenty of gas and no discernable mechanical issues. No way to know if she left the car there or something else happened."

Shock and annoyance overshadowed the fear in her gut. “Of course someone else did this. Someone took her car—took her—and left her stuff somewhere. She wouldn’t just leave her vehicle and walk away. She wouldn’t worry me and Jimmy.” Hysteria spiraled inside her, squeezing her windpipe and making her words harder to get out.

“Honey, I don’t disagree,” Sadie said, reaching across the empty space to rest a hand on her knee. “But we have to look at every option. We can’t miss something because we didn’t want to think the impossible might have happened.”

The reassurance wasn’t enough to remove the unease from Elsie’s shoulders. “What happens now?”

Sadie settled back in her chair. “An investigation has been opened at the sheriff’s department, with me as lead investigator. Tommy and Owen will be helping, as well as city police when needed—both from Pine Valley and Water’s Edge. Law enforcement from the whole county is on alert, and Mila has officially been named a missing person.”

The tears she’d held back rushed out at the declaration. This is what she wanted when she’d called the police last night. For them to take her seriously and go out and find Mila. Now that she was on their radar, they would find her and bring her home.

Because anything less than Mila back safe and sound with her son would be a nightmare she didn’t want to experience.

Boo whined and trotted to the front of the couch, laying his head on Elsie’s lap. Dean tightened his hold around her, keeping her upright when he felt her muscles go lax.

“I know this is hard,” Sadie said, compassion clear in her steady voice. “But we need to move quickly. Is there anything at all you can tell me? Is there anyone who would want to hurt Mila? Anyone who’s given her bad vibes or made her feel a strange

way?”

Elsie shook her head. “No. Nothing.”

He locked eyes with Sadie for a beat. He could see the wheels spinning in her head. Understood her thinking. Hell, he’d been an officer for years before moving back to Water’s Edge. The next few hours were crucial for collecting as much information on Mila as possible if they wanted to find her alive, and some of what they found might not be easy for Elsie.

Sadie refocused on Elsie. “What about the opposite of that. A guy who’s been calling lately? Asking her out or showing her positive attention?”

“I swear, nothing out of the usual has happened. She would have told me.”

Dean unhooked his arm from around her shoulders and clutched both of her hands in his lap. Her skin was ice-cold. “You mentioned you two planned to talk last night. Do you think she had something to tell you?”

A light stain kissed her cheeks, and she glanced down at their joined hands.

“What is it?” he asked, sensing she was holding back.

Shifting, she bit into her bottom lip. “I can’t be sure, but she indicated the talk was more about me. Wanting to know my thoughts on certain things that had nothing to do with her.”

His gaze went back to Sadie, who raised both dark brows. Curiosity brewed inside him, but he wouldn’t push. If Elsie thought for a millisecond any knowledge she held would lead to locating Mila, she’d spill all her secrets.

“We may need to look in your home,” Sadie said, drawing attention back her way. “Search through Mila’s things. See if anything points to where she could be or who may want to harm her.”

A shiver shook Elsie’s shoulders. “Go ahead. Do whatever you have to. I just want to be there when it happens.”

“Absolutely. I can execute the search if it makes you more comfortable.”

“You’ll need to come while Jimmy’s at school,” Dean cut in, thinking two steps ahead. Sadie and her fellow deputies probably already had a plan of what they needed to do and when, but the child’s well-being was of utmost importance.

Elsie squeezed his hand and stared up at him with watery eyes. “Thank you,” she mouthed, as if the words were lodged in her throat.

Her turmoil was like a weight on his chest, and he offered her a tight smile. This was why he was here. Not only to offer a hand in helping find Mila, but to support Elsie. She shouldn’t have to carry this burden alone.

“Of course,” Sadie said. “We can head back to your house now, if that works for you two. I’d like to see her room sooner rather than later.”

“We’ll meet you there in twenty minutes,” Dean said. He still needed to clean up and grab a shower. He could call Calvin during the drive back to town and explain the situation. He had a couple of cases he was juggling, but nothing Calvin couldn’t handle if he took off a day or two.

Sadie stood. “If you don’t mind, I’ll have Tommy meet us there. I’ve been awake all night and don’t want to miss anything. A second set of eyes is always good.”

Elsie nodded.

“We’ll see you soon.” Dean jumped to his feet and walked Sadie to the door.

He’d worked with a lot of great cops in his life, and Sadie was a damn good one. He had total faith in her, and knowing Tommy and Owen were on the case as well loosened the knot a bit in his stomach. The Wells brothers were a staple in Water’s Edge and law enforcement was in their blood.

Before Sadie stepped outside, he stopped her with a light touch on the arm. “Is there anything else you can tell me? Something to help Elsie feel a little better about all of this?”

“Trust me. I wish I had more information to share. I’ll see you both soon.”

He returned to the living room. Boo had jumped on to the couch and snuggled close to Elsie. She looked so small, so scared on his oversized furniture. Her face ashen and pale, her eyes red and puffy. Her misery shredded his heart.

He needed to move quick to clean up and get back to Elsie’s place in time, but he couldn’t walk away from her yet. Crouching in front of her, he rested one hand on her knee while petting Boo with the other.

“This is so surreal,” she said, her gaze fixed straight ahead and voice barely above a whisper. “I can’t believe anyone would hurt her. That anyone would steal her from her family. It has to be a mistake. An accident. Some weird cosmic twist of fate that took her somewhere. Somewhere we have to find.”

He swallowed the logical response circling his brain. There was no reason to crush her hopes but statistically speaking, something bad had probably happened to Mila. “We’ll figure this out. Mila has a smart and dedicated team of sheriff’s deputies

searching for her right now. I'll talk to Calvin, and I know he'll help anyway he can, and I won't stop until we bring Mila home. I promise you, okay?"

She drew in a shuddering breath. "Okay."

"Are you all right here with Boo while I get ready?"

"I'm good."

Straightening to his full height, he ran a hand over his shaggy hair. He wished he could jump in the shower but there wasn't enough time. Not only did he need to get them back to town, but he didn't want to leave Elsie's side for too long. Not right now when the bomb Sadie had dropped was so fresh.

"If you want water or something to eat, help yourself."

She pressed a hand to her stomach. "I don't think I could eat anything right now."

"Understandable. I'll be quick."

He cast her one long look before hurrying down the hall to his bedroom. He had to steel his nerves and gather his thoughts if he was going to be of any use to Elsie right now. The last thing she needed was him acting based on emotions and whatever this unshakeable attraction was between them.

No, he had to put a lock on the feelings she stirred inside him. Not just for her sake, but for his. Dealing with a missing persons case was something he could handle. Getting lost in Elsie's big hazel eyes was not. Elsie Sweet was off limits, and he'd be wise not to forget it.

Elsie's hands trembled as she took a step back and let the two sheriff's deputies into her home. Funny how she'd seen Sadie and her husband, Deputy Tommy Wells, in their uniforms countless times but she'd never put much thought into the authority they held.

There'd been no reason to see them as anything other than friends.

But this was different. They entered her house—her sanctuary—with deep frowns and black duffle bags. Determination was clear with every stride, every movement, every calculated glance.

Tommy dipped his chin. His eyes were filled with concern. "Morning, Elsie. So sorry about this. We'll be as quick as we can."

She rested her palm on Boo's head, grateful for his presence. Almost as grateful as she was for Dean standing behind her. "Take your time."

Sadie set the duffle on the couch. She pulled out two pairs of rubber gloves and a large bag labeled Evidence then tossed a pair of gloves to Tommy.

A chill raced down Elsie's spine.

As if sensing her unease, Dean took a step closer. "You're okay," he whispered in her ear.

She relaxed against him, needing his support now more than ever.

“We’ll start in Mila’s room,” Sadie said. “Do you mind showing us the way?”

Dread weighed her down with every step as she led the tragic parade down the hall. She pushed open Mila’s door. Keeping her feet rooted to the carpeted floor, she leaned across the threshold and flipped on the light.

“Thanks.” Tommy gave her a tight-lipped smile, firming the lines in his clean-shaven baby face.

Sadie walked past her and went straight to the nightstand on the side of the neatly made bed. She opened the top drawer with her glove-covered hand and shuffled through whatever she found inside.

Elsie wrapped one arm around her waist, propping her other elbow on her forearm so she could bite her thumbnail. “I don’t like this,” she whispered to Dean who stood beside her. “I understand it’s necessary, but it feels like an invasion of Mila’s privacy.”

“We don’t have to watch,” Dean said. “You can trust Sadie and Tommy.”

“I’d want Mila to watch if someone was digging through my stuff,” she said.

Done with the contents of the nightstand, Sadie searched under the bed. Apparently satisfied nothing of interest was there, she then folded down the comforter, smoothing her palm across the sage green sheets.

Elsie flinched. “What is she doing?”

“They need to make sure nothing was hidden under the blankets. They’ll probably

search under the mattress as well. They need to look at any place Mila could have hidden personal items. Things she might not want Jimmy or even you to find.”

As if Sadie had heard Dean’s explanation and wanted to prove him right, she grabbed the edge of the mattress and hoisted it into the air. “Tommy. Can you give me a hand with this?”

“Okay. That’s enough for me. I can’t stand here and watch any longer.” Elsie brushed past Dean toward her own room and sank onto the edge of the bed. She dropped her head into her hands. She wanted to cry, to scream, to pull at her hair in frustration. But what would be the point? It wouldn’t help find Mila. It’d just keep her in the same damn place, with the chance of making her look a little crazy in the process.

“Is it okay if I come in? Or would you rather have a few minutes alone?” Dean asked.

“Come sit,” she said, her face still buried in her palms. The mattress dipped beside her, and the feel of his strong body steadied her. Made her feel a little safer in this chaotic world she’d stumbled into.

Boo whined and leapt onto the bed beside her.

Flanked by the two protective and supportive beings, she steadied herself as best she could and dropped her hands to her lap. “I hate just sitting around and waiting. I want to help find Mila and bring her home.”

“Then let’s figure out how to make that happen.”

“Really?”

He lifted a shoulder and slid his lips to the side. “That’s why you called me right? Because I’m a private investigator who knows how to handle this type of

investigation.”

She forced a smile. Yes, Dean had all kinds of experience with locating people and closing cases, but that hadn’t been the main reason she’d reached out to him.

If she was being honest, even with only herself, in her darkest hour Dean was the person she wanted by her side. She could have called Jenna, who would have roped Calvin into helping, but that’s not who she’d needed.

She’d needed Dean.

“You’re right. What can we do that the police aren’t already doing?”

“Let them talk to Mila’s boss and handle warrants for speaking with the clients she saw last night. HIPPA creates a lot of red tape that’s impossible for a civilian to get through. I think we should track down Mrs. Pauly.”

As much as she appreciated that he’d believed not only Jimmy, but her defense of the little boy’s memory, seeking out an elderly woman that used to be on Mila’s client list didn’t seem like a plausible lead. “Do you think this woman hurt Mila?”

“No, but she may be the last person who saw her. If she stopped by after her last shift to check in, Mrs. Pauly might know where she went after.”

Elsie struggled not to roll her eyes. “We’ve been over this. She was coming straight?—”

He held up a hand to stop her. “I know. Straight home for girl talk. But if she made a pit stop at Mrs. Pauly’s, she may have planned to stop somewhere else quickly before heading home. Maybe she wanted a certain snack or brand of wine so told Mrs. Pauly she hoped she’d find a store open that late. Or maybe she wanted to fill her gas tank

and mentioned she hated stopping at a gas station at night. Any small tidbit that may have been said could lead us somewhere we may have never expected.”

“I never would have looked at it like that.”

He bumped his shoulder against hers and winked. “Which is why you’re an amazing business owner but don’t work as a PI.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “True. Are you sure you have time to spend on this today? You do work as a PI, and I don’t want Calvin upset. Or for you to neglect paying customers.”

All hints of amusement left his face. “Calvin will understand. You’re more important than anything else I have in the works. I’m here with you until this is over.”

Excitement tingled inside her for a brief moment before she stomped it out. Mila was missing and most likely in danger. Now wasn’t the time to get swept away by sweet words, even if they were coming from the man she’d had a crush on for the past few months.

“Thank you. So how do we find this mysterious Mrs. Pauly?”

“Are you two talking about Maxine Pauly?” Tommy stood in the doorway, his brows knit in confusion.

“Do you know her?” Elsie asked.

“Sure. She lives in Water’s Edge, close to downtown. She was a good friend of my grandma’s.”

Hope scooted Elsie to the edge of the bed. “Does she have health issues? Would she

need a home health aide to take care of her?”

Tommy scratched his chin. “She’s pretty old, and lives alone. Now that you mention it, I remember my pappy saying she’d suffered a stroke last year. Would make sense she might need a little help.”

Elsie straightened. Maybe this investigation stuff wouldn’t be so difficult after all. In a matter of seconds, they’d figured out who Mrs. Pauly was and where she lived. She only hoped that finding Mila would be just as easy.

Dean parked his truck outside Mrs. Pauly’s house and shut off the engine. The small home had a square concrete stoop, white siding, and one car garage. Flower boxes housed deep purple and orange mums, and a vertical sign beside the door announced Welcome .

“No car in the driveway,” Elsie said. “Do you think she’s home?”

He shrugged and unfastened his seatbelt. “Her vehicle could be in the garage, or she might not even have one. After having a stroke, she might’ve given up her license.”

He’d called Calvin on their way into town to get some information on Mrs. Pauly, and to give his friend an update on Mila. Calvin’s quick search had pinpointed her address, as well as given them a little background on the woman. And at eighty-nine, he doubted she was bopping around town in the early afternoon.

Elsie stayed frozen to the leather seat. “Why am I nervous? It’s not like I think we’re going to walk in and find Mila bound in the kitchen.” Her attempt at humor was cut off by a silent sob. She shook her head and sniffed back tears. “Sorry. This is all just so weird. I don’t know what to say or how to act. I don’t even know how I’m putting one foot in front of the other.”

Facing her, he hooked his arm on the back of the seat. “There’s no wrong or right way to act in a situation like this. You’re doing great. You’re strong, Elsie. Using your brain and your resources in a difficult time to help find your friend. Not everyone is as brave.”

“I don’t feel brave. I feel... lost.”

“Hey, look at me,” he said, ducking his chin so they were eye to eye. “You don’t have to feel brave to be brave. Just keep doing what you’re doing, and I’ll be beside you every step of the way.”

She let out a long breath. “Let’s go.”

He jumped out of the truck and was greeted by a rush of cool wind. The breeze filtered through the trees and added to the melody of the day.

Rushing to Elsie’s side, he rested the tips of his fingers on the small of her back as they walked up to the weathered door. Touching her was beginning to be like second nature. He should drop his hand, take a step back, but her body pulled him to her like a magnetic force.

At the front door, he lifted his fist and looked at her for the go ahead. “Ready?”

She gave one decisive nod.

He knocked twice.

“Come, on,” Elsie said, urging on the woman they hoped was inside.

A few seconds ticked by then the sound of shuffling reached his ears moments before the door squeaked open. A short woman with flowing gray hair, leaning her weight

on a bedazzled cane stared up at them behind thick, wire-framed glasses. “Hello, there. Can I help you?”

“Afternoon, Mrs. Pauly. My name is Dean Kingston, and this Elsie Sweet. Can we borrow a few minutes of your time?”

“Well sure. Why don’t you step inside? Standing here will let the cold air in and it’s not so good for these old bones.” Before they answered, she turned away from the door and slowly made her way to the recliner in the living room.

Dean waited for Elsie to step inside before following. The door shut behind him. A velvet couch pressed against the wall mirrored the loveseat across from it. Both nearly identical to the set his grandparents had owned when he’d been a child. Framed photos littered the walls, and knick-knacks covered the mismatched stands that made the small space suffocating.

Elsie moved further into the room but stayed on her feet. “Thank you for agreeing to speak with us. I’m Mila Kinsley’s roommate.”

Delight lifted Mrs. Pauly’s face. “Oh, Mila. I just love that girl. How is she?”

“She’s missing.” Elsie’s voice cracked, broadcasting her emotion.

“Oh my.” Mrs. Pauly’s hand fluttered up to cover her mouth.

“That’s why we’re here,” Dean said. “We know she kept coming by to visit you, even after you severed ties with Hometown Healers. Did she stop by last night? We thought maybe she decided to see you before coming home.”

“You’re right, she does stop by from time to time, but not last night.”

Elsie's shoulders dropped.

Disappointment pressed on Dean's lungs, but he wasn't done yet. "When was the last time you saw her?"

Mrs. Pauly rested her shaky hand on the arm of her chair. "It's been about a week. My grandson recently moved in so there was no reason for her to come care for me. Not when she has a little boy to look after. I always love to see her, enjoy our visits, but she doesn't need to waste her time on an old woman."

"I know for a fact she never looks at time spent with you as wasted," Elsie said, leaning forward to squeeze Mrs. Pauly's hand. "She spoke about you with Jimmy, her son. Told him all about you. She only talks about the most special people with him."

Mrs. Pauly beamed. "Thank you for that, child. I hope with my whole heart you find her."

"Before we leave, can you tell us if she ever discussed anything personal with you? Bad feelings or vibes she got from anyone? Other patients she looked after on her own time?" Dean doubted the older woman could give them much more information, but it was worth a shot.

A cloud of disgust tightened the lines of her wrinkled face. "We talked a little about her boy's father."

A small gasp came from Elsie. "Really? She hardly ever discusses Keith with anyone."

Dean mentally slapped himself. How had he not considered Jimmy's father? He didn't know the history beyond the fact that the deadbeat wasn't a part of his child's life, but there had to be a reason for that. A reason that could point directly to Mila's

disappearance.

“She didn’t say much, but I understood her pain of being a single mother. The guilt and burden that come along from loving the wrong man. Other than that, she talked mostly about Jimmy. Or let me prattle on about my own life. Such a sweetheart.”

“Thank you again for your time.” Dean plucked a business card from his back pocket and laid it on the side table by the front door. “Please call me if you can think of anything.”

They said their goodbyes then walked back into the dreary day.

Elsie sighed and stared at the house, as if willing Mila to be there. “That was a waste of time.”

“Not at all. We know Mila brought up Jimmy’s dad. That’s an angle we haven’t discussed yet.”

Scrunching her nose, Elsie stepped off the stoop and walked back to his truck. “Keith’s an asshole but he left town years ago. It’s hard to imagine him randomly showing up and hurting Mila. What would be the point?”

“A lot of crimes don’t make sense. They just happen.”

She stopped with one hand on the door handle, eyes round and pinned on him. “A crime. That makes it sound so sinister. So dangerous. I hate this.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be?—”

“Wait!” Elsie jogged around the front of his truck and made a beeline for a cluster of bushes on the edge of the property. A patch of red showed through the green leaves.

She plunged her hand through the thicket and emerged with a long strand of red, silky material.

“What is that?” he asked, crossing to her side. “Fabric?”

She clutched the material in her fist and fire flashed on every inch of her face. “Mila’s scarf. She wore it to work last night. I don’t care what Mrs. Pauly said. Mila was here.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:15 am

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The gentle creak of the glider kept Elsie company while she sat on the porch and stared at the gray sky. The bleak, cloudy day mirrored her mood—heavy and ready to explode.

Boo laid at her feet, his ears perked and body on alert.

Her mind raced. She didn't know what to think or how to feel at this point. Dean had called Sadie and filled her in on what they'd found at Mrs. Pauly's. A part of her had wanted to race back in the house and demand answers from the old woman, but Sadie assured her she would handle things.

So now she sat and waited, rocking back and forth. Praying her phone would ring with good news or Mila would magically appear unscathed.

A silver SUV pulled up her driveway and Jenna hurried out of her car and up the porch steps. She wore her blue doctor scrubs, her face clean of make-up, and her dark hair swung in a ponytail. She made a beeline for the wooden glider and lowered herself next to Elsie, silently taking her hand.

Emotions swelled inside Elsie. Words escaped her. She clung to her friend like a lifeline, grateful to have more support.

"I just talked to Calvin," Jenna said. "He filled me in on everything. How are you holding up?"

She shrugged and leaned her head on Jenna's shoulder. "Terrified. Anxious. Pissed."

"All understandable. This is one of those things that no one thinks will ever happen to someone we know, and when it does, there's no playbook on how to handle it. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other and you'll eventually get to the other side. You all will."

"Thanks," Elsie said. The sentiment meant a lot coming from Jenna. Only the year before, she'd survived her own nightmare. The circumstances might not be the same, but she understood the constant fear pressing on her lungs and the suffocating feeling of time running out.

"Is Dean still here?"

"In the kitchen. I put lunch together for us earlier because I needed to move, to do something, so he volunteered to clean before catching up on work. He's been with me since I called him in the middle of the night. I'm sure he has things to handle, even if he tells me differently."

"Calvin's taking over Dean's cases for now," Jenna said. "Sounds like Dean's pretty insistent he stays close."

The confirmation that Dean wanted to stick around warmed a cold dark place inside of her. "He's been amazing."

"He's one of the good ones. Always has been. I'm not surprised he stepped up for you."

A tiny catch in Jenna's voice straightened Elsie's spine and made her study her friend. Jenna's coy smile screamed she was hiding something. "What?"

Jenna schooled her features. “Nothing. I’ve known Dean since high school. He’s always been a great guy, and it’s nice to see him acting more like himself. Something I’ve noticed whenever you’re around.”

Elsie frowned but couldn’t help the tingles in the pit of her stomach. “He’s just being a good friend.”

“Sure,” Jenna agreed. “But no matter his motive, I’m glad he’s here with you. You shouldn’t have to be alone.”

Elsie glanced at her phone and cringed. “I won’t be alone for long. Jimmy will be home from school soon.”

“What did you tell him this morning?” Jenna asked.

“That his mom was caught up at work and would be home later. He seemed to buy the excuse, and I think having Dean cooking him breakfast was enough of a distraction to stop him from asking too many questions. But that won’t fly once he’s home. I don’t want to scare him, but I also don’t want to lie.”

Sighing, Jenna dropped a hand to pet the top of Boo’s head. “That’s a tough one, but I agree. Lying to a kid is never the answer. It’s better for him to understand some of what’s happening now so he’s not blindsided later.”

The softness of Jenna’s words indicated she wasn’t thinking only about Jimmy. Elsie’d been blindsided when her brother never made it home. When she’d woken to find a shattered world that would never be whole again. She wanted more than anything to shield Jimmy from experiencing that same pain and confusion and anger.

“What about your parents?” Jenna asked. “Have you spoken with them?”

Elsie shook her head. “Not yet. They love Mila like a daughter. I’ll call them later tonight if we still haven’t found her. They’ll want to help with Jimmy and do whatever they can to find Mila.”

“And her parents?”

Elsie’s entire body stiffened. Not many people understood why she and Mila were so close. Knew the circumstances from their past that had strengthened their bond, and cemented Elsie’s love and devotion to Jimmy.

“Mila hasn’t spoken with them in years. I don’t see any reason to let them know what’s happening. They gave up the right to be a part of Mila and Jimmy’s lives a long time ago, and if they’re ever allowed back in, that has to be Mila’s decision.” She raked her fisted hands over her thighs as nervous energy mixed with rage.

Jenna blinked, clearly surprised by Elsie’s brisk words. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know there was bad blood there. I just know that no matter how old Oliver is, I’d want to know if he was in trouble.”

“You’d also never kick Oliver out of the house because you didn’t agree with his choices,” Elsie said.

“Is that what happened to Mila?” Jenna asked, eyes wide.

“Yep.” Elsie hated discussing Mila’s business, but the need to confide in her friend—to explain why she hadn’t contacted Mila’s family—spurred her on. “Her parents were mad as hell when she got pregnant. She was only seventeen and the guy she’d been dating skipped town as soon as he found out. Her mom insisted she terminate the pregnancy, and when she refused, they told her to leave.”

“How awful,” Jenna said. “There’s nothing Oliver could ever do for me to stop

supporting him. Especially at such a young age. When life is full of tough choices.”

“That’s because you’re a good mom.” Elsie bumped Jenna’s shoulder with her own. “And so is my mom. My parents took Mila in and helped her care for Jimmy when he came along. Mila isn’t just my best friend, she’s my sister.”

Emotion stormed back and choked her. She wiped tears from her eyes. As much as she wanted to let the tears fall, she needed to hold herself together. At least for a little while longer. The last thing Jimmy needed was to come home and see her a hot mess.

Jenna hooked an arm around her and pulled her close. “We’ll find her. I know we will.”

The door squeaked open, and Dean stepped outside just as a big, yellow bus turned onto the road.

A different kind of fear swirled in the pit of her stomach, and she fought against the sudden nausea. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can,” Dean said. “And we’ll be with you the entire time, if that’s what you want.”

She stared up at him and gave a tiny nod, preparing herself to break the heart of the little boy she loved more than life itself.

The school bus lumbered toward the house, heightening Dean’s anxiety with each stop. By the time the giant kid-mover reached the house, he was about to jump out of his own damn skin.

When the bus stopped and the door swung open, Jimmy leapt down the stairs and ran up the drive. He waved his arm wildly in the air.

Elsie met him at the sidewalk.

Jimmy launched himself into her open arms. His mouth moved a mile a minute, but Dean couldn't hear him over the gust of the wind swirling the colorful leaves that clung to their branches. "Do all kids talk as much as he does?" he asked Jenna.

Jenna chuckled. "From my experience, absolutely. And the more they talk to you, the more they like you. So take it as a compliment."

"Dean! Jenna!" Jimmy wrestled out of Elsie's hold and ran to the porch. He fell to the ground and hugged Boo tight. "Is Oliver here?"

"No, I stopped by after work, so I didn't have him with me. He's home with his dad. How was school?"

Jimmy grinned and jumped up and down on the wide porch. "Good. I had a hot dog for lunch and played tag at recess. I'm super fast so no one could catch me. And I got a smiley face on my math test."

Dean laughed. He didn't know which was harder, keeping up with the boy's never-ending stream of chatter or following his constant motion as he spoke. "Dude, do you ever stop moving?"

Grinning, Jimmy shrugged. "Are we still getting ice cream? You said I could get three scoops." He finally stopped and held up three fingers to emphasize his point.

Not wanting to overstep, Dean glanced at Elsie who gave a little nod. "Are you sure you want ice cream on a gloomy day? I thought ice cream was only for sunny days."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "No way. Ice cream is good no matter what. Right, Elsie?"

“Right, buddy.” Elsie climbed the steps and leaned on the railing. She opened her mouth to say more, but Jimmy continued.

“Jenna, you should come. And bring Oliver.” Jimmy dropped his backpack and tossed it toward the closed front door then hopped from one end of the porch to the other on one foot. “But first we have to go to the shelter. Elsie and I have lots of work to do. I always help on Tuesdays after school. Mama’s already at work on Tuesdays. But Mama can get some ice cream later. Can we go now?”

“That sounds like fun, but Oliver’s waiting for me at home. You three should enjoy your time together.” Jenna met his eye, then Elsie’s, before smiling at Jimmy.

Dean snagged Jimmy’s shoulder and pulled him close, facing the boy toward Elsie. “Let’s say bye to Jenna then head to the shelter. Once our work is done, then it’s time for play, okay? You can have your three scoops, if you save a little room for dinner.”

He studied Elsie’s delicate features. The tight set of her mouth relaxed a fraction, soundlessly telling him she approved of his plan. Chances were high that bad news would still be there tonight. No need to stomp out Jimmy’s excitement for a fun evening.

“Okay,” Jimmy said. “Bye, Jenna! I gotta go inside for a second. Don’t leave without me.” In a flash of movement Jimmy dashed in the house, Boo hot on his heels.

Jenna stood and chuckled. “So much for a goodbye. I think waiting a little longer to tell him about Mila is smart. Let him enjoy a few more hours.”

Elsie sighed. “It doesn’t matter when I tell him, it’s going to devastate him.”

Dean crossed his arms over his chest and rooted his feet on the floor. Every fiber in his body commanded he cross to Elsie’s side and pull her close, but not now. Not

with Jenna here. She knew him too well and would no doubt run right to Calvin and tell him her suspicions. Better to keep a little bit of distance. “We can tell him now if you’d rather.”

“No, you were smart to dangle some normalcy in front of him. Structure is key, even in chaos. Hell, maybe especially in chaos.” Closing her eyes, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “How can I not show him how upset I am? He’ll know something happened.”

“You don’t have to hide anything. If he senses something and asks, then we tell him. If not, then we break the news when we bring him home.” He held his breath and waited for her response. He didn’t have a kid. Hell, he didn’t even spend a lot of time with them. But he understood respect. Understood people of all ages craving authenticity and honesty.

She offered him a watery smile. “You’re right. Sorry, I’m just so tied up in knots I can’t think straight.”

Jenna crossed the porch to Elsie’s side and braced her hands on either shoulder. “You’re doing great. Call me if you need anything, but you seem to be in good hands.” She tossed a quick look over her shoulder that told Dean he hadn’t been as subtle about his feelings for Elsie as he’d thought.

