



# CROSSROADS OF REVIVAL

INJURED PRIDE SERIES - PREQUEL



DANIELLE M HAAS

INJURED PRIDE SERIES - PREQUEL

CROSSROADS OF  
REVIVAL

DANIELLE M HAAS

Copyright © 2022 Danielle M Haas All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locals is entirely coincidental.

Cover created by Deranged Doctor Designs.

A Danielle M Haas Publishing Book Crossroads of Revival - Injured Pride Series  
Prequel

✿ Created with Vellum

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I'm so glad you decided to take a trip to the Smoky Mountains and found out a little more about Crossroads Mountain Retreat. I wanted to create a little story to introduce the small-town of Pine Valley, Tennessee as well as give you the first glimpse of the retreat and the amazing people who you'll find there.

If you enjoy this Injured Pride prequel, I hope you'll grab a copy of [Crossroads of Revenge](#) and find out more about Brooke and Lincoln and the danger that throws them together.

Hope to see more of you soon!

Danielle M Haas

# CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

About the Author

The bright, afternoon sun flooded Izzy Sterling's car. The warm rays couldn't chase away the chill racing down her spine as she stared at the construction site, the towering equipment and crates of supplies stealing her attention away from the majestic peaks of the Smoky Mountains beyond. The spring weather had done nothing to beat back the gloom and fear that had clung to her since before Christmas—since she'd barely escaped being tortured and sold into a life she couldn't imagine.

A life she couldn't stop envisioning, no matter how hard she'd tried.

And now she sat in her beat-up sedan, willing her body to move and climb out of the car. She'd dreaded this day as soon as she'd agreed to help the woman who owned the place—Brooke Mather—restore some of the old cabins behind the half-built log building that currently dominated her view. A suggestion made by her therapist. Dr. Kirkton recommended facing her fears in an attempt to handle the anxiety that had swept in and stalled her life for months.

Not knowing what else to do, Izzy accepted the challenge. She'd called Brooke and asked if she could lend a hand at Crossroads Mountain Retreat. A place Brooke hoped to make a destination for injured law enforcement and veterans, but for Izzy, it was where she'd been taken. Held captive as she waited for rescue, trapped in a nightmare. Brooke was thrilled for the extra help, and Izzy was now committed to spending time in the place where her life had changed forever.

A petite woman with her long brown hair piled on top of her head rounded the corner of the building with a large man in a yellow hard hat and bearded chin. Izzy watched them, the woman's hands moving in sweeping gestures as she spoke, like she could convey whatever she needed.

As if she could feel Izzy's eyes on her, the woman faced the car and smiled before waving her arm in the air.

Izzy sighed and secured her long, blond locks in a low ponytail. Great, she'd been spotted. No way she could change her mind and leave now. Shutting off the engine, she stepped onto the gravel that covered the wide parking lot and made her way to the woman's side.

"Hi! Are you Izzy?" The woman extended a hand. "I'm Brooke. We spoke on the phone."

Izzy forced a tight smile and shook Brooke's hand before draping her arms across her middle. "Nice to meet you. Thanks for letting me do this."

Brooke beamed but understanding lit her brown eyes. "Are you kidding me? Anyone who volunteers to help me get the old cabins back into shape is my new best friend. Scrubbing all the crud out of them won't be easy, but a little hard work can be good for the soul."

Relief loosened the knots tying up Izzy's insides. Brooke might know exactly why Izzy was here, but not mentioning it put her more at ease. If only her mom and sister could be the same way.

Pulling in a deep breath of fresh mountain air, she pushed aside her real reasons for being here. She just wanted to get this over with. "I can scrub with the best of them. Where do we start?"

Brooke hooked her arm through Izzy's and steered her around the building. "Why don't I give you a little tour first? There's not too much to show yet, but hopefully you can see my vision."

"Sounds good," Izzy said, falling into step beside her. She might be a good cleaner, but she didn't relish the thought of



scouring through dilapidated cabins. She cast a quick glance at the side of the building, spotting the interior walls and blocks of large spaces inside. “What’s this building for?” She asked, nodding toward the construction site.

“This will be the main lodge,” Brooke said, halting to turn them toward it. “Therapy sessions, dining hall, gym. The whole works. When I was at my lowest, I needed a variety of outlets to lift me back up. I want to make sure I have those same outlets, and more, for everyone who comes here.”

Questions burned the tip of Izzy’s tongue, but she kept them to herself. If she didn’t want to jump into her own issues, she had no right to ask Brooke about hers. Instead, she rounded the building, keeping a wide berth around a giant bulldozer, and the scene before her squeezed her breath from her lungs.

“Beautiful isn’t,” Brooke said, nudging her shoulder.

Unexpected tears filled her eyes, and she sniffed them back. The view of the large lake surrounded by miles of evergreens and looming maples transported her back to a simpler time. “I have so many memories of this place. I didn’t expect being here again to hit me like this.”

Brooke took a step closer, as though wanting to comfort her but also respect her personal space. “Did you come here as a kid? Back when it was a summer camp?”

She nodded and rubbed a hand back and forth over her collarbone—a nervous habit she’d picked up recently. “My sister and I always came to camp. We looked forward to it every year. I even had my first kiss here. We were heartbroken when the camp closed down.”

“Me, too. My grandpa owned it. I spent a lot of time here. Helping out any way I could. When my grandpa left me the land, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with it. Then it hit me. This land—this place—was always my refuge. I want this place to be a refuge for others who experienced setbacks like I did. Give members of law enforcement and veterans a place to heal. A place to rebuild their lives.”



Emotion clogged Izzy's throat, and she coughed to clear it out. Nostalgia and cherished memories battled against the constant fear churning in her gut. "That's nice. So you mentioned cabins needing scrubbed?"

Brooke clapped her hands and rubbed her palms together. "Yes. I'm salvaging the old bunk houses around the lake. Turning them into individual cabins for the guests. The ones deeper in the woods will be used for storage or torn down."

The reminder of the cabins tucked deep in the forest made Izzy wince. The memories of huddling in the corner of a run-down cabin, her body shaking from cold and terror, made her muscles rigid.

A gentle hand on her shoulder helped her release a shaky breath. "I'm sorry I brought up those cabins," Brooke said. "No need to think about what happened. Let's just lose ourselves in a little work. Maybe crank up some music. I promise I won't force you to listen to my horrible singing voice."

Izzy choked out a laugh and nodded. "Sounds good."

"Brooke! Come quick!" A man emerged from the edge of the trees. His pronounced frown and wide eyes clear from yards away.

Brooke broke into a jog toward him, Izzy following close behind.

"What's going on, Cruz?" Brooke asked, stopping in front of a clean-shaven police officer she recognized from town.

Cruz, dressed in worn jeans and a ratty t-shirt, wiped the back of his wrist across his forehead, smudging dirt on his sweaty skin. "I found something you'll want to see."

"What is it?"

Cruz cast Izzy a quick glance, recognition clear in his blue eyes, then focused back on Brooke. "Chains. Just like the ones we found a few months ago."

Izzy's legs weakened and she reached out to lean against Brooke as her world tilted on its axis. She'd seen the chains

the police had uncovered before—had barely escaped them being slapped on her wrists and ankles.

And if those chains were back, so were the people who'd put them there.



THE MOSQUITO BUZZING AROUND BEAU DAVIS' head refused to leave no matter how many times he swatted it away. But he couldn't let it bother him as he trekked through the overgrown weeds toward the cabin where Cruz waited.

Anticipation zipped through him, humming as loud as the annoying insect that refused to leave him alone. Only two weeks out of the police academy and an exciting new case awaited him.

Okay, so not just him. Officer Cruz Sawyer had requested help at the crime scene, and he'd been the only one available when the call came. An opportunity he would use to his full advantage. Not only because he longed to prove himself on the Pine Valley, Tennessee Police Force, but because this case was personal.

This case involved Izzy Sterling.

Jogging up the busted porch steps, he pushed past the door that had been left ajar and approached the small group of people clustered together in the corner of the cabin. Cruz and Brooke stared at a set of metal chains bolted to the wooden floor, and Izzy slouched against the wall with arms folded over her chest and giant blue eyes fixed on her tennis shoes.

Nervous energy churned inside him. He cleared his throat, unsure how to announce himself and hating how self-conscious he felt. Especially in front of Izzy. He hadn't expected her to be here, and all he wanted was to show her how he'd changed since the last time they'd seen each other. How he'd matured and grown into a good man that she could lean on.

Izzy's gaze snapped up and met his, and the tiniest flicker of a smile lifted one side of her mouth. "Beau," she said, her voice soft and wispy as if relieved to see him.

He nodded. "Izzy."

Cruz straightened and faced him. "Officer Davis. Time to get your feet wet. Come over and take a look at this."

He crossed the time-wrapped wooden floors and stopped when he was shoulder to shoulder with the officer he respected so much. He flashed a tight smile to Ms. Mather, then dropped into a crouch to study the chains. "These look like new chains. No rust. Even some flecks from the metal are scattered along the floor from when they were bolted down."

"Exactly," Cruz said. "Do you have any security back here?"

Brooke shook her head. "There's nothing here to take, and after we caught those sonsofbitches using the cabins further in the woods before, I didn't think they'd have the balls to come back. Especially since we started construction on the lodge last week."

"You think it's the same group of people?" Izzy's voice cracked, a shudder shaking each word.

Beau rose to his full height and wished he could offer her a comforting hand, but no way that'd be appropriate.

"Might be the same traffickers," Cruz said. "Your abductors never gave us other names or pointed a finger at a larger group or trafficking ring. That doesn't mean one isn't out there. To be honest, these operations usually have multiple enforcers, not to mention contacts who help in placing the victims."

Izzy slouched further down on the wall as if to make herself as small as possible. "So what now?"

"We track the chains. See if we can figure out where they were purchased. Go through the woods and look for signs of how they approached the cabin. Find clues that lead us to them." Confidence leaked into each new idea, but Beau

chanced a glance to Cruz to make sure his logic was well received.

“All good ideas,” Cruz said. “Brooke, I can try and pull in more officers, but the force is small and stretched pretty thin. Or you can question your construction crew. Ask if they’ve seen anything—”

Brooke raised a palm. “Say no more. This is my land and I want in on this case. I may not be a police officer anymore, but I won’t sit by and let people use this place to hurt innocent girls. Izzy, you don’t need to be here for this. Do you want me to give you a ride home?”

Beau kicked himself for not thinking of offering her a lift. “I can give her a ride. I mean, if she wants it.”

Izzy set her jaw, and a fire he hadn’t seen in her since they spent the night together after graduation lit her eyes. “I want to help.”

“I understand wanting to help, but just coming here today was a huge step in facing your fears,” Brooke said, crossing the room to wrap an arm across Izzy’s shoulders. “But you don’t have to put yourself back in that place again. We’ve got this. We’ve got *you*. I promise.”

Izzy leaned against Brooke and a tear plopped over her cheek, twisting Beau’s heart. “The two people who grabbed me that night in December might be in jail, but they took more from me than just a couple hours of my life. They took my peace of mind. They took my courage. I need to find a way to get that back, and I need to make sure I do all I can to stop any other person from losing those things as well. Let me do this. Please.”

Anger at what Izzy had been forced to endure fisted Beau’s hands at his sides. He wanted to sweep in and accept her offer of help, to promise to work by her side until these assholes were caught. But that wasn’t his place and putting Izzy in a bad position could be detrimental to the case as well as her mental state.