Elsie drew in a shuddering breath then pressed a quick kiss to Jenna’s cheek before Jenna said her goodbyes and hurried to her car.

Dean took over Jenna’s spot and stared into the darkening afternoon as the skies opened and raindrops plopped down from the heavy clouds. Wind spit water on his face and sent a chill down his spine. The storm was here and they’d weather it together, come hell or high water.

Elsie shook the water from her umbrella before stepping into the yellow and green three-story Victorian house turned shelter. Safe Haven Women's Shelter had been transformed from a family home into a beacon of hope for women and children for miles around. Mrs. Collins, the owner, had worked diligently to turn the rooms into spaces of service—opting to keep only a small portion on the top floor for her private quarters.

Entering the shelter, a sense of peace washed over Elsie. She'd been blessed with a loving and supportive family but that didn't mean she didn't understand the need for a place like this. Heck, if her parents hadn't stepped in and offered Mila a home, she and Jimmy might have needed a place like this.

Luckily, that hadn't been the case, but Elsie had promised herself she'd do whatever she could to give back. To be a strong and stable shelter to anyone who found themselves in a tough situation, just like her parents had done so many years ago.

"Smells good." Jimmy shrugged out of his rain jacket and hung it on the old coat rack in the corner of the foyer. "I bet it's cookies. Can I have one?"

She should say no, but she wanted to shower him with as much goodness and happiness as possible before she shattered his world. "Sure but take your boots off first. Mrs. Collins doesn't need you tracking mud through her kitchen."

Jimmy kicked off his boots then disappeared through the swinging door on the far side of the foyer that led to the kitchen.

“Let me help you with your coat.” Dean stepped in behind her and shut the door, blocking out the ugly gusts of wind and swirling leaves that had been ripped from the trees. He freed her from her jacket then hung it beside his, placing the umbrella on a black mat on the floor.

“Thanks.” She slipped off her shoes then picked up the ones Jimmy had left lying in the middle of the room. “Want a cookie?”

A buzzing sound echoed off the high ceiling, and Dean fished his phone from his pocket. He checked the screen and his features hardened into a mask. “I need to take this.”

“The library is right behind you,” she said with a flick of the wrist. “You can close the door for some privacy. Find me in the kitchen when you’re done.”

He gave a nod then answered the call before disappearing into the library.

A small part of her wanted to press her ear to the wooden pocket door to hear whatever conversation Dean couldn’t have in front of her, but the more mature part of her pointed her toward the kitchen.

A cheerful scene greeted her. Mrs. Collins stood at the marble-topped island and slid freshly baked peanut butter cookies onto a white platter. Flowers erupted from a vase on the farmhouse table, where Jimmy and his friend Amelia sat with a glass of milk and giant smiles.

Another little girl she hadn’t seen before sat across from Jimmy and shoved a cookie in her mouth. Her dark hair was pulled into two high pigtails and her dress fit a bit too snugly. A young woman with a faded bruise ringing her right eye hovered behind her.

“Elsie! Look, peanut butter. My favorite.” Jimmy snagged a cookie from the blue plate in the middle of the table.

“I thought he’d like them,” Mrs. Collins said, a knowing smile on her wrinkled face. “Elsie, this is Stacey and her daughter Skylar. They came to stay with us last night. Skylar and Amelia wanted to help me bake, and Stacey’s been looking forward to your arrival.”

Elsie waved at the woman who appeared to be around her own age. “Glad to meet you both.”

Skylar finished her treat and grinned. “I’m four. We’re on an abenture.”

Elsie couldn’t help but smile at the way the little girl said adventure, respect firm for Stacey’s ability to leave a bad situation and not let her child sense her turmoil. Only recently did she realize how difficult that could be.

Mrs. Collins washed off the countertop then dumped a dirty mixing bowl into the sink before facing Elsie once more. “Stacey has an interview on Friday. She saw the flyers around town for the Dress for Success event next week. She hoped maybe she could get a sneak peek. I can watch the little ones while you take her back to see the donations if you’re both okay with that.”

“Sure,” Elsie said. She didn’t know if Mrs. Collins had provided this distraction for her on purpose, but she’d grab hold of it and run.

Stacey rested a palm on Skylar’s shoulder, uncertainty clear in her blue eyes. “Do you want to stay in here with your new friends or come with Mommy to look at clothes?”

Skylar rolled her eyes with all the sass of a teenager. “I’ll stay with my friends, Mommy.”

Stacey hesitated, her hand still on her daughter.

“The room with the clothes isn’t far,” Elsie said. “On this floor, practically on the other side of the kitchen. We’ll probably hear the kid’s giggles from there.” She waited to make a move for the door, not wanting to put any pressure on Stacey to leave her child’s side.

Inhaling a shaky breath, Stacy nodded and offered a timid smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Great,” Elsie said with far more enthusiasm than she felt. “Jimmy, try not to eat too many cookies. Especially if you still want ice cream before we go home later.”

Jimmy took a giant gulp of milk then wiped his mouth with the back of his forearm. “There’s no such thing as too many cookies.”

Mrs. Collins cackled then dusted her hands on a dish rag. She grabbed the platter of goodies from the island and carried them to the table. “Don’t you worry, Elsie. I’ll make sure he’s okay.” She held Elsie’s eyes for a few beats, conveying everything she truly meant with a tender look and unspoken words.

Appreciation pressed on Elsie’s chest, and she turned away before her emotions took over. She had someone to help now. She could assist Stacey. Provide her with multiple options to help build her confidence as she stepped into a brave new world.

Dean ended his call and went in search of Elsie. She’d want to know about his conversation with Sadie. Thank God for good friends in small towns. Sadie was under no obligation to divulge any information regarding Mila’s case, but she understood how much Mila meant to Elsie.

Understood that as a former policeman and current private investigator, Dean had

plenty of useful skills that could be utilized. And would be, with or without the sheriff's department's permission.

The sweet smell of freshly baked cookies lured him into the kitchen. Mrs. Collins sat at the table like a proud mother hen with her flock of chicks surrounding her.

Jimmy reached for a cookie and stopped, hand in mid-air, when he noticed Dean in the doorway. "Hi Dean. Elsie said I could have some."

The boy's serious tone stifled his laugh. "You do what you need to do, my man. Where is Elsie?"

"She went into the store to help someone find an outfit," Mrs. Collins said. "Go through the door behind the stairs on the left."

He nodded his thanks and returned to the foyer. He passed the gleaming wood that zigzagged up three stories to the room Mrs. Collins indicated. The door was open, and he peeked inside. The space showcased Elsie's eclectic taste and talent for creating something warm and inviting wherever she went.

Circular racks of clothes scattered around the room while shelves filled with personal hygiene products lined the walls. Framed photographs of the shelter, along with the woman who ran it—filled in empty spaces. Inspirational quotes in bright pops of colors rounded out the room.

Elsie sat on a stool behind a glass display counter that housed a mismatch of jewelry. A woman stood in front of her, her bright grin and armloads of clothes almost distracted him from the bruise on her face.

Almost.

“I don’t have much money,” he overheard the young woman say to Elsie. “But I can give you what I have.”

Elsie rummaged behind the counter for a canvas bag and took the clothes from the woman. She carefully folded each piece and placed them inside. “Not necessary. All of the stuff in here is free for the people who stay at the shelter. I’m just happy you found some wonderful things for you and Skylar. This blouse and skirt will be perfect for your interview.”

“Thank you so much.”

The tears in the woman’s voice fisted his heart. So much gratitude for a few articles of clothing. Sometimes he forgot how blessed he really was.

Securing the bag, the woman turned his way, and her eyes flew wide. Her hand shot up to her throat and she glanced back at Elsie.

She flashed a kind smile. “Stacey, this is my friend Dean. Dean, this is Stacey. She’s staying here for a few nights.”

The fear in her eyes made his blood boil. Sensing nothing he said would put her at ease, he dipped his chin and kept quiet.

“I need to get back to Skylar. Thanks again,” Stacey said, but the excitement of a few moments ago had vanished.

He stepped out of the doorway to give her a wide berth as she rushed from the room.

Elsie sighed. “I’ll never get over seeing fear creep back into women’s eyes. She was so excited then she sees a big, handsome man and BAM...she’s scared to death. I hope she gets the help she needs for her and her daughter.”

“She’s in the right place for it.” When his statement didn’t coax a reaction from her, he continued. “So you think I’m handsome, huh?”

She wrinkled her nose and a light blush crept up her neck to settle in her cheeks. “That’s not exactly what I said.”

“You don’t think I’m handsome?” He hooked a brow and frowned. His attempt at teasing to lighten her mood had backfired, and now he was a little affronted.

She struggled against a smile. “You’re all right to look at.”

He grinned. “Right back at ya.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She shook her head then tucked away a few bracelets setting on top of the counter. “How was your call?”

“Enlightening. It was Sadie.”

Elsie stilled. “And?”

“She and Tommy questioned Mrs. Pauly. The woman swears she hadn’t seen Mila last night. Unfortunately, there are no cameras on the houses nearby to verify that, but Sadie believes her.”

“But that was Mila’s scarf. I know it was. She wore it last night. She always wears the red scarf in her hair when she has on those silly smiley face scrubs.”

“There’s a chance Mila showed up and something happened before she entered the home,” Dean said.

Elsie crossed her arms over her chest and nibbled on her bottom lip. “What about the

grandson?”

“That was my question as well. Mrs. Pauly said her grandson went to work after she fell asleep. Sadie couldn’t find any current employment on record for her grandson—Justin Pauly—and is tracking down whatever information she can. Have you ever heard of him?”

“The name doesn’t sound familiar.” Elsie frowned. “Why would some guy Mila doesn’t know stop her before going into his grandmother’s house and do God knows what to her?”

Not wanting to dive into why bad people did bad things, he shrugged. “Maybe she does know him, and you just weren’t aware. Or maybe he has nothing to do with it. But there doesn’t seem to be anyone she does know who you think would want to hurt her.”

“I swear there isn’t.” She threw her hands in the air. “Don’t you think I would tell you if I could think of anyone?”

“What about Jimmy’s father?”

Elsie worked her jaw back and forth. Anger flashed in her hazel eyes to rival the lightening striking the stormy skies outside. “He hasn’t been in the picture since Mila found out she was pregnant. Skipped town and never looked back. There’d be no reason for him to show up all these years later just to hurt her. What would be the point?”

He bounced the information around in his head, trying to make heads or tails of it all. “Revenge? Guilt? Maybe he decided he wanted to finally do the right thing and reach out, but Mila wouldn’t hear of it. Wouldn’t let him near his son so he decided to take things into his own hands.”

“His son?” Elsie said through clenched teeth. “He gave up any right to call Jimmy his son when he walked away. He’s a deadbeat who doesn’t deserve to be anywhere near Jimmy. And if he reached out, I hope Mila tore him a new one.”

“I agree one hundred percent,” Dean said. “But it’s an avenue that still needs explored. Even just to cross him off the list.”

She closed her eyes for a beat then blinked them open again. “His name’s Keith Brookstone.” She spat out his name as if the sound alone was enough to make her sick. “He was a little older than Mila, a year or two out of high school when they started dating. He’s not from here so I don’t know much about him.”

“It’s a good thing I’m so talented at finding people who don’t want to be found.”

“I hope so.” Sadness dropped her voice low.

“Elsie! Dean! Can I help now?” Jimmy ran into the room and skidded to a stop at Dean’s side. “I only had three cookies. It was so hard to say no to number four.”

Dean ruffled the mop of light hair on the top of Jimmy’s head. “All right, kiddo. Let’s put you to work.”

He watched the adorable kid skip to the back of the room and scoop up a shirt from the floor. With his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, he struggled to place it back on the hanger. An ache in Dean’s chest intensified. Only a few more hours before he’d stand by Elsie and watch a little bit of Jimmy’s innocence be ripped away.

He’d enjoy every second with Jimmy he could until then.

By one-deep exhaustion weighed down Elsie. Shutting herself into her bedroom, she collapsed on her mattress and buried her face in the mound of pillows. If she thought her conversation with her mom earlier had been tough, it didn't hold a candle to explaining to Jimmy why his mom hadn't come home.

Each question she couldn't answer tore her heart in two. By the time she'd stepped out of his room, confident he'd finally cried himself to sleep, her insides were nothing but shredded mush. Pain throbbed against her forehead and the tears streaming down her face threatened to fall forever.

A knock on her door turned her onto her back. As much as she wished she could tell whoever it was to go away and give her a few moments alone, that wasn't an option. "Come in."

Dean poked his head through the doorway. He had a glass of wine in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. "Thought you might need something to take off the edge. Pick your poison."

She scooted up to sit against the headboard and tucked her feet beneath her. "Wine, please. You're a lifesaver."

He stepped into the room and handed over the stemless glass. "I can take mine out to the living room if you want more alone time."

"Besides Mila coming home, I'm not sure what I want."

He leaned against the doorframe and the dim light from the hall highlighted the scruff on his face. “I get that. Jimmy finally fall asleep?”

She nodded. “Took a while. He had a few more questions once you stepped out of the room. He’s confused and scared. Having Boo sleep in his bed helped a little.”

“Poor kid. I’ve been through a lot of shit in my life but watching that little boy’s world fall apart is one of the toughest things I’ve witnessed.” He took a long pull of his beer. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget the tortured look on his face.”

The memory of Jimmy’s red, swollen eyes and tear-soaked cheeks slammed against her. “We have to figure out how to make things right. We have to bring his mom home.”

“Agreed. That’s why I’ve been doing some digging.”

Hoping for good news, she patted the bed beside her. “Take a seat. I don’t think I have the energy to make it to the living room.”

He hesitated for a beat then settled on the bed, stretching his legs long.

A sudden flash of heat ignited inside her. She’d imagined Dean in her bed a time or two but never like this. Two broken souls commiserating over a drink while discussing a missing persons case. Clearing her throat, she tried to forget any romantic fantasies and focus on the matter at hand. “Did you find anything useful?”

“I found Jimmy’s father.”

Excitement over a new lead clashed with rage at the mention of Jimmy’s dad. She took a sip of wine and struggled with how to respond. “A part of me has always wondered what that asshole’s been up to all these years. Hell, I’ve thought it might be

better for Jimmy if his father wasn't even alive anymore. Then we could explain it wasn't a choice for him to not show up. Maybe that'd be easier for Jimmy."

Dean shrugged. "Who knows what makes having an absentee father more understandable for a child or even an adult, but Keith is very much alive. He lives in the next county over, only about an hour from here. He's a truck driver who happens to have a couple weeks off."

The news dropped like a boulder in her gut. "How do you know that?"

"I talked to his boss. Explained the situation and why it was important I speak to him. I got his number, which the jackass won't answer, his work schedule, and his home address. The boss was pretty chatty when I explained a woman's life was in danger and he may have official law enforcement knocking on his door soon if he didn't cough up what I needed. I think we should pay Keith a visit."

"If he has time off work, he might not be home. Maybe he took a vacation or something. You know, since he has all that disposable income not paying for his child." She couldn't help the sharp bite of her words. The idea of Keith spending his money as he pleased, living life without a single thought to the woman he'd claimed to love and the child they'd created, boiled Elsie's blood.

Setting down his bottle, Dean's cold hand wrapped around hers and squeezed. "I know you're angry with him—hell I am too, and I don't even know the guy. But if he chose not to be a father, Jimmy's better off without him. Trust me, a man who walks away from his responsibilities isn't a real man at all."

"You're right. I know that with my whole heart, but it still saddens me for Jimmy. I don't want him to ever feel less than. To ever think it's his fault his dad isn't around."

"He has great people who love him who will never let him believe those things."

She rested her head on Dean's shoulder. The last couple of days had been a rollercoaster and tomorrow would prove even more stressful. "My mom wants to take Jimmy for a couple of days. He shouldn't be in school, sitting and worrying about Mila while trying to learn. She and my dad want to keep him busy. I suspect that's to keep their minds as occupied as Jimmy's."

"That'll be good for them all," Dean said. "Then you and I can focus on whatever we find out tomorrow. Hopefully we track down Keith and get some answers from him, then try and follow up more on Mrs. Pauly's son. I touched base with Sadie, and Justin's like a ghost in the wind at this point. If no one has found him, we should speak with Mrs. Pauly again. She may have more information than she realizes."

"I like having a plan," she said, struggling to keep her eyes open. The sips of wine and emotional turmoil combined creating a hazy cocoon around her brain.

"Let's put that glass down." Dean released their joined hands, took her wine, and set it on the nightstand beside his half-finished beer.

The absence of his palm against hers cast a chill down her arm. She wanted the heat of him back on her skin, the comfort of his long, lean body against hers. The haziness intensified, coaxing her toward sleep. She looped her arm with his and snuggled close, finally letting her eyes drift shut.

And for a brief moment, she forgot about everything outside of her bedroom. Forgot her fear and sadness and anger and simply slept.

The next day the rain stopped, but the sun couldn't reach through the cover of clouds to warm the air. Gloom shadowed the mountains during the drive, but as anxious as Dean was to find Keith, it couldn't dim the excitement growing in the pit of his stomach.

He'd spent the night in Elsie's bed.

The thought had flames of desire burning so bright inside him, it didn't matter that the sun was hidden. His blood hummed louder with each spin of the tires, and by God, he hadn't even touched her.

Okay, so he'd touched her, but not in the way that should leave him feeling like a hormonal teenager. She'd fallen asleep on his shoulder, her body wrapped around him like a blanket. He hadn't wanted to disturb her so he'd let her sleep, rousing her only moments before she needed to wake Jimmy. The last thing he wanted was for Jimmy to walk in on him in bed with Elsie. He'd never met Mrs. Sweet before this morning, and he didn't need Jimmy mentioning that Dean had already slept with her daughter—no matter how innocent the night had been.

The simple act of sleeping together created a type of intimacy he'd never experienced. A type of intimacy where a solid foundation for something so much more could be built. He may have been too scared before, terrified of being burned again, but Elsie had shown him a type of loyalty that couldn't be faked.

He turned off the highway and the truck bounced over uneven roads. A few houses dotted the landscape showcasing large tree-filled yards with trees separating neighbors.

Elsie shot off a flurry of text messages then stared out the window. "Are we close?"

"Just a few more minutes." He dipped his chin toward the phone clutched on her lap. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just making sure Jimmy's all right. Thanks for letting Boo go with him, by the way." She huffed out a humorless laugh. "My parents must really love Jimmy if they let him bring home a dog, even if only for a short visit. I was never allowed to

have one.”

“I’m glad Boo’s giving him some comfort. I’d be lost by now without him. Nothing like man’s best friend when times are tough. It’s a shame you never had a pup. Boo can be your honorary dog. Yours and Jimmy’s.”

“Don’t tell him that or Jimmy will never give Boo back!”

The humor in her voice gave him a glimpse of the Elsie he’d known the past year. He wanted to hear her laugh, hell, be the one to make her laugh. Make her smile. Give her all the things she’d always wanted.

A lane veered to the left, and he took the muddy route. A large No Trespassing sign was secured to the ground with a wooden stake. The number on the chipped mailbox told him he was at the right place. He just hoped Keith was there. If the guy had answered his phone or returned a message, they could have avoided this whole trip. If they’d come all this way to find an empty house, he wouldn’t be happy.

The cluster of trees opened up and revealed a dingy double-wide trailer. A rusty pickup was parked on the gravel driveway.

Elsie leaned forward as if the seatbelt was the only thing holding her inside the vehicle. “Looks like someone’s here.”

He studied the area around the trailer as he parked. Patches of weeds overtook grass and wind threatened to bring down a dilapidated shed in the backyard.

“Could Mila be in that shed?” Elsie asked, a tremor shaking her voice.

“I’ll make sure to check it out before we leave. No stone left unturned, okay?”

Blowing out a long breath, she nodded. “Mila and I have discussed what we’d say if we ever saw Keith again, but now my mind is blank. All I want to know is if she’s here.”

“You say as much or as little as you want. Hell, you can stay in the truck. I got this.”

“No. I want to look him in the eye when you ask him about Mila. Nothing else matters.”

Dean hopped out of the car and met Elsie at the hood of the truck. Her jaw was locked, eyes hard as she walked beside him. He rested a hand on the small of her back to offer whatever support he could.

A low growl reached his ears seconds before a big brown dog lunged forward. The dog strained against the thick chain holding him back and barked.

Elsie jumped and stumbled against Dean. Her hand flew to the base of her neck.

Before Dean could reassure her that the dog couldn’t reach them, the trailer door flew open and a man stood in the doorway with a rifle dangling at his side.

Dean maneuvered Elsie behind him and cursed himself for not having his sidearm in his hand. He held his palms high. At least he could show Keith he hadn’t come with an intention of violence. “Are you Keith Brookstone?”

“Who’s askin’?” The man scratched the top of his head, spiking his unruly brown hair. A couple days’ worth of stubble covered his jaw and his bloodshot eyes spoke of a man with alcohol swimming in his veins.

“My name is Dean Kingston, and I’m looking for Mila.”

“Mila who?”

Elsie’s body tensed and she shot out from behind him, hands fisted on her hips. “Seriously? Mila who? How dare you stand there and act like you don’t know the name of the woman you abandoned. The woman you got pregnant then left. How do you sleep at night?”

Keith grinned and showed off a row of yellow teeth. “Oh, that Mila. I ain’t seen her in too many years to count. Now get off my land. I don’t take well to strangers. Neither does Sal, over there.” He used the barrel of his gun to point to the pissed off dog.

“We’ll leave in just a second,” Dean said, aiming for a calm he didn’t feel. “Can you tell me where you were two nights ago?”

“Well, now, I can’t go around just tellin’ everyone my business. A few ladies wouldn’t like that very much. You know what I mean.” Keith winked then laughed.

Elsie’s body shook and he swore fire would shoot from her ears if possible.

Dean understood Elsie’s anger, but this guy didn’t have Mila. No way he had the smarts—or would he spend his time—to track Mila’s movements and lay in wait for her. “Do you mind if we take a look in your trailer and shed? Mila’s missing and I’d hate to have the cops sniffing around here looking for her, which you and I both know they will with your connection.”

Keith worked his jaw back and forth as if chewing over the question. “Fine. You got ten minutes then I don’t want to see either of you on my property again. Hear me?”

Dean kept Elsie close as he searched the trailer and shed but all they found were empty bottles of liquor and enough trash to fill a dumpster. The quick search only

reaffirmed what Dean already surmised.

Keith wasn't hiding Mila.

Back in his truck, he started the engine and took off back to the highway. At least the visit hadn't taken too much of their day. They had plenty of time to speak with Mrs. Pauly again and hopefully find something to point them in a new direction.

He glanced at Elsie for a beat before staring back at the two-lane highway winding around the mountain. "You okay?"

"I don't know if I'm relieved or upset to not find Mila in that shithole. The one thing I do know is Jimmy is better off without a man like that in his life. Even if he was around, he'd never be the kind of father Jimmy deserved. Never make him eggs in the morning or spoil him with ice cream just to make him happy."

Her words stirred a sensation inside Dean that had him tightening his grip on the steering wheel. Helping take care of Jimmy the last couple days had been rewarding as hell and he hoped he got a chance to prove he was a good father one day.

"Jimmy has a lot of love in his life. He may wonder about his dad, but he'll always know support and kindness and joy. You and Mila and everyone else who knows him will make sure of that."

He just hoped Jimmy didn't have to grow up without either of his parents in his life, because as time ticked by, chances of bringing Mila home decreased.

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Stepping into the warmth and comfort of Mrs. Pauly's home was a far cry from wading through the filth of Keith's trailer. The stench of the double-wide clung to Elsie's skin, and she wanted nothing more than to wash away the entire encounter.

But that'd have to wait.

"Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us again," she said and perched onto the edge of the loveseat in the cramped living room.

Dean sat beside her, dwarfing the furniture with his size. "Yes, we don't want to put you out."

Mrs. Pauly settled in her wine-colored recliner with a black cat on her lap. She swatted her hand through the air before swiping it along the top of her furry animal. "I hate to hear Mila is still missing. The reason for your company is a real tragedy but I love having someone to talk to besides Sprinkles here."

"I'm sure Sprinkles is a wonderful companion," Dean said. "Although I bet your grandson is a little better at having a conversation."

"Pfft. That rascal? He never has time for me. Especially lately. I told him that he could stay here if he helped me out. Ran my errands, prepared meals, cleaned the house. All things I've been paying other folks to do. But once he moved in, I couldn't get him to do a darn thing."

Elsie frowned. Not only did Justin Pauly sound like an ungrateful snot, but Mrs. Pauly's description of the young man gave a much different impression than the other day. "You mentioned yesterday he was the reason you parted ways with Hometown Healers. I'd hate to think your health was in jeopardy because he wasn't holding up his end of the bargain. Is that why Mila still stopped by from time to time? Because she knew Justin wasn't taking his responsibilities seriously?"

Mrs. Pauly sighed, her puff of breath lifting a swirl of loose black hair from Sprinkles. "Mila came by one evening to say hello and noticed things weren't being done properly. I never spoke an unkind word about Justin, but she just knew. She didn't press or ask questions. She'd simply show up and do what she could for me without taking one cent."

The older woman's obvious adoration for her friend misted Elsie's eyes. She smiled through her tears, a genuine smile for the first time in days. Mila had cast such a bright light for so many. "That sounds like her."

Dean shifted beside her. "Mrs. Pauly, if your grandson hasn't been pulling his weight around the house, do you know how he spends his time? Where he works? Friends he may have?"

"He doesn't tell me anything. He stops in when he needs sleep or food. A few times he's needed to store things in his room. I couldn't tell you more than that." Sprinkles leapt from Mrs. Pauly's lap, and she swiped the leftover fur off her pants. "Why are you so curious about Justin?"

Unsure of how much she was supposed to say, Elsie glanced at Dean, giving him the space to continue.

"As you know, Mila's scarf was found in your bushes yesterday morning. We understand you didn't see her the night she went missing, but we're wondering if

your grandson did.”

Mrs. Pauly pursed her lips. Her eyes narrowed. “You think my grandson hurt that sweet girl? No. I can’t believe that. Justin might not be the most responsible young man, but he’d never hurt a fly. And what for? Because she stopped by to help me? Nope. Doesn’t make sense.”

Unease skittered up Elsie’s arms at Mrs. Pauly’s change of attitude. The woman had shown nothing but concern and compassion for Mila, but maybe she was willing to keep a few secrets in order to protect her family. “We’re not saying Justin hurt her, just that he may have seen her. We’d love to ask him. To see if he witnessed anything that could help us find Mila.”

The scowl melted off Mrs. Pauly’s face. She fidgeted with her glasses. “I can tell him to call you the next time I see him, but I’m not even sure where he is or when he’ll be back. Heck, I don’t even have the boy’s phone number to pass along.”

“You mentioned he stored stuff here. Can we take a look at his room?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice growing unsteady.

Sensing they were losing Mrs. Pauly’s hospitality, Elsie scooted to the edge of the cushion and scooped the old woman’s hands in hers. She prayed Mrs. Pauly would sense her urgency. “Please. I know this is intrusive and maybe insensitive, but I don’t know what else to do. If there’s even a small chance we could find something to help us, I need to take it. Even a number for Justin, a receipt or check stub to tell us where he’s working. Something to find him to ask about Mila. If he hasn’t been here since the night Mila disappeared, and we know Mila was here, Justin may be in trouble too.”

Mrs. Pauly’s eyes widened. “I hadn’t thought about that. I figured he’s been out and

about the way he always is.”

“Then let us see his room,” Dean pressed. “Let us find him and make sure he’s okay.”

Slowly, Mrs. Pauly nodded. “Okay. Go on down the hall. First door on the left.”

Elsie followed Dean down the hall. Holding her breath, she stepped into the room, only to be greeted by stale air and dusty furniture. “What are we looking for?”

“Anything out of the ordinary or that points to how we can find Justin. You had an impressive list of ideas for Mrs. Pauly. Ever think of being a PI?” He tossed a grin over his shoulder before opening the top drawer of a nightstand.

His praise heated her cheeks. “I think I’ll stick to retail, thanks. Find anything?”

He pulled out a handful of crumpled papers. “Hard to tell. The room may be neat, but this drawer is jammed full of crap.” Smoothing the first sheet, he laid it on the bed. “Nothing on this one but doesn’t mean the rest won’t have anything useful.”

While he analyzed what he’d found, she studied the small room. Only a tall dresser, nightstand, and full-sized bed occupied the space. The thought of rummaging through a strange man’s personal items gave her the ick, so she slid open the closet door instead. A few button-down shirts hung on the silver rod and a pair of nice shoes were tossed on the floor. “Not much in here.”

Deflated, she faced the bed. If she had something to hide, it wouldn’t be sitting in the closet or even placed in a drawer. She’d want it out of sight and somewhere an eighty-something-year-old woman wouldn’t accidentally discover it.

She approached the bed and dropped to her knees. Lifting the green blanket, she peered underneath. A black duffle bag was wedged against the wall. She snagged a

strap and yanked the bag loose, falling back on her behind. Wads of cash spilled from the opened top. “Umm, Dean. You might want to see this.”

Dean rounded the bed to stand behind her and whistled. “Well, that’s not what I was expecting to find.”

She peered up at him, eyes wide. “What does it mean?”

“Nothing good. But maybe we can find Justin at The Town Tavern and ask him.”

Frowning, she tried to follow his logic. “Isn’t that the bar over in Water’s Edge? Why would we find him there?”

“Because if all the wadded-up receipts I found are any indicator, that’s where he spends a lot of his time.”

Her phone rang in her pocket, and she hurried to grab it. “Hello?”

“Elsie, it’s Sadie.”

Her heart seized in her chest. “Did you find Mila?”

“No, but I need you to meet me at your store. There’s been an incident.”

Dean didn’t register the cold air as he stood in front of Sweet Repeats. Not when anger boiled his blood. He wanted to scream his frustration into the cold, dreary air but he bit the insides of his mouth to keep himself in check.

The front window of Elsie’s shop was shattered. Glass sparkled on the ground like the devil’s confetti. Bits of broken decorations from the display Elsie had lovingly put together lay discarded on the floor inside.

Passersby loitered on the sidewalk. They talked in hushed tones with their heads together or stared open-mouthed at the vandalism. Tommy spoke with a woman outside the bakery next door while Sadie stretched bright yellow crime scene tape across the scene.

Elsie shook her head and covered her mouth with her hand. “I don’t understand. Who would do this?”

Dean wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. A fierce protectiveness swept over him. “I don’t know but I’m sure as hell going to find out.”

Sadie finished attaching the tape to the busted window then approached them. “I’m sorry about this. You already have so much on your plate, but I thought you’d want to know about this right away.”

“Yes, of course,” Elsie said. “Thank God the store was closed. I’d hate it if someone was hurt. Have you been inside?”

Sadie cringed. “Yes. Looks like someone went through the alley behind the building and broke in from the back entrance. The inside didn’t fare much better than the window.”

A strangled sob came from Elsie’s mouth, and she turned into Dean’s embrace, burying her head in his chest. “It’s too much. Mila missing and now this. I feel like I must have pissed off some unknown deity who’s wreaking my life.”

He held her tight and kissed the top of her head. “We’ll figure this all out. I promise. Sadie, can we see the extent of the damage?”

She nodded and opened the front door.

He slid his hand up to cradle the back of Elsie's head. "You up for going inside?" he whispered against her ear. "We can see if anything was taken and what we need to do to put everything back together."

There he was, throwing around the we word again. Funny how he'd been hellbent on keeping distance between him and Elsie for so long and now he couldn't imagine not being part of her team.

She drew in a shuddering breath, wiped the tears from her face, and glanced up at him under long, black lashes. "How do you always know exactly what to say to get my head back on straight?"

He lifted the side of his mouth. "Sorry, I'll work on keeping you in a panic if you like that better."

His teasing words coaxed a hint of a smile from her before she stepped away and headed into the store.

He clenched and unclenched his fists a few times to expel his flurry of unspent energy and followed Elsie. Upturned clothing racks and a smashed glass counter greeted him. A fresh wave of anger crashed against him. Someone hadn't just broken in and vandalized Elsie's store, they'd destroyed it.

"We've already cleared the space," Sadie said. "I can walk you through everything, or you can take your time and go at your own pace."

Elsie stood as if paralyzed, taking in the mess. "I hate that I'm upset about my shop. Mila's disappearance is so much more important, so much more pressing, but this store...this is my baby. What's the point of doing this?"

Tommy stepped through the doorway and flipped his small notebook into the breast

pocket of his jacket. “In my experience, this type of vandalism is usually meant to send a message. Someone’s angry, bitter, or fearful and wants to make sure you’re paying attention to those emotions.”

Dean scrubbed a palm over his face. “I agree, but who would feel those things toward Elsie?”

“I need to take pictures and make a list of everything that’s damaged for insurance. Doesn’t look like anything was stolen, but not sure how I could tell.” Elsie’s words came out clipped.

As much as Dean hated seeing her upset, he’d rather her be pissed than panicked or sad. Channeling her fury would help push past her fear. “I can start taking pictures with my phone. Do you have some paper to make a list?”

Elsie looked around, lifting her hands in the air for a beat before dropping them back to her side. “I used to keep some supplies under the counter but I’m guessing I can’t use those now. Has anyone seen my office?”

Tommy nodded. “Looks about the same as here but without quite so much stuff.”

“Come on,” Dean said, sensing she needed a second to herself. “I’ll walk back with you. Then we can talk things over with Tommy and Sadie.”

Ushering her down the hall and into her office, he closed the door and took in the mess. Bolts of fabric were unwound and strewn around the room, paperwork scattered on the floor and the upholstery had been ripped on a chair in the corner.

Elsie whirled to face him. Fire lit her eyes for a second before they flew wide, and fear pushed out the fury. She lifted her finger and pointed over his shoulder.

He turned around and found large, messy writing scrawled across her door.

Mind Your Business.

O overwhelmed didn't even begin to describe Elsie's emotional state. She stood in the middle of her busted showroom with a broom in one hand and trash bag in the other. Dean had taken pictures of all the destruction, and she'd noted that nothing seemed to be taken—not even the small amount of cash left in the register.

She spied Dean through the shattered window. He stood on the sidewalk speaking with Sadie and Tommy. The pissed-off pinching of his facial expression hadn't left since they'd arrived. He threw his arms in the air as he spoke, his distress clear even from a distance.

Tommy and Sadie wore matching looks, their faces masks of professionalism. But Sadie hadn't been able to hide her flush of emotions when she'd walked in the office and saw the threat written in bold red.

A fresh flood of fury washed over Elsie, threatening to suck her under. How dare some asshole break into her store—her baby—and try to scare her away from finding her best friend? Yes, seeing the broken pieces of her blood, sweat, and tears hurt like hell, but it was nothing compared to the pain of not knowing what happened to Mila.

And no one would bully her into walking away from the truth.

Stepping back inside, Dean picked his way through the mess and took the broom. “You sure you want to clean now? You’ve been dealt quite a blow. We could take a break, grab some food, and let things simmer for a bit.”

She shook her head and scooped a broken frame from the floor. “No. I think better when I’m busy, and what better way to stay busy than to clean up this mess? Or at least start the process.”

It would take more than a few hours and two pairs of hands to put her beloved store back together, but she had to begin somewhere. Besides, closing the shop for a couple of days while finding Mila was one thing. Being shut down for an unknown amount of time was entirely different. Her savings was enough to buy her a little time, but she needed to make money to live. Bemoaning her misfortune wasn’t an option.

“Okay. Let’s talk things through while we clean.” Dean crossed to the front of the store and swept the smattering of broken glass into a pile. “Sadie and Tommy are concerned you’ve struck a nerve. They think it’d be wise if we stopped asking questions and let them handle the case.”

Her spine stiffened. “And what do you think?”

Halting his chore, he faced her. His strong jaw was clenched, his fist around the broom handle so tight she thought his knuckles might burst through the skin. “That you wouldn’t stop looking for Mila no matter what, and I’d rather you search for Mila with me than try to track down some criminal alone.”

She breathed in deep. “You know me better than I realized.”

“Maybe I do.” He snorted and went back to cleaning the floor.

Her statement rang in her ears. She’d spent months looking forward to their brief encounters. Chatting with him when their paths crossed always left her giddy. He’d clearly been paying attention. Hell, he seemed to understand her more than she did him.

“Actually, I don’t really know that much about you besides you grew up in Water’s Edge and returned home after working for the police force somewhere in California. That seems like a whole other planet. What made you move in the first place?”

His body tensed. “After graduation, my ex-wife and I wanted to see the world. Move somewhere we’d only seen on TV. Things didn’t work out, I came home, and now work with Calvin.”

The rigid set of his shoulders and clipped pace of his words told her he didn’t want her to dive any deeper. Something inside her wilted. Last night, she’d slept curled against him. He’d held her, silently and respectfully comforting her in the exact way she needed. Maybe it had meant more to her because he clearly didn’t want to open up.

Not that it mattered, especially right now. They had more important issues to think about. Forcing a smile, she turned her back on him and continued collecting ruined clothing and knick-knacks she couldn’t repair. “Well, we’re glad you’re here and I’m happy you’ll keep helping me. You’re right. No way I’d dust my hands of this and sit around, waiting for Mila to turn up. So what’s next?”

“I told Sadie and Tommy we spoke with Keith and Mrs. Pauly. They’ll talk to Keith and see if he has an alibi. They still need to pore over video footage they’ve pulled from nearby businesses, but chances are low they’ll catch much since the perpetrator came through the alleyway. Even your security camera didn’t pick up anything useful.”

She let the rundown filter through her brain as she tossed the garbage bag on the ground and settled on the stool behind the destroyed display case. “I don’t think it was Keith, but it’s good for them to be thorough.”

“Why don’t you think it was him?” Dean asked, leaning on the broom.

“Too much work for a guy like that. Doesn’t make sense he would make the drive and track me down. Maybe he’s capable of this type of destruction,” she said, waving her hand through the air like she was showcasing the worst game show prize ever. “But not the effort. Especially when he has no motive to hurt Mila.”

“I agree. He obviously had no interest in Jimmy, which kills my theory that he wanted the boy and Mila wouldn’t give him visitation. His involvement doesn’t make sense.”

“Which leaves Justin.” She still didn’t think Mrs. Pauly was blowing steam up their behinds about her grandson. She may want to protect him, but Elsie couldn’t picture the older woman outright lying.

But would she tell him people were asking about him?

“Mrs. Pauly could have told him about our visit,” she continued. “That might have spooked him into action.”

“Or he was watching. If it was him, he knew how to find you. Which means he might have eyes on you.”

A chill raced down her spine. She’d been so fixated on the danger surrounding Mila she hadn’t considered someone might be watching her. Her ransacked store had definitely forced open her eyes, but the idea someone was following her made the back of her neck tingle.

A quick glance at her watch told her it was close to dinner. “Are you getting hungry?”

Dean frowned, as if confused by the sudden change of topic. “A little.”

“Town Tavern serves great burgers. Might be the perfect time to get some food and try to find Justin Pauly.”

Licks of burnt brick snaked along the outside of Town Tavern. Besides that, the outside of the historic building on the main street of Water’s Edge hadn’t changed since Dean was in high school. An act of arson had almost burned the bar and restaurant to the ground a little over a year ago, but luckily the building had been refurbished, and no one seriously injured during the fire.

Dean stepped inside and stepped back in time. The bar had been passed through the hands of a few different owners since he’d left for California, but the inside had stayed remarkably consistent. A smattering of tables took up the center of the room, with two pool tables at the back, wooden bar along the back.

And at 5:30 on a weekday, the place was packed full of hungry patrons.

“I don’t see any empty tables,” Elsie said over her shoulder. “You okay sitting at the bar?”

“Sure.” He stayed close behind her as she weaved through the crowd and settled onto a stool. He sat beside her and swiveled around to take in the room.

Elsie did the same. Her eyes were narrowed, lips downturned. “Do you see him?”

He swallowed a laugh at her impatience. Life would be so much easier if Justin Pauly was seated at the front table, waiting for his food. But in his experience, tracking down someone who didn’t want to be found usually took a little more legwork. “If this guy’s involved in Mila’s disappearance, I doubt he’ll show at one of the busiest times of the day.”

She swiveled to face him, and her knees brushed against his thigh. “Then why are we

here?”

“To eat.” He couldn’t help but grin at her crinkled brow. He bumped her leg with his own. “And to ask questions. I’ve got Justin’s photo from his social media pages on my phone. We’ll see if anyone has seen him in here. And if they have, maybe they’ll know something about him.”

She sighed, puffing the long strands of auburn hair away from her face.

“I know it’s frustrating,” he said.

Turning back around, she tapped her fingertip against the bar and screwed her lips to the side. “I can’t help but feel like this giant clock is ticking above my head. I’m not naïve. I understand that whatever has happened to Mila, it’s really bad. She might not have much time left. Hell, she might not even—” Her voice caught, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

Leaning forward, he cupped her shoulder in his palm. “Look at me.”

She opened her eyes and tears glimmered.

“Don’t let your mind go to that dark, scary place. Once you do, it’s damn near impossible to come back. Mila has a community of people working nonstop, trying to find her. You’ve got to keep the faith until you’re face to face with the worst. Okay?”

“Okay.”

She agreed but her uncertainty was louder than the pool balls bouncing off each other in the distance behind them.

The bartender hurried over and slid two cardboard coasters in front of them. She

smiled brightly, showing off deep dimples and straight teeth. “Hey, Dean. What can I get you and your friend?”

He dipped his chin. “Hi, Ashley. Water for me, Elsie?”

“Same.”

“Easy enough. Planning on eating?” Ashley asked as she scooped ice into two glasses then filled them with water.

“Yeah, but we’ll need a second. Before we figure out what we want, can you look at something for me?”

She tilted her head to her side, spilling her dark waves over one shoulder. “Sure.”

Dean popped up Justin’s Facebook profile picture and showed it to Ashley. “Have you seen this guy around here?”

Nodding, she studied the photo. “Yeah.”

Elsie frowned. “Do you know him?”

Ashley placed their water glasses on the coasters and wiped her hands on the white apron tied around her waist. “Never talked to him but he comes in mostly around closing time. Grabs a beer and sometimes a burger, but only talks to Malcom.”

“Who’s Malcom?” Dean asked, trying to put a face to the name.

“The owner,” she said. “He bought the place after the fire last year. Not from around these parts.”

“Is he here now?” Dean asked.

Ashley scowled. “Nope. He isn’t one to lend a helping hand. Shows up in the evening, after the dinner rush, and locks himself in his office. Not a super friendly guy.” The door opened and a large group of teenagers hurried inside. “Sorry, but I need to get back to work. We’re swamped. I’ll grab your order in a minute.”

“What now?” Elsie asked. “Sit around and wait until closing time to see if this guy shows up?”

Dean handed her a menu. “We eat.”

The side of her mouth ticked up at the corner. “So logical.”

He shrugged. “I was a little hungry when we got here but now that I smell food, I’m ravenous. We’ll finish, then we have someone new to investigate.”

“Malcom?”

“Yep.” He took a sip of water and zeroed in on what he wanted to order as he formed a plan in his mind. “Easy to get a full name and plenty of information. We can always return tonight to see if Justin shows up. If he doesn’t, we’ll talk to Malcom. At least we found someone who knows Justin. He may be the key to finding him.”

With a heavy heart, Elsie disconnected the call with her mom and welcomed the cool, night air. Bistro styled lights hung over Jenna and Calvin's patio at their century-old farmhouse. A fire flickered in the stone pit, sending whirls of smoke heavenward. Stars blanketed the sky, mirroring the pretty lights, and a shadow of the Smoky Mountains provided the most beautiful backdrop.

Dean sat with Calvin at the round patio table. They ducked their heads together as they studied whatever was on the computer screen.

"Am I interrupting?" she asked, hesitating by the sliding glass door that led to the kitchen. She didn't want to sit alone with her darkening thoughts, and Jenna was putting Oliver to bed. A sacred routine Elsie was smart enough not to disturb.

"Never," Dean said, sliding a chair out next to his own. "How was your call?"

Exhausted, she fell into the seat. "Tough. I told my mom about the break-in at the store." An image of the destroyed shop flashed in her mind, burying her in fresh anger and fear.

Dean winced. "I'm sure that was a hard conversation."

"She wants me to stay with her and Dad until things settle. She's afraid I'm putting myself in danger." Her mom's frantic pleas rang in her ears. She hated that her mom was so worried but no way she could abandon ship and do nothing to help Mila.

Not to mention the thought of not being next to Dean made her skin itch, but that was a problem she'd have to solve another time.

"I'm sorry to hear you were targeted," Calvin said, bringing her attention back to the matter at hand. "I agree with what Dean already said. Someone doesn't like you snooping around their business. And if I had to guess, the cash you found stashed under Justin Pauly's bed is connected to whatever that business is."

"Justin's friends with the bar owner. Could the bar be involved in something illegal?" she asked.

"You're thinking like an investigator," Dean said, resting his arm behind her on the back of the chair. "We're digging into Malcom Miller right now."

She wasn't sure if it was his praise or the rush of excitement at his touch that made the heat rush to her cheeks, but she enjoyed both.

Enjoyed his touch a little more.

Which confused the hell out of her. He'd stayed so close, casually placing a hand on hers or providing comfort anyway he could, but he'd clammed up when she'd asked him personal questions. She should put distance between them until she figured out what he wanted—if anything—from her. Maybe he was just being a good friend, even if she'd never had a man make her feel the way he did with just a simple brush of his palm on any part of her damn body.

It didn't matter. She had more pressing issues than figuring out if a man liked her.

"Am I too optimistic to hope you find he's a criminal mastermind who takes women and puts them somewhere safe and warm until they can be rescued?"

Dean tucked in his lips and let his fingertips drop to the top of her shoulders. “A little. But we have found some interesting information.”

“Such as?”

Calvin turned the computer so she had a better view of the screen. A picture of a man with ginger hair and a thin mustache stared back at her. “This is Malcom Miller. Does he look familiar?”

“Not at all,” she said.

“I’ve never seen him either,” Calvin said. “Which I find pretty odd considering I actually live in Water’s Edge. Turns out he bought the bar not long after the fire. Everyone in town was thrilled that someone wanted to invest the money to get such a well-loved community staple back on its feet.”

The back door slid open. Jenna stepped outside and sat in the chair between Elsie and Calvin. “Who haven’t we all seen?”

“The new bar owner,” Calvin said, resting his hand on her knee. “The guy Dean’s looking for has been at Town Tavern talking with him at closing time. Sounds like he only shows up at the end of the day and doesn’t do much work.”

Tilting her head to the side, Jenna scrunched her nose. “Now that you mention it, I don’t know if I’ve ever met the new owner. I mean, we don’t go in there very often. Not exactly the best place to take Oliver for a meal, but I pop by occasionally to grab food to go. The staff is pretty much the same as before. If the boss isn’t in to help, how can he keep the business going?”

Elsie rubbed her closed eyes as her mind spun. She wanted to scream and yell and ask why it mattered if the bar owner worked a nine-to-five shift or not. Hell, they needed

to find Justin Pauly, not Malcom Miller. But it seemed like as soon as they found one lead, it did nothing but produce a tangle of knots that needed untied.

“You okay?”

The concern in Dean’s velvety voice opened her eyes. “I’m overwhelmed. I trust you and Calvin. You two have tons of experience with investigations, but it’s hard for me to follow your train of thought when I feel like everything around me is falling apart. I’m just struggling to keep afloat.”

“We’re all here to lift you up,” Jenna said. “Any way you need.”

“Thanks,” she said.

Leaning back in his chair, Dean scratched the dark whiskers on his jawline. “As far as Malcom and his work habits are concerned, it may play a key part in figuring out where Justin is and why he’d take Mila—if he’s the one who has her.”

Elsie frowned. “How so?”

“Remember that bag of cash?” Dean asked. “If Justin and that money are linked to Malcom, then we need to understand why.”

A headache pulsed against the back of her head. She wanted to throw her hands in the air and demand the men just give her the damn answers instead of stringing out questions like she was on a stupid trivia game.

But then a lightbulb went off in her brain. “If Justin has a bag full of money, chances are he didn’t get it legally. And if he didn’t get it legally, he needs to do something with it to make it look like he earned it in a legitimate way.”

Dean grinned. “Exactly. He’d need to clean the money. Which could make Malcom a pretty big player in whatever scheme Justine’s involved in. So we not only track down Justin, we get as much dirt on Malcom as we can.”

“You think they may be using the bar to launder money?” Jenna asked.

Calvin shrugged. “It’s a possibility, and one I plan to run past the sheriff’s department.”

“What does this guy look like?” Jenna leaned forward for a better glimpse at the computer and her face went white.

“What is it?” Elsie asked, her nerves stretched tight.

“I’ve seen him before.”

Elsie frowned. “I thought you said you’ve never met the new bar owner.”

Jenna bounced her gaze between Dean and Calvin before settling on Elsie. “I didn’t see him at the bar, it was at the hospital. He came into the emergency room a few weeks back. I didn’t tend to him, but I heard murmurs. He said he’d been in an accident but that wasn’t what the doctor who treated him thought really happened.”

Elsie’s throat went dry. “What did he think happened?”

“I can’t tell you,” Jenna said, wincing. “All I can say is it wasn’t an accident, and it appeared this man must have really pissed off the wrong guy.”

Disappointment weighed down every step Dean took toward Elsie’s house. They’d spent the last hour at Town Tavern, but Justin Pauly never showed.

And neither had Malcom Miller.

Elsie sank onto the porch stairs, looking out into the quiet neighborhood, as if unable to even make it the rest of the way to the door. She leaned her head against the white pillar and sighed. “I’ve never felt so defeated in my entire life.”

He plopped down beside her. He’d experienced his fair share of setbacks—both in work and in life—but the stakes had never been so high. The constant countdown hanging over his head ticked away precious seconds. “The good news is Calvin talked to Owen, and Owen is heading into the sheriff’s station to pick up where we left off.”

“Do you think he’ll find more than you and Calvin already did?”

Dean scrubbed his palm over his face and winced at his longer than normal whiskers. “Hopefully. Calvin and I are damn good at our jobs, but a sheriff’s deputy still has more resources and can get results quicker. Especially when that deputy is the son of the county sheriff. In the meantime, I’ll work on pinning down an address. The one Malcom has on record is bogus. If he’s the front of whatever the hell this money laundering operation is, then he needs to maintain a somewhat clean appearance. Can’t stand out too much.”

Elsie sighed. “How can I help?”

“You can rest.” They’d been going a hundred miles an hour since they’d woken that morning. Not to mention the emotional stress of both Mila’s disappearance and her store being vandalized.

Elsie straightened and looked him in the eye. Her jaw was clenched, and eyes narrowed. “I’ll rest when you rest. No reason for you to be up burning the midnight oil while I cozy up in bed. Besides, I don’t think I could sleep even if I tried.”

An image of her cuddled up to him in bed the evening before turned his blood to molten lava. Shifting, he cleared his throat. They hadn't spoken one word about the night they'd shared. Maybe that was for the best.

She frowned. "What is it?"

"We've, uh, been so busy today that we never discussed last night."

"A lot happened last night," she said with a small snort. "Can you be a little more specific."

"Us spending the night in the same bed."

"Oh, that." She wrinkled her nose and jumped to her feet. "Sorry. I was so tired and something about the wine and you making me feel safe just knocked me out. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

He stood and reached for her, but she busied herself by searching in her purse. "No. I didn't mean?—"

She found her keys and flashed him a tight smile. "Seriously, there's no need to make a big deal of it. Nothing happened. I understand you're here because you're being a good friend and you're concerned about Mila. Besides, that's where our focus should be."

Her instant reaction to brush aside the intimacy that had meant so much for him was like a dagger to the heart, but she was right. Their attention should be solely on figuring out what happened to Mila. He swallowed the words that had sat on the tip of his tongue all day and waited for her to unlock the door.

Her hand stilled on the doorknob. Her body went rigid.

Alarms went off his head. “What’s wrong?”

She took a step back, bumping against him, and glanced over her shoulder. “The door’s not locked.”

“Okay.” The fear etched on her face told him he was missing something.

“I locked it before we left.”

“Are you sure? Things have been hectic. Is there a chance you forgot?”

“No way I forgot. Not with everything going on right now. What do we do?”

He grabbed the gun tucked in his waistband at his back. Adrenaline zipped through his body, and he swept Elsie behind him. “I need to clear the house. Stay close.”

She fisted the back of his shirt and held on tight.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside. The house was dark, shadows cloaking corners of the living room where anyone could be hiding. “Where are the lights?”

Elsie leaned to the side and flipped a switch. Warm light washed over the room and chased away the threatening darkness.

Inch by inch, he looked at every nook, every cranny in the living room and connected kitchen before heading down the hallway. His pulse beat against his temple, and he kept his breath steady even though anxiety knotted his gut. “You all right?”

“Yeah,” she said, although the quiver in her voice told a different story.

He ducked into the bathroom, checking inside the linen closet before moving across

the hall to Jimmy's room. Once he was certain no one was inside, he led the way to Mila's room.

Nothing.

"Maybe I was wrong," Elsie said.

"Maybe," he echoed. "One more room to clear."

He pushed open the door, flipped on the light, and his gaze landed on a butcher knife stabbed into Elsie's pillow.

The comforting scent of freshly laundered sheets permeated the air in the guest room, enticing Elsie to drop her overnight bag and crawl under the down comforter. Her body craved sleep, but the rest of her wanted answers.

Answers Deputy Owen Wells had promised to find after he'd come to her house and taken her statement.

If she wasn't convinced before that someone was trying to keep her quiet, now there was zero doubt she was on the right trail. And she needed to stay on that path until it led her straight to Mila. Her best friend had been missing for almost forty-eight hours, and each minute that passed lessened the chances of her being found alive.

The icy fingers of fear circled her neck. No. She couldn't think like that. Couldn't stare at the clock and wonder how much time was left for Mila. That wouldn't do anyone any good. Especially Mila.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

She blinked at the sound of Dean's voice from the doorway. "You wouldn't have enough money to cover everything circling my brain right now."

"It's been a long-ass day. You have to be exhausted," he said.

"I am, but also weirdly wired. Like all this nervous energy is swirling inside me, refusing to let me relax."

“I experience those feelings, too. Usually that’s when Boo and I take a walk or play with his toys. Focusing on him helps calm me down and forget my troubles for a while. But since he’s not here...” he gave an exaggerated shrug, “We’ve got to think of another solution.”

Her mind went back to the night before. All she’d needed to calm her down was Dean’s body snuggled close to hers, but no way was she about to suggest he hold her in his bed all night. “Got any ideas?”

He swished his mouth to the side and a glint of mischief sparked in his eyes. “Want to play cards?”

“Cards?” she asked, raising her brows.

“Why not? It’ll take our focus off the awful day we just survived and help us unwind.”

Cards weren’t exactly her thing. Growing up, family night was a staple in her house, but her parents had been more into board games. She bit into her bottom lip, considering her options. She could lay awake and wait for sleep to come, her mind working over every detail of the last couple of days. Or she could fumble her way through whatever Dean wanted to play until she couldn’t keep her eyes open any longer.

“Okay, on two conditions.” She lifted two fingers to emphasize her demands.

He chuckled, the sound flowing over her like cashmere. “Lay them on me.”

“You provide some salty snacks, and I get a few minutes to put on more comfortable clothes.”

“Two very reasonable requests. I’ll get the snacks ready while you do whatever it is you need to do. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

She waited for him to leave and shut the door before digging through her bag for the clothes she’d packed. She found the red and black checked pants and buttery soft long sleeved sleep shirt. They might not be the cutest pajama set she owned, but she couldn’t care less. She craved comfort, any way she could get it.

Once she was dressed, she made a pitstop in the bathroom. She finger-combed her long tresses until she’d loosened out the knots, making the waves look more intentional and less like a rat’s nest. She debated adding a touch of lip gloss but decided against it. She didn’t want Dean to think she was trying to turn his head.

Shutting off the light, she scooped up her phone from the nightstand and headed to the kitchen. Quiet music wafted from a Bluetooth speaker on the counter. A bowl of popcorn sat on the table with two tall glasses of water.

Dean stood facing the microwave, waiting for the timer to reach zero.

“Making more popcorn?” she asked, settling into one of the chairs at the table.

The microwave beeped and he pulled out a large mug. “Chamomile tea,” he said, carefully setting it in front of her. “I noticed you and Jenna like to drink it sometimes. Thought it might help you relax.”

Her insides turned to mush. “Thank you.”

He flashed her a shy smile then rifled through a drawer by the fridge. He faced her with a triumphant gleam in his eyes and pack of cards in his hands. “Are you ready for this?”

“UNO?” she asked, bursting into laughter. “I thought you’d want to play poker or blackjack. Something where you can swindle me out of money and taunt my lack of skill.”

Pressing a hand to his heart, mock outrage took over his face. “Is that what you think of me? I’d take advantage of you and steal your money? No way, ma’am. Gambling of any kind is illegal in the great state of Tennessee. UNO is my game of choice. Can you handle it?”

She couldn’t help but absorb his enthusiasm. “I live with a six-year-old, and I just so happen to be the UNO champion in our house. Buckle up, my friend.”

Dean chuckled and sat across the table with a giant mug of his own. He shuffled the deck and passed out the cards.

Amusement curved her lips. She gathered her cards and arranged them in her hand by color then number. “I didn’t take you for a tea drinker.” She nodded toward the blue ceramic mug.

“I’m not. That’s a hot toddy.” He dipped his chin toward the steam billowing from his drink. “Whisky helps calm me down a little more than leaf water.”

She snorted out a laugh. “Fair point.”

Dean rearranged his cards in his hands. “You can play first.”