Cruz rubbed the back of his neck, his lips swished to the side. “If you’re up for it, we could go over your statement with you again. Talk about that night and see if anything comes to light that could be helpful.”

Izzy bobbed her head up and down. “Yes. I can do that.”

Beau took a step forward, gaze latched on Izzy. “I can handle that. If that’s all right with you.”

“Okay.”

“Perfect,” Cruz said. “Brooke, is there a place they can talk?”

“How about my trailer? I have an office set up in there, but it’s cozy and quiet.”

Beau blew out a long breath, praying no one noticed his nerves. The last time he’d been alone with Izzy had been the best night of his life. Discussing the horrible event that had brought them back together wasn’t the ideal way to be thrust back into her life, but he’d be there for her. He’d help throw the people who hurt her behind bars and then finally tell her everything he’d bottled up for so damn long.

**A**drenaline rushed through Izzy's veins, refusing to let her sink into one of the two plush chairs in Brooke's trailer. She paced the perimeter of the rectangular room, sidestepping the potted Ficus shoved in the corner and not venturing behind the desk on the far end.

The heat of Beau's gaze followed her every move, making tiny bursts of excitement erupt in the pit of her stomach despite the fear gnawing at every fiber of her being. As much as having someone with her she'd known and trusted for years set her a little more at ease, it also put her more on edge.

She didn't want Beau to see her as a victim. She wanted him to see her as...what? The girl he spent a whole night kissing and holding, confiding all his hopes and dreams to before she took off in the morning and dodged his calls?

She winced, hating the way things had played out between them and having no idea how to make them right. And at this moment, she had bigger issues to focus on.

"Are you all right?" Beau shifted in the seat he'd taken directly across from the metal desk, bracing his forearms on his knees.

Forcing her feet to stop moving, she faced him and nibbled on her thumbnail. "I guess."

He frowned, squaring off his strong jaw. The stubble he'd grown since the last time she saw him had a weird way of darkening the green of his eyes. "We can talk about what

happened the night you were taken later. You were just dealt a huge shock. Give yourself some time.”

She sucked in a deep breath and finally lowered herself on the soft, brown chair. “No. I can do this now. My mind is just racing a million miles a minute.” She tapped her toe against the floor, her body needing to move as quickly as her brain whirled.

Beau leaned back in his seat and flipped open a notebook. “Okay. I don’t have your statement with me, but I went over the case file. I remember most of it. So it’s up to you how much you want to tell me. How much you want to relive.”

“I relive it every minute of the day.” She blinked the moisture away from her eyes. Emotion lodged in her throat, and she raked her nails up the thighs of her old jeans. “I can still feel his hands on me. Grabbing me. Forcing me into that cabin in the woods. The cold and wind biting into my skin. None of it every leaves.”

As if to drive home the point, a rush of wind flowed through the lone half-open window, carrying with it the sounds of hammers and saws and the chugging of machinery. She rubbed her hands up and down the long sleeves that covered her biceps, but like always, the motion did nothing to warm her.

Jumping to his feet, Beau hurried to shut the window. “I’m sorry you had to go through all of that. Is there anything that you’ve remembered since then? Something you didn’t think to tell the police at the time?”

She gave a half-hearted shrug. “I’ve run this through my head so many times. I understand why Officer Sawyer suggested I talk it over again, but I don’t see how there can be a single thing I forgot.”

“Well, before you and everyone else thought the criminals were caught,” Beau said. “So even though you’ve replayed the whole terrible situation, you never focused on details that could point to who was responsible. Why would you when the people were already in jail? Maybe if you tell me everything



you remember, something might jump out that didn't mean anything before."

"It's worth a shot," she said, preparing herself to confess the hours that played over and over in her mind. "I was in the bathroom at a rest stop. A man came up behind me, hit me on the head, and dragged me through the woods. He threw me into one of the old camp cabins, and there were two other girls in there chained to the floor."

"Did he speak to you at all?" Beau kept his gaze latched on hers as he wrote in his notepad.

"A few words," she said, snapping her eyebrows together. "He told me to be quiet. And when we were in the cabin with the other girls, he promised to punish them if I did anything stupid or tried to run." The deep timbre of his voice came back to her, and she squeezed her eyes closed in an attempt to block it out.

A rustling sound and shift of energy opened her eyes. Beau sat in the chair beside her, concern lining his forehead. The scent of his aftershave tickled her senses and loosened the ball of tension nestled in the center of her shoulder blades.

"Did he have an accent? Sound local?"

Considering the question, she twisted her lips. "He sounded more like the people I went to college with up in Ohio than folks down here in Tennessee. I'm not sure about the woman. My sister spoke with her, and I don't remember her mentioning it."

A small smile formed on his full lips. "That's good. Maybe we should talk to your sister. Paxton could help pinpoint a dialect that could be useful. Is there anything else you want to add? Anything else that stands out?"

Overwhelmed, she let her head drop forward. "Not really. But I'll keep thinking. I really want to help."

Beau clapped a hand on her knee. "We'll all do everything we can to finally put this behind you."

Lifting her head, she met his eyes. "I hope so."

Needing to focus on something else for just one second, she rested her hand on his. A bolt of electricity shot up her arm, and she relished the sensation—relished the idea that something positive and exciting could still come into her life.

Beau swallowed hard, refusing to glance away. “Do you need me to see you home?”

As thoughtful as the suggestion was, the question stomped down on her heart. She wanted to be near Beau, wanted him to want to be close to her, not counting down the minutes before he could take her home. But what did she expect? She’d left him high and dry. If she wanted a second chance at life—a second chance with Beau—she’d need to do more than touch his hand. “I’ll be fine. Though I do think you talking to Paxton is a good idea. Maybe you can stop by the house when you’re free?”

The side of his mouth hitched up. “I’d like that.”

She jumped to her feet and wiped her sweaty palm on the side of her leg. “Okay. Just call me later, then? Do you still have my number?”

He rose slowly, his long legs and muscular build dwarfing her in a way it never had when he’d still been a kid in high school. “I’d never get rid of your number, Izzy. I’ll call when I get a chance.”

She gave one nod of her head, a lightness she hadn’t experienced since that cold night months before lifting each step she took toward the door. She bounded down the stairs of the trailer and headed toward her car.

The sounds of the construction crew had gone. The tiny ping of hunger in the pit of her stomach told her it was probably lunch time. She hadn’t been able to eat much lately, but a new sense of hope for her future had her craving a burger from the Chill N’ Grill. Maybe she’d stop on the way home and indulge.

Gravel crunched under her tennis shoes, and she chanced a peek over her shoulder. Beau stood with his hands shoved in the front pockets of his trousers—damn he looked good in

uniform—and waved. An old threat might have stormed back into her life, but at least she could work on righting a wrong from years before. A wrong she'd regretted as she'd laid in bed at night and dreamt of Beau's soft touch and gentle words. One day at Crossroads Mountain Retreat had already shown her a path toward healing that she hadn't even considered.

Turning back to her car, she gripped the door handle and a flash of movement at the tree line no more than ten yards away caught her eye. She darted her gaze through the flowering bushes and pine trees, her heart rate picking up its pace.

A man ran out of the dense underbrush. A glare of light bounced off a knife in his hand as he charged her.



ELECTRICITY still tingled Beau's hand as he lifted it in the air, waving goodbye and watching Izzy walk to her car. He fought the urge to accompany her across the parking lot, not wanted to crowd her—to appear like an overprotective neanderthal who couldn't control himself after a simple request for a phone call.

To talk to her sister.

Not exactly what he wanted, but he'd take anything Izzy could offer. He'd bided his time for years, waiting for the right moment to confess his feelings. With everything she'd been through, he couldn't bombard her with more. He'd stand by her side, if she let him, and be there when she was ready.

He turned to head back to the cabin. A piercing scream ripped through the air, sending a flock of birds into the sky. Adrenaline leaked through his system, and his training kicked in. He ran for Izzy.

A man rounded the hood of Izzy's car. She stumbled as she turned to flee, her eyes catching his from across the open space between them and hurling herself in his direction.

He reached for his gun. Fear like he'd never known beat against his temples with every thud of his heart. He needed to

get a little closer to get off an accurate shot. “Stop! Put your hands in the air!”

Dust flew around Izzy’s feet. Her face pinched together as she ran.

He kept his focus on the man with the baseball hat pulled low over his forehead. His momentum stalled, hesitation locking him in place as he darted his gaze between Beau and Izzy. Bending down, he picked something up from the ground, pulled back his arm, and threw it forward.

Izzy fell, a sharp cry squeaking from her, and she collapsed onto her knees. She grabbed the side of her head.

Thirty yards still separated Beau from Izzy’s attacker, but he had to act. Planting his feet, he aimed his weapon at the man and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet slammed against the metal of the car, inches from the man.

Izzy rolled into a ball on the ground and covered her ears with her hands.

Beau erupted into a sprint, his gun trained ahead.

The man turned and bolted, disappearing into the trees.

Beau stuffed his weapon back in its holster and beat back the desire to scour the woods for the asshole who’d come after Izzy. He dropped to his knees beside her. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

She stayed in the fetal position, her body shaking like the leaves shimmering along with the subtle breeze. “Is he gone?”

The slight tremble of her words shook his core. He rested a palm on her upper arm, wishing he could do more to reassure her. “He ran. I need to call Cruz.” He pressed the button on the radio attached to the shoulder of his uniform. The line crackled, and he spoke into the speaker. “Backup needed in the parking lot of Crossroads Mountain Retreat. Attempted attack and possible abduction in connection with Officer Cruz Sawyer’s current case. Attacker fled into the woods.”

Wincing, Izzy pushed herself into a sitting position. Blood trickled from an open cut on the corner of her forehead, just below her hairline. She brushed the tips of her fingers against her wound. “Go after him.”

Beau set his jaw then pressed the button on his communicator once more. “Send an ambulance. Young woman, early twenties, has a head wound that needs examined.”

“I’m fine,” she said, attempting to raise to her feet. She swayed to the side.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her back down beside him. “I won’t leave you. Not when you’re hurt and alone. Cruz and Brooke will be here soon. They won’t stop looking until they bust this guy. Not many places he can hide.”

She latched on to his wrist and leaned against him, securing him in place—not like her pleas could make him be anywhere but right next to her “I was about to get into my car. Then all of a sudden, he came running at me. He had a knife.” Her grip tightened on his skin.

“I won’t let anyone near you. I promise.” He spoke the words through clenched teeth, anger pulsing against his chest that she’d almost been taken again. This time, right in front of him.

A golf cart zoomed into view. Brooke was behind the wheel with Cruz beside her. The engine revved and tires crunched over stone as Brooke steered the cart toward them.

Once stopped, Cruz jumped out. “Is everyone all right? What happened?”

“After Izzy and I spoke in the trailer, she walked to her car. A man ran out of the woods toward her. When I saw him, I grabbed my gun and ran. Took one shot when it was clear he wouldn’t stop. He threw a rock at Izzy, hence the wound on her head, then ran back the way he came. I chose to stay with Izzy.” His voice threatened to crack, and he cleared his throat

before he continued. "I couldn't leave her injured and alone. Not when someone else could be lurking nearby."

A vein ticked above Cruz's eye. "You did the right thing. But we need men in those woods now. Brooke, is Grace around?"

"Grace?" Beau asked, the name not ringing a bell.

"Best tracker in the area and newest employee here," Brooke said, her gaze fixed on the shaded land as if she could see through the thick foliage if she looked hard enough. "I'll call her."