She selected the correct color and tossed it on the pile. “I can’t remember the last time I got to take the first turn. Jimmy always finds some reason or excuse to jump the line. Mila and I don’t care though. We’ll let him go first every time if it means getting him away from the television to actually spend time with us. Maybe I’ll see if Mila and Jimmy want to play tomorr?—”

Reality crashed down, stealing all the air from her lungs. As much as she'd love to lose herself in a silly game of cards, it wasn't possible to place her worries to the side. The best she could hope was biding time until her eyes were too heavy to keep open.

Dean reached across the table and rested his hand on top of hers. "I can't promise you that tomorrow all this will be over, but it will be soon and you'll have many more game nights to enjoy."

"I appreciate that, appreciate this." She flicked her free hand toward the offerings he'd placed on the table. "But I doubt it will be enough to take my mind off of everything that's going on right now."

He tilted his head to the side, brow furrowed and a hint of hesitation in his eyes. "What if we add something else to the mix?"

"Like what?"

"Ever play twenty questions?"

Now that piqued her interest. "My sister and I played it all the time when we were kids."

"Good, then I don't have to explain the rules." He removed his hand from hers and tossed down a card. "Just like with UNO, you can go first."

She studied her cards, planning her next move, but the numbers and colors blurred together. She had other things on her mind now. If she only had twenty chances to really get to know Dean Kingston, she sure as hell would make them count.

Dean had faced his share of danger in the line of duty, but nothing sent the fist of fear slamming into his gut like exposing his vulnerabilities. Especially in front of a

woman he cared about. But he'd handed Elsie a lit match and there was no turning back.

Elsie studied the cards fanned out in her hands.

She couldn't fool him. Nothing on her cards could take that much of her concentration.

He picked a kernel of buttery popcorn from the bowl and tossed it into his mouth. "You're making me nervous."

She grinned. "I won't be too hard on you. I'll even be fair. We can alternate questions, that way you're not the only one on the chopping block."

"I like that idea. So what's your first question?"

She placed a wild card on top of the growing discard pile. "I'll start with an easy one. Do you have family who still live in Water's Edge?"

A small bit of tension leaked from his system. She may have tossed him a softball to start with, but he could hope they stayed this easy to answer. "My parents live in the house where I grew up, right in town. My baby brother and his wife are across the street from them. What about you? Are you from Pine Valley?"

Taking a sip of her tea, she nodded. "My parents are still there, but my sister moved out of town. Not too far though, so I see her pretty often."

"And you're close with your parents?"

She hooked a brow. "That's question number two."

He nodded. If he could steer the conversation a little, he might avoid divulging too much. “I’m aware.”

“Very close,” she said. “But that’s not my next question for you. Why’d you move home?”

He threw down another card, debating how much to say. A year had passed since he’d packed his belongings and drove away from the life he’d built with Gina. A life he’d worked damn hard for and would have given anything to keep. Admitting out loud how difficult that time had been, and even acknowledging the part he’d played in the demise of his marriage, soured his stomach. “I had nothing left for me back in California.”

“And your ex-wife stayed?”

Sighing, he tossed his cards on the table and scrubbed a hand over his face. “Yep.”

She winced. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have used a game to pry into your personal business. Your story is yours to tell, how and when you see fit.”

Leaning back against the hard chair, he took a sip of his drink. The whisky burned all the way down his throat. “No apologies necessary. This was my idea, remember. Hell, maybe I wanted an excuse to talk about this shit and figured it’d be easier this way.”

She tossed a reverse card on the pile. “Looks like the question asking just switched back. Fire at will.”

“I don’t think that’s how the game works,” he said, unable to hide his grin.

She shrugged. “I make my own rules.”

“Good to know. All right then. What do I want to know about Elsie Sweet?” He rubbed his palms together for dramatic effect. “Why don’t you have a boyfriend? You’re smart, beautiful, funny as hell. I don’t understand why someone hasn’t swooped in and stolen your heart.”

It was her turn to lay down her cards and squirm. “Between owning my business and volunteering at the shelter, I don’t have much free time. Throw in how much time I spend with Jimmy, and most men turn heel and run.”

“Men are idiots,” he said with a derisive snort.

“Really? Do explain.”

The humor dancing in her eyes made him bark out a laugh. “Well, the way I see it is you owning a business shows you’re a hard worker with brains to back it up. The hours you spend at the shelter tell me you have a kind heart. And Jimmy? Hell, who couldn’t love that kid? Your relationship with him, and Mila, is a sign of how loyal and committed you are to those you love. Who would want to run from a woman with those qualities?”

A pretty blush stained her cheeks. She folded her hands around her mug before lifting it to her mouth for a small sip of tea. “You’re right, men are stupid, but not all of them. You don’t appear to be an idiot.”

The countless arguments he’d had with Gina after he’d been injured on the job flew to mind. “I’ve had my moments. Didn’t always listen to my wife’s needs. Didn’t see that the decisions I made affected her so much until it was too late.”

“And since?” Elsie asked.

He thought back on the past year. His growth and self-reflection. His contentment

with the smaller things in life. “Well, it’s taken me some time to move on. When I thought I had my future figured out, only for the rug to be yanked out from beneath me, it hurt like hell and threw my whole life off balance. They say time heals all wounds, but I think that’s bullshit. Some wounds stay forever, they just don’t always hurt quite so much.”

Her face fell. “I understand that.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, kicking himself for getting too philosophical. “I didn’t mean to bring your mind back to Mila.”

She shook her head, her long hair spilling over her shoulder. “I meant my older brother. He died in a car accident when he was seventeen. Changed my entire life. Wrecked my family. The pain of losing Brad will never go away, no matter how much time passes. So I get it. Some of those expressions people make up because they don’t know what else to say—don’t know how else to offer comfort. But those of us who’ve been through the war know those battles will continue forever.”

“I’m so sorry.”

She let out a long breath and stood. “I’ll need a raincheck on the rest of those questions. If I stay up any longer, I won’t make it back to the bedroom. Good night.”

Fighting the urge to follow, he sat and watched her disappear down the hall. Elsie was a woman who’d already been to hell and back, losing someone she loved. Yet she kept her heart open and lived her life with kindness and compassion, not bitterness and resentment.

And life had dealt her another shitty hand.

But this time would be different. This time he would do whatever he could to bring

home the person she loved—or at least give her the answers she needed to heal and move forward.

He'd do whatever he could to make Elsie happy.

Needing at least one moment of peace before starting her day, Elsie tiptoed into the kitchen, brewed a single cup of coffee, and stepped onto the back deck. Most mornings were too hectic to allow her the time to sit and soak up some quiet before tackling her day.

But not today. Today she had nowhere to be. No child to help get ready. No store to open.

Despair threatened to grab hold of her and suck her into its ugly vortex, but she fought against it. There was plenty of time to dwell on the negative. She'd take a few seconds to sip her hot coffee and watch the sunrise over the mountains.

"Good morning."

She jumped at the sound of Dean's husky voice, sloshing coffee over the side of her mug. "Sorry. I didn't know you were awake."

He sat at the two-person table tucked at the back of the deck. His laptop was closed in front of him with a blue mug beside it. "I'm an early riser. I like to start my day out here with Boo. Get my head on straight."

"I can go back inside if you'd like to be alone." Not as if she wanted to but she felt an obligation to make the offer. She was already intruding enough on his space.

Then there were all the feelings he'd stirred up inside her. Their little game night was

supposed to distract her from all her troubles but ended up placing even more on her mind. Mainly Dean and the ex-wife he left in California. His willingness to open up had shocked her, but something didn't sit right about using a game to make him talk.

"No, sit," he said. "I'm not used to being out here by myself to watch the sunrise. Makes me miss my dog."

Crossing the worn wooden planks to sit across from him, she wrinkled her nose. "We can pick him up if you'd like. It was nice of you to let Boo stay with Jimmy, but I'm sure he's dying to come home."

Dean snorted. "Doubt it. When he senses someone's turmoil, he sticks to them like glue. That's why he hasn't left my side much this past year."

"Well, I know Jimmy's enjoying having him around."

"Have you spoken with him this morning?"

She shook her head and took a sip of coffee. The bitter, black liquid scalded her tongue before sliding down her throat. "Not yet. Since my mom is keeping him home from school, he'll want to sleep in a little. Not like it'll be that late, 8:00 am max, if he was able to sleep at all."

"I'm sure your parents kept him pretty busy yesterday. Probably tuckered the little man out."

"I hope so, although not much would make him forget he hasn't spoken to his mom, and nobody knows where she is." A familiar stab of pain echoed inside her. She didn't want to dwell on all the negative possibilities of where Mila was, only on how to bring her home. "I had fun last night. I can't think of anything else that would have distracted me as much as grilling you over a friendly game of UNO."

“You took it easy on me,” he said with a grin.

Lifting her shoulder, she leaned back in her chair and kept her gaze on the glow of the sun hovering around the mountain peaks. Birds chirped and the colorful explosion of leaves in the woods around them shimmered in the early morning air.

She considered playing coy but didn't want to. Didn't want to pretend like Dean meant nothing to her. Didn't want to sit here and act like she didn't want to strip him down and know the real him. “I want you to tell me things because you want to, not because you feel obligated—even if by a game. These last couple of days have been absolute hell but spending time with you has been a bright light. I want to get to know you outside of this craziness. When we can take time to be two normal people, opening up to someone we care about. Someone we want to know, because it feels right.”

He stared at her with wide eyes, mouth slightly agape.

Shit .

She should have kept her mouth shut. Now she'd gone and made everything awkward as hell. Humiliation scorched the back of her neck and crept around to her face, probably shining like a beacon.

“Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. Just forget it.” She shot to her feet and took a step toward the door when a warm hand stopped her in her tacks. She turned and was so close to Dean, the scent of sandalwood and citrus wafted over her. She stared up at him and swallowed hard at the fire in his eyes.

“I don't want to forget it, don't want to ignore whatever's happening between us. I won't lie, the idea of getting close to you has scared me for a while. I've tried to keep my distance. Tried to tell myself we're only friends.” Erasing the space between

them, he smoothed his palm against her jawline. “But honestly, I don’t want to be just friends.”

Her throat went dry. Before she could talk herself out of acting on her feelings, before logic and sense stormed back to take center stage in her brain, she lifted onto her toes and pressed her lips to his. Electricity shot through her veins and stole her breath. Stars burst behind her closed eyelids. Her core tingled, and she pressed her body closer to his.

His arm went around her waist, and his tongue pressed into her mouth. His lips moved in a steady rhythm with hers.

She moaned, her entire being wanting more of him. More of his touch, his taste, his tongue. In this moment, she wanted to escape the fear and worry and growing doubt that her friend was still alive.

She simply wanted Dean.

The sound of the doorbell broke them apart.

Dean rested his forehead on hers and pulled in a long breath. “Whoever that is has the worst timing ever.”

She chuckled and found his hand with hers. “Come on. Let’s see who it is. If it’s nothing important, we’ll ask them to leave and continue this somewhere a little more comfortable.”

A low growl hummed from his throat before he led her inside and marched for the front door. He yanked open the door and his body went rigid. “Gina? What the hell are you doing here?”

Dean's entire world tilted on its axis. Cold hard anger settled like a rock in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't laid eyes on his ex-wife since she'd thrown his clothes on the lawn and told him their marriage was over.

And now she was here. In his house. With the same smile on her face that he fell in love with so many years ago.

Gina's gaze landed on his and Elsie's joined hands and her smile faltered for an instant. "Hi, Dean. I hoped to find you home, but I didn't mean to...interrupt."

Dean released Elsie's hand and wiped his palm on the soft material of his gym shorts. "You didn't answer my question. Why are you here?"

Gina ran her hands through her thick, black hair—a nervous habit she'd never been able to break. Her blue eyes were wide, her tall, slim frame showcased in a fitted long-sleeved shirt and leggings. "Can we talk?"

Elsie shifted at his side then wrapped her arms around her middle. "I have some things to take care of. I'll just step out on the back deck."

"You don't have to go," he said, kicking himself for not being more considerate of her. "Gina, this is my friend Elsie."

Gina tucked in her lips and gave Elsie a little nod. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too." She lifted her gaze to Dean's. "I'll give you some privacy."

The flash of hurt in Elsie's eyes cut him at the knees. He wanted to reach for her, to tell her to stay, to tuck her hand back in his, but shock paralyzed him. Before he could respond, she lifted her hand in a hip-high wave and hurried out the back door.

“She’s here awfully early in the morning.” The tight clip of Gina’s words snapped him back to reality.

“What concern of yours is that? You threw me out, left me for someone else, remember?” Squeezing the back of his neck, he stormed into the kitchen, leaving her in the foyer. He didn’t care if it was rude, he needed to move. He couldn’t just stand there like an idiot in front of the woman who’d broken his heart.

Timid footsteps followed after him. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. You’re right. It’s not my business who you have in your home at any time of day. I just wasn’t expecting to find anyone here with you.”

Needing to do something with his hands, he opened the refrigerator door then shut it when he couldn’t find anything of interest. He faced her, hating the way she could send him into a tailspin after all this time. “What did you expect?”

She shrugged, her confidence never wavering. “I told you. I wanted to talk.”

“About what?”

“Us.” Rounding the island, she took a step toward him.

“There is no us. Hasn’t been since you slept with another man while we were married then divorced me.” He scrubbed a palm over his face.

“I made a mistake.” Her smile finally fell. Tears hovered over her dark lashes, making the blue of her eyes the color of the sea. “I was lonely and stupid. I thought your job was the problem and if you would have just quit—would have just chosen me—then everything would be okay. But I didn’t understand I was part of the problem.”

He snorted. “Did you think screwing someone else might have been another part of that problem?”

She winced, red clashing against her tanned cheeks. “I deserve that.”

He tilted his head to the side, studying her. She’d wanted out of this town more than she’d wanted her next breath, never returning with him on visits home. He’d been her ticket out of Tennessee, and once she’d escaped, she’d moved on to someone else.

Someone who could give her what he couldn’t.

“Where’s Andy?” The other man’s name on his tongue churned his stomach.

She straightened and looked him dead in the eye. “It didn’t work out. I made a mistake.”

His body tensed. He’d wanted to hear those words for so damn long, but now that Gina had finally said them, they meant nothing. “That’s not my problem anymore.”

She sucked in a sharp breath and took another step. “Listen, I know we can work past what happened. We both made rash decisions, made choices that pushed the other away.”

“Are you kidding me?” He couldn’t stand there and listen to more of her bullshit. “You think me not wanting to quit my job is the same as you cheating on me? Leaving me? Kicking me out of the home we made? You have some gall coming back here and making such a ridiculous claim.”

“Well, if you didn’t leave me waiting up all night, praying for you to come home safely, maybe I wouldn’t have had to look outside our marriage.”

The familiar argument came back to him in a flash. He laughed a humorless laugh. How had he ended up right back in this place with Gina? Fighting over the same shit after so much time, after so much had happened.

“Listen, I’m sorry that things aren’t working out the way you’d hoped. I want you to be happy, I really do. But you won’t find that happiness with me. Not anymore. We’ve been over for a long time. There’s no going back to what we once were.”

Her bottom lip trembled, and she sniffled back tears. She moved quickly across the kitchen tiles, as if panic pushed her forward. “Please. Dean, you know what we had was real. That you once loved me with your whole being. If you really try, I know we can get that back. I want that back. More than anything.”

Before he could respond, she fisted the neck of his t-shirt and yanked him toward her, capturing his mouth with hers. She moved closer, wrapping her free arm around the back of his neck.

He broke away from Gina seconds before a throat cleared behind him.

Elsie stood in the doorway, the crisp morning breeze filtering inside. Her mouth was pressed in a pissed-off pinch and her eyes narrowed. “Sorry to interrupt, but Calvin called. He found Malcom Miller’s house and thought we’d want to know.”

She turned her back on him and slammed the door closed behind her.

Gina’s dark brow arched high. “Is that something you need to handle now, or we can we keep talking?”

“I told you. We have nothing left to discuss. Now please leave.”

Gina flicked her glance outside where Elsie’s back was visible as she stood staring

out at the mountains, a phone pressed to her ear. “Fine. I’ll go, but I’m not leaving town. I won’t give up on us.”

“There is no us. Not anymore.”

He stayed rooted to the spot until Gina left then hurried to explain everything to Elsie. He stepped outside, and Elsie whirled around.

She handed him his phone. “I’ll get ready then we need to meet Calvin,” she said, moving past him.

He reached for her, but she yanked her arm away from his grasp. “Elsie. I—please.”

She held up a palm and squeezed her eyes shut for a quick second. When she opened them again, pain sparked the green of her irises. “You don’t have to explain. It doesn’t matter. Just be ready to go in ten minutes.”

She rushed back inside, leaving his heart shattered. Once again, Gina had found a way to screw up his life.

Tension filled the truck on the short drive to the property Calvin had found. Elsie struggled not to fidget in the uncomfortable silence. Witnessing Dean kissing his ex-wife was like a knife in the heart, but she had to put that behind her. If he wanted to give his marriage another chance, that was his choice. One she would respect.

Besides, all of her energy needed to be aimed in one place. Figuring out what the hell had happened to Mila.

The truck bounced along a gravel lane, partially overgrown with weeds. Elsie gripped the handle above her head to steady herself. “So Malcom actually lives here and not the apartment above the bar?”

“Calvin thinks so,” Dean said through gritted teeth. “If the house is anything like this damn driveway, I’m afraid of what we’re walking into.”

Dean maneuvered the truck along a narrow strip of gravel between two trees and parked beside Calvin’s SUV. A ranch-style house with dark brown siding and cracked windows sat in a sea of weeds. A rusted white sedan was parked on the other side of Calvin—who leaned against the hood of his vehicle with his phone in his hand.

“Is anyone here?” she asked.

“Not sure. I didn’t get a chance to talk to Calvin much before we left. Hell, to be honest, my mind was more preoccupied with trying to talk with you.” He parked then

shot her a timid smile.

Her resolve to not make an issue of hurt feelings weakened. “There’s no need for a conversation. We’re friends who might have been more but something else popped up. I don’t fault you for wanting to give your marriage a second chance. You didn’t plan on any of this to happen. No harm, no foul.”

Before he could say another word, she hopped out of the car and marched toward Calvin with her head held high. She might be willing to step aside for the sake of not making things any more awkward, but she didn’t need to sit there and listen to his “I’m sorry” speech. She had more dignity than that.

Calvin straightened and slipped his phone back in his pocket. “Morning.”

“Morning,” she echoed. “How’d you find this place?”

“Property is owned by Celia Miller, Malcom’s sister. I ran a background check on her, and she has another residence, as well as a business, in Alabama.” He paused, lifting his chin to acknowledge Dean before continuing. “Looks like that’s where she lives, along with her husband, two kids, and three dogs. I’d be surprised if she spends any time in this shithole.”

Dean shoved his hands in the front pocket of his jeans. “Nice work. Is anyone home?”

“Rang the bell a few times and no one answered. I peeked through the windows as best as possible and didn’t see anyone.”

“So what now?” Elsie asked. “Can’t we just go inside and look around?”

Calvin grinned. “Ask former Officer Kingston. He’s a little more rigid about the rules

than I am. Technically, going inside without a reason or invitation is breaking and entering. But my thoughts are geared more around no harm, no foul.”

She turned pleading eyes on Dean. “Well? Willing to bend the rules a little?”

Lifting his eyes to the sky, Dean sighed. “You told me last night you make your own rules. Might as well make a few more. But stay close. Even if things seem quiet, this could be the residence of a criminal. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

A shudder ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the wind whipping through the trees. Staying close to Dean wouldn’t have been a hardship yesterday, but now she wanted space. She’d stay as close as she could if it meant getting into a house that could have the answers they were looking for.

Calvin dipped his chin. “Let’s do this.”

Calvin took the lead on the uneven pathway to the front of the house. She stayed half a step behind him.

“I’ll try knocking again before we let ourselves in,” Calvin said.

She nodded, although no one waited for her response before Calvin fisted his hand and pounded on the front door.

Seconds ticked by. Nothing happened. No sound. No shifting of the house. No answer to the persistent knocking.

Calvin glanced over his shoulder. “Here we go.”

He tried the knob, which turned without issue, and pushed open the door.

“Hello?” Calvin yelled into the house. “Anyone home?”

Darkness and a wave of stale air greeted them. An unknown odor assaulted her. She covered her mouth and nose with her hand as she stepped inside. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s been here in a while by that smell. Either that, or whoever lives here doesn’t care about how much it stinks.”

Both men armed themselves, Calvin training his gun in front of him while Dean kept his pointed toward the floor.

Bile sloshed in her stomach. “What is it?” Alarm tightened her muscles. A sense of dread loomed over her. A million questions danced in her head, but she didn’t dare speak. Didn’t dare move.

“Try not to touch anything,” Dean said. “We’ll clear the house, okay? Just like last night at your place.”

An image of the knife plunged in her pillow flashed in her brain. Something told her what they’d find in this house would be much worse.

“I looked at the layout before we got here. It’s pretty basic,” Calvin said. “We’re in the only living area. A small kitchen is on the other side, and this hall leads to one bedroom and a single bath.”

“I’ll head down the hall,” Dean said. “Be alert.”

Calvin peeled off to the left, she and Dean walked straight ahead. Her body jumped at every sound, her mind envisioning what they’d find behind each closed door.

Please don’t be Mila.

Pushing open the first door revealed a small bathroom. Dean flipped on the light. A rusted tub was visible, the moldy curtain shoved to the side. A pedestal sink stood beside the toilet. Dean tensed and took another step inside.

She glanced around the space until her gaze landed on the sink. “Oh my God. Is that blood?” Red streaks stained the white porcelain, splattering the floor.

“Looks like it.” Dean searched inside the slim linen closet then ushered her back to the hall. “Found blood in the bathroom,” he yelled to Calvin then faced her. “You okay?”

Her mouth went dry, but she nodded. “Keep going.”

He studied her for a beat, as if wanting to make sure she was telling the truth. Without another word, he turned to the last door and shoved it open.

The offensive smell of blood and death slid against her. Dread curdled in her belly. She held her breath and fought not to squeeze her eyes shut. An unmade bed was shoved to the corner and clothing spilled from an open dresser drawer.

A crumpled body with a pool of blood beneath lay in the middle of the room.

Instinct shifted Dean to block Elsie’s view of the body. Adrenaline shot through his veins. He didn’t know what he expected to find, but it definitely wasn’t a homicide.

“Oh my God, is it Mila?” Elsie shrieked. She pushed against his chest, trying to shove past him. “I have to see. I have to make sure it’s not her.”

Dean grabbed her arms and rooted her in place. He dipped his chin to stare her in the eyes. “Hey. Look at me.”

She stilled, her breath heaving from her body in ragged spurts.

“That’s not Mila, but I need to figure out who it is and make sure whoever killed him isn’t still here.”

Her head bobbed up and down, but her eyes remained wide and filled with fear.

“I want you to turn around and face the hallway while I double check the rest of the room. You don’t need to see this, okay?” He kept his voice low and calm as if speaking to a frightened animal.

“Okay.” Slowly, she spun around. Tremors ran through her body and the sound of her teeth chattering cut through the silence of the room.

He struggled not to wrap his arms around her, but after the morning they’d had, he doubted she wanted his comfort. Not to mention there were more important things to see to at the moment. Tiptoeing around the body, he noted thick, dark blood dried around a gaping wound at the side of the man’s head—a headful of ginger-colored hair. He was careful not to disturb the scene as he made sure no other surprises waited in the room.

“Holy shit,” Calvin said. “What happened here?”

Dean crossed back to Elsie’s side. He tentatively pressed his fingers to her back, urging her into the narrow hall. “Looks like Malcom Miller’s dead. Let’s go outside and call it in.”

Calvin worked his jaw back and forth then led the way to the front yard.

Elsie hurried to the weed-covered sidewalk and bent over at the waist. She drew in large gulps of air.

“I’ll call the sheriff’s department,” Calvin said. “You take care of Elsie.”

Dean hovered a palm above Elsie’s shoulder blades, torn between touching her and wanting to respect her boundaries. “Keep taking deep breaths,” he said. “Give yourself a few minutes.”

“Will I ever forget that smell?” Her voice shook, each word louder than the last. She gulped in one more big breath and straightened, facing him with questioning eyes and ashen skin.

“I wish I could lie and tell you that everything you witnessed in that house will fade from your memory until it’s all gone, but that’s not the truth. Just like those wounds we talked about, this is something that gets easier to deal with as time passes but will probably never completely go away.”

“What about the guilt?”

He frowned. “Guilt? What do you mean?”

“Guilt for the relief I felt when I realized it wasn’t Mila laying on that dirty floor.” She rubbed a palm over the base of her throat. “I don’t know who’s inside, but he was a person. I shouldn’t have felt an ounce of joy at his death. I’m horrible.”

“No, you’re human, and your reaction was completely natural. You’re not happy someone is dead, you’re happy Mila is alive. Those are two very different things.”

“Okay,” Calvin said, striding toward them. “I talked to Owen. He’s on his way out here with the coroner. He wasn’t exactly pleased that we went inside the house but can’t be too upset since we found who we believe is Malcom Miller.”

Dean scrubbed his hand over his jaw. Elsie wasn’t the only one who’d have a hard

time getting the grisly scene they'd uncovered out of her head, but if discovering what happened inside Malcom's house led to finding Mila, he'd gladly be haunted by a hundred dead bodies. "They'll open an official investigation into his death. Hopefully that will give us more answers regarding him and Justin Pauly. And if the sheriff's department can somehow tie Justin or Malcom to Mila, that could be the break we need."

Calvin grimaced. "They won't have a problem tying Mila to this house."

Unease danced down Dean's back.

Elsie stiffened. "Why not?"

"I found some dirty material in the trash can. Looked like someone had ripped it off a pant leg."

Elsie's jaw tightened. Her arms wrapped around her waist, but she lifted her chin as if bracing for impact. "Was it blue with yellow smiley faces?"

Calvin nodded.

"She was here." Elsie's voice was strong and crisp as the autumn air. "Now we need know what they did with her."

The subtle scent of Elsie's tea was enough to turn her stomach. No way she could eat anything, but she'd hoped getting something in her system would settle her nerves. The hustle and bustle of Lulu's Diner mirrored the craziness buzzing in her brain.

But it wouldn't matter where she waited to speak with Deputy Owen Wells. Nothing would calm her right now. She was like a bull ready to attack, only needing the signal to charge forward to finally get answers.

Dean took a bite of eggs. "Are you sure you don't want anything else? I know you're not hungry, but something light might help."

She shook her head and held her mug tight. The tea might not be appealing, but at least the warmth seeping from the porcelain might chase away some of the chill clinging to her bones. "I'm fine. I just want Owen to hurry up and get here so we can get this conversation over with."

After Calvin had called the sheriff's department about the dead body, Owen had hurried to the scene with a few other deputies and the coroner. Once the death was ruled a homicide, it was more important for Owen to start his investigation than take statements from her, Dean, and Calvin. The three had agreed to meet him at Lulu's once he was done at Malcom's house.

Calvin sipped his coffee then leaned his forearms on the table. "He should be here soon. I gave him my initial statement, but he wants to go over a few more details. Hopefully by waiting this long, he'll have more information to share. Information that

could help us figure out where to go next.”

A bell above the door chimed. Elsie leaned to the side to catch a glimpse of Owen striding through the breakfast crowd. “He’s here.”

Dean and Calvin both turned to watch Owen approach.

Fatigue made the five o’clock shadow on Owen’s jaw appear more haggard than usual. He slumped into the empty chair at the four-person table and signaled for the server with his index finger. “Can I get some coffee, please?” he asked when the middle-aged woman appeared. “To go.”

“Sure can.” She scribbled on her order pad. “Anything else for the rest of y’all?”

“No, thank you,” Elsie said, finally taking a sip of her now lukewarm tea. The bitter taste coated her mouth, and she struggled not to cringe.

Owen waited for the server to walk away before letting out a big sigh.

“Did you find who killed Malcom?” Elsie asked, unable to wait another second.

“Not yet. We’ve searched the property and are following all leads. I need you to tell me what all you touched inside that house. We dusted for fingerprints, and it’d be beneficial to know where to expect to find any of your prints.”

Dean scoffed. “Do you really think we’re dumb enough to contaminate a crime scene?”

Owen pinned him with narrowed eyes. “I think you entered a house without cause and didn’t know you were walking into a crime scene.”

“Fair point.” Dean stabbed the remaining bits of egg with his fork before shoveling them into his mouth.

“Besides the front door handle, I didn’t touch anything,” Calvin said. “Dean?”

Dean shrugged. “Opened the closest doors in the bathroom and bedroom. Doors to the rooms themselves. That’s it.”

“What about you Elsie?” Owen’s voice was gentler when addressing her.

“Nothing, at least I don’t think so. I stayed close to Dean. And when we found the body, I froze. I don’t remember after that if I touched anything or not.”

The server appeared and set Owen’s cup in front of him before hurrying to another table.