Izzy loosened her hold on his wrist, moving her hand up to his forearm and leaning on him for support as she rose to her feet.

With a palm on the small of her back, he cupped her elbow and stood along with her.

"What does this mean?" Izzy asked. "Why would he come after me in broad daylight? When any number of people could see him?"

Beau met Cruz's hard stare, an unspoken agreement passing between them.

"Whoever that was, he didn't come here to find unsuspecting victims," Beau said. "Izzy, he came here for you."

The soft blanket draped around Izzy's shoulders slipped down her arm. She let it fall, not wanting to unwrap her hands from the warm mug her mother had brought her moments before. As soon as she'd returned to her childhood home where she now lived with her mom and sister, her mom had swarmed in to do whatever she could to make Izzy feel better.

But nothing her mom could do would erase the memories of a stranger coming after her. Again. Thank goodness she'd turned twenty-one in the fall, or her mom would have never added the shot of sweet liquor to her hot chocolate.

"Are you sure you don't want something to drink?" Her mom asked Beau. "If you don't like hot cocoa, I can get you coffee. Or water. Or anything really." She fluttered her hands around her face as she spoke like a nervous bird.

Izzy sighed and took a long sip of her warm drink. Her mom had always been an anxious woman, especially after her dad had been killed when she was only ten years old. It had taken years for her to learn to stand on her own two feet, and Izzy now realized, Sue had depended on Paxton way too much. The constant stress of watching her mother fall apart and her sister swoop in to put her back together was what had motivated Izzy to move out of Pine Valley. Turning her back on everything and everyone in an attempt to find herself far from home.



And now she'd returned, afraid to leave her house let alone resume college for her last semester—her mother once again an anxious mess who bumbled around the house. Trying to help but helpless to make a difference.

Beau sat across from her in the small living room. His muscular frame practically spilling over the floral armchair. "I'm fine but thank you Mrs. Sterling."

Sue sat next to Izzy on the sofa, choosing the middle cushion to be right beside her. "I'm just so grateful you were there. I don't know what I would have done if..." Her voice broke and tears filled her eyes.

Izzy bit back her irritation and patted her mom's knee. She understood why her mother was upset but comforting someone else over *her* near abduction wasn't high on her fun list. "Don't think about what could have happened, Mom. I'm fine. You should go to work. You don't need to call off on my account."

Sue gathered Izzy close and rested her head on her shoulder. "I can't leave you alone. I'm here for you, honey."

"Beau's here," she blurted out. Paxton wasn't home to smother her with worry yet, and she needed space from her mom to sort through her own thoughts. Making it clear she wasn't alone was the only way to get her mom to leave.

"But you need your mom, and I'm sure Beau needs to leave soon. I mean, you already gave your statement." She squeezed Izzy tighter. "We can watch some good old fashioned rom com's to take your mind off everything. Maybe order your favorite pizza. Come on, Iz. What do you say?"

Guilt swirled in her gut, and she dropped her gaze to the heaps of marshmallows at the top of her mug.

"I actually have some more things to go over with Izzy, Mrs. Sterling. I'll be awhile. I promise I won't leave her alone. I'll take care of her." Beau flashed a smile that would have made her knees weak if she'd been standing.

Sue bounced her gaze between the two of them then slapped her hands on her thighs before standing. "Well, if

you're both sure. I'll be home around nine tonight. Paxton is off in an hour. Call if you need anything."

"I will," Izzy said.

Sue leaned down and pressed her lips to Izzy's cheek. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

Izzy waited for her to slip on her shoes by the door and grab her keys from the hook mounted on the wall, disappearing outside, before setting down her mug on the end table and melting back against the couch cushion. "Thank you for that."

He shrugged. "No problem. You kind of had a deer in the headlight's thing going on. My parents can be a little overbearing sometimes, so I get it. Even when they're coming from a good place."

She grabbed the edge of the blanket and wrapped it around herself again. "She gets so upset, and I don't blame her. But I don't want to feel guilty for showing her how upset I am. I don't want to hold things back right now because of how they'll affect her."

"That's understandable."

Swallowing past the wedge of terror lodged in her throat, she prepared the question she'd held back while her mom had been in the room. "Do you really think someone is after me specifically? Is targeting me?"

"I do," Beau said. "My guess, someone is afraid you'll point a finger at them. You're a loose thread they want to snip."

Her shoulders gave an involuntary shiver, and she hugged the blanket tighter.

A grimace twisted his features. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so harsh."

"But it's the truth, and that's what I need to hear. If we're going to stop this person, I don't need anyone tiptoeing around me. Trying to spare my feelings. So what's next?"

He ran a hand through his shaggy, dark hair. “Cruz is searching areas around the retreat with a handful of officers and a few trackers. If he finds something, I’ll get a call. You didn’t get a good look at the guy, but his build and the little we could discern—the dark blue baseball hat and bulky frame—are being broadcasted over the county on the off chance it strikes a chord with someone.”

“Do you still think we should talk to my sister?”

“It couldn’t hurt. She has a different perspective than you, and she spoke with the woman who was apprehended more than you did.”

Izzy took one more long sip of her cocoa, savoring the way it burned all the way down her throat. The humming in her veins told her more than just a drizzle of alcohol had been added to her drink, and she was beyond grateful. “Mom mentioned Paxton would be off work in an hour. Why don’t we go to the Chill N’ Grill now? Then she can chat with us when her shift’s over.”

He leaned forward in his chair, dark eyebrows pulled low over his hooded eyes. “Are you up for that? It’s close to dinner time. That place will be crowded.”

The idea of countless sets of eyes watching her made the chocolate in her stomach sour, but anything had to be better than sitting in a quiet house twiddling her thumbs. “You’ll be with me, right?”

The half-smile that turned her heart to a throbbing pile of mush lifted the corner of his mouth. “As long as you want me to be.”

Heat enflamed her cheeks. “Then no one stands a chance of hurting me.” Because if history had proven anything, when it came to Beau, she was the only person capable of inflicting pain.



AFTER SHOOTING OFF A TEXT, Beau laid his phone on the square table that separated him from Izzy in the busy restaurant. The only instruction he'd been given from Cruz when he'd left the retreat was to keep Izzy close, but he wanted to keep the other officer abreast of his plans. Sticking to Izzy like glue wasn't a hardship but keeping himself in check and professional was growing harder by the second.

"I don't see Paxton," Izzy said, shifting to the side of her chair as she searched for her sister.

Scanning the room, he spotted Izzy's older sister leaning over the scarred wooden bar, probably asking Wade—the owner and current bartender—for drinks. He jutted his chin in her direction. "She's on the other side of the couple at the end of the bar. Looks like she's still working."

Izzy blew out a long breath. "She'll see us, and she'll be all over me. Mom called to let her know what happened earlier. I'm surprised she didn't run right out the door and come home."

He raked his gaze over the stone hearth at the center of the room and mounted buck head above the fireplace as he watched Paxton weave through the mismatched tables and chat with customers. Her smile was wide but worry lined the corners of her eyes that looked so much like Izzy's. "It's nice to have family to support you."

"Support yes," she said, anchoring her chin on her fist. "Fret day and night, not so much. I'm freaked out enough for the three of us. I don't need them constantly hovering over me. Afraid that I won't finish school or get back to the carefree girl I once was. How do I tell them that girl is gone?"

"She's not gone," Beau said. "She's just a little different. We all go through things in life. What fun would it be if it didn't change us? Time will bring back a little of who you were, but not the exact same person. But that's not a bad thing."

She held his gaze and swished her lips to the side. "I've missed you."

Her confession slammed against his chest, threatening to toss him from his chair. He and Izzy had been friends since they were kids. He'd been by her side when her dad died and listened to her complain about her mom and sister. Coming from a stable family with no siblings and parents who were still madly in love, all he had to offer was an understanding ear.

Until a party at Danny McCade's house on graduation night, and a couple of America's finest ales, had prompted him to finally share his real feelings. The night had been magical, two kids giving into a trusting friendship and watching it morph into something so much deeper. No lines had been crossed, but he'd hoped the foundation for a new beginning had been laid.

Those hopes were dashed when he'd woken up alone, with nothing but a note telling him Izzy had a future somewhere else that she had to see through.

Years of trying—and failing—to lose himself in other women, other relationships, proved that Izzy might have had to seek her future elsewhere, but for him, she was his future. And hearing that she'd missed him boosted his resolve tenfold.

He smiled. "I've missed you, too." That's all he was willing to say with half the town's eyes on them and uncertain of where Izzy's head was.

Izzy dropped her gaze to the table and tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. "Listen. I'm not proud of how I treated you. I needed to get out of this town and was scared that—"

"Izzy!" The screech of Paxton's voice cut through the din of the room as she bolted to their table and threw her arms around her sister. "Oh my gosh. What are you doing here? You should be home. Resting."

With her head on Paxton's shoulder, she mouthed, "See. Told you."

He swallowed a chuckle, not wanting to upset Paxton or mock her concern. Brushing back the disappointment at not getting a chance to hear all Izzy had to say, he nudged out the

seat beside him then offered Izzy a wide-eyed expression he hoped she'd understand meant, 'I got you.'. "Any chance you can join us?"

Paxton straightened and glanced over her shoulder. "Wade, I'm off the clock," she shouted toward the bar. "Gonna sit with my sister."

Nodding, Wade grinned and fiddled with the tap to fill a glass with beer. "Got it, darling. Dinner's on the house," he yelled back, adding a wave before retuning his focus to the woman leaning against the bar, waiting for her drink.

Paxton slid her chair as close as she could to Izzy's and sat. She clasped their hands together. "You hungry? You want to eat something?"

A tight smile flattened Izzy's lips. "I'm not hungry. We just want to talk to you."

Paxton's light eyebrows rose to her hairline. "Talk to me? About what? About what happened? I mean, you don't need to go through that again. And you really should eat something. Did you have lunch?"

Izzy shot Beau a pleading look he'd seen countless times in their youth.

"How about I order some fries for the table?" Beau asked, flicking a finger in the air to grab a server's attention. "Then anyone who wants to grab some can."

A perky teenage girl with a dark, swinging ponytail and a pretty smile approached the table. "Sorry about the wait, guys. What can I get ya'll?"

"Just a water for me, Willa. Thanks," Paxton said.

"Same," said Izzy.

"Water, as well and a basket of fries. We'll order more later if we're hungry." He pushed the menu aside, more interested in talking with Paxton than perusing a menu he'd practically memorized. He waited for Willa to hustle away before getting down to business. "Paxton, we wanted to speak with you about what happened the night Izzy was taken."

Paxton reared back her head, her blonde waves bouncing around her face. “I thought you wanted to talk about what happened tonight. Why would you bring up what Izzy and I went through before? We’ve tried so hard to put that behind us.”

Izzy rested a hand on Paxton’s arm. “But it’s not behind us—not behind me. And what happened today proves that.”

Tears dotted the corners of Paxton’s eyes. “I hate this. Hate this so damn much. That night was terrifying. When I couldn’t find you...I thought I’d lost you forever.”

“But you found me, and you saved me,” Izzy said.

The server appeared and set down their glasses of water.

Beau took a long drink, the cool liquid sliding down his throat. “You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to, but now that it appears as though the two criminals in jail weren’t the only traffickers in the area, we have to look at things a little differently.”

“How so?” Paxton asked.

“Do you recall the woman you spoke with having an accent? Any discerning characteristics that would point to a specific location?” He ran the pad of his finger over the condensation on his cup.