“Calvin mentioned you identified the scrubs he found in the trash as Mila’s. Is that true?” Owen asked.

She nodded, her stomach tying itself into knots. Her optimism regarding Mila’s fate faded with each passing second, but knowing she’d been in that house—that pieces of her clothing were dirty and discarded—was almost enough to put the final nail in her coffin. “I saw her the night she went missing. I am one hundred percent positive those were hers.”

All three men frowned, their worry and fears hovering over the table like a storm cloud.

She had to press on. Had to get as much information from Owen as possible if even the slightest chance of finding Mila remained. “Was there anything else in the house that leads to Mila?”

“No. I’m sorry. I wish I had better news. At this point, the department is all-hands-on-deck with the investigation. I hope that uncovering who killed Malcom will lead us to Mila. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go. I’ll keep you posted if we gather any more information you should be aware of.” Standing, Owen grabbed his coffee, dipped his chin, and headed toward the door.

Elsie dropped her head to the table. “What was the point of that? He didn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know. Such a waste of time.”

A gentle touch on her arm lifted her head. Dean was closer than he’d dared to get to her all morning, and it melted something inside of her. She wanted him near her. Wanted him to touch her, calm her, reassure her.

“It may feel like that, but each new development brings us closer to the truth.”

“We need to get closer, and fast. We need to head to Town Tavern.” Conviction hummed in her veins. She was tired of waiting. If she wanted answers, she’d find them herself. “It should be open by now. Malcom was never there in the morning, and the staff might have information we could use. Owen said all hands on deck. That includes us, whether he likes it or not.”

Dean blinked to adjust to the lack of natural light inside Town Tavern. The place was business as usual. A few patrons already lined the bar, most opting for a quick meal before heading into work. The smell of coffee and bacon mixed with the hint of cigarette smoke that had permeated the walls years before.

Elsie stepped further into the room but kept space between them. He hated that they hadn’t had a chance to clear the air, but he hadn’t had an opportunity to explain his conversation with Gina. Now it was just the two of them, Calvin opting to work another angle from home, but he wasn’t sure how to broach the subject.

Especially when Malcom's murder and its connection to Mila was at the forefront of their minds.

"We should talk to Ashley again," Elsie said. "She was willing to spill information before."

Dean scanned the restaurant until he spotted Ashley scurrying from the kitchen with her hands full and scowling. "Good plan. She's here. Let's sit in her section. Try to make things easy on her."

He led the way to a table close to where Ashley stood, taking another order. He pulled out a chair for Elsie then took the seat across from her. "Hungry at all? You haven't eaten anything all morning."

She shook her head then dropped her gaze to the scarred table. "I haven't had much of an appetite."

He opened his mouth to at least clear the air regarding his ex-wife, but Ashley rushed to the table before any words came out.

"Hey guys. What can I get you two?" Bags hung heavy under Ashley's brown eyes. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun. Dark spots stained her wrinkled white shirt.

Elsie frowned. "Are you all right?"

Ashley blew out a sharp breath. "Just tired. Tired of working in a place where the boss is nowhere to be found. Tired of being the only responsible one around here, forced to clean up messes I didn't make. And now I'm getting woken up in the middle of the night because apparently people were trying to get into the bar last night and there was no one else to call." She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge

of her nose. "I'm sorry. That was unprofessional and uncalled for. I shouldn't have unleashed all that on you. I'm just overwhelmed."

A twinge of intuition heightened Dean's awareness. "No apology necessary. That sucks you were getting calls in the middle of the night. What in the world was that all about?"

She shrugged. "Who knows. I guess a few guys were lingering by the front door and a friend of mine happened to be out and was concerned they were attempting to break in. Don't know why they didn't call the police. That's what I did, and when they got here, no one was around. I called Malcom to fill him in but haven't heard from the world's best boss since yesterday." Sarcasm dripped from her mouth like honey.

Dean tucked that bit of information into the back of his mind. "Ashley, have you heard any news about Malcom?"

"No," she said. "Did something happen?"

Dean glanced across the table and found Elsie's grimace before staring up at Ashley. The long-time server of Town Tavern would learn the truth soon enough. Might as well fill her in and hopefully her shock would loosen her lips. "He was killed last night."

Ashley's eyes flew wide. "Seriously? Was he in an accident? I can't believe this. I swear this place is cursed."

"Not an accident." Dean didn't elaborate. At this point in the investigation, the sheriff's department wouldn't want him spreading the details of Malcom's murder. But there was no reason to pretend his death was anything other than what it was.

"Oh my God," Ashley said, swaying slightly.

Elsie shot to her feet and wrapped an arm around Ashley's waist, guiding her to an empty seat. "I'm sorry. I know this is a lot to take in, especially after everything that's happened around here lately."

Sinking into the chair, Ashley's skin drained of color. "I didn't really know him that well, but he was pleasant enough. What should I do? Should we close? Keep working like nothing happened? Dammit, I need this job." Tears glimmered in her eyes and she sniffled.

Dean pulled a napkin from the silver dispenser on the table and pressed it into her hand. "Stay open until you're told otherwise. No one will fault you for wanting to make a paycheck. And if you want to help uncover what happened to Malcom, you can tell us anything you think we should know."

Frowning, her brows dipped low. "Like what? I told you everything I know. I swear. He kept to himself. Didn't work shifts or make friends with anyone here. Hell, he didn't even spend much time in his apartment upstairs."

"Could we poke around a bit?" Elsie asked.

Ashley shifted in her chair. "I don't think it's my place to authorize that. I'm sure his apartment is locked. Won't the police be by to look at all his things?"

"They will, yes," Dean said. "But right now, they are busy elsewhere and time is limited."

Ashley bounced her gaze between them. "I don't understand. How can time be limited? I get wanting to find a criminal if someone killed Malcom, but he's already dead. Moving quickly won't change that."

Elsie slid her hand across the table and rested it on top of Ashley's, gaining her

attention. “My roommate has been missing for days and we think whoever hurt Malcom might be connected to her disappearance. Each minute that passes lessens our chances of finding her alive, and she has a little boy waiting at home for his mom. Dean and I are doing everything we can to help law enforcement.”

“Well, maybe you can look at his office. The staff use it more than he does, but he’d go in there from time to time.”

“Thank you,” Elsie said. “Can you show us where it is?”

Standing, Ashley nodded and wiped her eyes. “Sure. Come with me.”

Dean followed the two women to a small room down a short hallway. A dim light shone from the single overhead globe. A desk sat in the middle of the space, with a metal filing cabinet to one side. “It’s pretty tidy in here.”

A small smile tugged at a corner of Ashley’s mouth. “Thanks. I try to get things as organized as possible.”

“Do you handle the books?” Elsie asked.

“Mostly.” Ashley rounded the end of the desk and typed on the keyboard of the desktop computer. “Here’s everything I have access to for the business. Not sure how it can help, but feel free to look. Let me know if there’s anything else I can do, but I need to get back to work.”

“Thank you,” Elsie said. “You can’t know how much this means. How much it might help.”

Ashley let out a shaky breath. “Do I tell the rest of the staff about Malcom?”

“That’s up to you,” Dean said. “They’ll find out soon. If it’s too much, you don’t need to take on the responsibly of giving that news.”

She flashed a tight smile then disappeared down the hall.

Elsie hurried to the look at the computer screen. “Looks like they use the same accounting software I use at the store. A quick glance makes everything seem like the books are clean, but if Malcom was using the bar to launder money, he wouldn’t keep it on the computer the rest of the staff can access.”

“Agreed,” Dean said. He opened the drawers of the filing cabinet, but nothing stood out. “Looks like mostly product receipts and payroll information.”

Elsie clicked out of the program and scanned the digital files. “Not much on here.” She plopped on the brown leather desk chair then opened the top drawer. Reaching inside, she shifted around the clutter of paperclips and post-it notes. Excitement flashed on her face, and she pulled out a key. “Wonder what this is for. There’s a tiny piece of paper taped to it. Says A2. Sounds like an apartment number or something.”

Dean came up beside her and took the key. “Might be the key to the apartment above the bar. There’s only one way to know for sure.”

A nxiety zipped through Elsie's veins. She tapped her toe against the stained carpet at the top of the stairwell and willed the key to work in the round doorknob. She'd already been a part of one break-in this morning. Even though she'd do whatever necessary to get into the apartment Malcom kept above the bar, she hoped to do so in a more legal capacity.

"The key fits." Dean whispered and swung open the door. "Hurry."

She brushed past him, the heat of his body causing butterflies to awaken in the pit of her stomach, and the shock of the inside of the apartment stopped her in her tracks. The gleaming hardwood floors and sleek, modern cabinets stood in stark contrast to the bar downstairs. An impressive collection of liquor bottles lined the shiny white marble.

A hand on her back prompted her forward. "This is not what I expected," she said, spinning around to face Dean.

He let out a low whistle, darting his gaze around to take in the room. "Doesn't make sense Malcom chose to live in the shithole where we found him when he had this place."

"Maybe that's because he doesn't have any furniture in here."

The kitchen and living room were one open space. Thick, black curtains hung from the window on the far wall, but the living room was empty.

Dean walked toward the kitchen cabinets and flipped open door after door. “Fancy glasses in here, but that’s about it. Let’s hope we find something in one of the other rooms.”

Elsie waited for Dean to lead the way down the hallway. Fear heightened her awareness, but at least there wasn’t the putrid scent announcing death like in Malcom’s other residence. She peered over Dean’s shoulder into the bathroom. The space was small but as high-end as the front of the apartment with its white pedestal sink, tiled shower, and platinum finishes.

“I can’t wrap my mind around this apartment belonging to the same man as the house we were at earlier.” She trailed her fingertips on the soft fluffy hand towel, a pristine white that looked as if it had never been touched.

“Let’s check the bedroom. There’s got to be something more in there than decorative towels and booze.” He flipped off the light and stepped across the hall.

Her nerves tightened into a little round ball. Either they’d find something useful or end up right back where they started—with jack shit to help figure out what happened to Mila.

Dean pushed open the door, turned on the light, and frowned. “What the hell?”

Hesitating, she wrinkled her nose and closed her eyes. “Should I stay out here? Do I want to see?”

“He’s using this as a storage area,” Dean said. “Looks like poker tables.”

She blinked open her eyes.

Dean crossed the room to the closet and peeked inside. Plastic cubes stored poker

chips, playing cards, and folding chairs. A big black safe took up half the closet space. He tugged on the handle. “Locked, and we need a combination to open it. I wouldn’t even know where to start to figure that out. At least not without more information about Malcom.”

“What about Calvin? If he’s in front of his computer, he might have an idea.” She tilted one of the round tables to see the green felt on the other side. “Is it normal for people to have this much stuff for a poker game? I’m afraid UNO is as far as my card knowledge goes.”

“I have some buddies who take their poker pretty seriously and may have one table in their basement or man cave for an occasional game, but nothing on this scale. I mean, you only need a fraction of the chips that are in the closet for a game with people who’d fit on one table.” He dug his phone from the pocket of his jeans. “I’m taking your advice and calling Calvin.”

A quick thrill shot through her. “Can you put it on speaker?”

“Sure.” He pressed a button then held the phone between them.

She moved closer to his side to hear better. The thrill from moments before intensified.

Stop it. He’s giving his failed marriage another shot. Don’t drop your guard. Just focus on the problem.

“Hey, man,” Calvin said when the line picked up. “What’s up? Find anything?”

“A weird-ass apartment with nothing but booze and a shit-ton of poker equipment.” He locked his gaze with hers and widened his eyes as if to exaggerate his point. “Found a safe that has a combination lock. Do you have any information that could

point to a four-digit combo Malcom might use?”

“Give me a sec.” The sound of clicking keys filtered through the phone. “Try his birthday. 1122.”

Dean handed her the phone then crouched in front of the safe and turned the dials. “Nope,” he said over his shoulder.

Elsie sunk to her knees to bring the phone closer to Dean.

“Okay, then 1181. That’s year and month of birth,” Calvin said.

Dean twisted the dials again. “Nothing.”

Elsie’s shoulders dropped. There were thousands of options. It would take a miracle to open the damn safe. “What about his sister’s birthday? He used her name for the other property. Might have used something related to her for this as well.”

“Good point. Let me bring it up,” Calvin said. “Try month and day first—0902.”

Dean’s fingers went back to work, and he shook his head. “Give me month and year.”

“0985.”

“Got it,” Dean said, and the door swung open.

She leaned to the side for a look inside the safe. Wads of cash lined the shelves with a thick manilla file folder on the very top. “The money’s strapped just like the cash we found in Justin’s bedroom.”

“Anything else in there?” Calvin asked.

“Cash, paperwork, and a handgun.”

He stood and she caught a glimpse of the gun at the bottom of the safe. She sucked in a breath. “What the hell is going on here?”

Dean scrubbed a hand over his face. “Looks like Malcom was heading up an illegal poker ring. Buy-in must be pretty high for this kind of cash. We need to call in the sheriff’s department. This is the kind of money people would kill over.”

“Sadie said some deputies will be by soon.” Dean stuffed his phone back in his pocket and gave the bedroom-turned-storage area a long look.

Elsie sat on the floor beside the safe and flipped through a file. “How can we have found so much that doesn’t tell us a damn thing?” Her scowl highlighted the frustration in her voice.

“It might feel like that, but we’re circling the truth. We know more about Malcom and what he was doing here, and that ties in with Justin Pauly. Which might tie in with Mila.”

She tossed the file on the floor. “How? She’s not here. She wasn’t at the other house. We don’t know where Justin is, or if he’s even the one who took her. Unless she’s hiding somewhere, or the surprise ringleader of some illegal gambling ring, I don’t see how she’s connected at all.”

Sensing Elsie was close to a breakdown, he held out a hand. “Come here.”

Sighing, she nestled her palm in his. “What?”

He ignored the jolt of heat that shot from his arm and pulled her to her feet. Dipping his chin, he forced her to meet his eyes. “I know it might not seem like it, but we’re

getting closer. I feel it in my gut.”

“Well, my gut is sinking,” she said, pressing her hands to her stomach. “I feel sick and worried and I’m scared as hell. Mila has been gone for too long.” Tears slid down her face.

His heart cracked in two and he wrapped his arms around her. It felt like years had passed since he’d held her, not hours, and the anxiety tying him up inside since Gina had walked into his house this morning melted away. He’d fix what went wrong between him and Elsie, but not now. Now he had to keep her from falling over the edge.

“We know Mila was at Mrs. Pauly’s and that Mrs. Pauly didn’t see her the night she went missing,” he said, holding her close and repeating the facts of the case. He didn’t have any new information for her, but cycling through what they’d learned over the last few days was the only thing he could think of to help her see how much they’d uncovered—and prove they were on the right track. “We also know Justin hasn’t been seen since that same night, that he came to Town Tavern a lot to talk to Malcom, and he was hiding cash under his bed.”

“Which circles us back to needing to find Justin.” She took a step away from him and wiped her eyes. “We’ve been to his residence. Staked out his known previous locations. Maybe we need to dig deeper into his past.”

Now it was his turn to be frustrated. “Calvin and I have searched and haven’t found anything useful. This guy’s flown under the radar for a while.”

Elsie swished her mouth to the side. “What about his mother?”

“What about her?”

“Have you talked to her?” She raised her brows high and spoke slowly as if talking to a child.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?”

“We follow the facts as they’re found. With Justin, that was tracing him through what was in his room then checking into his relationship with Malcom.”

“Mrs. Pauly mentioned she’d told her daughter Justin could stay with her as long he helped around the house. That would mean his mom was actively helping him find a place to live. Maybe he hadn’t been living with her, but he’d been in contact with her. Regardless, if we need to dig deeper into this guy’s past, his mom would be the logical place to start.”

“Good points. Let’s head downstairs and regroup. Maybe take a walk to get some fresh air while tracking down Justin’s mom’s information.”

A tiny smile poked through her misery. “Sounds good.”

He led the way back to the stairwell and downstairs, not bothering to shut off the lights. The sounds of chatter and clanking of dishes grew louder as they entered the restaurant. Ashley glanced their way from behind the bar.

“I want to give Ashley a heads up that deputies are on the way to go over the apartment,” he said.

“Good idea.”

He made a detour toward the bar and lifted a finger to gain the server’s attention.

“All done?” Ashley asked.

“Yeah. Full disclosure, we found a key and went upstairs.”

Her mouth fell open, eyes widened.

He lifted a palm. “You’re not on the hook for anything we did. We found some things upstairs and called Deputy Pennel. She’s sending some people over to take a look. If you haven’t told the staff about Malcom, you might want to either do that now or let the deputies handle it when they get here.”

Her hands shook as she filled two glasses with dark soda.

“Thank you for everything,” Elsie said. “And good luck. I hope this place finds a new owner soon.”

Ashley offered her a small smile. “Me, too.”

“Ready for that walk?” Dean asked. He wanted to stretch his legs a little and enjoy the outdoors, even if only for a few minutes. Something to recharge and maybe help calm Elsie’s nerves. Exercise had always done that for him, especially exercise that could be done with the sun on his face.

“That actually sounds really nice right now.”

Before they reached the door it swung open, sunshine pouring into the dimly lit room.

Gina walked in and beamed. “Hello, again.”

He stopped, shoulders stiffening. “Hey.”

“Gotta love small towns,” Gina said with a laugh. “Sooner or later, you’ll always run into the people you want to see. I stopped in for a late breakfast. Dean, would you like to join me?”

Elsie took a step away from him, wrapping her arms around her stomach. “I’ll leave you two alone. I have some calls to make.”

Gina’s smile widened. “Perfect.”

Elsie made a move toward the door.

Damned if he’d make the same mistake as earlier, he snagged her hand before she could escape. She hadn’t wanted to discuss Gina earlier, but this time, he’d make sure she was present for the entire conversation. He wanted her to know exactly where his head—and heart—stood regarding Gina and their failed marriage.

“No thanks, Gina. Elsie and I have other plans.” He kept his voice firm, clipped and steady as he spoke. He didn’t have time or emotion left to waste on his ex-wife. He didn’t wish her ill-will, but she’d made her choice. A choice that had nearly destroyed him.

And now that she regretted what she’d done, he wouldn’t let her believe there was even an ounce of him that wanted to revisit their failed relationship.

Gina frowned. “But your friend said she had calls to make. We could talk a little while she does that.”

“Elsie isn’t just a friend. She’s the woman who has helped me to see beyond the pain you caused. Helped me to believe in loyalty and trust and all the things you tarnished. Because that’s who she is. She’s a woman who stands by the people she loves even when it’s hard. Even when it makes her life messy. Even when things look

impossible, she keeps fighting.”

He squeezed Elsie’s hand and looked down at her partially open mouth and warm brown eyes. “I might not be more than a friend for her, but she’s more than that for me. And the fact that she doubted that, for even second, has torn me up inside.”

“But you two kissed,” Elsie said. “I thought you were getting back together. I didn’t want to be in the way.”

Leaning closer, he ignored Gina and everyone else in the room. Inches separated them, his forehead almost brushing against hers. “You are never in the way. You are everything I’ve searched for, and I don’t want anything to ruin what could be between us before we even give it a chance.”

Elsie grinned. “I don’t want that either.”

“You still want to take that walk?” he asked.

“More than anything.”

Gina’s scoff lifted his attention back to her. “So that’s it? You’re going to throw away our history to start something new because you think she can give you what you want?”

“Honey, you threw us away and left me to pick up the pieces. And now that I have, I won’t waste one more second on you. Good luck with everything, I really mean that, but your future isn’t with me. Not anymore.”

As he sidestepped the woman who’d almost broken him, a sense of peace settled in his gut. He didn’t know what was in store for him and Elsie, but he knew that he could trust her. That he would give her his whole heart because he had finally found

someone worthy of his love.

He just hoped she felt the same way.

Elsie's heart threatened to explode with joy even as fear for Mila stayed rooted in her soul, a dizzying combination that was becoming all too familiar.

And as much as she wanted to forget everything except Dean's confession and the look on his ex-wife's face, they had more pressing issues waiting for them.

Stepping outside, Dean turned her toward him. "I hope what I said didn't scare you, but I needed to be very clear with Gina. I didn't want to leave any doubt on where things stood on my end."

"Are you serious? Everything you said, the way you described me, I don't even know how to explain how much that meant." Heat climbed up her neck. No one had ever made her feel so seen, so appreciated, and he'd done so with only a handful of words. "No, nothing you told Gina scared me. Only made me realize what an idiot I'd been earlier to think the worst of you. I'm sorry."

He tucked his thumb under her chin. "You have nothing to be sorry about. Neither of us could have predicted Gina showing up at my house like that. I would have thought the same as you if I'd walked in on your ex laying one on you. Which, just for the record, is not something I ever want to witness."

She grinned. "Seeing as the only ex-boyfriend I have is happily married with a baby on the way, I don't think you need to worry."

"Good. And listen, I know your mind is centered on Mila. I don't want to push you.

We can take this as slowly as you want, however you want. You're worth waiting for."

Lifting onto her toes, she pressed her lips to his. Excitement stirred in her gut, but she broke away before their sweet kiss morphed into a hot make-out session in the middle of town. "I've never been a patient woman. Yes, things are all out of whack right now and my attention needs to be on Mila, but that doesn't mean I can't think about you, too. Besides, I need to give Mila some good stories when she gets home." She forced the last words from her mouth with a tight smile. Hope was harder to cling onto with each passing hour, but she had to believe they'd find Mila. The alternative was too devastating to handle.

"Okay," he said, grinning. "I'll call Calvin quick to get information on Justin's mother and then give her a call. Then we can sit down and talk about us. Sound good?"

She nodded, although talking wasn't exactly high on her list of things she wanted to do with Dean. Her mind wandered back to earlier, before they'd been interrupted. Being in his arms, his mouth on hers and his hands all over her body, had felt so right. And after days of pain and worry, she just wanted to be loved.

While Dean called Calvin, she studied the river that trickled along beside her. The constant gray clouds of the last few days had dissipated, leaving behind a clear blue sky. She leaned against the railing separating the sidewalk from the grassy incline that led down to the water. Something about the gentle gurgle of the rushing stream calmed her nerves and reminded her life was always moving, always changing. A sign from above that no matter what, she would be okay and figure out how to move forward.

Her phone rang in her pocket, jolting her back to reality. She hurried to retrieve it, and her chest tightened at the sight of her mom's photo on her screen. "Hey, Mama,"

she said, answering. “How are you?”

“Hanging in there. Any news?” The tightness of her mother’s voice gave away her worry.

An internal war waged. She wanted to confide in her mom, but also didn’t want to add to her stress. Nothing they’d learned had given them any clue on how to actually find Mila, and everything they’d found pointed toward an outcome nobody wanted to accept.

An outcome that would destroy her mother.

“There’ve been a few developments. Dean keeps telling me each new piece of information is pointing us in the right direction, even if it doesn’t feel like it.” At the mention of Dean, she glanced up to find him disconnecting his call with Calvin.

Her mom sighed. “Jimmy’s getting antsy. He’s worried about his mom and missing you. Any chance you could drop by? Maybe we can find some way to keep him occupied.”

Guilt burrowed into the pit of her stomach. She’d been so consumed with finding Mila she hadn’t stopped to consider how Jimmy was handling things. Yes, she wanted to help in any way she could, but Mila would want her to be there for Jimmy.

“Let me check on something really quick.” She lowered her phone and cupped her palm over the speaker so she could talk to Dean without her mom overhearing. “My mom’s asking if we can spend some time with Jimmy.”

“Absolutely. Just let me know when and where.”

His immediate agreement warmed her down to her toes. “What about Justin Pauly’s

mom?”

“Calvin’s tried getting ahold of her, but she hasn’t answered her phone. He gave me her address if we want to check it out while he’s tracking down another lead. She lives over in Cooper County, about forty minutes from here.”

“I want to go there first and hear about whatever leads Calvin’s looking into.”

Dean nodded.

Plan made, she lowered her hand and refocused on her mom. “How about we meet you after dinner? The sun’s finally out. We can get Jimmy outside and maybe help him burn off some energy. Give you and Dad a little break.”

“We can get him ice cream,” Dean mouthed.

She couldn’t fight her grin as she rolled her eyes. She wasn’t sure who that treat was for, Dean or Jimmy.

“Sounds good,” her mom said. “Your dad and I could use some of that fresh air as well. We’ll meet you at the park close to downtown Pine Valley. It’ll do us all good to lay our eyes on you.”

“We’ll see you then.” Disconnecting, she returned her phone to her pocket and straightened her shoulders. “All right. Let’s go.”

The sun rose in the sky on the drive to Cooper County, the streaks of light setting the colorful leaves of the tree-covered mountains ablaze. Dean had his window cracked to let the crisp air circulate in his truck. A strand of hair whipped around Elsie’s face, and she tucked it behind her ear.

“Do you want me to put up the window?”

She flashed him a smile. “It’s fine. It’s nice to get the fresh air, even if just a small bit. I’m actually looking forward to spending time with Jimmy and my parents later. Thank you for that.”

“Are you kidding me? It will be good for everyone, and besides, I miss the little guy.”

“Same, but until then, we need to stay focused. Do you think Calvin will get any information from the person he’s going to speak with?”

Dean shrugged. “You never know, but this is the only person we’ve connected with Justin besides Malcom. Calvin found him on social media. The two appear to have been friends pretty recently. Maybe the mom will know this guy or have other names to investigate.”

He followed the curve that hugged the side of the mountain. “Want to try calling Justin’s mom again? I’ve left a handful of messages. I wish she’d answer the damn phone.”

“Sure.” She held out her hand for his phone. After he unlocked it and handed it over, she scrolled to his recent calls. The quiet beats of classic rock weren’t loud enough to drown out the ringing that was interrupted by a voice message directing the caller to leave a name and number after the beep. Elsie disconnected before the recorded message ended. “No answer. Let’s hope she’s home.”

Following the voice of his GPS, Dean turned down a gravel driveway. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

A large yard stretched in front of a two-story farmhouse. A detached garage sat on one side of the house, a well-tended garden on the other. A woman in denim overalls

and a wide-brimmed hat worked the land.

“Hopefully that’s her,” Elsie said, nodding toward the garden.

Dean parked his truck in front of the house and hopped out, meeting Elsie by the passenger door.

The woman stopped and shielded her eyes with her free hand, the other hand gripping a tall garden tool. He couldn’t make out her features, but the rigid set of her shoulders told him their arrival put her on alert.

“Do we walk over there?” Elsie asked.

He lifted a hand to wave. “Might as well.”

Elsie fell into step beside him. As they approached the fenced off garden, the woman removed her dirty gloves and erased the distance between them.

“Afternoon,” she said. “Can I help you with something?”

“Mrs. Thomas?” Dean asked, coming to a stop beside the dirty white fence caging in the rows of vegetables.

“That’s me, but you can call me Jackie.” Her voice was warm and sweet, but she couldn’t hide the tiny frown that broadcasted her unease.

“Hi, Jackie. My name is Dean Kingston and I’m a private investigator. This is Elsie Sweet. We are looking into a case involving your son, Justin. Can we ask you some questions?”

Worry was clear as the blue sky on Jackie’s weathered face.

“We’re sorry to show up and spring this on you,” Elsie said, setting her forearm on the top of the fence. “We tried to call but could never connect.”

Sighing, Jackie leaned on the long handle of her garden tool. “Did he get himself into trouble? I swear, that boy’s the reason for all my gray hair. I thought sending him to live with my mom would be good for him but that doesn’t seem to be the case. You’d think at twenty years old he’d start getting his life together.”

“Have you spoken with him recently?” Dean took the spot beside Elsie and stood with his thumbs hooked in the front pockets of his jeans.

Jackie scrunched her nose. “Let’s see. It’s been a couple of weeks since we touched base. We don’t get great reception all the way out here, or at least that’s the excuse I get for him not calling me more.”

“When you spoke, did he mention anything about what he’d been up to in Water’s Edge?” Dean asked.

She shook her head. “He doesn’t tell me much. Never has. Always been more on the secretive side. He got that way after his daddy left when he was little. My husband, Paul, always tried to get him to warm up, build a relationship. But Justin preferred to keep to himself. And after the hurt his daddy caused, I never pushed him too much. Maybe I should have.”

“I’m sure you did the best you knew how.” Elsie understood the guilt that always accompanied making decisions for a child in your care. Mila often talked about her concern over choices she made for Jimmy, and Elsie too wondered if she did the right things for the little boy she loved so much.

Jackie smiled and rubbed a smidge of dirt from her cheek. “Thanks for that.”

“Everything all right out there, babe?” An older gentleman with a jawline as strong and broad as his shoulders stepped outside and climbed down the porch steps. His narrowed gaze landed on Elsie then Dean before it softened on Jackie.

“Yes, fine. Something’s going on with Justin and these investigators are here to ask some questions.” Jackie waited for the man to join her before continuing. “This is my husband, Paul.”

Paul gave a curt nod. “Is Justin in trouble?”