She shook her head. “Nothing. I thought she was an officer until she pulled a gun on me. I was too scared to think about anything else besides getting help and finding Izzy.”

“Did she sound like she was from Tennessee?” Izzy asked.

“I...I don’t know. I’m so sorry.”

Beau’s phone rumbled on the table. Cruz’s number and photo flashed on the screen. “One second,” he said, scooping it up and answering the call. “Hey, Cruz. What’s up?”

“I need you to come down to the station.”

Apprehension tightened his chest. “Did you find the man who tried to grab Izzy?”



A beat of tense silence pulsed through the line. “No, we found another girl.”

A sharp buzz signaled the interior door to the main hub of the police station was ready to be opened. A sense of déjà vu transported Izzy back to the last time she'd stepped into the stand-alone, brick building just off the main square downtown. Numbness trickled down her spine and slowed her feet.

Beau rested a hand on her back. "You're okay," he whispered against her ear.

His warm breath on her face made her shiver, and his reassuring presence pushed her over the threshold. After making sure Paxton's boyfriend was on his way to see her home safely, Izzy insisted on accompanying Beau to the police station. Not only did she not want to be without him, but she wanted to offer whatever comfort she could to the poor girl who'd been discovered in the forest.

The station was quiet, only a couple officers hunched over paperwork at their desks. She kept her head down as Beau guided her to the same room where she'd once given her statement. This time, the beige-colored room stuffed with a lone table and cluster of chairs held Cruz, Brooke, and a girl no older than sixteen with dirty cheeks and soiled clothing.

Cruz caught her eye and nodded. "Thanks for coming, Izzy. Beau."

She flashed a small smile, unable to stop herself from staring at the girl. Had she looked that scared and fragile when she'd sat in the same spot?

Brooke stood and met her with a hug then offered her a chair. “This is Kasie. Kasie, this is the young woman we told you about. You already provided your statement, but we thought you might be more comfortable if she were with us as we waited for your parents to arrive.”

With chattering teeth, Kasie cast a quick glance at Izzy before dropping her gaze to her tightly clasped hands on her lap. “He took you, too?” The question was small and quiet.

Izzy’s heart pounded and she sought Beau with her gaze, who quickly crossed the room to stand at her side.

He dipped his chin, as if encouraging her to answer.

“Not him, but someone else did,” she said, licking her dry lips. “The man who took me is in jail.”

“Were you on a hiking trail?”

“No, I was at a rest stop. I was grabbed in a bathroom.” She wrapped her arms around herself, but the memory didn’t assault her like it usually did. “Are you from around here?”

Kasie moved her thumb over the top of her hand again and again. “Elm Ridge. Not far. I just wanted to hike. To see the sunset over the mountains. I drove to the state park, close to where ya’ll found me, and that man just appeared.”

Brooke settled into a folding chair close to the door. “You don’t have to relive this. Don’t need to tell it all again.”

“I want her to know,” Kasie said, voice cracking.

Izzy grabbed the girl’s hand and squeezed. “I understand. When I went through this, there were two other girls with me. We’re all still in touch, encourage each other. What happened to us was horrible, but it bonded us together in a way no one understands.”

Beau lowered himself into the seat beside Izzy and draped his arm across the back of her chair. “Did you find links to the man? Any idea where to find him?” He directed the question across the room at Cruz.

“Based on the things Kasie overheard, we’re thinking he lives close by,” Cruz said. “Or at least has been in the area for

a while.”

Izzy tightened her grip on Kasie. She’d always assumed the monsters behind the sex-trafficking ring were from out of town. That there was no way people like that could live so close, or even in their close-knit community. The idea that someone had hidden among them constricted her throat like a noose. “What did he say?”

Kasie drew in a shuddering breath, shaking her slender shoulders. “He was talking to someone on the phone. He said he couldn’t let an opportunity just pass him by, no matter how bad Charlie and Karen ruined everything. That he had to clean up their mess before he could move on but would just take me with him.”

“Charlie and Karen aren’t a threat anymore, and we know they’re from Indiana,” Cruz said. “But if they had another partner who’s lingered in the area since December, there’s no telling where he’s staying.”

“If his partners are in jail, what was his plan?” Beau asked. “Move Kasie? Or is there another player we aren’t even aware of?”

Kasie shivered. “He said he had one more shot to make things right. To get off the shit list, whatever that means.”

Brooke fisted her hands at her sides. “Sounds like he has more contacts in this sick world. We just need to find them.”

“No matter where he is, he won’t get you again,” Izzy said, wishing she could make the scared girl beside her believe that was the truth. A confidence she hadn’t felt since her life was derailed steeled her spine. Maybe it had to do with finally being active—helping in whatever way she could. Or maybe it was the man beside her, quietly giving her strength. Either way, she didn’t want to go back to always being scared. Always looking over her shoulder and waiting for something horrible to happen.

A knock on the open door stole all their attention. A middle-aged officer poked his head inside. “The parents are here.”

“Send them in,” Cruz said.

A man with salt and pepper hair and a woman with bloodshot eyes and a stylish blond bob swept into the office, ignoring everyone else and flocking to Kasie.

“Mom! Dad!” Kasie yelled, fresh tears springing to her eyes.

“Oh, honey,” the woman said. “We’re so glad you’re safe. We were so worried.”

Izzy watched, happy Kasie had a loving family to be there for her in her darkest hour. The thought was a punch in the gut. *She* had a loving family who’d do anything for her, and she’d spent the last five months pushing them away.

Just like she’d pushed away Beau.

“We’ve taken your daughter’s statement, but we’d like to speak with you as well,” Cruz said. “Beau, can you make sure Izzy gets home safely?”

Nodding, Beau rose to his feet. “Absolutely.”

“Can I steal a piece of paper from your notepad?” Izzy asked, staring up at him.

He snatched the pad from his back pocket and handed her the paper along with a pen. His fingertips brushed against hers and red smashed against his cheeks.

A blush crept up her neck as she wrote down her name and number before handing the paper to Kasie. “You can call me any time. Day or night. I’m sure you’ll find some amazing resources to help you through this, but sometimes, you just need someone who understands. I can be that person.”

Kasie threw her arms around Izzy. “Thank you.”

Pulling away, Izzy gave her hand one more squeeze then stood. Beau was right. She wasn’t the same person she’d been before, and today had shown her a glimpse into the person she still wanted to become. A person who used her past trauma to help others, to show them that the future was still bright with possibilities.

As she walked out of the room, Beau beside her, she took a chance and linked her fingers with his. Words of apology and explanation would have to wait, but she could start showing him how she felt. Take the first step toward that bright, new future. Where hopefully her troubles were behind her and a new life she'd never imagined waited.

She just needed to make sure it was a future Beau wanted as well. Because sometimes, once a bridge was burned, it could never be rebuilt.



FLIPPING on the lights in his apartment, Beau said a silent prayer of thanks to the universe that he'd cleaned up before heading into work that morning. "Thanks for agreeing to stop by here before heading to your house so I can change out of my uniform."

Izzy didn't hide her interest as she glanced around the open-concept room—the front entrance led right into the living room, an island jutting from the wall separated it from the kitchen. "Nice place," she said, strolling further inside.

"It's not fancy, but it's home." He tossed his keys and wallet in a shallow dish on the narrow table pressed against the wall.

"I miss having my own space. Living back home has been an adjustment."

"I bet. As much as I love my parents, I can't image living with them again. Make yourself comfortable. I'll be quick."

She flashed him a smile. "Take your time. I'm in no rush. Besides, I need to see what fun things Beau Davis keeps around his apartment."

Chuckling, he shook his head and hurried down the short hall to the lone bedroom. That grin was the same one she'd used when she was about to get into trouble—one he hadn't seen in longer than he could remember.

One he'd do anything to see again.

He shucked off his clothes as fast as he could, the feel of her hand imprinted in his mind. She'd taken him by surprise when she'd nestled her palm in his. He'd held on tight, unsure if she was upset by the encounter with Kasie and needed support or the gesture was something more.

As much as he understood her need to get away from Pine Valley and find herself somewhere new, he'd still been burned by her before. They needed to finish the conversation Paxton had interrupted back in the restaurant before he could wrap his mind around something brewing between them. He may have dreamed of holding her one more time, but he couldn't dive in until he fully understood why she'd shut him out.

Tonight could be the night the subject was broached, so he dressed with more care than usual. A pair of low-slung dark wash jeans and a heather gray t-shirt with two buttons at the top he left undone. He ran a quick hand through his hair, tossed his dirty clothes in a hamper in the corner, and hurried back to the living area.

Izzy stood, slightly stooped over a hutch his mom had given him that he used as a desk. Framed photographs and weird knickknacks he'd collected or been given littered the oak furniture.

"You've always been nosy," he said, liking the way she looked inside his home.

She spun toward him, an old photo he'd forgotten he'd placed on the top shelf in her hands. "I can't believe you kept this." She traced a finger over the glossy paper.

His heart twisted, and he erased the distance between them. He scratched the back of his neck, searching for the right thing to say. "It's all I had left of you." His admission sucked the air from his lungs. Maybe he should have played it cool, kept his feelings a little closer to the vest. But that just wasn't who he was.

Needing to move, he plucked the picture from her hands and stared down at a photo of them from senior prom. Neither had gone with a date, opting instead to attend the dance with a group of friends. So instead of the typical prom picture with

wide smiles and his arms looped around her waist, they'd stuck out their tongues, Beau swinging Izzy off her feet.

She sidled against him, the heat of her body engulfing him. "We were so young."

"Hmm," he said in agreement. "Sometimes it still feels like yesterday. Other times I swear this photo was taken decades ago. So much has happened since then."

"I'm sorry I left the way I did."

He stared down at her, words and questions he'd held in for so long dying to burst free. "You hurt me, Izzy. You were my best friend. All you had to do was answer a call, a text. Just explain what was going on inside your mind and I would have understood."

She let her head fall forward and strands of her long blond hair slipped from her hair tie and spilled around her face. "I know you would have. That was the problem."

Confusion wrinkled his forehead. "What do you mean?"

She finally met his eyes. "Leaving you behind was the hardest thing I've ever done. If I talked to you, heard your voice, I wouldn't have had the strength to go. And I needed to go. Needed to see what all was out there and stand on my own two feet."

Even though a part of him understood, her words still hurt. "I wouldn't have tried to hold you back. But after that night..." He lifted his shoulders. "I thought things had changed between us. I thought I could be part of you finding yourself."

A tortured expression crumpled the lines of her face. "After that night, all I wanted was to be yours. To stay here and be with you. To love you. So if I would have let you in, even just a little bit, the decisions I made would have centered around you. Not me. And for once in my life, I had to take that risk—that step—put aside everyone else's expectations and just live my life my own way."

A heaviness sat in his gut. He'd waited so long for this conversation, but now he wasn't sure what it meant. But did it



matter? His feelings for her had never changed, and he'd have told her to go back then. Told her to take those risks and the time she needed to find herself apart from the kid she'd been in Pine Valley. "What's next? What do you want *now*?"

She lifted a palm and flattened it over his chest. "I want the same thing I've always wanted, Beau. I want you."

Not needing any more time to think or analyze or discuss, he gathered her into his arms and pressed his mouth to hers. Stars exploded against his eyelids and anticipation tightened his stomach. The past was behind them, the future unclear, but in this moment, he had everything he'd ever wanted.

He had Izzy.

I zzy melted against Beau. She slid her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. Excitement beat a steady rhythm against her chest. The kisses she'd shared with Beau before had been tentative and sweet and filled with slow exploration. But this was something different.