“Oh yes, you never mentioned what exactly happened to bring you all the way out here.” Jackie set the tool on the ground, opting instead to rest her hand on her husband’s arm.

Nerves twisted Elsie’s insides. She didn’t want to lie to this woman, but also wasn’t sure how much information was wise to share. Before she could decide how to respond, Dean cleared his throat.

“We have reason to believe that Justin was involved in some way with a man named Malcom Miller.”

Paul mumbled something under his breath.

Jackie slid her hand down his arm and fit her palm inside his. “I know that name. Justin met him when he was busing tables at a rest stop restaurant. Brought nothing but trouble to Justin’s door. I hate to think of what he’s gotten him into now. If you can find a way to get my boy away from him, I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Winching, Elsie shifted and dropped her gaze. She hadn’t given any thought to how hard it would be to face Justin’s mom. She believed Justin had hurt her friend and possibly killed a man. She hadn’t been prepared to drop that bomb on such a nice

woman.

“What kind of trouble did Justin get into with Malcom?” Dean asked.

Jackie shrugged. “Stealing, lying, picking fights. He’d come home with black eyes or a busted lip. Always had new fancy things but no job to pay for anything like that. I asked a lot of questions he never wanted to answer. I always had a feeling he had his hands in something illegal but couldn’t prove it. Didn’t know how to fix things.”

“You tried everything you could think of.” Paul pressed a kiss to her temple. “Do you think Justin’s with Malcom now? What kind of trouble are they in?”

“We believe Justin is involved in a missing person’s case,” Dean said. “It’s important that we find him as soon as possible.”

“What? No. No way.” Jackie pressed a hand to the base of her throat. “He may have strayed off the right path a little, but he wouldn’t hurt anyone. I’m sure if you find Malcom, he’s the one in the wrong. The one who has the answers you’re looking for.”

Bile sloshed around Elsie’s stomach. She was about to play a part in wrecking this woman’s world. Dean had more experience in delivering this kind of news. She could stand back and let him tell Jackie what kind of trouble her son was in. But something about the fear in the woman’s eyes had Elsie taking the lead.

“We found Malcom this morning. Someone killed him.” Elsie kept her voice low and quiet, knowing each word was like a tiny bomb.

Jackie swallowed hard and kept direct eye contact with Elsie as if she were a lifeline. “You think Justin was involved?”

Elsie nodded. “We do. We also think he knows where my roommate is. She went missing a few nights ago, and her last known location was your mother’s house. We can’t be sure yet how her path crossed with Justin’s, but it’s clearer with each passing hour he’s involved.”

Jackie squeezed her eyes shut for a beat, and when she opened them again, tears shimmered at the corners. “Justin’s not a violent person. Never has been. I’m not blind to his faults, but he wouldn’t hurt anyone. I know he couldn’t.”

Elsie’s chest tightened. “I’m so sorry to bring this to your doorstep. Maybe you’re right. Maybe Justin is as much of a victim right now as Mila. But we won’t know that until we find him.”

“I don’t know where he is,” Jackie said, lifting her shoulders to her ears. “I promise I’d tell you if I did. I’ll try to call him, try to find him, and then you’ll see. He’s not the one you should be after.”

“You should have my number on your phone,” Dean said. “Please call if you talk to him. Thank you for your time.”

“I’ll walk you to your truck.” Paul bent and whispered something in his wife’s ear then met them by the gate before walking toward Dean’s truck.

Elsie and Dean fell into step beside him.

“I’m sorry for upsetting your wife,” Dean said.

Paul glanced over his shoulder and sighed. “I’m not surprised someone has shown up to deliver this kind of news about Justin. The guy’s always been a troublemaker. Jackie knows he’s done some things he shouldn’t, but she’s his mom. She still has some blind spots. I’ve seen that boy’s temper.”

Elsie stopped at the side of the truck and steeled her nerves to ask her most pressing question. “Would he hurt a helpless woman?”

Paul’s jaw hardened, his eyes narrowed. “Honestly, I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

Dean handed Elsie a cup of tea then fell onto the sofa beside her. The day pressed down on him like a two-ton weight on his shoulders. He'd replayed his conversation with Justin's mom over and over on the drive home, but no new nugget of information came to the surface. Nothing erased the sorrow he'd witnessed in Jackie's eyes.

Elsie curled her legs under her and took a sip of her tea. "That sucked."

She hadn't spoken much during the ride back to his place, and he'd been too consumed with his own thoughts to coax out conversation. Nothing else she said could've summed up their encounter with Jackie Thomas better.

Sighing, he leaned his head on the back of the couch and studied the subtle white swirls on the ceiling. "Yeah, it did. Nothing worse than delivering bad news. Chances are high things will only get worse for her."

"She seemed like a nice lady. Just like her mom. Makes you wonder how Justin turned down such a dark path."

Dean shrugged and shifted to face her. "Who knows why people end up the way they do. Something inside them that just isn't right, or something happens that knocks them on their ass and they don't know how to get back up."

Indignation scrunched her nose. "Sorry but that's bullshit. We all have things that happen in our lives that are beyond our control, but that's not an excuse to do bad

things. To hurt people. To take and take with no regard to how it affects others.”

He squeezed her knee and offered her a small smile. “You’re absolutely right. Unfortunately, not everyone looks at life the same way you do. If they did, the world would be a much better place.”

A knock on the door stole his attention and brought him to his feet. The last thing he wanted was to rehash details with Sadie and Tommy, but they’d texted earlier to ask for a few minutes. “You ready for this?”

“I don’t think I have a choice.” Elsie set her teacup on the end table and sat up straight. “Who knows. Maybe they have some good news and wanted to share in person.”

Her continued optimism sank low in his gut. As much as he’d urged her to keep hope, things weren’t looking good for Mila.

“You never know.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead before answering the door.

Tommy and Sadie stood side by side in their matching deputy’s uniforms.

“Hope you’re hungry,” Tommy said, lifting a large pizza box in his hands. “We’re starving. Thought we’d bring dinner.”

“Thanks. Come on in.” Dean waited for them to enter then closed the door and led the way to the kitchen. “We haven’t eaten much today. Neither one of us has had an appetite.”

“That’s understandable, but you have to keep up your energy. No one is worth a damn if they aren’t taking care of themselves,” Sadie said. “That’s also why we

brought pizza. According to Amelia, no one can say no to pizza.”

Elsie laughed and met them in the kitchen. “She’s a smart kid. You better save her a slice, or she’ll be mad.”

Tommy set the box on the counter and lifted the lid. “She’s being spoiled by Mrs. Collins. She’ll be fine if we polish off this whole thing.”

Chuckling, Dean gathered plates and placed them by the box. “Good thing because I can’t pass up Prato’s. Best pizza in town. Hell, even when I lived in California, I craved this stuff.” He placed two slices on a plate and handed it to Elsie.

“Thanks. Not sure if I can eat all this though.”

“Listen to Amelia,” Sadie said in a sing-song voice. “Can’t say no.”

Appreciation for Sadie’s gentle prodding tightened his chest. Elsie hadn’t eaten much the last two days. He didn’t want to make a big deal of it, she was a grown woman who understood what she needed, but that didn’t stop him from worrying.

Dean set out glasses, filling two for him and Elsie with water, then balanced the cups with his plate filled with pizza as he made his way to the table. He sat next to Elsie and waited for his guests to get settled before digging in. Warm cheese spread onto his tongue, and he closed his eyes on a moan. “So good.”

Comfortable silence settled around them as they ate. Their problems weren’t going anywhere. Might as well enjoy a warm meal before dissecting all the ugliness they’d uncovered.

Finally full, Dean shoved his plate toward the center of the table so he wouldn’t keep eating what little remained. “Thanks for that. I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

“Same,” Elsie said. She picked a pepperoni off the plate and popped it in her mouth, licking the marinara off her fingers.

His stomach muscles clenched. He focused on Tommy across the table from him. “I guess it’s time to get down to business. What brings you two here?”

Tommy took a sip of water then cleared his throat. “Honestly, we wanted to check in and see how you two are holding up. We’re treading water over at the station, searching for anything to lead us to Mila.”

“We spoke with Malcom Miller’s sister,” Sadie said. “She shed a little more light on her brother. The house was left to her when their mother passed away, and she let Malcom crash there whenever. Said she’d rather he stay in Tennessee than bother her and her family in Alabama.”

“Did she have any information about the poker stuff we found?” Elsie asked.

“Malcom’s more of an entrepreneur than a gambler.” Tommy picked up the line of conversation. “Always looking for a big score. His sister mentioned he’d always hosted card games for friends and tried to make it bigger and bigger.”

Dean wiped his face with a napkin then tossed it on his empty plate. “How did he have money to fund this type of game? Based on what we found, he and Justin were bringing in a lot of cash. That means either a lot of high rollers were joining the game, or they have a large number of players. Either way, they’d need startup money to fund the operation. A channel of some sort to get the word out to the right people about illegal gambling.”

“Malcom’s held a job as a long-haul trucker,” Sadie said. “I spoke with his former employer. He never had trouble with Malcom. He was reliable and kept his nose clean, most of that we knew based on his background. Sounds like he found other

people to do his dirty work, which is where Justin Pauly comes in.”

“But how does that tie in with Mila?” Elsie asked. “And don’t try and tell me that my roommate had some secret life working with an illegal gambling ring, finding poker players to fill some game at Town Tavern. I would know.”

Tommy shook his head. “Chances of that are highly unlikely. We’re assuming Mila went to check on Mrs. Pauly and saw something she shouldn’t. But we won’t know for sure until we find Justin and Mila.”

Dean considered the new information, struggling to figure out what the missing angle was that would point to the key. “Malcom had to have done this before. We need to find other people connected to him, Justin, or the poker games. Someone who can break this thing wide open with more information.”

Elsie straightened. “Ashley mentioned getting a call that people were trying to get into Town Tavern in the middle of the night. What about camera footage? Maybe someone can be identified. Someone who’d tell us what we need to know.”

Dean rested a hand on Elsie’s and squeezed. Her idea might give them what they needed to find Mila, he just hoped that when they finally found her, she’d still be alive.

Elsie placed the last dirty plate in the dishwasher then wiped her hands on the towel draped around the oven handle. The impromptu dinner had eaten up a large chunk of time, but she and Dean still had an hour before they had to meet her parents and Jimmy.

Dean came in from the back door after depositing the trash in the bin. “Thanks for cleaning.”

“No problem. Mila and I are seldom home at the same time, so I’m used to being the only one tidying up after a meal. Having an extra set of hands always makes things quicker. Jimmy helps as much as he can, but sometimes he creates more of a mess.” She let out a long sigh. “I can’t wait to hug him.”

Dean placed an arm on either side of her, bracing the heels of his hands on the counter. “I’m sure he’s just as excited to see you.”

She rested her forehead on his chest and breathed in the smell of him. The familiar hints of sandalwood and citrus still clung to his skin after a long day. “What do you think about what Sadie and Tommy came to tell us?”

“I think they stopped by more to see how you’re doing than to give us any real information. I agree with their train of thought—that Mila saw something at Mrs. Pauly’s house and Justin acted on impulse. It makes sense.”

“But where would he take her? His mom’s convinced he wouldn’t hurt anyone. If that’s true, maybe he took her somewhere until he figured out his next move. I mean, she has to be somewhere. ” Her voice cracked. She wasn’t an idiot. She understood that Justin might have hurt her and tossed her body in a place they may never find.

But even if that was the case, Justin hadn’t just vanished. And once they found him, she’d have all the answers—even if they were hard to learn.

“Hey,” he said. “Look at me.”

She tilted her chin to stare directly into his eyes.

“We’ll figure this all out, okay?” His warm breath tickled her cheeks.

Gone were his promises of bringing Mila home safely, but she needed that hard, cold

truth right now. Not empty promises of happily ever afters that may not come to fruition. But she'd fall apart if she allowed her mind to walk down that path.

"Okay," she said. "But not right now. Right now, I just want to forget all the ugliness we've witnessed. I want to put all the fear and worry away and find a way to just feel good. To remember that there is still a world around me I want to experience."

Heat flashed in his eyes. His tongue licked out to wet his bottom lip. "I have a few ideas on how we can do that."

She grinned, desire flaring to life inside her. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," he echoed then dropped his hands to her hips, hoisting her up to sit on the counter.

Her legs went instinctively around his waist, her arms looped around his neck.

He groaned as her middle pressed against his.

She grinned, loving the sense of feminine power that washed over her. She didn't have a ton of experience with men, but instinct told her Dean was about to awaken something inside her. Something that would make her forget all her pain—at least for a little while. "I'd love if you can show me those ideas. I have a funny feeling they just might help me relax a little."

His groan morphed into a growl and he swooped forward, taking her mouth in his. His tongue pressed through her lips, deepening the kiss.

She squeezed her legs tighter around him, bringing him closer. Raw, hot lust shot like flames through her body. Tingles of excitement burst along her skin. Her breath became ragged, and she fisted the back of his shirt in her hands. She wanted it off,

wanted all barriers between them to disappear.

Breaking away, she dipped her hands under his shirt and worked the fabric up his torso before slipping it over his head and tossing it to the floor. Rock hard muscles stared back at her, and her palms rested on his chest. Her fingers itched to roam the rest of his body, to find out what lay beneath his clothing.

He trapped her hands with one large palm while his other hand slid under the front of her shirt. “Two can play at that game,” he teased, his voice so low and husky it skimmed across her skin.

He trailed his fingertips up her side, sending shivers down her body, then flipped the cup of her bra down to release her breast. He flicked the pad of his thumb over her nipple, rolling the tender bud until it hardened.

Throwing back her head, she moaned.

Dean pressed kisses against her neck, up her jawline, until he found her mouth once more.

“Dean,” she whispered, flattening her palms against his cheeks.

His hand stilled, and she thought her body might scream out in protest. “What is it? Are you okay? Do you want to stop?”

She stared into his earnest eyes. Tenderness melted her insides. This was what she needed—what she wanted. A man who not only desired her, but cared enough about her to stop and make sure everything was all right for her. A man who wanted to give her everything, even if it meant he got less. A man who valued her for exactly who she was.

Her heart ached in a beautiful and terrifying way that told her she had fallen hard for Dean Kingston and there was no turning back.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I definitely don’t want to stop. I was just thinking maybe we should take this somewhere a little more comfortable.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Gripping her ass, he molded her against him and carried her down the hall to his bedroom.

She held on tight, her pulse thundering in her ears, and prepared to make love to the man of her dreams.

Forty minutes later, every inch of Dean's body screamed to turn the truck around, gather Elsie in his arms, and take her back to his bed. A bone deep satisfaction settled in his soul unlike anything he'd ever felt. Being with Elsie had been magical. Had opened his eyes to what he'd been missing, and all he wanted to do was continue that magic over and over.

Unfortunately, that wasn't an option. Not when Jimmy and Elsie's parents waited for them at the park.

Sliding his truck into a spot between two cars, Dean shut off the engine and hurried out to open Elsie's door. He didn't want to be away from her. Not even for the few seconds it'd take for her to unbuckle her seatbelt and meet him outside.

Nestling her palm into his hand, she smirked and accepted his assistance down. "My, my. What a gentleman."

"Don't get used to it," he teased. "I have to be on my best behavior in front of your parents. Once I get you back to my place, I plan on being very, very bad for as long as you let me."

She laughed and slapped at his chest with her free hand. "Sounds like I freed a little bit of a beast."

He grinned. "You have no idea." He tugged her closer and placed a kiss on her cheek. "But don't worry, the beast will be in check until the right time."

“Elsie! Dean!”

Jimmy’s delighted squeal, followed by Boo’s excited bark, broke into the intimate moment.

Dean could have stared at the pretty blush that crept up Elsie’s cheeks all day, but instead braced himself seconds before Jimmy slammed against him and Elsie, his little arms extending to wrap around their legs.

“Make sure to watch out for cars.” Mrs. Sweet darted down the wood-chip filled path that led to the play equipment, hurrying to catch up to Jimmy.

Mr. Sweet strode beside her. He gripped Boo’s leash in his large hand, keeping the dog directly by his side despite Boo’s attempts to lunge forward.

Laughing, Elsie dropped Dean’s hand to crouch and gather Jimmy in her arms. “Hey little man. I’m so happy to see you.”

Jimmy buried his head in the crook of Elsie’s neck. “I missed you. Did you find Mama?”

Dean’s heart couldn’t have hurt more if someone ripped it from his chest and stomped on it.

Mr. and Mrs. Sweet stopped beside Elsie with matching worried expressions, Boo straining to get to Dean.

“Not yet buddy,” Elsie said, voice cracking.

Jimmy clung tighter to Elsie and tears streamed over her face.

“Hey, bud,” Dean said, cutting in before things got even worse. “Did you take good care of my friend?”

Sniffing, Jimmy squirmed away from Elsie and a tiny smile poked through his sadness. “I sure did. I fed him and brushed him and he even slept in the bed with me. Grandpa wasn’t sure if he should, but Nana talked him into it.”

“That’s usually the way things go. I’m a big softie, though. Especially where my favorite grandson’s concerned.” Mr. Sweet gave an exaggerated eye roll and held out a hand for Dean to shake then passed over the leash. “I’m John. Nice to meet you.”

“Dean. Nice to meet you, too. Thanks for taking care of Boo.” He couldn’t ignore Boo’s wagging tail and lolling tongue another second. “Hi, big guy. Were you a good houseguest?”

Boo barked and jumped up to rest his paws on Dean’s chest.

Dean pet the big dog’s head then took a step back to make Boo’s paws drop on the ground. “I hope you had better manners last night.”

“He was perfect. A great addition to our little slumber party,” Mrs. Sweet said.

Boo’s tail never stopped moving as he sat and shifted his gaze to stare at Jimmy.

“Did you have fun with Nana and Grandpa?” Elsie stood and kept Jimmy’s hand clutched in hers. “I bet they gave you lots of chocolate.”

Jimmy grinned, showing off a missing tooth. “I helped Grandpa build a fire so we could make s’mores and I got ice cream. Nana said I was bouncing off the walls.”

Dean chuckled, imaging Jimmy pinging around like a bouncy rubber ball. “I’m

surprised they got you to sleep at all.”

“We kept him busy until he dropped in bed like a rock.” Mr. Sweet rustled the top of Jimmy’s head. “I’m going to make him run laps around the playground to get all of his energy out before we head home.”

Jimmy frowned and sank against Elsie’s legs. “I want to go to my house with Elsie. When Mama comes home, she’ll want to see me.”

The tortured expression on Elsie’s face pierced Dean like a dagger. He scrambled to think of a reason for Jimmy not to leave the park with him and Elsie, so she didn’t have to be the bearer of more bad news. “Buddy, Elsie and I need to visit a friend when we leave here, and I can’t take Boo with me. It’d be a big help if you stay with your grandparents again tonight and watch Boo for me. I don’t trust many people with Boo, but I know I can trust you.”

“Okay.” Jimmy’s little chest puffed out. “I take good care of him. Don’t I, Nana?”

“You sure do, honey. But why are we standing around talking in the parking lot when there’s a swing set over there to play on? Want to race?” Mrs. Sweet asked.

Jimmy beamed. “No way you can beat me.”

“She’s faster than she looks,” Elsie said. “But even if you can run faster than her, you can’t run faster than me.”

“Wanna bet?”

Dean winced at his innocent choice of words as gambling tables and poker chips flashed in his mind.

Jimmy took off like a rocket, Elsie, and Mrs. Sweet on his heels.

Mr. Sweet hung back and studied Dean's face. "What was that look?"

"What Jimmy said." Dean scratched the back of his neck as his stomach tied in knots. "Hit a little too close to home."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Sweet stared in the direction of his family, giggling as they leapt onto the swings and catapulted themselves in the air.

Dean debated how much to say, but if he were in the other man's shoes, he'd want to know every piece of information uncovered. "We think Mila somehow stumbled upon a man who's involved in an illegal gambling ring—high stakes poker. Saw something she shouldn't."

"Sonofabitch," Mr. Sweet said, letting his eyes fall shut for a second. "That lovely girl. She's been through so much in her life. She doesn't deserve more pain."

Boo whined and tugged at the leash, leading Dean toward the play area.

Mr. Sweet walked beside him, his hands shoved in the pockets of his fleece jacket. "Is there anything at all you can tell me? Not knowing is eating me alive. I thought losing my son was the worst kind of pain, but as much of a nightmare as hearing about that car accident was, at least we knew he wasn't suffering. But with Mila..." The older man's voice cracked and he stopped, hanging his head.

Dean rested a hand on Mr. Sweet's shoulder. "I wish I had more to tell you. I really do. All I can say is we're doing everything we can. Tracking every lead."

"And still no idea where Mila is?"

“No, sir.” Dean shook his head. “Elsie and I even drove out to Cooper County this morning to speak with the main suspect’s mother. We hoped she’d have some idea of where her son may be hiding, but we came up empty.”

Mr. Sweet let out a long sigh. “Dear God, I hope no one took her out that way. We’d never find her.”

“Why do you say that?”

“That’s mining country. Lots of land. Lots of shut-down mines. Lots of places to hide...”

Mr. Sweet didn’t have to finish his sentence for Dean to understand his fear. If someone took Mila to a labyrinth of old mines, they might never find her body.

Elsie gripped the linked chains of the swing and pumped her legs back and forth. If she closed her eyes and focused on the cool breeze on her face and the sound of Jimmy’s laughter, she could almost pretend today was an ordinary day.

But soon the tears would come back along with the crushing pain of leaving Jimmy, not knowing if they’d ever make his world right again.

“Elsie, will you push me? Please!” Jimmy’s innocent little voice sang out.

“Sure.” She dragged the toes of her tennis shoes against the mulch to slow herself, then hopped off. “Mom, do you need me to push you, too?”

Her mom chuckled and kept her steady motion on the swing beside Jimmy. “I think I’m fine but thanks.”

Elsie gently pushed against the small of Jimmy’s back, lifting him a little higher in

the air.

He kicked his legs and giggled. “Higher. I want to go higher!”

“Any higher and you’d go over the top of the swing set.” Her mom clicked her tongue, somehow managing to keep her voice stern and serious.

“That’s not true,” Jimmy said. “But I want to do something else anyway. Watch me jump.”

Elsie slowed his momentum enough so she wouldn’t have a heart attack when he catapulted himself into the air and landed on his feet.

He took off running toward the twisty slide.

“Wait,” Elsie said. “Something fell out of your pocket.” She jogged to the red, plastic whistle he’d left behind. Picking it up, she aimed arched brows at her mom. “S’mores, a dog in his bed, and whistles? He really did get spoiled yesterday. Unless you and Dad now enjoy loud, piercing noises that blow out your eardrums.”

Her mom slowed to a stop and offered a sad smile. “Anything to make him happy. Go ahead and place that in my purse. It’s over there on the bench.” She nodded toward a wooden bench at the end of the playground, shadowed by large trees.

She flipped the whistle between her fingers. She loved her parents so darn much. Always so selfless and full of love. She hoped one day she found a partner who exuded the same qualities her mom and dad lived by.

Maybe she already had.

Glancing over her shoulder, she spied Dean and her dad walking Boo around the

perimeter of the play area. Both their heads were ducked as Boo kept his ears perked and eyes on alert.

“Is that serious?” Her mom asked, the side of her mouth ticked up.

“Could be,” she admitted, unable to stop her smile. “Maybe. We’ve found something beautiful in this mess, and I hope it can grow once we’re out of the weeds. He makes me feel treasured, special. Like I’m worthy of all the love in the world.”

“My darling girl, you are all those things. And if he makes you see that, makes you feel it, then don’t ever let him go.”

Her face fell. “I want to tell Mila all about him. I hope I get the chance, but I’m scared that’s not going to happen. Every hour that passes my hope diminishes. I can’t imagine a life without her. A life Jimmy would have without his mom.” A lump formed in the base of throat, stealing the rest of her words.

“If the worst happens, we’ll be there for him in every way we can. You’ll make sure you raise him the way Mila would want—to love him the way Mila would. We all will.”

Her mom’s confidence in her made the lump in her throat swell, and she nodded.

Jimmy waited his turn behind a line of children at the top of the slide. When it was his turn, he yelled, “Elsie! Come catch me!”

“Coming buddy.” She wiped the moisture from her eyes and shoved the whistle in her coat pocket. She arrived at the base of the slide just as Jimmy shot out the end, crashing into her. She fell to the ground with Jimmy landing on top of her.

“Ouch, my knee.” Jimmy cried and rolled to sit on his butt. He scootched his knees to

his chest. His joggers were torn, and red scratches marred his skin. "I'm bleeding." He sniffed back tears but couldn't stop the high whine of his voice.

"Let me see. Okay, it's just a little scrape. You're okay." Understanding that Jimmy was more sensitive now than usual, she made sure to remain upbeat and positive. Any wrong tone or words would send him into a tailspin.

"But there's blood everywhere. "

She fought not to laugh at his exaggeration.

Her mom rushed over, her purse now slung over her shoulder. "Nana's here, baby. Let me take a look at it."

Elsie stood and wiped her dirty palms on her jeans. "He's fine. A little bump won't bring you down, will it?"

Tears hovered above his dark lashes. "It hurts, Nana."

"I'm sure it does," her mom said, kneeling beside him. "How about we go into the bathroom and get you washed off?"

Jimmy nodded and struggled to his feet. He hobbled to the cement building on the other side of the play set that housed the restrooms and a pavilion filled with picnic tables.

Dean appeared by her side. "Is everything all right?"

"He fell and scraped his knee. Not a big deal, and nothing that would usually affect him. All his emotions are right on the surface today." Boo nudged her hand with his wet nose, and she rested her palm on the top of his head.

Her dad draped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for a quick side hug. “Understandably. This is hard for all of us, but most of all for Jimmy. The boy’s allowed to shed a few tears over a minor bump.”

“I agree,” she said, wishing she could do more to take away Jimmy’s fear. Unfortunately, she didn’t have that power.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out to find a text from her mom.

Jimmy’s really upset. Can you come help?

She sighed and shoved her phone back in her pocket. “That’s Mom. She needs me to help with Jimmy. I’ll be right back.”

She weaved around the play set to avoid the crush of children enjoying the evening, mulch crunching under her tennis shoes. The sun still hung in the sky, although it had started to dip toward the mountain peaks. A subtle wind rustled through the leaves. Hopefully she could help calm Jimmy so they could squeeze out more fun before heading home.

Turning the corner of the building toward the restroom, a flash of movement caught her attention.

A man shot out from the shadows. His hair was shaggy, and face covered in a few days’ worth of scruff. Mud stained his jeans and black hoodie. He grabbed her bicep and pulled her close to his side, shoving the barrel of a gun against her ribs. “Don’t try anything stupid. I’d hate to kill you in front of your family.”

Dean stared after Elsie and watched her disappear around the side of the building. The ache in his chest intensified. “Man, that poor kid. Watching him struggle is so freaking tough. I don’t know how anyone can be a parent. It looks so damn hard.”

Mr. Sweet stared up to look at a cawing bird flying overhead. “Best and hardest job in the world. You’ll never love anything more than your child, and all you want to do is protect them. Make them happy and watch them flourish.”

“The happy and flourishing part sounds nice.”

“It is, but then they get older and make their own choices. You might not agree with all those choices, but you have to let them make their own mistakes. Live their own lives. And sometimes, even when they make all the right decisions, fate steps in with other ideas. Ideas that will crush your heart and leave you broken on the floor.” A sad, wistful tone coated Mr. Sweet’s voice.

“Elsie told me about her brother,” Dean said, his gut twisting like a pretzel. “I’m so sorry.”

Mr. Sweet studied him, head tilted slightly to the side. “I’m surprised she talked to you about Brad. She rarely mentions him. At least not with me and her mother. It’s as if she thinks saying his name will remind us of the pain, but the pain is always there. We just learn to live with it. Learn how to channel our loss into something more positive. I’m glad she opened up to you.”

“So am I, sir.”

“You want kids some day?” Mr. Sweet narrowed his blue eyes and his lips curled ever so slightly at the corners.

Dean shrugged and watched the giggling children climbing over the playset. “I was married before and thought that’s what we both wanted, but I was wrong. I’ve come to realize that none of that makes sense if I don’t find the right woman.”

“None of what?”

“Marriage, kids, building a future. Like a neat little package tied in a bow.”

Mr. Sweet chuckled. “Even with the right woman, nothing comes tied together all nice and neat. Marriage, parenting...it takes a lot of work. A lot of patience and love and commitment from all sides. I was lucky. I found my person when I was only a teenager, and we’ve worked together to build the future we both want. It might not always go as planned, but we keep fighting. Keep building. Keep loving the hell out of each other. So the question I’m interested in is, do you think you’ve finally found the right woman?”

Dean grinned. Elsie’s dad shot straight as an arrow, no beating around the bush. Reminded him of his own father. “I really hope so. Elsie’s unlike anyone I’ve ever met.” He wasn’t willing to say more. As much as he wanted to reassure Mr. Sweet that he had only the purest intentions with his daughter, he needed to have that conversation with Elsie first.