This was insistent and passionate and full of the kind of raw desire she thought she'd never experience.

Breaking away, Beau framed her face with his hands. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She nodded. "I want my best friend back, and I want to see where this could go. I've thought of you every single day since I've left. Missed you every day."

He slid one palm over her jawline and around to the back of her neck. "But what about school? Finding yourself away from here? I don't want to be your back up plan. Something to pass the time until you go back to your other life—away from here."

The questions hit her like well-placed missiles, chipping away at the flush of joy blooming inside her. She'd put her entire life on hold since Christmas with no clue when she'd be ready to dip her toe back in, but that didn't mean Beau was a backup plan.

She took a step in retreat, putting space between them that felt like miles instead of inches. "I was gone for three and a half years and bounced from one major at school to the next. I joined a sorority and went to parties and never missed a home

football game. For what? To come home and have my life flipped upside down? The only things I found away from home were fake friends and one too many hangovers. I don't want to be that girl anymore. I couldn't be if I tried."

Hysteria hitched high in her throat as the reality of her words slammed against her chest. She'd spent the last few months surviving—figuring out how to put one foot in front of the other. Her mom and sister might have tiptoed around the subject of returning to college, but she hadn't been forced to really examine her thoughts until now.

Beau frowned and stuffed his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "Then what kind of girl do you want to be? Because regardless of you and I, you can't just throw away all the momentum you've put toward your future. You still need to find yourself."

A flash of uncertainty had her rubbing her collarbone. Nerves danced in her gut. At the police station, she'd been inspired to use her past trauma for good, but maybe that was stupid. Really, who was she to help anyone?

Not wanting to put her thought into the universe just yet, she decided to turn the tables on Beau. "How did you know you wanted to be a police officer? You never really talked about wanting to get into law enforcement. I always thought you'd go to college, earn a degree in engineering or something. Get a job to use that creative side you always had."

Shrugging, he rocked back on his heels. "I just wanted to help people in my community. I never had the urge to leave Pine Valley like you did. I love it here. Love having my parents on the other side of town and knowing everyone's name. When I thought about who impacted me as I grew up, it was always the police. The first responders. The firefighters. They always showed up when there was trouble. Always lent a helping hand."

She smiled. "I bet you're a great police officer. You've always been a good friend and neighbor."

"I haven't had much practice yet. My parents are terrified I'll get hurt, but it's part of the risk." Grinning, he wiggled his

eyebrows. “See, we all have those risks sometimes.”

She let out a shaky breath. “True. I wish there was a giant roadmap laid out for me. Showing which way to turn, which routes to avoid. I mean, how do I know if I’m making a mistake until the mistake is already made?”

“What if you do?” He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, letting his hand linger for an extra second before dropping it to his side.

She furrowed her brow. “What if I do what?”

“Make a mistake. We all make them. If you make a mistake about what you want for your future, about the type of person you want to be, what happens? Is your life in shambles? Will you fall apart and destroy everything?”

“Wow, you really suck at this motivational stuff.”

He let out a full belly laugh. “Stick with me a minute. You went to college to find out who you really are and now you’re back home after a horrible situation. So you decide to go back to school and it isn’t what you want anymore, what’s the worst that can happen?”

Considering his question, she bit her thumbnail. “I waste time and money. I have to start over. I push people further away because I chose to run again.”

“You can leave without pushing people away,” Beau said, his voice gentle and cracking with emotion.

She dropped her gaze to the tan carpet in his living room. “And if I decide to stay?”

He took a step forward and erased the distance she’d put between them. “If you stay because that’s what you truly want, the rest will fall into place.”

Her phone rang, crashing into the moment like a bucket of icy water. She snatched it from her back pocket and offered Beau a quick smile before answering. “Hi Paxton. Everything okay?”

“Just wondering how you’re doing. Gavin and I finished dinner and he’s about to bring me home.”

A new appreciation for her sister's concern tightened her chest. "I'm fine. Beau wanted to stop by his place after we left the station. We're leaving soon."

Beau retrieved the keys and wallet he'd dropped in a little dish by the door then jammed his feet into a pair of sneakers.

"Perfect. Did you eat anything?" Paxton asked.

"No, but I'm sure Beau won't mind picking up something on the way."

"How about you guys text me what you want from the Chill N' Grill, and I'll place the order to bring home?"

With her phone still pressed to her ear, Izzy sidestepped Beau and slipped on her own shoes. "That'd be great. Thank you. Is there anything you need me to grab before I get home?" If she wanted to start being there for other people, she should start by showing up for her family the way they'd shown up for her.

"Will you be passing through town?"

"Yes," Izzy said with a small laugh. She knew her sister well enough to know why she asked. "You want something from Crawley's Confections?"

"Yes, please!"

"We can handle that. I'll be home soon." She hung up and returned her phone to her pocket.

"Evening bakery run, huh?" Beau asked, twirling his keys around his finger.

"If you don't mind." She rounded her eyes and flashed her most pathetic look.

"For you and Paxton, anything."

He reached for the door handle, and she stopped him with a hand on the middle of his back. The hard muscle under his shirt had her swallowing the saliva that pooled in her mouth. "Did you pack a bag for the night?"

He spun around to face her, eyebrows raised. "You want me to stay with you all night?"

Heat flamed her face, but she wouldn't back down. "I don't want to be alone. Not with everything going on. You'll keep me safe."

Clearing his throat, he nodded. "Okay. Give me a second."

She watched him jog down the hall and disappear into his room. Tonight wouldn't bring as much excitement as the first night she'd spent with Beau, but it'd give them time to talk. Time to figure out how to move forward. And maybe, if she leaned on him the way she always had, he could give her the encouragement she needed to begin a new chapter in her life. A chapter that would include him but also open up the possibility of finally figuring out who she really was.



THE SUN DIPPED below the horizon, chasing away twilight as the sky morphed into the color of a deep bruise. The stars had yet to appear, and the moon was more white than yellow. Beau parked the car at a diagonal on the town square then jogged around the hood of his truck to open Izzy's door.

Izzy took his offered hand and stepped onto the brick sidewalk. "You know, as much as I wanted to get away after high school, I always missed this."

He followed her gaze to the grassy center of the square. "What? The gazebo?"

She chuckled and playfully slapped his chest. "All of this," she said, extending a hand as if showcasing the town he loved so much. "The cute little benches on the square and the streetlights that are always adorned with seasonal decorations. How all the owners have twinkle lights strewn under their canopies. The city where I attended school was much bigger with none of the charm. This place..." she shrugged, as if searching for the words. "There's just something special about it."

Her declaration touched a special place inside him. Gave him hope that her extended stay here wasn't just a pit stop before she moved on to something more. "I agree. Now let's

get some pastries. I can smell Mrs. Crawley's cinnamon buns from out here. No way I'll have the will power not to eat one before we leave."

The owner of the new yoga studio right next door to the bakery, Mountain Serenity Studios, stepped out of the shop with a white to-go bag and a cardboard coffee cup. Her long auburn hair was pulled into a messy bun on the top of her head, and she offered them a quick smile as she held the door wide. "Evening. How ya'll doin'?"

He nodded, catching the door with his hand to allow her to pass. "Hi Ms. Peyton. We're well, thanks. You?"

"Please, call me Zoe," she said, waving a hand through the air. "And you caught me giving into a little sugar craving. I better add some more classes if I'm going to keep grabbing these chocolate croissants all the time."

"Ohhh, those are my sister and I's favorite, and the exact reason we're here. I hope they're not all gone," Izzy said.

"You're in luck," Zoe said with a wink. "She has three left. I'm Zoe Peyton, by the way. I don't think we've met."

Izzy shook her hand. "I've seen you around town, but never had an official introduction."

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you. If you ever want to try a yoga class, come see me. Bring that sister of yours, too."

"I'd love that. Maybe I can even drag Beau along." Izzy smirked in his direction, pure mischief in her eyes.

As much as the idea of watching Izzy doing all those moves in a pair of tight pants made his heart thunder, he didn't relish the idea of being a part of such a class. "I'm more of a bakery guy. Was nice seeing you, Zoe."

Zoe waved and strolled to her studio, disappearing inside.

"After you," Beau said, letting Izzy pass before entering the cozy bakery.

Crawley's Confections was a staple in Pine Valley and had been since his childhood. His parents used to bring him after church. Mrs. Crawley always wrote out the specials in colorful

chalk on a giant board that took up most of the wall behind the display case. As soon as something sold out, she'd erase that treat and add a cute little picture in its place.

A petite woman with gray hair pulled back into a low bun and circle glasses over her milky blue eyes stood behind the counter and beamed. "Well look who's here. Izzy Sterling and Beau Davis. Color me surprised. It's so good to see you two together again."

"I thought you were always happy to see me, no matter who I'm with," Beau said, teasing the proprietor.

"Oh, you stop it, Mr. Big Shot Policeman." She pressed her lips together and shook her head, losing her battle to hide her amusement. "And Ms. Izzy. I've heard you were back in town, but you hadn't stopped in to say hello."

Izzy scrunched up her nose. "I'm sorry I haven't been in to see you."

"Don't you worry about that, Dear. Now what can I get you? If I remember correctly, you loved my chocolate croissants. And Beau, you're always one for surprises, aren't you?" She wagged her finger in his direction.

"You're a mind reader, Mrs. Crawley. Add an extra croissant for Paxton, please. Can you bag it up for us?"

"Sure thing." She retrieved a white bag then used parchment paper to pluck the goodies from the pretty cake stands and stuff them in the bag, grinning as she hid the mystery selection for Beau. "Can I get you anything else?"

"That'll be all," Izzy said, taking the bag.

Beau paid the tab. "See you soon."

The older woman grinned. "I should hope so. You, too, Izzy. It's been way too long since I've seen that beautiful face."

Izzy's smile didn't leave until they were back outside. "What'd she give you?"

He opened the bag and inhaled the scents of maple and sugar. "Maple long john doughnut and she threw in an extra



croissant. Want to split it before we head home?"

"Just don't tell Paxton."

He led her across the deserted street to the sidewalk that cut through the grassy patch in the center of town. Halos of light glimmered off the red brick. He ushered Izzy to one of the benches facing the mom-and-pop shops that surrounded them then sat beside her. "Not a lot of people out tonight."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I like it like this. So quiet. It's as if we're the only two people in the world."

Draping his arm around her shoulders, he skimmed his fingertips up and down the side of her arm. "It's peaceful."

"I haven't been this relaxed in longer than I can remember," she said, a hint of sadness weighing down her words.

He stared ahead, watching Bob Truly emerge from the hardware store, his trusty toolbox in his hand, and tried not to think about all the horrible things Izzy had endured. "You've been through a lot."

She turned her head to stare at him. "Even before that. Nothing felt as right as this."

"I know the feeling. But you know what will make this moment even better?"

"What?"

He reached into the bag, pulled out a powder-sugar dusted croissant, and shoved it in Izzy's face.

She squealed then laughed as she took a chunk out of her dessert. "You brat!" Chocolate oozed from the pastry and smeared along the corner of her mouth.

Chuckling, he swiped his thumb over the mess then pressed his lips to hers. She tasted sweet and sinful at the same time—like salvation.

And he hoped like hell she wouldn't leave him broken hearted yet again.

A sugar-induced high had Izzy floating as Beau drove them through town to her childhood home. She smiled to herself and stared at Beau's strong profile as he concentrated on taking the sharp turn that led into her neighborhood. His lips were full, his jaw strong and covered with the stubble that gave him an edge she loved.

Okay, maybe it wasn't the pastry that had her spiraling higher than a kite on a spring day. Maybe it had to do with the kisses they'd shared.

She tightened her grip on the top of the bakery bag as she replayed the earlier events in her mind. It seemed like a lifetime ago that she'd first stepped foot at Crossroads Mountain Retreat to help Brooke with the cabins. Anxiety and fear had weighed her down, those emotions only heightened after her near abduction and the realization that sex-traffickers still lingered nearby.

But even though the threat hung over her head, all that seemed a million miles away. In this moment there was only her and Beau and the beautiful backdrop of mountains in front of them. Nothing else mattered.

"No lights on at your place," Beau said, pulling into the gravel driveway.

Her home was nestled between two other houses in a small neighborhood just outside of town. Modest, ranch homes made of brick lined the streets with ample yards and ancient trees

between. No streetlights lit a path for travelers, and she hadn't considered flipping on the porchlight before they'd left earlier.

"Mom is still at work, and I guess Paxton isn't back yet. Her car isn't parked in front of the shed where it usually is." An unexpected flash of apprehension shoved aside her earlier excitement, but there was no reason to be afraid. Beau was with her, and yes, part of the reason he'd agreed to stay the night was to keep her safe. So there was nothing to worry about.

"Can I park anywhere?"

"Just pull right in front of the garage." Not like her mom or sister would care where Beau left his truck, but she'd rather he picked the spot closest to the house.

Beau shut off the engine and reached into the second row of seating to grab his duffle bag. "Got the dessert?"

"Yep." She forced a cheerfulness to her voice she didn't feel.

Even with only the dim moonlight shining through the windows, Beau's concern was bright as day. "Is everything all right?"

She shook her head. He knew her too damn well so there was zero reason to hide anything from him. "I don't know. I'm sure I'm just being silly, but I have this weird feeling. Like something isn't quite right, but I have no idea what."

"Always trust your gut." Reaching across her, Beau flipped open the glove box and pulled out a gun.

Izzy widened her eyes. "What are you doing?"

He shoved the gun in the waistband of his jeans, nestled against the small of his back. "Just being cautious. I trust your instincts, and if you get the sensation something is wrong, I take that seriously."

She pressed a hand to her stomach to squelch the nerves. "Okay. Makes sense."

Jumping out of the vehicle, he ran to the passenger side door and opened it. "I'm sure everything is fine, but I'd rather

be safe than sorry.”

She nodded as she hopped down then followed him to the front stoop. She stayed close to his back, the hairs on her arms standing straight up as if being watched.

Beau took the two cement stairs in one big step then stopped. His body tightened, and he muttered something she couldn't make out under his breath.

“What's wrong?” She glanced around, searching behind the bushes that filled the flower bed in front of the house.

“The door's ajar.”

She stiffened and fisted his soft t-shirt in her hand and tried to steady her rapid heartbeat. “What should we do?”

“Stay close,” Beau said, securing his weapon in his grip. “I want to make sure no one is in the house.”

“Hold on one second. Let me text Paxton and tell her what's going on. I don't want her to show up and scare the snot out of us.”

“Good idea.”

She snatched her phone from her back pocket with trembling fingers and pounded out a quick text, telling her sister to stay put until she let her know there were no issues. “Okay,” she said, sliding her phone back in place. “I'm ready.”

Fear tightened her throat and slowed her steps as she followed him into the house. Darkness greeted them, long shadows falling in creepy shapes in the living room. The old floor squeaked under her feet, each sound making her wince.

Beau flipped the switches on the wall, and light illuminated the hallway and family room.

She blinked to adjust her eyes. Everything appeared to be in its place—the red throw draped over the gray couch. Her still-full mug of hot chocolate on the end table.

Tiptoeing into the room, Beau checked behind the drapes and the furniture. “Nothing in here.”

She blew out a shaky breath.

He glanced over his shoulder and grinned then continued down the hall. He ducked into the bedrooms.

Izzy stayed close as he searched every corner. She kept on high alert, attuned to every sound. Every shift of energy. Her muscles coiled tight, as if subconsciously prepared to run.

Beau dropped to his knees and glanced under her bed. “Nothing.” He straightened, propping his forearms on the mattress. “Wow, it’s weird being in here. It looks exactly the same as it did in high school.”

Embarrassment flamed her face as she saw her pink curtains and the ratty teddy bear she kept on her bed with a fresh set of eyes. She crinkled her nose. “I never thought to change it. I didn’t come back much.”

“It still suits you,” he said, climbing to his feet. “I have to clear the bathroom before we get to the kitchen.”

Relief loosened the knot in her gut. She fell into step behind him, watching from the doorway of the kitchen as he disappeared into the little restroom she shared with her mom and sister.

The faint sound of a footstep behind her made the energy crackle with tension. Steeling her nerves, she attempted to spin around, and a strong arm hooked around her waist locked her in place. “Bea—”

A sweaty palm clamped down on her mouth. “Quiet or you’ll make me do something we’ll both regret.”

Something sharp dug into her side, and an image of the knife he held earlier flashed in her mind. Panic clawed at her throat. The man who held her against him dragged her backward.

She dug her heels into the wooden planks of the kitchen floor. She couldn’t go anywhere with this man.

“Bathroom’s clear. Must have been—” Beau stepped into the hallway and his eyes widened. He raised the gun in his hand. “Let her go. Now.”

The man's laugh slid across her cheek along with his hot, sticky breath. "Never gonna happen. Now be a good boy and stay put while I walk us out of here. If you make any sudden movements, I'll kill her."



LIGHT from the hallway bounced off the knife in the man's hand, and Beau tightened his grip on his weapon, but he didn't move. Didn't blink. Didn't think of one damn thing except how to get Izzy away from this creep.

Izzy's gaze latched onto him, eyes wide and filled with terror.

"Just let her go, and I swear, I won't try and stop you," Beau pleaded. "You can get the hell out of here. Free and clear. But leave Izzy alone."

The man sneered. "Do you think I'm an idiot?" he asked, taking a step backward. He lifted his palm from her mouth to better grip her arm and drag her with him.

Only a handful of feet separated the man from the backdoor. Beau needed to think of something and fast. His phone sat heavy in his pocket, but there was no way he'd get to the device and send off a message before Izzy was injured.

As if sensing Beau was forming a plan, the man bolted backward, Izzy still pressed against him like a shield.

"No!" Izzy yelled, scratching at the arm secured across her waist.

Beau lunged forward.

The man jabbed the tip of the knife against Izzy's side.

She doubled over his forearm, pain contorting the lines of her face as she let out a sharp hiss.

Beau stopped, his heart wedged in his tight throat. "Please. Don't hurt her."

"Drop your gun."

Crouching low, Beau set his weapon on the floor and rose with his palms held high. “She hasn’t done anything.” He kept his focus on the man, partly to commit every detail of his chiseled jaw and gray eyes to memory, partly because if he focused on the tears streaming down Izzy’s face he’d fall to pieces.

“She’s seen too much. One way or another, I need to clean up the mess made here before moving on. Now kick the gun to me.”

Frustration rippled through his muscles as they bunched together, stiffening his body until he thought he’d explode. He wanted nothing more than to erase the space between them and slam his fist in this asshole’s face, but that wasn’t an option. His only option was doing as he was told while he figured out a plan to get him and Izzy out of this mess—before anyone got hurt.

Biting back a growl, he used the side of his foot to slide the gun across the floor.

Izzy’s captor kept the hand with the knife against her side in its place, released his arm from across her middle, and quickly bent to retrieve the gun. He pressed the barrel to the back of Izzy’s head.

She squeezed her eyes shut and hunched her shoulders forward, as if trying to make herself smaller. A pathetic whimper poured through her lips.

Anger heated Beau’s blood. His palms itched to make a move, to take action, but his choices were too freaking limited.

“We’re leaving now,” the man said, hauling Izzy with him as he moved toward the back door. “Don’t do something you’ll regret. I’d hate to hurt one piece of hair on this pretty, blond head. She’s worth a lot more to me alive.”

Izzy’s eyes grew wide. “Please. Please don’t take me. I swear I don’t know anything.”

The man clicked his tongue. “Maybe, maybe not. Either way, time’s up. For both of you.” He removed the gun from Izzy’s skull and aimed it at Beau.

Adrenaline shot through Beau's veins, and he dove behind the four-person table at the exact time the deafening explosion of the gunshot erupted against his eardrums. The impact of the hard floor against his body slammed against him. A burning sensation singed the top of his shoulder.

"No!" Izzy screamed, thrashing against her captor.

*Bang!*

Another bullet slammed into his calve. He bit down, swallowing a scream of agony.

The man swept Izzy off her feet, threw her over his shoulder, and ran out the door.

Wincing, Beau sat up and struggled to free his phone from his pocket. Agony ran down the length of his arm and pulsed in his leg, but he secured the device and called 911.

"911. What's your emergency?"

He pressed a trembling hand against his throbbing shoulder. Blood seeped through the thin material of his t-shirt and coated his palm. "It's Beau Davis. I'm at Izzy Sterling's home just off Glen Nook Road. Send backup and an ambulance immediately. Izzy's been taken."



Izzy's teeth chattered as she huddled on the floor of the dirty van. The hard metal siding bumped against her back, keeping an odd rhythm with the music pulsing through the speakers. Her abductor had parked the vehicle behind the shed, impossible to see from the driveway of her house. Especially in the dark. The seating had been ripped out and the lone window on the back door blackened. Her mind raced faster than the speeding tires that took her away from the man she loved.

The man who'd been left shot and bleeding on her kitchen floor.

The sweet pastry turned in her stomach, threatening to shoot back up her throat. But she couldn't panic. Couldn't give in to the crippling fear that threatened to paralyze her. If she stood any kind of chance of escape, she had to keep a cool head.

The ringing of a phone sliced through the intense music. The driver turned down the radio and answered. "Cory, here."

Izzy's ears perked up and she scooted closer to the front, tucked behind the driver's seat and out of sight from the rearview mirror. Not wanting to miss a single word, she held her breath. *Cory*. She ran the name through her memory bank, coming up empty.

"I've got her. We're on our way now. Should be there in about five minutes. We'll need to take off as soon as we get there."

A beat of silence passed, the quiet hum of the angry music filling the space.

“It’s not my fault some guy was with her. I did what I had to do. We’ll meet at the designated place then put this god forsaken town behind us for good.”

The call ended and the music blared in her ears once again. A sharp turn had her struggling to stay upright. She only had five minutes to come up with a plan. There hadn’t been time for Cory to bind her hands or legs, so she could hit him then run. She squinted and scanned the floor for anything she could use for a weapon. Finding nothing, disappointment sat heavy in her gut. Determination fisted her hands on her lap. She’d have to fend for herself any way she could.

But he had a gun, and even a good, unexpected punch to his face would only stun his senses for a few seconds, tops. Which meant she had to run like hell, either finding help or a good place to hide.

She inched herself close to the back door. Cory would get her out this way, and she needed to use the element of surprise if she stood any kind of chance against him. The van slowed, and anxiety pitched high in her stomach. She steeled her nerves and tightened her muscles. She could do this. She *had* to do this.

The vehicle rolled to a stop. The car door opened then slammed closed. Sounds of crunching gravel penetrated the thin walls of the van. Izzy wet her lips, mentally pumping herself up to attack. Her heart thundered, competing with the noises outside.