Mr. Sweet gave one decisive nod then winked. “She’s the best. Just don’t tell her sister I said that.”

Boo jumped to his feet at Dean’s side. He pinned back his ears, fur standing on end at

the scruff of his neck, and let out a low growl.

Dean followed Boo's line of vision to the small shelter that housed the bathrooms and picnic area. He rested his hand on the top of Boo's head. "It's all right boy."

"He okay? I didn't hear him make a sound like that last night." Mr. Sweet frowned.

"Probably anxious because he can't see Jimmy. It's crazy how he's responded to the boy. He understands that he needs to keep an eye out, pay a little extra attention to Jimmy." Even though he spoke the truth, unease tightened his nerves. He liked having Jimmy and Elsie out of sight even less than Boo.

"He's a good dog," Mr. Sweet said. "Made me wish we had one of our own."

"Don't tell Elsie that. She already told me how she was never allowed to have one as a kid." Dean threw a quick grin over his shoulder then kneeled beside Boo. "Come on, boy. You're fine. Just relax."

Jimmy ran around the side of the building, a wide grin splitting his face. "I'm all better." He waved an arm high over his head as if he needed to make extra sure he was seen.

Mrs. Sweet trailed behind him. "Not too fast. You don't want to trip and hurt yourself again."

Her concern slowed Jimmy a little. He made a beeline for the monkey bars. "Dean, watch. I can do this whole thing."

"I'm watching, buddy," Dean said, standing.

Agitation twitched Boo's body. He stayed on alert. His steady gaze never venturing

from the building.

Mrs. Sweet came to a stop beside him. “Jimmy’s right as rain. Just needed a little antiseptic so he wouldn’t get an infection and a kiss from Nana. Of course that kiss had to come in the privacy of a bathroom stall so no one would see. I mean, talk about embarrassing.”

“He’s got to keep his reputation intact. Glad he’s feeling better.” Dean watched Jimmy make his way across the monkey bars, his little body swaying with the effort.

At the last bar, Jimmy hopped to the ground and lifted his hands above his head. “I did it.”

Dean clapped. “Way to go. I’m sure when Elsie gets out of the bathroom, she’ll want to see you do it, too. Have enough fuel in the tank to make it across again?”

Mrs. Sweet stepped over to a bench and set down her large purse. “Elsie didn’t come to the bathroom.”

Boo whined and tugged at the leash.

Dean’s heart hammered against his chest, threatening to break through. “What do you mean? She got a text from you saying you needed help with Jimmy.”

“No,” Mrs. Sweet said, drawing out the word. “I never texted her. She must be mistaken. Hold on.” Sitting, she dragged her purse onto her lap and rummaged through it. “Dang it. I can’t find my phone. John, will you call me? I swear, I can never keep track of this blasted thing.”

“Sure. One second.” John unclipped his phone from its holder on the side of his belt. “Okay. It’s calling.”

Mrs. Sweet held the purse to her ear. “I don’t hear it or see it.”

Alarm screeched out a warning in Dean’s brain. “Try calling Elsie.”

John fiddled with his phone. “No one’s picking up. Went to voicemail.”

Without another word, Dean dropped Boo’s leash and sprinted toward the building. “Elsie!” He took in his surroundings as he ran. Kids played and squealed while their parents watched. A few people strolled along a far path that wound around to the woods. A couple pushed a baby stroller toward a minivan.

But no Elsie.

He reached the women’s bathroom and pounded on the door. “Elsie! Are you in there?” When no one answered, he shoved open the door to find the room empty.

Shit, shit, shit.

Running from the room, he raced to the men’s room and rushed inside.

Empty.

He hurried back out, his gut sinking low and fear heightening his awareness as he turned a small circle to look in every direction.

Mr. Sweet stood under the pavilion, worry widening his eyes. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Dean swallowed the bile sliding up his throat. His stomach churned, his pulse beating against his temples. “Elsie’s gone.”

Terror twisted Elsie's insides so tight she could barely breathe. She clutched her hands in her lap as Justin Pauly sped down the highway, leaving her family and Dean behind. A million questions raced through her mind, but she couldn't push any words through the dryness of her mouth.

Justin gripped the wheel at ten and two, his focus squarely out the windshield. The gun sat on his lap.

The ringing of her phone cut through the silence and stretched her nerves tight. There went the hope that Justin wouldn't be smart enough to take it from her before she got a chance to use it.

"Throw that phone out the window." Justin cut his gaze to her then back to the road. "Don't try anything cute."

Indecision slowed her response as she fished her phone from her pocket. Her dad's face flashed on the screen. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. If she could accept the call before tossing out her phone, maybe even scream a few words, she might stand a chance.

Justin picked up the gun and pointed it at her head. His hand shook slightly, and he darted his gaze between her and the road at a panicked pace. "I said get rid of it. Now!"

Not wanting to upset him further, she rolled down the window and tossed out the phone. Wind whipped through the car, the cold air skimming her face. Her finger trembled as she pushed the button to bring the window back up.

A few minutes of silence heightened the tension in the car. She kept her eyes on the signs they passed, but the country roads weren't clearly marked. The landscape flew by. The colorful trees and winding roads all blended together. Nothing stood out or

announced which way they headed, although a sense of familiarity scratched at her brain.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, unable to stay quiet a second longer.

“You wanted to find your friend, didn’t you? Well, now you’re going to get a real good look at her.”

A pitch of excitement waded through her fear. If he took her to Mila, they could work together to figure out how to get help.

But only if she was still alive.

“Is she all right? Did you hurt her?”

Justin shrugged and tightened his grip on the wheel. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Irritation gritted her teeth. This bastard had stolen her friend, caused heartbreak to people she loved, then kidnapped her at gunpoint and couldn’t be bothered to tell her what he’d done to Mila? Anger battled against common sense, screaming at her to act. Fight back. Do something to show this asshole he’d pay for what he’d done.

But if she stayed quiet and formed a plan, he’d deliver her straight to Mila. Without that, they may never find her. Justin might be a violent asshole who’d end her life, but he was the only chance she had to find her best friend.

She needed a weapon. Something she could use against her captor if he came after her. If he chose to shoot her, she was screwed, but he spoke as if she’d be reunited with Mila. Meaning he’d keep her alive long enough to get to where he kept her.

Her body rigid, she used her peripheral vision to study the inside of the car. Nothing

but a dirty mat and crumpled fast food bags laid at her feet. Her fingers itched to open the glove compartment, but no way she could do that without Justin noticing. The back seat was small, and unless she grew eyes in the back of her head, she'd never see what was back there.

Hopelessness pressed down on her chest, but she refused to succumb to it. She needed to stay strong, use her wits, and find a way to survive.

Justin turned off the two-lane road and the car bumped along an uneven lane. The road narrowed and outstretched limbs scraped against the car. The canopy of leaves blocked the sun and darkened the sky. Unable to drive further into the cluster of trees, Justin stopped and shut off the engine. "We're getting out now. Don't make me shoot you."

Her heart jumped to her throat as she stepped out of the car. Twigs and dead leaves crunched under her feet. She studied the forest. They'd ventured far enough into the woods that the foliage swallowed any sounds coming from the road behind them. The path they'd driven on narrowed until it disappeared, leaving no trails.

"Where are we?"

"It doesn't matter." Justin stomped to her side and trained the gun at her. "Walk."

Instinct demanded she run, dart through the woods and use the towering trees as cover. She was quick and might find help before a bullet from Justin's gun dug into her flesh.

But if he killed her, Mila would never be found.

Okay. Time to form a new plan. Walk beside this bastard until she knew exactly where Mila was. She dragged her feet with each step. Dean would know she was

missing by now. If he'd moved fast enough, he might be on his way to find her. She might not know exactly where Justin had taken her, but she'd give anyone who came looking for her every best chance to find her.

They approached a moss-covered rockface. Weeds and grass overtook a path that led to a cavernous opening in the middle of the mountain. Dilapidated boards stretched across parts of the makeshift entrance. Wind whistled through the opening.

Justin moved one of the boards, creating enough space for someone to crawl through. "In you go."

She took a step backward. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Does it look like I'm joking? Move. Now." He waved his gun toward the cave.

Saliva pooled in her mouth. No way she'd go inside the mountain. If she did, she'd never make it out.

The board Justin had moved caught her eye. It hung down from the rockface. Summoning all her courage, she sucked in a large breath and walked to the opening.

She stopped beside Justin and stared up at him with widened eyes. "Please don't do this. I won't tell anyone what you did. I promise. You can get in your car and drive. Get away from here. Start over." As she spoke, she braced her arm against the hard rock as if preparing to duck and step inside.

"I can't. Things have gone too far. I have to clean up this mess. You should have left things alone. I didn't want any of this to happen, but now I have to look out for me." He closed his eyes on a long sigh.

Elsie yanked on the board, freeing it from the rock, and swung it against the side of

his head.

He stumbled back, falling to the ground as he screamed. “Sonofabitch!”

She leapt over him and ran as fast as she could toward the cover of trees. She had to put as much distance as she could between them. Had to get help and bring someone back to search for Mila. Her lungs burned. Her body vibrated with each slap of her foot against the hard ground. Low hanging branches snagged her hair and whipped it across her face, but she kept moving, kept running.

The car came into view, and relief seeped into her bones. The road was close. She could stay hidden in the shrubs and weeds until someone drove by. She’d done it. She’d escaped her captor and freedom was moments away.

Bang!

A burning pain erupted in her leg and sent her flying to the ground. Stones embedded themselves in the palms of her hands. She whimpered and tried to stand, but the agony was too intense. Too brutal.

No, no, no!

Hurried footsteps came her way. She dug her fingertips into the ground and crawled toward an oak tree. Dread curdled in her stomach. She leaned against the tree, using all her strength to pull herself to her feet. She had to get away. Couldn’t be hunted down like injured prey.

Justin appeared in her sightline, blood trailing down the side of his face. He stalked toward her, his gun pointed at her head. “I told you not to do anything stupid.”

He brought the butt of the gun down on her temple.

She crumpled to the ground, regret in his eyes the last thing she saw before her world went black.

Dean's hands trembled as he scrubbed them over his face, replaying the last few moments he had with Elsie to Sadie. "I swear, it couldn't have been five minutes that passed between Elsie disappearing around the corner of the building to when I realized she was missing. Ten minutes tops."

Mr. and Mrs. Sweet sat at one of the picnic tables, Jimmy between them, and spoke in hushed tones to Tommy.

Boo whined at his side. He sniffed the air and strained at the leash.

Sadie nodded toward the dog. "Have you let him roam and catch her scent?"

"First thing I did," Dean said. "He led me to an empty parking spot. He's got her. I know that sonofabitch snuck her right out from under my damn nose. Guessing he got a hold of her mom's phone and lured her away."

Sadie glanced behind her where Mrs. Sweet sat with tears streaming down her face, her arms wrapped tightly around a confused and terrified Jimmy. "She still hasn't found it?"

"Nope. She dumped everything out of that giant purse and it's nowhere. She swears she had it when they got here. She set it on a bench away from the playground. Justin must have snatched it when we weren't looking." His chest tightened, and he rubbed the heel of his hand over his sternum. Fear gnawed at the pit of his stomach and grew with each passing second. "She blames herself. Dammit, Sadie, we have to find her."

Please tell me you guys have something we can use to get her back.”

“I wish I could. We still haven’t located him. Owen is at the station looking into other leads. We have to be close.”

Tommy walked over, anger and worry clear on his face. He turned so his back faced Elsie’s family. “They’re a wreck. I told them to take Jimmy and head home. There’s nothing else they can do.”

“I want to talk to them. Give me a second.” Dean approached the trio with Boo at his side. Anxiety dampened his palms. Not too long ago he’d spoken to Elsie’s dad about kids and marriage and the possibility of Elsie being the right woman.

Now he had to face him with zero answers and no clue where his daughter might be.

Mr. Sweet rose from the table and took a few steps away from his wife. His eyes were red and glassy. The wrinkles running across his forehead had deepened in the last twenty minutes. “Anything?”

Boo leaned against Mr. Sweet’s legs.

Dean shook his head, and Mr. Sweet’s face crumpled. It took all of Dean’s effort not to follow suit. Terror clawed at him from the inside out, causing a streak of pain to flash so bright it threatened to bring him to his knees.

But he couldn’t fall, couldn’t crumple under the unrelenting pressure when Elsie’s life was in the balance.

“I’m sorry,” he said, clearing the rising emotion from his throat. “But I promise you, I’ll do whatever it takes to find Elsie and bring her home safely.”

His phone vibrated against his leg. He grabbed his device and a tiny bit of relief unwound the tension wrapped around his neck. “I have to take this. Why don’t you and your wife head home with Jimmy? I’ll call if I hear anything.”

Mr. Sweet swallowed hard and ran a hand along Boo’s back. “Okay. I’m trusting you to bring her home. You got me?”

The expectation was like a two-ton weight on his chest, but it was nothing more than what he planned. “I do. If you’ll excuse me.”

Stepping away, he took the call. “Calvin? Tell me you found something. Anything.” The plea scraped against his raw throat, but he didn’t care. All he cared about was Elsie.

“I finally connected with that friend of Justin’s I told you about. Said that they didn’t keep in contact much after Justin hooked up with Malcom. They tried to rope this guy into their business, and he wasn’t having it.”

“Good for him,” Dean said, a bite in his voice. He didn’t have the patience to hear mundane details about some guy. “But what about that can I use?”

Calvin didn’t miss a beat. “Justin was a friend of his since elementary school and stayed in touch. Last time he spoke with him was before Justin moved in with his grandma. Told this guy his mom and stepdad were driving him crazy. That he’d been staying in the clubhouse the two of them had built back in the woods when they were younger so he didn’t have to listen to his stepdad bitch at him to get a job.”

Adrenaline zipped through Dean’s veins. His pulse raced. “Where’s the clubhouse?”

“On Justin’s mom’s property.”

The answer was like a sucker punch in the jaw, and Mr. Sweet's words from earlier came back. "Shit. The mines."

"What mines?" Calvin asked.

"Pull up a map of Jackie Thomas' property. See if there are any old mines on her land."

The sound of Calvin pounding on a keyboard reached Dean's ears. "Okay. I'm looking at the property now. Wow, she owns a lot of land, but I don't know how to tell if there are mines there or not."

"One second." Dean searched for Mr. Sweet. He made a beeline across the grass to the parking lot, stopping Elsie's dad before he climbed behind the steering wheel. "Mr. Sweet. You mentioned the abandoned mines in Cooper County. Do you know how to tell where they are on someone's property?"

"The Department of Environment and Conservation have claimed ones on file, but there are dozens more that aren't claimed." Mr. Sweet's eyes sharpened, his jaw tight. "Why?"

Dean held up a finger asking the man to wait. "One second. Calvin, look up maps on the Department of Environment and Conservation website. See if Jackie has claimed any mines."

"Okay," Calvin said. "Looks like there's one on here. On the back edge of her property."

A beat of hope pulsed along with his racing heart. "Meet me there."

Disconnecting the call, he faced Mr. Sweet. Adrenaline pumped through his system

and the need to alert Tommy and Sadie about what he'd just learned made him spit out the information to Elsie's dad as fast as he could. "Thanks to you, we have a new lead and possible location. I'll give you more details when I have them, but now I need to speak with the deputies. We need to get search parties together fast."

"I'm going with you," Mr. Sweet said.

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"I don't care what you think. That's my daughter out there, and if I can do anything to help bring her home, I will."

The quiver in Mr. Sweet's voice matched the one threatening to take over Dean's body. He wanted to argue, to save him from any more pain, but he understood Mr. Sweet's need to act. Hell, he respected the man for it. "Okay. I'll leave you to talk to your wife and meet you at the pavilion."

He ran to where Sadie spoke with Tommy at the far end of the building. He waved an arm high over his head to grab their attention. "Call in as much backup as you can. I may have figured out where Justin would hide Mila and Elsie."

Something skimmed across Elsie's cheek, calm and gentle. She struggled to open her eyes. Pain ricocheted around her skull. Her leg throbbed. Darkness kept her under its spell, refusing to let her wake. She was all right with that. In the dark, she could escape the agony tearing at her head.

Another touch against her face stirred her consciousness.

Dean?

No, his hands were larger, his skin rougher.

Jimmy?

No, he'd never tried to wake her so calmly. If he wanted her out of bed, he'd pester her with his endearing sass until she gave him what he wanted. Probably at the crack of dawn.

"Elsie, wake up."

The gentle prodding tickled her awareness. Her eyelids fluttered open. Not much light filtered in, but enough to cause a jolt of pain that squeezed her eyes shut again. A cold breeze whipped across her body. She tried to curl into herself, to escape whatever hell waited for her, but her body wouldn't cooperate.

"Please, Elsie. I don't want to be alone anymore. I need you."

Oh my God!

Elsie ignored the knife she swore stuck in the back of her neck and bolted awake. Her hands brushed against dirt and moist stones. Nausea pitched high in her stomach, but the tearful face hovering inches above hers made her forget every awful thing assaulting her senses. Joyful tears filled her eyes. "Mila! You're alive."

A tiny smile curved Mila's dry, cracked lips. Dirt stained her cheeks. Mud and leaves matted into her hair, which hung limply around her shoulders. Long, red scratches streaked across her face. "Barely."

Elsie ignored every ounce of agony licking through her body and lunged for her friend, pulling her into a fierce hug. The effort zapped her limited energy. "It's you. It's really you. I can't believe it."

For a brief moment, all the pain and terror melted away. She'd found her friend, and

Mila was alive. Nothing else mattered. Together, they'd find a way out of this mess.

Mila melted against her, sobs shaking her shoulders. "I hate that you're hurt, that you're stuck in this hellhole, but I'm so happy to see you. I thought I'd die without laying eyes on you again. Without seeing Jimmy. My poor baby, he's probably so scared."

Wincing, Elsie pulled away but kept her hands secure in Mila's. Wounds on her palms stung, but she couldn't let go of her friend for fear she was only an illusion. "He's worried, but he's safe. What happened?" Her muscles screamed as she turned her head to study the space around her. Darkness engulfed nearly every inch, the hole above them allowing glimmers of moonlight to leak in. Dirt and rocks covered the ground, and wooden tracks led away into unknown parts of the cave.

Mila sank against the rough rock wall. "I'm not really sure. I stopped by to check on one of the women I used to care for."

"Mrs. Pauly?"

Hissing out a sharp breath, Mila used her free hand to rub her temple. "Sorry. I haven't eaten in days and the water I found is nearly gone. I alternate between violent chills and being so hot I can't stand it."

Mila was in worse shape than Elsie first suspected. She needed a doctor quick. "Where are we? How did I get here?" Dizziness made the space spin in large, loopy circles.

"Don't move too quick. Preserve your energy." Mila kneeled beside her. "I'm not exactly sure where we are. He knocked me out, then I woke up here. It's like some kind of cave but I can't find a way out."

“If he got us in here, there has to be a way back out.” Elsie studied her friend and fought not to cringe. Even with the limited light, she could see the dark circles under her eyes and ashy pallor of her skin. Her cheeks were sunken in, showcasing the weight she’d lost. One pantleg was ripped, revealing dried blood.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried to get myself out of here? I’ve spent hours crawling through this place, searching for escape. There’s a tunnel that I followed for a while but it got too small to fit in, and I was afraid I’d get stuck. Then there’s the shaft right above us.” She flicked her wrist toward the small opening above them. “But there’s no way up. When I climbed, the walls crumbled under my hands.” Mila rested her head on Elsie’s shoulder. “Now I’m too weak to do anything. All I want to do is close my eyes and sleep.”

A fresh wave of horror grabbed hold of Elsie’s throat. She might be reunited with Mila, but they were far from out of danger. “We have to keep searching.”

“Can we wait? I need a second.”

As much as she wanted to let Mila rest, time was too precious to waste. “We have to go now. People are searching for us. We need to give them every chance to find us, and that means locating the best place to be rescued.”

“People know where I am? They’re coming to find us?”

Elsie couldn’t crush the hint of hope that crept into Mila’s weak voice. Unless someone witnessed Justin taking her and Dean followed suit, she wasn’t sure how close anyone was to uncovering Mila’s location.

How close anyone was to rescuing either one of them.

Instead, she infused as much enthusiasm in her words as she could. “You have no

idea how many people have worked day and night to find you. Now let's do what we can to make it easier for them. Can you help me up?"

Mila slowly stood. She closed her eyes on a long breath before reaching down to help Elsie.

Elsie took her cold hand and pressed the other against the moist wall of the cave to support most her weight. In Mila's condition, she'd topple over if Elsie leaned on her too much. Once on her feet, she blew out quick puffs of air to keep from getting sick.

Her injured leg buckled under her. A raw, hot burning sensation snaked from her calf up to her thigh. She glanced down. Her pant leg had been shoved up, a torn piece of fabric tied around the top of her calf. "Did you do that?"

"I ripped off a strip of my scrubs and used it to stop the bleeding. I can't do more beyond that, but the blood stopped pretty quickly. I think the bullet grazed you because I didn't see an entry point."

"Thank God for small favors, but I don't know if I can walk."

"Loop your arm around my neck," Mila said.

Taking in Mila's slight frame and gaunt face, Elsie hesitated. "You sure?"

Mila managed a small smile that looked more like a grimace. "You bet your ass. Come on."

Elsie hooked an arm over Mila's shoulders and winced. The limited amount of weight on her injured leg set her limb on fire, but she had no choice. She wouldn't lay in this cave and wait for death. They had to move, no matter how slowly.

They had to find a way out or die trying.

Desperation echoed through Dean's body with each pound of his fist against Jackie Thomas' door. Every fiber of his being wanted to run through the property searching for Elsie, but needing permission to be on the land was one downfall of working alongside the sheriff's department.

Boo sat on his haunches at Dean's feet, gaze fixed straight ahead.

Sadie stood beside him while Tommy studied a map on the lawn with Mr. Sweet and Calvin.

The door flew open. "What the heck is going on?" Jackie asked.

"Mrs. Thomas, I'm Deputy Pennel," Sadie said, taking the lead. "I'm here to ask permission to search your property."

"I...I don't understand," Jackie said, eyes wide. "I spoke with Dean and his friend earlier. I told them everything I know about my son."

"I don't doubt that, but recent developments have led us to believe your son may be hiding on your land without your knowledge."

Jackie shook her head. "No. That's not right. He wouldn't have anywhere to stay out there in the woods. Especially with all the rain and cold we've had."

"Not even an old clubhouse?" Dean asked.

Jackie's gaze snapped over to meet his. "How do you know about his clubhouse?"

"My business partner spoke with a friend of his, Travis Bidlack. Does that name ring a bell?"

A whisper of a smile broke through her confusion. "Of course. He and Justin have been friends forever. The two of them dragged boards and hammers and nails back to the forest for weeks until their clubhouse was exactly how they wanted it when they were kids."

"Can you show us where the clubhouse is?" Sadie asked. "It'd be much easier if you cooperated instead of forcing us to get a warrant. By the time that came through, it may be too late."

Jackie frowned. "Too late for what? None of this makes any sense."

"Do you remember the woman with me yesterday?" Dean asked.

Jackie nodded.

"She's missing. We think Justin took her. Please. Let us take a look at your property and see if she's out there." Emotion clogged his throat. Tears misted his eyes, but he didn't dash them away. Let this woman see his pain and fear. Let her understand how serious this situation was. Hell, he'd drop to his knees and beg her if that's what it took to gain her permission.

Paul appeared behind Jackie and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Let them look, babe."

Jackie shifted to stare up at her husband's face. "Excuse me?"

“Justin’s been in a bad place for a long time. You’ve tried to help him, we both have, and nothing we’ve done has gotten through to him.”

“You think they’re right?” Jackie flung out a hand to point toward Dean and Sadie. “You think my boy did what they said?”

“I sure as hell hope not, but there’s only one way to know for sure. Give them the permission they need to start their search. If they come up empty, that’s good. But if there’s even a chance we have two hurt, scared women out there, we owe it to them to look.” Paul pressed a kiss to the top of Jackie’s head. “I know this is hard.”

Jackie faced them, her expression tight and fearful. “Fine. Do whatever you need.”

Her approval caused a new rush of adrenaline to race through Dean’s veins. “Any chance you can give an idea of where the clubhouse is located?”

“I’ll take you.” Paul plucked a jacket off the hook by the door. “Whatever I can to help. Honey, I’ll be back soon.”

Jackie wrapped her arms around her waist and watched the commotion in her yard with wary eyes.

Dean leapt down the steps, Boo at his side, and stalked toward Tommy. “Jackie’s husband will show us where the clubhouse is. That should cut down on time wasted searching the woods.”

“Okay. You and Sadie go with Paul.” Tommy pointed to the map he had spread across the hood of his cruiser. “Me, Calvin, and Mr. Sweet will head to the abandoned mine at the back of the property. That’s the only other logical place to search.”

“You take Boo.” Dean handed the leash to Mr. Sweet. “He has Elsie’s scent and will alert you if he comes across anywhere she’s been.”

Paul stomped into the yard. “The clubhouse is a little less than a mile to the left of the house. Shouldn’t take long.”

Dean remembered his earlier visit to the old farmhouse. “Cell service is spotty here. Tommy, use your communicator if you find something.”

“Will do.” Tommy folded his map then hooked a bag on his back. “Let’s go.”

Dean peeled off with his group, following close behind Paul. Cold wind whipped through the trees, rustling the leaves. The sun dipped behind the mountains, cloaking the land in shadows. The temperature had dropped, but as he hiked deeper into the dark forest, sweat dotted his hairline. Weeds snaked up and brushed against his pantleg.

The crunch of Sadie’s footsteps sounded behind him. His mind spun, preparing him for every possible scenario they may encounter. Each one ended with Elsie safe in his arms because that was the only outcome he could handle.

Paul glanced over his shoulder and pointed ahead of him. “Just down this incline. Tucked behind the pine trees. They always said they liked to be camouflaged all year long. Those were much simpler times.”

Anticipation hurried Dean’s pace down the hill. They were so close to finding Justin’s hiding spot. Maybe he’d be there with Elsie and Mila. Then they could rescue the women and put this whole nightmare behind them.

Sadie came up to walk beside him. “I don’t know if it’s the setting sun or trees, but it’s damn good camouflage. I can’t see a thing besides pine needles.”

Paul stepped into the thicket, disappearing from view. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s inside,” he called out. “Justin’s friend must have been mistaken.”

Sadie approached the trees ahead of Dean and shoved aside a thick branch.

A gunshot rang out, the sound piercing against the stillness of the evening. A bullet slammed against Sadie’s chest, sending her flying backward.

“Shit! Sadie!” Dean lunged for her side and dropped to the forest floor. Moisture from the damp mud seeped into his pantlegs. He searched the woods for Justin. “Paul! Watch out!”

“I’m sorry,” Paul said, suddenly towering over him and Sadie. “You left me no choice.”

Exhaustion closed in on Elsie like the narrowing walls of the cave. The throbbing in her calf had intensified to the point that each step was like walking through fire. Dust-filled air coated her throat and squeezed her lungs. The excruciating pain in her head made every movement more difficult than the last.

“I have to stop.” Mila let out a shaky breath and leaned against the jagged rock.

Elsie unhooked her arm from around Mila’s neck and dropped to the ground. Chills raced up and down her body despite the heat burning her up from the inside out. Dryness coated her mouth, her thirst so overwhelming she almost licked the moist wall of the cave.

“We should go back.” Mila wiped her hand across her brow then let her arm drop to cover her eyes. “There’s no fresh air.”

“We tried to climb up the shaft. It didn’t work. We have to find a different way out.”

Elsie's chest heaved with the effort it took to take another breath.

"What if there's not? What if we're moving further and further from the only way to be found?" Hysteria increased the pitch of Mila's voice. "We're going to die here. I'll never see my sweet boy again. Never hold him in my arms or tell him I love him. Oh God, I can't do this anymore. Everything hurts." Her shoulders shook as sobs wracked her frail body.

The agonizing sound of her friend's misery twisted her heart. Scooting closer, she flattened her palms on either side of Mila's face, and alarm made her pulse race.

Mila's head drooped forward. Her eyes closed.

"Mila, honey, open your eyes."

Mila's eyes fluttered open for a second before closing again. "Too tired. So thirsty. Need to rest."

Terror grabbed hold of Elsie's neck and squeezed. She hadn't gone through hell to find Mila just to watch her die.

"Okay," she said. "You stay here. I'll move ahead a little and see what I find. I won't be long." She removed her hands from Mila's face and gently rested her against the rock wall. "I'll be right back."

With a forearm braced against the cool wall, Elsie hopped forward. The jagged edges of the ceiling lowered and forced her to duck. Stale air stung her nostrils, the sulfurous scent activated her gag reflex.

Seconds ticked into minutes until she lost track of time. The ceiling got lower, the walls closer together. She dropped to her knees. Pain ricocheted throughout her body,

but she kept moving. She'd find a way out. She had to. Failure wasn't an option.

Crawling through the dirt, her palms stung like she'd been attacked by a hundred bees. Anxiety tightened her chest. Heat snaked up her body, leaving her dizzy and disoriented. She strained to see in the dark. Something skittered against her arm, and she fought the urge to scream.

The faint outline of wooden beams stood out against the rock at the top of the cave. Elsie hurried forward and brushed against a makeshift wall of packed dirt, preventing her from moving. Large rocks leaned against the makeshift wall.

Defeat crushed down on her as tears misted her eyes. She slammed her fists against the dirt over and over. Desperation stalled her breath and she clawed at the wall, willing it to come down. A scream built in the base of her throat. Opening her mouth wide, she unleashed all her pain and misery and hopelessness.

How could this be the end? How could she finally have her life exactly the way she wanted it only to be thrown into a literal pit of despair? Left to watch her best friend die before she took her own last breath. Leaving behind her family and the man she loved.

Oh God, she loved Dean, and she'd never get a chance to build a life with him. Never spend the night in his arms after making love. Hell, she'd never even tell him how she felt. Anger curled her hands tighter and she tore at the hard earth, striking the cold dirt again and again. Tears streamed over her face.

Exhausted, she fell to the ground. Her jacket snagged on something sharp. She yanked at her arm, but the material wouldn't break loose. She tore off her jacket and threw it on the floor. Something fell out of the pocket and bounced at her feet.

What the heck?

She plucked the red plastic off the ground.

Jimmy's whistle!

A new wave of determination gritted her teeth, and she scooped the whistle off the ground. If she went back to the open shaft, she could blow the whistle and pray someone heard her. She ignored the intense ache in her leg and the beating against her skull and crawled. Dust and clay caked under her nails. Sweaty strands of hair fell in front of her face.

The tunnel widened and the ceiling rose inch by inch, but she stayed on her hands and knees. Clawing her way back to where she started. She stopped when she reached Mila, who was slumped over with her eyes closed and body lax.

"Mila!" She called out her friend's name and scrambled to her side. She pressed her dirty fingers to Mila's neck until she found a weak pulse. Time was running out. "I'll get you help. I promise."

Summoning all her courage, she moved forward. Tiny shafts of moonlight urged her on. The air became a little less toxic, a little less dusty and she struggled to fill her lungs with more oxygen.

Under the mineshaft, she fell to her butt and stared up at the darkness. Shadows and shapes shifted over the opening some ten feet up.

Please God. Please let someone be out there looking for us. Please let someone hear me.

She placed the whistle in her mouth and blew as hard as she could. The shrill noise echoed off the walls and pierced her ears. Energy leaked from her system, but she blew harder. Blew louder.

A shadow shifted above her until a face appeared in the hole.

Hope lifted her to her feet. She waved her arms above her head. “Help! Help me! My friend and I are stuck down here.”

The face disappeared, replaced by something shiny that glinted in the moonlight. The shape of a gun registered in her brain seconds before bullets flew down the opening like rain.

Terror pinned Dean to the ground as he stared into the barrel of Paul's gun. Limited options ran through his mind. He lifted his palms into the air and wished like hell he could get to the weapon tucked at the back of his waistband.

Sadie laid motionless beside him.

"What are you doing, Paul?"

"What I have to do in order to save my family. You'd do the same thing if you were in my shoes." Paul frowned and kept his gun trained on Dean's head. "I'm sorry it had to come to this. I really am."

Dean braced himself for the impact of a bullet in his brain. He'd failed. He hadn't seen what was right in front of him, and now Elsie might be lost forever.

Elsie. So sweet and kind. After Gina left him, he never thought he'd find someone he'd open his heart to or build a life with. Never thought he'd find another woman to love.

A gun fired, the abrupt sound vibrating his eardrums.

Paul crumpled to the ground, and a moan of pain ripped from his mouth.

Dean lunged forward and swiped the gun still clutched in his hand. Blood poured from the wound on Paul's chest. Dean checked Paul's pulse. Still alive but losing

buckets of blood.

He whirled around to find Sadie sitting up and clutching her chest, her weapon in her hand. “Holy shit, Sadie. You okay?”

“Thank God Tommy made me put this vest on, but dammit, that bullet still hurt like a bitch. Never been hit at such close range.” She grimaced and climbed to her feet then bent over at the waist, leaning her forearms on her knees. “He alive?”

“Yeah, but he needs medical attention fast if he’s going to stay that way. We need to alert Tommy and call in paramedics.” He studied the unconscious man lying on the ground.

“On it.” Sadie grabbed the communicator clipped to her shoulder and brought it to her mouth. “Tommy, Sadie here. Paul pulled a gun. I handled the situation. He’s incapacitated and needs medical attention as soon as possible. Unsure of Justin’s involvement at this point but be on high alert.”

The sound of rapid gunfire echoed through the forest, stopping his heartbeat. His gaze flew to Sadie’s.

Elsie!

“Go!” Sadie yelled. “I’ll stay with Paul.”

Dean took off at breakneck speed toward the terrifying sound. He weaved through trees, ducking to avoid low branches. Weeds and overgrown brush rubbed against his ankles. Dim moonlight barely filtered through the canopy of leaves overhead.

Bang!

Another gunshot quickened his pace. He tripped over an upturned root, nearly throwing him to the ground. Catching his balance, he kept moving, kept running, tuning his ears to every sound until only the calls of nature surrounded him.

Unsure of which direction to head, he stopped and drew in large gulps of air. His lungs burned and his head spun. Fear stretched his nerves to the limit, but he couldn't give in to the horrible thoughts clamoring for his attention.

He closed his eyes and brought the map of the property to mind. Paul had taken them northeast of the house. The mine where Tommy had led Calvin and Mr. Sweet was to the west, directly parallel from where they'd headed. Which meant if he kept moving in the same direction, he'd be close to the mine.

If that's where the gunshots were fired.

Moving on instinct, he sprinted ahead.

Bang!

The shots grew louder. He pushed himself harder, digging deep for every last ounce of energy left inside him.

The trees parted and revealed a narrow path that snaked its way through the woods. Marks through the dirt caught his attention and he crouched for a closer look. Deep lines interrupted faint outlines of shoe prints.

Validation spurred him on until the path ended at the opening of a cave blasted into the side of a mountain. An old board stretched across the entrance; a second board discarded on the ground. He ran to it and the sight of blood turned his stomach. He debated charging inside the cave, but the shots he heard hadn't come from inside the mountain.

Bang!

The explosion of gunfire was closer than ever. He raced to the left, heart in his throat. He followed the curve of the mountain until the outline of a man staring down a chute of some kind came into view.

Justin!

Dean secured his weapon and slowed, stepping carefully. At ten feet away, he yelled, "Drop your weapon!"

Justin stilled.

"I said drop your weapon," Dean repeated. "Hands in the air."

Justin whirled around. His gun stayed firmly in his grip.

"It's over. We know your stepdad is involved and that you were helping Malcom launder money through the bar. We found the stuff for the poker games. There's no way out for you, so set down the gun and put your hands where I can see them."

Justin sneered. "You're forgetting one thing."

"What's that?"

"You come one step closer, and my next bullet goes in your girlfriend's head. She's already hit. Took her right down. You don't want to be the reason she's dead, do you?"

Dean stopped moving but his weapon stayed in place. He considered the threat. He couldn't risk leaping into action if Justin was telling the truth.

A flash of movement caught Dean's eyes. Something rustled the brush behind Justin. "Why did you take Mila? She had nothing in this." He inched a little closer.

"I didn't want to, but she saw too much. I couldn't let her leave my grandma's. She would have ruined everything." Justin flung his free hand wide. "Hell, she did ruin everything even though I didn't kill her."

Hope flared to life. "Why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to hurt her, dammit. That's not the kind of person I am. Even when Malcom went after her, I wouldn't let him. Wouldn't let him do the things he wanted to with her. But I couldn't let her just walk away. Then your stupid girlfriend wouldn't leave it alone, wouldn't stop looking."

The hope melted into raw, hot anger. "If you couldn't kill them, what was the plan? Leave them out here to die?"

Justin shrugged. "Maybe. But then your girlfriend had to keep being a pain in the ass, even trapped in a damn mine."

Dean took another step.

"Stop moving!" Justin's piercing scream sent a pair of birds flying overhead.

The movement behind the young man increased and a flash of brown and black fur darted forward. Boo raced from the tree line and lunged at Justin, shoving his front paws against Justin's back.

"What the—?" Justin yelled as he fell to the ground.

Dean sprang into action, erasing the distance between him and Justin. He stomped his

boot on Justin's wrist, forcing him to release the gun, then dropped his knee between his shoulder blades to pin him to the ground.

"Ahh!" Justin screamed. "Get off me."

Tommy and Calvin emerged from the woods, running at full force, Mr. Sweet not far behind.

"Toss me your handcuffs," Dean yelled over his shoulder.

Tommy dangled the cuffs from his hand. "I got him. Where's Elsie?"

Dean spang to his feet and stared down the mineshaft into a pit of complete darkness. "She's down there. I just hope she's still alive."

Elsie curled in a ball on the dirt floor, her hands over her head. Her muscles were so tight she swore they'd never relax, never uncoil. Each bullet that ricocheted around her tore at her psyche—brought with it a promise of more pain, more fear, more undeniable truth that death was near.

The gunfire stopped.

She held her breath and waited.

"Elsie!"

The sound of Dean's voice washed over like a calming balm. Tears clogged her throat. Excitement built in the pit of her stomach. She was safe. Dean had found her. Now he had to get her out of this hellhole.

Sitting up, she waved her hands over her head. "Dean! I'm here! Mila's here, too. She

needs help right away. I don't know how to get out."

"Don't worry," Dean yelled. "I'll be down in a second."

Relief settled into her bones and adrenaline leaked from her system. Her teeth chattered and shivers shook her body, stealing what was left of her energy. Heat crashed against her cheeks.

A rope trickled down the hole. Dean lowered himself inch by inch until his feet hit the ground and he rushed toward her, pulling her into his arms. "You're alive. Oh my God, I was so damn scared."

Elsie melted against him, clinging to his chest. Tears filled her eyes and fell down her face. "You're here. I can't believe you're really here."

He cupped his hand around the back of her neck, and she let out a hiss of pain. He pulled back and studied her, the worry in his eyes clear even in the dark mine. "Are you hurt? Justin said he shot you."

She tried to dip her chin toward her leg but couldn't find the effort to move. "My leg. He shot me then hit the back of my head before he tossed me down here. Mila's in worse shape. Down the tunnel."

"Honey, you're burning up. I think you have a fever. We need to get you out of here right away." His words were gentle, soothing, but he couldn't hide an undercurrent of fear.

Her eyelids grew heavy. She blinked to keep them open but dropped her head to his shoulder. "Mila first. Please."

"Tommy," Dean yelled. "We need medics here now! Elsie and Mila both need

immediate attention.”

Dean was here. He’d take care of her. She didn’t have to find a way out, didn’t have to stay awake another second to make sure Mila was okay. Her body turned lax. Her muscles refused to move.

“Elsie, baby, I need you to stay awake. I’m getting you out of here, okay? But you need to stay with me. Can you talk to me?”

His voice became faint. His steady arms pressed her against him. She was safe now. She was with the man she loved. A calming buzz sounded in her brain. The dizziness came rushing back. She couldn’t keep her eyes open one more second, but at least she got to see Dean one more time.

Giving into exhaustion, her head fell forward. She savored the feel of Dean’s body as the world around her disappeared and she surrendered to oblivion.

Dean heaved a sigh of relief as Tommy clapped a hand on his forearm and helped him out of the hellhole with Elsie draped over his shoulder. “I located Mila about ten yards away down a narrow tunnel to the left. Injury to her leg and lacerations on her face are the only visible injuries, but she’s unconscious and severely malnourished. Elsie suffered a head wound and was shot in the calf. Both women need immediate medical attention.”

Mr. Sweet stood beside Tommy, terror written on every line of his face. “Elsie, honey. It’s Dad. Please wake up.”

Dean dropped to the ground and cradled Elsie in his lap. He cupped her dirty face in the palm of his hand with his heart lodged in his throat. “Elsie. Can you hear me? Calvin, what’s the status of medical help?”

“Should be here any second. I gave them coordinates and they were en route before you started up the shaft.” Calvin grabbed the rope from the ground that Tommy had dropped. “Tommy, I’ve got the rope while you head down to get Mila.”

Tommy plunged his hand in his backpack and tossed a medical kit and bottle of water to Dean then hoisted the pack on his back. “Not much in there that can help but try and get some fluids in her if she wakes. I’ll be quick.”

“Elsie,” Dean said, attention turned solely to the woman who held his world in her cold, limp hand. “Honey, open your eyes.”

Boo whined but stayed glued to Mr. Sweet's side, as if sensing the older man needed the support.

"What's wrong with her? Why isn't she awake? Oh my God. She has to be all right." Mr. Sweet crouched and pulled Boo close. He kept his gaze fixed on his daughter.

Dean didn't have the energy to comfort Elsie's father, not when anxiety squeezed his lungs so hard he couldn't breathe. "Help's on the way. For you and Mila. I need you to wake up. Mila needs you. She won't be able to take care of Jimmy without you."

Her eyelids flickered. A small groan sounded from the back of her throat.

Excitement tripled his pulse. "You know how excited he'll be when he sees his mom," he continued, knowing with his entire being it was her instinct to protect Jimmy that would make her fight the hardest. "Jimmy will need you to take him to school and assure him his mom needs a little rest before she can play. We can take him for ice cream again—five scoops this time if you just wake up. Please, babe. He needs you. I need you."

"You just want more ice cream." The wind almost swallowed her faint voice, but there was no mistaking the tiny smile that lifted the side of her mouth.

Relief washed over him like a cool, spring rain. "You know how much I love chocolate, but we can talk about that later. Can you open your eyes for me?"

Slowly, she blinked them open and winced. "Mila's safe?"

"Tommy's getting her now, and medics are on the way. Here, can you drink some water?" He unscrewed the cap from the plastic bottle and pressed it to her lips.

She took a small sip then turned her head. A dribble of water dripped down her dirty

chin. "Everything hurts."

He swiped the water off with the pad of his thumb. "I know, baby. I'm so sorry I let this happen. I should have been there with you. Should have stopped him from taking you. I never would have forgiven myself if I hadn't found you in time. I love you, Elsie. I love you so damn much it hurts. I couldn't face another day without you."

Tears swam in Elsie's eyes. "Do you mean it? Do you really love me?"

"With every fiber of my being."

"I knew you'd find me." She rested her head against his chest. "I want to go home now. I'm cold."

Mr. Sweet stripped off his jacket and laid it across her before placing a kiss on Elsie's forehead. "We'll get you home soon, honey."

She smiled. "Thanks, Dad," she whispered, her voice cracking.

Boo crawled over to lay at Dean's feet and placed his head on Elsie's arm.

The sound of hurried footsteps and mumbled voices carried to Dean on the cool wind. A beam of light bounced around the ground.

"Emergency responders, here."

Two twenty-something men and a middled-aged woman jogged forward, their arms loaded with medical equipment.

Mr. Sweet stood and gestured them over. "She needs fluids and oxygen as soon as possible."

The woman dropped to the ground beside Elsie and opened her medical bag just as Tommy climbed up the shaft with Mila.

“Wait,” Elsie said, straining to sit up. “Mila! Is she okay?”

“She’s breathing but is in pretty bad shape,” Tommy said and carried her to the two men quickly pouring through their equipment.

“Help her first,” Elsie said, her words swallowed by a fit of coughing.

Dean took an oxygen mask from the medic and fit it over Elsie’s mouth. “Give them a second. Take deep breaths. You both can get what you need at the same time, okay?”

Her eyes widened and she nodded, placing her hand over his to keep the mask in place.

“I’m Macy,” the woman said. “I’m going to look at your leg and see what I can do before transporting you back to the ambulance.”

Again, Elsie nodded.

Dean glanced at the flurry of movement as Mila was worked on.

Mr. Sweet paced between the two women, then stopped to stare down at Mila. A soft cry came from him, and his strong shoulders shook. He crouched low. “Hello there, sweetheart. You have no idea how happy we all are to see you.”

Elsie tore off the mask. “Is she awake?”

Mr. Sweet glanced back and nodded, the moonlight bouncing off the tears

glimmering in his eyes. “Yes.”

Elsie gripped Dean’s shirt. “I want to see her.”

“Okay, but then put that mask back on.” In one swift movement, he rose with Elsie still in his arms. He secured her tightly against his body, committing the feel of her to memory.

A fresh round of anger swept through Dean like a flash flood. Dirt covered Mila’s face and matted her hair. Her sunken cheeks were as hollow as her droopy eyes. Dried blood caked her tattered and torn scrubs. Mila gingerly lifted a hand toward Elsie.

Elsie threaded their fingers together. “I told you we’d make it out of there.”

Mila swallowed hard. “Thank you.” The words croaked from her throat.

“I love you, lady,” Elsie said.

Mila managed a tiny smile before her eyes slid shut.

“We need to get you both out of here,” the medic with a shock of black hair said.

Dean took a step away from Mila to give them space to move.

Elsie curled against him. “I love you, too, Dean.”

Joy tightened his chest. He tenderly pressed his lips to hers before carrying her out of the forest and toward a future he couldn’t wait to build together.

Elsie struggled with her crutches as she hobbled across the storeroom at the shelter,

helping a young woman find the pale pink shirt she remembered that would go perfectly with her new suit. “It’s right over here. I know you’ll love it and it’s your size.”

The woman hugged the clothes she’d already found to her chest and sighed. Her dark hair was pulled into a stubby pony tail and no make-up covered the tiny laugh lines on her face. “This is such an amazing event. I’ve been so nervous for this interview, it could change mine and my son’s lives, and having something professional to wear will help my confidence so much. You’re a God send, Elsie.”

“I’m only doing my part. So glad to help.” Even as she batted away the praise, she clung to it. Making a difference to all the women who’d stopped by the Dress for Success event three days after she’d fought for her life kept her on her feet. A dull ache still swallowed her head and her leg throbbed from spending too much time moving around.

Mrs. Collins met Elsie at the clothing rack and hooked an arm around her shoulder in a gentle side hug. “Let me grab that shirt and a bag for Marcia. Your man is about to jump out of his skin watching you from the corner. Go have a seat, for all our sakes.”

She grinned, her gaze connecting with Dean’s. He hadn’t left her side since he’d lifted her out of the mine shaft. Staying by her hospital bed while the doctors cleaned her up then sleeping at her place to help take care of Jimmy while Mila recovered. He’d supported her while the police explained the charges against Justin and his stepdad, and how they’d fallen into business with Malcom to help pay off a lien on their family’s property.

A mistake that would cost them—and the woman they were both trying to protect—a whole hell of a lot more than a house and some land.

Dean made his way toward her, weaving through the clusters of women and children

browsing the multitude of items waiting to find a new owner. “You okay? Need a break? Jenna said you should take it easy for a few days. You’re still healing from that nasty concussion.”

His concern warmed her from the inside out, but she didn’t need to be reminded of her injuries. Every sudden motion sent spikes of pain through her body, which unlucky for her, was accompanied by dizziness and nausea.

But nothing would have kept her from being at the shelter today. Seeing her idea come to life and all the people it benefited made every ache and pain worth it.

“A break would be nice. Maybe something cold to drink.” She studied the dwindling racks and volunteers buzzing about. “Where’s Jimmy?”

“In the back yard with Boo, Jenna, and Oliver.”

She rolled her eyes. “Jenna wasn’t supposed to be here today. She’s like a mother hen. Hell, she’s been more on my case than my own mother.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple and led her outside. “She wants to make sure you’re not pushing yourself too hard. Plus, she figured she could help keep an eye on Jimmy today since you’d be busy. And did you see the time?”

A quick twist of her wrist to check her watch made her grasp. “I didn’t realize it’d gotten so late. Is she almost here?”

He grinned. “On the way.”

Crossing through the kitchen to the back door, she slowly made it outside. Jimmy sat in the middle of the large yard with Boo and Oliver on the ground beside him. Pumpkins lined the cobblestone walkway. Jenna sat on a pergola-covered swing with

deep purple and orange mums flanking the sides.

“Elsie!” Jimmy jumped to his feet and ran to her. “Dean gave me a ball to throw to Boo. He caught it once but now just wants to munch on it. He’s so silly. It’s not food!”

She laughed at his full-body giggle. “Are you having fun with Boo and Oliver?”

He nodded, but a hint of sadness crept into his blue eyes and tore at her heart.

Her parents had taken Jimmy to visit Mila at the hospital so he could see with his own eyes his mom was all right. But Mila had been heavily sedated. Jimmy’s worry remained, no matter how many reassurances she and Dean gave him. He wanted his mom home and his world back to exactly the way it had always been.

Well, maybe not exactly. He begged daily for Boo to be his dog instead of Dean’s.

A car door shutting on the other side of the white picket fence turned Elsie’s head to the street. She spotted the top of her parents’ silver SUV seconds before her parents hopped out of the vehicle.

“What do you want to do tonight, buddy?” she asked, turning Jimmy to face her and not the gate.

Quietly, her dad pushed Mila’s wheelchair into the backyard. Her mom stood beside him with a wide smile and watery eyes.

He shrugged. “See Mama? I know you said we should let her rest, but I really miss her. I won’t be loud or hug or kiss or anything. I promise.”

“What if I want that hug and kiss?” Mila asked, her voice still a little weak.

Jimmy gasped and spun around as fast as cartoon character. “Mama!” He sprinted to the front of her chair with outstretched arms but stopped abruptly. His arms fell to his sides. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Mila reached out her hand. The bruising on her face had grown faint, and her cheeks weren’t as hollow. Her healthy glow replaced the ashy pallor of her skin. “You could never hurt me, baby. All I want in this entire world is a giant hug from my favorite little man.”

“Are you sure?”

Elsie ruffled the hair on the top of Jimmy’s head. “Would your mom lie to you? Get your little butt up there.”

With more care than Elsie had ever seen, Jimmy crawled into Mila’s lap and looped his arms around her neck. He nuzzled his head against her shoulder.

Mila closed her eyes and snuggled him close. Tears flowed down her face. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Mama.”

Her own tears dotted the corners of Elsie’s eyes. This was why she’d fought so hard, why she’d risked everything. To reunite Jimmy and Mila. To bring her little makeshift family back together. To give a mother and son a way back to each other.

Dean wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her close to his side. “Not much sweeter to see than that.”

She smiled up at him. “Seeing you wake up next to me in the morning comes pretty damn close.”

He hiked up his brows. “Oh really? You like that do ya?”

“I like it a lot. And I love you. Thank you for helping me make this happen. Thank you for helping me bring Mila home.”

“I love you, too.” He leaned down and gently placed his lips on hers. “Thank you for showing me what my life could be. I only hope things are a little less... exciting from here on out.”

“You don’t want excitement?”

“I just want you, babe. A life with you. A home with you. A future with you.”

Her heart threatened to burst. “Do you really mean that?”

“Absolutely. You, Elsie Sweet, are everything I’ll ever need. Well, you and Jimmy and plenty of ice cream of course.”

“Of course, what’s life without ice cream?” Dropping her crutches, she threw her arms around his neck and he lifted her off her feet. She had her family back safe and sound and the man she loved by her side. Nothing could ever be sweeter than that.

EPILOGUE

Elsie rolled over and snuggled closer to Dean. His body radiated heat. Something she craved to warm her from a cold front the crisp December weather had brought to town. Even the cream-colored duvet couldn't chase away the morning chill.

Dean wrapped her up tight. "Good morning."

The huskiness of his voice heated a different part of her body. She ran her bare foot up the side of his leg. "We could find a way to go from good to great."

"I like the thought of that." In a flash of motion, Dean clamped his hands around her wrists and pinned her against the mattress. He pressed lazy kisses along the curve of her neck.

Desire exploded in her core. She groaned and arched her back, eager to start her morning off the same way she had every day for the past month and a half.

"Elsie!" Impatient pounding slammed against her closed bedroom door. "Are you awake?"

Dean fell to the bed at her side with a groan. "Well, at least the kid has learned to knock before running in here."

"The lock might deserve more credit than Jimmy." Elsie chuckled and hopped out of bed. She found her plush, white robe and slipped it on before answering the door, a hand fisted on one hip. "Can I help you?"

Jimmy bounced up and down on his toes. “We need to go. Now.”

“Go where?” she asked, frowning.

“It’s a surprise. Hurry up! Mama’s waiting!” He disappeared down the hall before she could wrangle any more answers from him.

She turned back toward Dean, surprised to find him out of bed and nearly dressed. His hair was a tousled mess and whiskers filled out his jawline. The butterflies in her stomach went crazy.

“You heard him. We’ve got to go.” He pulled a sweatshirt over his head, planted a kiss on her cheek, and left her with her mouth open and confused. “We’re heading downtown so take a minute to do whatever you need to do.”

Boo trotted inside and stared at her, as if also urging her to hurry.

“Wait?” She threw her hands in the air. “You’re in on this secret as well?”

He whined and ran out the door.

Chuckling, she dressed in a warm sweater and jeans before finding her fur-lined boots and tying her hair in a ponytail. She made a pitstop in the bathroom to brush her teeth and add a little make-up. By the time she made it to the living room, Dean, Jimmy, and Boo all waited by the front door with coats and shoes in place.

Dean reached for her hand before stepping into the cool, morning air. He whistled as they walked along the quiet sidewalk, Boo at their side and Jimmy slightly ahead.

She stared up at him and a hundred questions sat on the tip of her tongue. It didn’t take a genius to realize nothing she asked would get answered. So instead, she enjoyed the way the cool breeze chased the warm rays of sun from her face and

Jimmy's carefree laughter as he skipped toward town.

At the town square, Dean led her to her storefront and stopped before the front window came into view.

"What in the world is going on?" Bewildered, she stared up into the face she loved so much.

"Elsie Sweet, you make the world a better place by just being in it. You're selfless and loyal and committed to doing whatever you can to help others. I thank God every damn day that He brought you into my life. And then I thank Him for everyone else that came along with your cute little package." He threw a wink in Jimmy's direction. "Before we get to the reason Jimmy wanted you down here so quick, I had something I wanted to ask you with a little more privacy."

All the questions about why she'd been brought to downtown Pine Valley to stand beside her store vanished. Excitement rippled through her body in big sloppy waves.

He slipped his hand from hers and grabbed a ring box from his pocket before dropping to one knee. "Elsie, my best friend and love of my life, would you do me the greatest honor of all time by becoming my wife?"

Her excitement grew and tears hovered over her lashes. "Yes! Absolutely yes!"

Jimmy squealed and clapped his hands.

Dean slid a princess cut diamond onto her finger. He rose and swept her into his arms, kissing her soundly before spinning her in a wide circle.

She laughed, happier than she ever imagined possible. "I love you, Dean. I love you so much."

“And we all love you, Elsie!” Jimmy shouted before waving her forward. He opened the door to Sweet Repeats.

Brows knitted, she glanced at Dean then took a step forward. A gasp caught in her throat. Inside, her store was not only packed with all her family and friends, but every last detail of the space had been refurbished, replaced, and repainted. Racks of beautiful clothes took up the center of the room and shelves filled with knick-knacks and decorations lined the walls. A new glass counter boasted jewelry inside its case and a register on top.

Elsie turned in a wide circle, her hands pressed to her mouth. Between recovering from her injuries, taking care of Mila, and looking after Jimmy, her broken store had slipped through the cracks. Low on her list of priorities, but always at the back of her mind.

“How is this possible?”

Mrs. Collins approached and placed a kiss on Elsie’s forehead as Mila walked to her side to give her a hug.

“You do so much for everyone else,” Mila said. “We wanted to do something for you.”

Dean hooked a hand around her waist and snagged her close to his side. “Everyone pitched in.”

Emotion clogged her throat. Tears filled her eyes as she struggled to find the right words. “But everything was destroyed. Shattered. All of it was gone. This must have taken so much time. So much money.”

“All it took was a community of people who wanted to give back to one of their own,” Dean said.

She stared at the smiling faces of that community. Of her friends and family. The women she volunteered her time with at the shelter, and some she'd helped there as well. Children giggled and ducked in and out of hiding spots, and Boo wagged his tail at Jimmy's side.

"Thank you all so much. How did I ever get to be so lucky?"

Dean leaned down and gave her one more kiss. "It's not luck, babe. It's love. Everyone here loves you so damn much, but I love you most of all—and will continue to love you for the rest of your life."

Elsie wrapped her arms around him, savoring every second of time she was given with him—with everyone else in the room. "You're right. My life isn't built on luck. It's built on choices, and every choice I made led me straight to you. You're worth every bump in the road."

"Honey, if I have anything to say about it, there will be no more bumps for us. From here on out, nothing but smooth sailing."

Jimmy rushed forward and threw his arms around them both. "Yeah, Elsie. Smooth sailing and plenty of ice cream."

The Safe Haven Women's Shelter Series continues with Clara's Secure Hideaway .