The click of the lock sounded and the back door swung open, rusted hinges squeaking, and Izzy pulled back her fist.

Cory stood with the gun pointed at her chest. “Don’t even think about it.”

Deflating, she dropped her arm to her side. She needed to think of something else, and quick.

“Jump down.” He commanded.

She did as instructed and took in her surroundings. A beat of hope pulsed through her despair. He'd brought her back to the retreat. Not to the cabin Cruz had found with the chains, but to the construction site. Surely this would be the first place the police would look for her. But even if luck was on her side, she had to do whatever she could to escape.

Pinching her bicep with his meaty hand, he pushed her along. "Hurry up."

She stumbled over a large rock, and an idea flashed in her head. Needing to act quickly, she let her knees buckle and fell to the hard ground.

Cory's tight grasp loosened, and he staggered forward, but stayed on his feet. "What the hell? Get up. Now."

She swayed to the side to block his view and grabbed a fistful of stones and dust. The rock he'd thrown at her earlier had knocked her off balance and caused her to faceplant. If she could toss a handful hard enough, she might break free. He still had the gun, but she'd rather be shot in the back while running than walk right into the lion's den.

"Sorry," she said, slowly raising. She planted her feet, as if correcting her balance, and threw the stones at his face as hard as she could.

"Sonofabitch!" Cory released her arm and scrubbed his palms over his eyes.

Izzy took off faster than a freight train. Dust flew up from the ground. She weighed her options as she bolted forward. The woods provided coverage, but she could get lost in the forest. Or worse, he could find her and haul her back to wherever the hell he was meeting the person on the other end of the phone.

A smattering of abandoned construction equipment lingered in the parking lot. A dump truck caught her eye. Changing direction, she sprinted toward it. Most folks in these parts left their keys in their vehicles. If she could find the keys to the truck, she could at least get far enough away to find help.

The sound of muttered curses echoed behind her, followed by the heavy fall of footsteps. She summoned all the energy she had left and ran faster, harder, for the truck. She reached the driver's side and flung open the door, hopping onto an attached footstep on the side and hurling herself on the seat. Her breath came out in ragged pants, and her lungs burned. She closed the door and pushed down on the manual lock with shaking fingers, then reached across the seat to lock the passenger door.

Straightening, she looked at the ignition, disappointed not to find a set of keys dangling. She slid her hand into a tray below the radio but came up empty. No. This was her last shot. The keys had to be in here or she was screwed.

Pounding on the driver's side window pushed adrenaline through her veins. Cory stood beside the door, face red and filled with fury. The gun aimed at her through the glass. "Open the damn door."

Ignoring him, she flipped down the visor, and a single key tumbled onto her lap.

The sound of gunfire exploded, and a bullet blew through the window and lodged in the passenger seat. Glass shattered, sharp shards pelting her face.

She screamed, fighting the instinct to duck and cover her head with her arms. Gripping the key, she shoved it in the ignition then swallowed hard at the cluster of dials and gauges on the dash.

Cory plunged his arm through the jagged hole in the window.

With no time to think or second guess herself, she started the engine, shoved what she assumed to be the clutch, and jammed her foot down on the gas.

The dump truck shot backward, and Cory flew off the side.

Izzy slammed on the brake, repositioned the clutch, and gunned the vehicle forward. The truck veered to the side, and she jerked the wheel. Tires crunched over a lump, jostling her in the wide, cloth seat. Instinct pressed her foot against the

brake, and she threw the dump truck in Park. She leaned over the steering wheel and peered out the wide window.

A pair of jean-clad legs stretched out from under the oversized tire. She covered her mouth with her hand. Bile coated her tongue. Her need to escape fought against her natural instinct to make sure she hadn't just killed someone.

Even if he deserved to die.

She fell back into the seat and gripped the round knob of the clutch.

A large man popped up at the side of the door and hooked his arm inside the shattered window.

A scream ripped through her, and she struggled to put the clutch in in Drive. Terror bounced around inside her and unshed tears burned the backs of her eyes.

The man unlocked the door, yanked it open, and jerked her through.

She spilled out of the vehicle and crashed onto the ground, the impact knocking the air from her lungs.

The man kneeled beside her, a creepy smile twisting his lips. "You're not going anywhere, sweetheart."



A HURRICANE of emotions whirled inside Beau, stretching his skin. Fear and anger boiled his blood as impatience at the chaos circling him in Izzy's kitchen cracked through his veneer. He kept his gaze on Paxton as she paced and twirled a strand of hair around her index finger over and over. Gavin, her boyfriend and current police academy recruit, stood with his back pressed against the sink, his foot tapping an annoying pace against the floor.

A stinging pain brought his attention back to Vaughn, the young EMT who'd cleaned and dressed his shoulder. When Cruz and Brooke arrived ten minutes before, Beau'd fought hard to go with them as they searched the property for signs of

where Izzy had gone. But his need for medical attention had kept him on the sidelines, desperate to be in the action.

“Sorry, man,” Vaughn said, securing an adhesive patch over the sensitive skin on his shoulder. “You can put your shirt back on. You’re lucky the bullet didn’t lodge into your flesh. I was able to take care of it here. The shot to your calve looks a little worse, but I managed to clean it as best I could. You should head to the hospital, though.”

“Thanks.” He scooped his shirt off the floor and swallowed hard. Blood stained the gray fabric, drying and making the material stiff.

Paxton cringed. “I’d offer you something, but I don’t think any of us have clothes that’d fit you.”

He balled up the shirt and tossed it on the mahogany table. “I have a duffle in the truck.”

“I’ll go grab it,” Gavin said. He crossed to Paxton and rubbed his palms over her arms then pressed a kiss to her forehead. “We’ll find her.”

Paxton drew in a shuddering breath and leaned into him. “How? Last time, I was right there when they took her. Finding her wasn’t a total shot in the dark. This time....” A sob caught in her throat.

Gavin gathered her close and caught Beau’s eye over Paxton’s head.

Beau clenched his jaw, willing Gavin’s words of comfort to be truth.

The back door swung open, and Cruz and Brooke came inside.

Cruz swept his cowboy hat off his head and frowned. “We found tire tracks behind the shed. Paxton, does anyone ever park back there?”

“No. Never.” She stepped out of Gavin’s hold and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Let me grab your things really quick,” Gavin said and headed out the door.

“Tread marks are thick and sunk into the grass pretty deep. I’m guessing a bigger vehicle was back there. Chances are he put Izzy in there and took off,” Brooke said, pinching the bridge of her nose. She’d pulled her mess of brown hair into a high ponytail. Concern outweighed the exhaustion in her eyes.

Beau propped his elbows on the table and framed his face with his hands, digging the tips of his fingers into the corners of his closed eyes. “What good does that do us if we don’t know anything about the vehicle or where it’s going?”

“It’s a start,” Cruz said. “I sent pictures of the tread marks to my brother in Nashville. Lincoln’s got a ton of connections. He’s looking for a better match on the tires. If we can get that, it will point us to a more specific model of the vehicle.”

“And by that time, there’s no telling how far away she’ll be.” Beau hung his head and rested his hands at the back of his neck. Failure pressed down on his shoulders like a fifty-pound weight. He was supposed to keep Izzy safe, and he’d failed.

Gavin emerged from the backdoor with Beau’s duffle bag. He tossed the bag to Beau.

Beau snatched it from the air and riffled through until he found his shirt. He shoved it over his head, the pain from his wound barely registering through the haze of horror around his brain.

The front door flung open, followed by rapid footsteps down the hall. Izzy’s mom burst into the kitchen, her face puffy and tears pouring over her cheeks. “What happened? Where the hell is my Izzy?”

Beau lifted his head and faced Izzy’s mom. Guilt crushed his windpipe. “I’m so sorry. I should have stopped him.”

Sue turned toward him with wide eyes, and her face fell impossibly farther. She pressed her hand to her mouth. A soft moan emanated from her throat, and she swayed.

Paxton rushed to her side and held her up. “We found her once. We’ll do it again.”

“Why is this happening? She’s already been through enough.” Sue wailed, the words coming out between panicked

sobs.

Beau swallowed the hard ball of emotion and stood, wincing as pain shot up his leg. “We need to do something. I can’t sit here and wait for pieces of information that may or may not help us. Did you find anything at all in the woods today that could help us figure out who the hell has Izzy or where he’d take her?”

Cruz scratched the back of his neck and shared a quick glance with Brooke. “We followed some broken branches and footprints, which all led us to Kasie.”

“What about after you found her?” Beau asked. “Did anyone stay on the trail? Keep looking for where it led?”

Brooke nodded. “Grace did. She said it turned cold. The only things she found that were out of place were some discarded construction materials.”

Beau furrowed his brow, mind spinning. “What kind of materials?”

“A couple nails. Ripped fabric from a safety vest.” Brooke shrugged. “Nothing too surprising so close to a construction site.”

Something didn’t sit well with Beau as he tossed around the new information. “The chains Cruz found in the cabin were relatively new, and the construction started about a week ago, right?”

“Yes,” Brooke said. “What are you thinking?”

“That it’s a pretty damn big coincidence that all this started happening again right when a new crew came to work at the retreat. What if someone on the crew stuck around, got the job to stay close to Izzy?”

Brooke’s eyes widened. “You think someone working on the construction crew took her?”

“Everything that’s happened leads back to the same place,” Cruz said. “If the leaders of this trafficking ring wanted to make sure Izzy didn’t become a problem, what better way than



to stay close? To scope out the one place they'd used to keep girls before transporting them onto the next location?"

"Oh my God," Sue said, falling into one of the kitchen chairs. "What does this mean?"

Beau met Cruz's stare. "That we need to get to the retreat. Now."

“Let me go,” Izzy yelled, her voice muffled against the hard rocks covering the ground. Anger rushed through her like a waterfall, demanding her to fight. She hadn’t gone through all this just for someone else to show up and take her.

With her face on the jagged stones, she spied Cory under the truck. His eyes closed. Blood staining the gravel. She swiveled onto her butt and peddled away from the gut-wrenching scene.

A hard grip on her bicep jerked her to her feet.

“I should thank you,” the man said. “You just got rid of a pesky problem.”

She struggled against his hold, refusing to meekly obey. She squinted through the darkness, searching for another answer. Another solution. Another idea that could get her out of this mess. The splatter of bright stars against the inky sky cast a dim glow on the half-built lodge. An endless maze of pallets and large equipment dotted the area.

She had to get away from this man, but no ideas penetrated the thick fog of fear covering her brain.

“Get moving.” The man loomed over her, his full beard hiding his jawline. The long shadows from the surrounding trees made it impossible to make out the color of his beady eyes.

Something about him struck her as familiar, and she studied the deep lines on his face. “Who are you? Why won’t you leave me alone?”

He took another step closer and pushed into her personal space. “Because you’ve seen our faces, you know our names. Letting you get away was a huge mistake that can’t be tolerated.”

Recognition flashed in her mind. “Oh my god. You!” She pointed a finger at his chest. “I saw you earlier today. With Brooke. You work here.”

He smirked. “Aren’t you smart? Now come on.”

A loud groan of agony drew their attention under the dump truck. “Tony.” Cory stretched the name into four long, weak syllables.

“Well, shit,” Tony said half under his breath.

With his heavy palm between her shoulder blades, he forced her back on the ground. The hard gravel threatened to rip through her shirt and burrow into her skin. All the air squeezed from her lungs. She inhaled, the scent of dust and dirt shooting up her nose, but her breath was cut short by the pressure on her back. Panic ripped through her as she struggled to pull in air. She’d endured all this just to suffocate on the hard ground. She braced her palms on the gravel and it scraped against her skin, giving herself just enough space to breathe.

Tony dropped to his knees beside her. “Sonofabitch.”

“Tony. Help.” Cory’s body was wedged under the truck. His face contorted in pain, his eyes half-open and arm stretched out. Blood pooled on the ground. His leg was twisted at an awkward angle.

Izzy tried to squirm out from under Tony’s hold, but he kept her pinned down. Her stomach rolled at the carnage her actions had wrought. She turned her face away, when something on the ground caught her eye on the other side of the passenger side tire.

*Cory’s gun.*

Her palms itched to dive for the weapon, but she'd never reach it with Tony's meaty palm holding her down.

"Can't breathe," Cory rasped out the words. "Call. 911."

Tony chuckled, and the sound sent chills of terror down Izzy's arms despite the dots of sweat beading on the back of her neck. "Sorry, pal. It's time to say goodbye." He stood, pulled out a sidearm from the waistband of his baggy jeans, then angled his body to aim the weapon under the truck before blasting a bullet in between Cory's eyes.

She lunged forward, scooped up Cory's gun, and flipped onto her back with the weapon trained in front of her. Her heart hammered in her ears. Her palms grew damp around the handle of the gun.

"Well, well, well. Little lady's got some spunk." He swung his weapon at her.

She squeezed the trigger. The explosion of gunfire made her ears ring. The force of the blast vibrated her arms and the gun bounced in her hands.

Tony staggered backward and slammed against the truck. He pressed his hands to his side and blood stained the material of his shirt, oozing between his fingers.

She pulled the trigger again and again, but nothing happened. *No more bullets.*

Abandoning the gun, she jumped to her feet and ran. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and blocked the horror of just shooting a man. The break in the tree line that led to the main road loomed to her left and she aimed straight for it.

A feral growl sounded behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and fear assaulted her like a punch in the gut.

Tony stormed after her with long, slow strides like a horror movie villain. He kept one hand pressed to his side and bent slightly at the waist as he moved.

Tears blurred her vision as the hope for freedom became smaller. How long could she run from him? How well could she hide? Her heart splintered into a dozen pieces. Fear had

paused her life, kept her hidden away from months. Hell, if she were being honest with herself, fear was what had pushed her away from Pine Valley in the first place—away from a future with Beau.

And now that she finally understood what she really wanted out of her life, she'd be ripped away and tossed to the wolves. Forced into a life not even worth living.

The beams of headlights poured onto the lane and bounced across the lot.

She kept moving but threw her arms in the air. *Please see me.* Her leg muscles ached, and lungs burned. The sound of footfalls grew louder, closer.

The truck shifted and sped toward her. A beat of apprehension pulsed through her temporary relief. What if the truck was here to take her away? What if she was running toward her captor, not her rescue?

Not willing to take the risk, she switched gears and darted toward the woods.

The truck skidded to a stop, the sound of gravel pinging against metal sent a cawing bird into the night, and the groan of opening truck doors made terror fist her rapidly beating heart. She didn't stop to see who'd arrived. She sprinted toward the covering of thick tree trunks and overgrown brush.

“Stop! Police!” A familiar voice shouted.

*Cruz.* The knot of tension gripping her entire body loosened. Help was here.

*Bang!*

Another blast of gunfire had her covering her ears with trembling hands and ducking in the tall grass. She squinted through the darkness, the long, thick blades obscuring her view. Someone fell to the ground followed by a shuffle of feet across the lot. Anxiety pressed against her chest, and she swore the sound of her heartbeat shook the ground at her feet.

“Izzy!” Beau shouted.

Excitement launched her to her feet, and she ran from her hiding spot and flew into Beau's open arms.

He stumbled backward and grunted, letting out a hiss of pain but held her close, placing kisses over her cheeks, her forehead, her lips. "We found you. You're okay. Oh my god, I was so scared I'd lost you forever. I'm so sorry."

A torrent of emotions leaked from her system and her body trembled. She pulled back, searching his handsome face. "Are you hurt? I saw blood. Cory shot you. I thought you were dead."

He grinned the devilish smile she loved so damn much. "Just a couple gunshot wounds. I'll be fine. What about you? Did he touch you? Hurt you?" He skimmed his hands up her sides and cradled her jawline in his palms.

She shook her head. "I'm okay. Did Cruz shoot the man who was running after me?"

Beau glanced over his shoulder then faced her again with a deep frown. "Yes. Looks like Cruz has him in cuffs now. He won't hurt you ever again. And this time, we'll make sure no one else is out there."

"This time, I have you," Izzy said, a new kind of warmth trickling through her.

He hooked up an eyebrow, a smile lifting one corner of his mouth. "Is that what you want?"

"More than anything in the world. No more running away from what scares me. No more second guessing what my heart is telling me. I've loved you most of my life, Beau. And I want to keep on loving you."

His half-smile erupted into a full-blown grin, and he pressed his lips to hers. "I love you, too Izzy. Never stopped from the day we met. Now let's get you home."

She nestled her palm in his, leaning against him as he led her back to the truck and toward a new future they'd share together.



ANXIETY TIGHTENED the muscles in the pit of Beau's stomach as he stood on the wide, wraparound porch of the lodge at Crossroads Mountain Retreat. He glanced at his phone. No texts or calls from Izzy, and she was now ten minutes late.

Six months had passed since the nightmare that had almost stolen Izzy—the nightmare that had brought the two of them back together. And even though the sex-trafficking ring behind Izzy's abductions had been destroyed, he still was uneasy any time Izzy was running behind.

A little sedan rolled into the packed parking lot, and he let out a long breath. She was here but watching her park and jog up to greet him only increased his anxiety.

She jumped up the steps and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Sorry I'm late. Class ran long then there was an accident on the way back to town."

"No problem. But we need to get inside before everything starts." He grabbed her hand and led her to the wide double doors. "How was class?"

Izzy had decided to attend a local college when the fall semester started, and he couldn't be prouder of her decision to go into a field that would enable her to help troubled teens and young adults. She had a few more years of school to get through, but he had no doubt all her work and dedication would be worth it when she became a trauma counselor. In the meantime, Brooke had hired her to work the front desk once the retreat opened next week.

"Good. We're finally getting into some interesting stuff in the psychology class. I think I'm going to like it, even if it can be triggering at times."

He looped an arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to her temple. "That's what Dr. Kirkton is for. To help you though any issues that arise."

She grinned up at him. “You’re a pretty good shoulder to lean on, too.”

He basked in her compliment, feeling exactly the same way about her, as he swept open the door and ushered her over the threshold. A reception desk directly to the right greeted them as they stepped in, but the stone hearth that stretched up three stories to the pitched roof stole his attention. Dark wooden beams ran the length of the ceiling, and a grand staircase spilled onto the second and third floors where Brooke had created spaces for all kinds of therapies.

But the focal point was the floor to ceiling windows that showcased the picturesque lake, now surrounded with a colorful explosion of autumn leaves on the cluster of trees that dotted the landscape. The beautiful peaks of the mountains lay beyond.

Izzy placed a hand over her heart. “This is amazing. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of this view.”

“If you do, then living in The Smoky Mountains isn’t the place for you,” he teased. “Come on, everyone’s outside on the deck.”

They crossed over the soft burgundy rugs that covered sections of the maple floor. Beau ran a hand along the supple, suede fabric of one of a handful of couches that filled the room—this one situated in front of the fireplace and flanked by a love seat and overstuffed chair. When he reached the glass door that swung out to the deck, he stopped, needing this moment to be just between the two of them.

Izzy wrinkled her brow, her head tilted as if trying to figure out what he was doing. “Aren’t we going outside?”

“In a second. I just want to take a good look at this place. A good look at you. I’m so damn proud of everything you’ve accomplished, and how you plan to take something horrible and use it to help other people. That’s what this entire retreat embodies. Healing. Moving forward. Finding peace and building a new future.” He dipped his hand in his pocket and rubbed his fingertips along the velvety box.



She ran her hand over her long, blond hair and hooked the strands over one shoulder. “Brooke really has created something special. I hope it’s successful. I mean, I found what I needed here. Even when I was so scared, I could barely step foot out of my car the first time I came.”

“But you took that step—that leap. Now, I’m asking if you’ll take another leap with me.” Dropping to one knee, he pulled out the box and lifted the lid. The blinding princess-cut diamond stared up at Izzy.

She gasped and pressed her hands to her mouth. “Oh, my goodness. Beau!” An excited squeal squeaked from her throat, and she bounced up and down on her toes.

He grinned. “I met you when I was nine years old and have loved you every day since. You’re my best friend. The person who brings me joy and lifts me up when I’ve fallen. I want to stand by your side for the rest of our lives, lifting each other up. Cheering for each other. Loving each other. Izzy Sterling, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?”

She dropped her hands to her sides, the most radiant smile lighting her face. Moisture made her blue eyes shimmer. “Nothing would make me happier. I love you, Beau. I love your friendship and support. I love the strength you give me. The encouragement. Marrying you would be a dream come true.”

Beau let out a whoop of happiness and scooped her into his arms. He crushed his mouth on hers and spun her in a circle.

A cheer from the deck erupted.

Izzy giggled. “Put me down and give me that ring!”

He laughed and did as instructed, sliding the engagement ring he’d saved months for onto her ring finger.

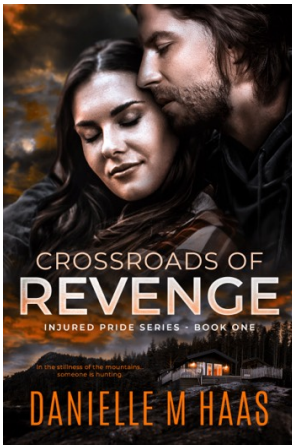
The door burst open. Paxton and Sue rushed inside and gathered them both in a hug.

Gavin stood nearby, smiling wide. “Congratulations, man.”

“Okay,” Beau said, breaking into the commotion as the crowd of law enforcement and Pine Valley citizens poured through the doorway and smothered them with excitement. “Let’s get back outside. We have a grand opening ceremony to get to.”

With a hand on the small of Izzy’s back, he led her onto the deck. Surrounded by loved ones and friends, he stood beside the love of his life and listened as Brooke bubbled over with news and explanations about what she hoped Crossroads Mountain Retreat would bring to the community.

He hung on every word and held Izzy close to his side. He couldn’t wait to watch this place grow and see the benefits it heaped on everyone who visited. He’d lend a hand in any way he could as he and Izzy built their family...their home...and created a life they loved in the shadows of the Smoky Mountains.



WHEN BROOKE MATHER’S past storms back into her life, sexy detective Lincoln Sawyer throws himself into the case. The two fight for their lives as they uncover who’s seeking their ultimate revenge.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle attended Bowling Green State University with a dream of studying creative writing, but the thought of sharing her work in front of a group of strangers was enough to make her change her major to Political Science.

Once married and raising babies, she decided to stay home with her children. Some days her sanity slipped further across the line to crazy town so she decided to brush off her rusty writing chops and see what happened.

Danielle now spends her days running kids around, playing with her beloved dog, and typing as fast as she can to get the stories in her head written down. She loves to write fast-paced romantic suspense that leaves them on the edge of their seats. Her story ideas are as varied and unpredictable as her everyday life.

Keep up with everything going on in Danielle's writing life by following her online:

