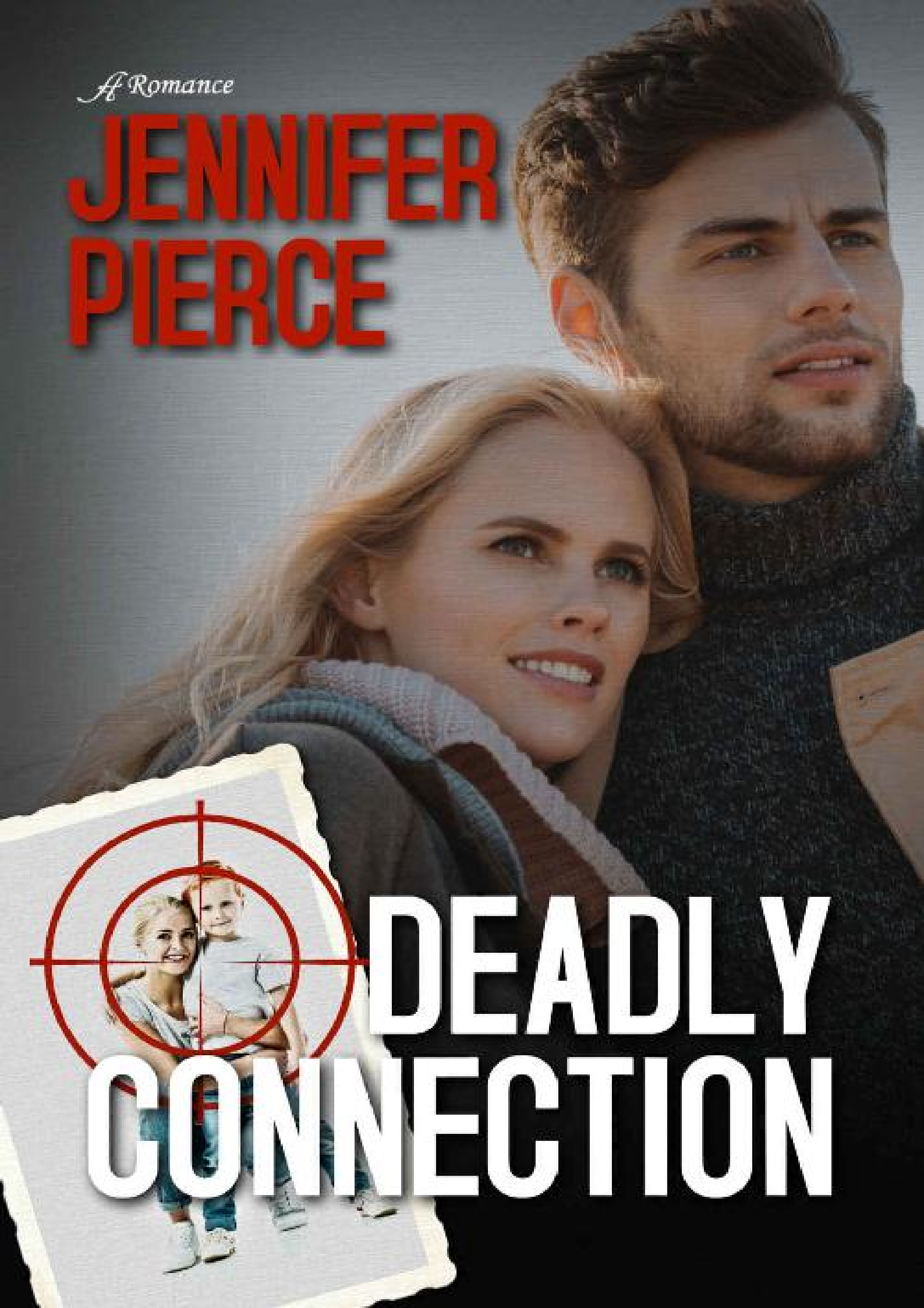


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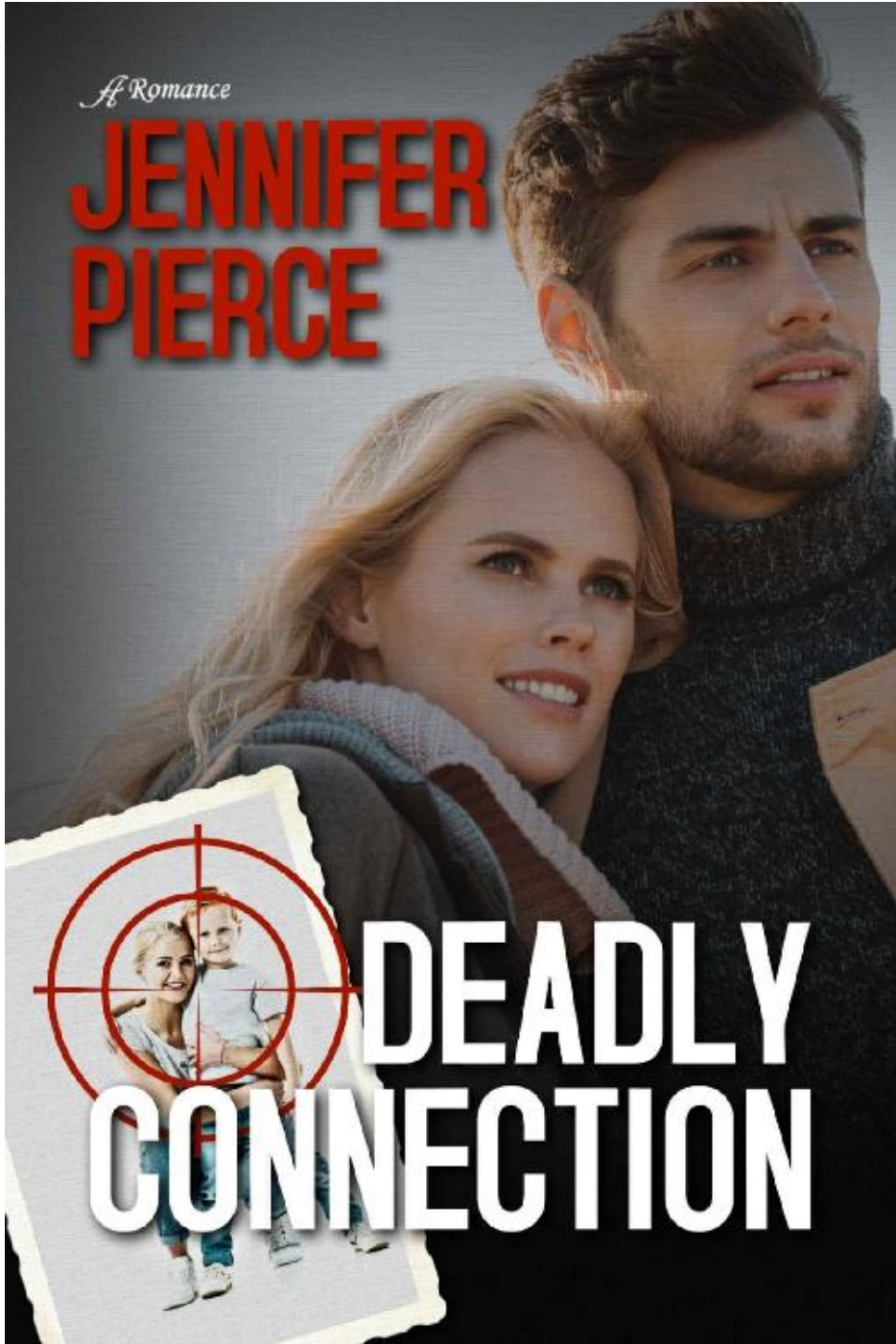
JENNIFER PIERCE



DEADLY CONNECTION

A Romance

**JENNIFER
PIERCE**



**DEADLY
CONNECTION**

DEADLY CONNECTION by JENNIFER PIERCE

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**To my children, I love you more than I
can say. Never give up on your dreams.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank You God for Your love and saving grace. Even if I don't get to see the harvest, I pray that a seed is planted.

I have the most amazing support team. Thank you all for everything you do for me. You'll never know how much I appreciate it, even if I'm a little hair brained at the time.

To the readers, thank you for going on another adventure with me. I hope you enjoy it!

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CHAPTER ONE

Reid Lucas looked at his text message again. SOS. SUNRISE AT SUNRISE.

Joe Lockhart had sent Reid an urgent message to meet and had even provided an address. Reid's knee bounced under the table. He'd been sitting in the Sunrise Café since they opened at six. It'd been an hour, and Joe still hadn't shown up. Or contacted him. Reid had sent a couple of texts and tried to call. No responses and straight to voice mail. He'd give Joe a few more minutes and then be on his way.

Good thing the diner that had been chosen employed a wide range of characters. He'd spent his time watching everyone. He cast another glance at the front door, hoping to see Joe. The only person he saw was the busboy, who was busy wiping down a table. His hands shook, and he kept wiping at his nose. He was displaying other jerky movements. What was his poison? Meth? Cocaine?

Whatever it was, it wasn't bad enough for him to steal the tip that had been left. The lady manning the cash register watched him the entire time. She pulled a cup from under the counter and walked to the table as he finished up. She smiled sweetly, put the cup in his dish bin, and then swiped the tip with her other hand before flouncing back to the register.

Moments later, the waitress made a stop at the table and frowned when she didn't see a tip. She was attractive—strawberry-blonde hair pulled into a ponytail at the base of her neck, green eyes that lit up every time she laughed, and full lips. She was also friendly and courteous to the customers, even the ones that didn't deserve it.

The older man two booths in front of him had sent his breakfast back three times. Reid would have told him to go home and cook his own meal the second time. But not her. She

took it back, smiling each time, ignoring the foul language he spewed.

After his meeting with Joe, Reid would be sure to leave a generous tip, making sure to hand it directly to her. She definitely deserved it. He checked his watch for the umpteenth time since he had gotten here and then drummed his fingers on the tabletop. It wasn't unlike Joe to be late, but to be this late and without some sort of contact was definitely not like him.

The bell over the door chimed, and he looked up, hoping it was Joe. Instead, a boy, maybe six years old with an unruly mop of red hair, raced to the counter and plopped down on one of the stools, throwing his backpack on the floor beside him. The waitress reached across the counter, trying to tame the boy's hair.

"Moouoom," he yelped in embarrassment.

She took her hand away and filled a glass with orange juice before placing it in front of him.

Reid's phone vibrated on the tabletop. He didn't recognize the number. He contemplated ignoring it but decided against it. He swiped the screen and put it to his ear. "Reid."

"Are you at the meet?" Joe's voice boomed from the other side.

"Where are you? I've been waiting over an hour." Reid let his annoyance be evident in his voice.

"I'm not coming." The answer was clipped.

"You had me sit in this hole-in-the-wall for an hour and didn't even bother to call and tell me you weren't going to make it?" Annoyance turned to anger as he clenched his fist.

"Do you see the waitress behind the counter and the little red-haired boy that just ran in? Quinn Matthews and her son, JJ."

Joe must be close by and watching if he knew the boy had just shown up.

"Yes, I see them. Along with the druggie busboy, thieving cashier, and ogling cook. What about them?"

“You have five minutes to get them out of there before men come in and try to kidnap them.”

“Five minutes! What is this? What’s going on, Joe?” His pulse pounded as adrenaline coursed through his veins. Joe couldn’t have called to have him get her out sooner. Now, the window of time was dwindling.

“There’s no time to explain. They’re here now. I’ll stall them as long as I can. Get those two out now!” The line went dead.

Great. Just great. He had mere minutes to convince that woman to grab her son and leave with him—a complete stranger. He wasn’t sure his rusty powers of persuasion would work this time, but he’d give it a shot. Joe had saved him several times, and he’d returned the favor on occasion. This was serious business, and Joe trusted him. Reid wouldn’t let him down.

Reid gulped his coffee, burning his mouth and throat, stood, and took the cup to the waitress, who was studying her son as he shoveled eggs into his mouth by the spoonful. A commotion outside the door caught her attention. A black SUV with dark tinted windows was parked in front of the diner. Two large, intimidating men stepped from it. Joe stepped in front of them and wildly waved his arms.

Reid’s chest tightened as urgency propelled him to step between her and the activity outside. He held his empty cup out. “Excuse me?”

“Oh no. I let your cup get empty. Let me grab the coffeepot.” Her cheeks tinged pink.

“It’s not that,” he said, trying to look as embarrassed as she did. “I made a mess with my coffee.”

“That’s okay. Let me grab a towel, and I’ll be right there to clean it up.”

He turned his attention to JJ, who had just crammed an entire slice of toast into his mouth. “Hey there, champ.”

“Hemffo.” The boy tried to speak around the soggy bread.

“JJ, what have I told you about talking with food in your mouth?”

He shrugged and took a swig of his juice to wash it down. “Sorry, Momma.”

“That’s quite all right, ma’am.” Reid turned his attention to JJ. “You look like you could fit under one of those booths. When I knocked my coffee over, I dropped my cell phone under the table. Now, I can’t find it, and I’m too big to crawl under there. Do you think you could look for it while your mom helps me clean up my mess?”

“Yes, sir.” Not only was he willing to help a stranger; he was polite, too.

Reid let Quinn lead the way, JJ followed her, and he brought up the rear, keeping himself as a shield. She got within sight of the booth and spun, then stepped between him and JJ. “Look. I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but we won’t be a part of it. Now, you need to pay your tab and leave.”

He lowered his voice, hoping she wouldn’t bring attention to them. “It’s no game. I had to get you and the boy away from the front door.”

She started inching backward. JJ tried to peek around her, but she shoved him behind her. She looked over her shoulder at the small supply closet by the bathroom. Thanks to his hour wait and observation skills, he knew there was a door that would lead to the alley. That’s how he planned to get them out.

He could see the fear in her eyes, so he raised his hands in front of him in a gesture of surrender. “I’m not going to hurt you. My name is Reid Lucas. I’m a private investigator, and I have credible information that you’re in danger. Someone is going to walk through that door and try to kidnap you and your son.”

“No offense, but I don’t believe you.” She jutted her chin.

The bell over the entrance rang, and she leaned around Reid. “Welcome to Sunrise Café. How may I help you?”

Reid turned and recognized the man as one of the men from the black SUV. His stomach tightened. Time was up.

Not bothering to remove his sunglasses, the man scanned the diner, and his gaze stopped on her. Then, he started walking toward them while reaching into his coat pocket. When he pulled his hand out, he held a dark, shiny gun. “You and the boy are coming with me.”

Reid spun, using the momentum to punch the man, sending him to the floor. He turned to Quinn. “Go out the back. I’ll be right behind you.” He turned back around and crouched over the man, then punched him again and took his gun. “Who sent you?”

The man said nothing, only fought back. Reid dodged a fist and used the butt of the gun to knock the man unconscious. Patrons of the diner stood frozen, staring at the scene. One person had a cell phone out, recording the incident. Why did people automatically want to record something like that instead of calling the police? “Call 911.” He ejected the magazine from the gun and emptied the chamber, leaving the gun on the booth table for the police. He hated guns.

Now, he needed to find Quinn and JJ. He slammed against the supply door, but it didn’t budge. Instead, his arm folded, and his shoulder slammed into it. Quinn must have used something to block it to keep him from following her. Ordinarily, that would be a good decision—except, he was the good guy.

He turned and raced to the entrance, stepping over the man he’d knocked unconscious. He made it to the door and shoved it open. The black SUV was idling at the side alley entrance. To the left, Joe was propped against the side of the building, blood oozing from his side. Reid knelt and felt for a pulse. A steady beat pulsated beneath his fingers.

Joe opened his eyes. “I’m fine. Find Quinn and JJ. Get them out of here,” he rasped as he stood, grimacing and clutching his side. “The other guy went around back after he stabbed me.”

Reid took off around the building, not waiting on Joe. He came to the corner and stopped.

“Let’s go.” A voice boomed from around the corner. Just then, Quinn and JJ appeared. The man had a grip on the collar of JJ’s shirt and was using Quinn as a shield.

“Excuse us,” the man said, pushing Quinn and JJ forward. “Just the family out for a stroll.” The man must not have seen Reid in the diner.

Even if Reid didn’t know what was really going on, he’d be able to tell something wasn’t right. “Looks like kidnapping to me.”

“Is that so?” The man pulled JJ closer to him. “What exactly do you plan to do about it?”

Movement at the opposite end of the alley caught Reid’s attention. Joe had gone around the block. He was sneaking up behind the man. Reid’s pulse kicked up a notch. All Reid had to do was stall. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do that.”

“Seeing as I’m the one with a gun and the kid.” The man placed a gun to JJ’s temple.

Quinn gasped, and JJ’s eyes widened.

“No!” Quinn spun around.

Reid took a step forward and grabbed JJ right as Joe barreled into the man, sending him to the ground.

“Go!” Joe kicked the gun away. The man wasn’t unconscious, but he was stunned.

Reid didn’t hesitate. He grabbed Quinn’s hand and pulled her and JJ away. They raced to the front of the building. Sirens sounded.

Reid had parked his car a couple of blocks south of the diner, which was part of his routine when meeting Joe. He spotted the black SUV still idling by the curb. A gunshot sounded from the alley. He hoped it was Joe behind the trigger, but he wasn’t going to stick around long enough to find out.

“Get in.” He let go of Quinn’s hand and pointed to the SUV.

“The police are on their way.”

“Yes, but we don’t know who pulled that trigger, and we’ll find out before the police get here.”

She took a moment and then pushed JJ toward the vehicle.
“Get in, JJ.”

The boy followed directions and climbed into the back seat. Reid climbed in and put the vehicle in drive. The man from the alley stepped out and raised his gun.

“Get down!” Reid jammed his foot on the accelerator an instant before the rear windshield shattered.

CHAPTER TWO

“JJ!” Quinn jerked around, her body trembling.

The man who had helped them in the alley grabbed her shoulder and shoved her down. “He’s okay. He was already down on the floorboard.”

Her heart thundered in her chest. She had to see him with her own eyes. Still crouching, she turned in her seat. “JJ?”

He was lying huddled on the floorboard. “I’m okay, Momma.” His voice quaked.

Knowing he was okay eased the panic rising in her. “Thank You, God.”

The car slowed. “It’s okay now. You can sit up.”

She turned back toward the front. She’d caught a glimpse of the other man who’d helped them get away back at the diner. She must have been seeing things. It had looked like Joe Lockhart. It couldn’t be, though. She hadn’t seen him in almost seven years. Not since he told her he loved her and then left her to raise their child alone. After telling her he was a married man. She needed answers, and the man sitting next to her could give them to her.

“Thank you for saving us back there, but how did you know what was going to happen?” Realization slammed into her, stealing her breath. He had known someone was going to attack them. Was he in on it? Was his rescuing them just a ruse so she’d trust him? “Take us to the police station right now.”

“That is our current destination. I have no intention of keeping this car. And maybe, the police can shed some light on what’s going on.”

She whipped her head around. “You mean you don’t know what’s going on? You knew those guys were going to come into the diner.”

He flipped on the turn signal. “I didn’t know that until mere minutes before they walked in.”

“How did you know? How did you know we were the targets?”

“I was at the diner to meet an old private investigator buddy. He called and told me they were coming.”

Could that buddy be Joe Lockhart? “That man back there. The one who helped us.” She took a deep breath, steeling herself for her question. “Was that Joe Lockhart?”

Reid’s eyebrow rose. “How do you know Joe?”

It was Joe. Quinn’s vision blurred, and nausea rolled in her stomach. What was he doing here?

“Quinn?” Reid’s voice broke through the fog.

“Oh, um, we have a history.” She glanced back at JJ.

“I see.”

Questions swirled in her mind. *Why is Joe here? Is he still alive?* “We need to go inside.” She wasn’t going to get answers sitting in the parking lot.

“Come on, JJ.” She climbed from the SUV and opened the back door. As soon as his feet were on the pavement, she gathered him in her arms. *Thank You, Lord, for keeping my baby safe.* A tear slid down her cheek. JJ hugged her just as tight. His body quivered. She knelt in front of him and looked him in the eyes. “We’re okay now.”

She smoothed the hair from his forehead. He nodded and wiped tears from his eyes with the back of his hands.

“We’re going to go inside and talk to the police. They’re going to have a lot of questions, and we need to tell them everything we know, okay? That will help them figure out what’s going on.”

“Yes, Momma” He nodded.

She stood, grabbed his hand, and walked into the police station. Reid followed. A uniformed officer greeted them from behind the information desk.

“Hello. My name is Quinn Matthews, and someone just tried to kidnap my son and me from the Sunrise Café.”

The officer’s jovial face turned hard. “Of course. Just a moment, and I’ll have someone come take your statement.”

He picked up the receiver and pushed a few buttons. “Detective Jacobs. We have a witness to what happened at the diner. She claims it was an attempted kidnapping.” He listened and then hung the receiver up. “Detective Jacobs will be right out.”

She led JJ to a chair, sat, and pulled him onto her lap. Her eyelids were heavy, and her body was weak. The adrenaline was wearing off.

Joe Lockhart had been in the alley. Seven years without a word. He’d never met JJ, only financially supported him from afar. What had changed his mind after all these years? She nuzzled her son. They were safe. Peace washed over her. She turned her head toward Reid. “Thank you.” Her voice cracked.

Reid didn’t say anything, only gave a curt nod.

A door to the right of the information desk opened, and a man in his late forties appeared, wearing khaki pants and a blue polo with the department’s logo where a breast pocket would be.

His gaze zeroed in on her, and he walked toward them, extending his hand as he neared. “I’m Detective Jacobs.”

She shook his hand. “Quinn Matthews.”

The detective turned toward the man beside her and reached for his hand.

“I’m Reid Lucas.”

Detective Jacobs led them down a hall to the left of the information desk and to a room with a table and four chairs. “Come in and have a seat. I was just about to head out to the scene. Corporal Dale tells me you believe someone attempted to kidnap you.”

“It’s not a belief. It’s a fact. Just ask Joe Lockhart. He helped us get away.”

The detective looked from her to Reid Lucas. “I’m sorry, but Joe Lockhart didn’t make it. He was dead when officers arrived.”

The room started spinning, and bile forced its way into her throat. She got up, raced for the trash can, and emptied her stomach’s contents. After she composed herself, a female officer brought in a bottle of water for her and a small stuffed bear in a police uniform, a bracelet, and a snack for JJ.

“Would you like a tour of the police station?” the officer asked JJ.

While he vibrated with excitement, dread filled Quinn. She didn’t want him out of her sight.

“Can I, Momma?”

Probably sensing her hesitation, the officer smiled. “It will just be the areas where he can meet other officers, and it’ll give you some time with Detective Jacobs.”

Reid laid a hand on her forearm. “He’ll be okay.”

The warmth of his hand chased the chills of apprehension away. She nodded. “Okay.”

“Yes!” JJ squealed.

“Ms. Matthews, can you tell me what happened?” Detective Jacobs asked as soon as the door closed behind JJ and the officer.

She told him everything that had happened from the time she started her shift to their arrival at the police station.

Detective Jacobs had been attentive, jotting notes on his yellow legal pad. He never interrupted her, though he sliced a glance at Reid when she came to the part about him luring her away from the front door. “Did you recognize either of the men?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’ve never seen them before.”

“Can you describe them?” Detective Jacobs sat poised, ready to write down her description.

She thought a moment. “I remember the man from the alley but not much about the man from inside the diner.”

“Tell me about the man in the alley.”

“He had short brown hair. Like a military haircut. He wore sunglasses so I couldn’t see the color of his eyes. He had a big bulbous nose. He stood about a foot taller than me.” She rested her hands on the table. Picturing him made her queasy.

“Good. What about facial hair? Did he have a beard or mustache?” Detective Jacobs was writing down her answers.

She shook her head.

“Could you give an estimate on his weight? Was he slender or husky?”

She studied Reid, comparing the two. “He was smaller than Reid but not much. Lankier.”

Reid raised an eyebrow.

She wanted to slide down in her chair and hide. She hadn’t meant to insinuate he was fat. He was by no means overweight. He was perfect. That thought shocked her.

Reid didn’t say anything.

“Do you think you’d recognize him if you saw him again?” Detective Jacobs interrupted her thoughts.

“Definitely.” She nodded for emphasis.

“Good.” Detective Jacobs scribbled again. “Now, tell me how you know Joe Lockhart.”

She could feel Reid watching her, soaking in the details. She didn’t want her past indiscretions laid out in front of a complete stranger. It was bad enough she was telling the police. She’d asked God for forgiveness and knew she had been forgiven. But that didn’t mean baring her mistakes for all to see was easy. Not to mention, how would it affect JJ if he found out?

He didn’t know his biological father and hadn’t really asked many questions about him. She couldn’t imagine how it would feel to know that his dad hadn’t wanted him. She could

certainly empathize with him. After all, her mother had practically disowned her. But she'd had years with her mother before it happened. Would knowing she'd been unwanted from the beginning make the pain worse? That was one reason she made sure JJ knew he had a Father in heaven who loved him.

“He's JJ's father.”

Reid's face didn't change when she told Detective Jacobs that JJ was Joe's son. No surprise or disgust. Relief washed over her. She couldn't pinpoint why it mattered what Reid thought, but it did. She was sure he had questions, though. But right now, the detective had plenty of his own about her personal life.

“When was the last time you spoke with him?”

“The day I told him I was pregnant.” Her throat burned as she fought back the memory.

“No phone calls, emails, or letters in all these years?” Detective Jacobs bounced his pen on his legal pad.

“Nothing. Just a monthly deposit into a bank account. His way of support, I guess. Or hush money.”

“Okay. We may need to revisit that later. Do you have any idea why he would show up now?”

She shook her head.

“Do you know why anyone would want to kidnap you and your son?”

“No.” Nausea began to churn. “I live a quiet life. Go to work and go home. Spend time with JJ and his activities.”

“No enemies? Make anyone angry recently—a customer perhaps?”

She shook her head again.

“What about JJ?”

Her mouth fell open. “He's a child. He doesn't have any enemies.”

“Trust me—I know it sounds crazy, but we have to check every angle. People do dangerous things for unknown reasons. Is there anyone who would want to hurt him? Any fellow parents or teachers at his school he or you have had problems with?”

“None that I can think of. He has lots of friends, rarely gets into trouble, and makes good grades.”

“Okay, Mr. Lucas.” The detective turned his attention to Reid. “Tell me what happened.”

Quinn sagged in her chair, happy the spotlight was off her.

Reid sat up a little and cleared his throat. “It’s just as Quinn said except, when she kept me from following her, I had to go out the front. I found Joe leaned against the front wall with a stab wound to his abdomen.”

Quinn pinned her arms against her stomach and bent over a little, trying to ease the guilt that had formed. If she’d known how all this would play out, she never would have kept Reid from following. Then maybe, Joe would still be alive. She shivered.

“He told me the other guy had gone around the building,” Reid continued. “I followed. That’s when I met with him as he was trying to kidnap Quinn and JJ. That’s when I saw Joe coming from the other side. He stunned the guy so we could get away.”

Despite what she’d thought about Joe until today, his showing up and helping proved he did care about JJ. Even if it was just a little bit.

“We took their SUV when I heard the gunshots. Here’s the keys. You know how the rest of the story ends.”

And it did for Joe.

Detective Jacobs leaned forward and picked up the keys from the table. “How did you know Joe?”

“He was my mentor. Gave me a job, training, and helped me get my PI license.”

“You’re a PI. I’ll need your details. License number and credentialing.”

Quinn listened as Reid detailed the classes and training he’d done, along with his years working with Joe and eventually branching out.

The more she learned about him, the more her anxiety eased. He’d had an extensive background check and seemed highly sought after in his practice. While he gave a general overview of his case history, he did state that he took client confidentiality seriously and wouldn’t be giving specifics. He had integrity to back what she’d already learned about him.

Detective Jacobs turned back to her. “Ms. Matthews, we don’t have the manpower to station an officer outside your home, but we will increase patrols in your neighborhood.” The detective put his pen down, indicating he was done with his questions. “Is there anywhere else you could stay?”

A pit opened in her stomach. “No. It’s just me and JJ. We live in a duplex, and the only real friend I have is my landlady, who lives in the other half.” They were going to be alone.

“I’ll stay with them,” Reid blurted instantly.

Quinn eyed him warily. What was his game? They’d only just met.

“I mean, if that’s okay with her. Or she could stay with the neighbor, and I could stay in her duplex. That way, she’d be close to home but not there should these guys try again.” He looked from her to Detective Jacobs.

“That’s an idea.” The detective looked at Quinn.

“I’ll talk to Mrs. Stevenson about it,” Quinn said, not committing to the idea. She didn’t really have any other options, though.

“Good. Let’s get you back to the diner and your car,” Detective Jacobs said.

“I left my car at home. We only live a couple of blocks from the diner. I usually walk to work.”

“In that case, I’ll have an officer take you home.”

“My car is down the street from the diner. If your officer wanted to drop us off, I could give them a ride home,” Reid offered.

“We’ll drop you off and then take her home. It wouldn’t hurt to have the officer take a look around the house.” Detective Jacobs left the room.

She turned to Reid. “Thank you again for what you did at the diner.”

“You’re welcome. You don’t have to keep thanking me.” He smiled.

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She’d thank him until the day she died. He’d saved her son.

Detective Jacobs rejoined them, bringing JJ with him.

Ten minutes later, Quinn and JJ sat huddled in the back seat of the cruiser while Reid rode up front. She’d caught Reid stealing glances at them. JJ was leaning into her while she rubbed his arm. A mother’s comfort.

They drove past the diner. Yellow police tape cordoned off the building. A couple of police vehicles lingered. Collecting evidence, no doubt. Quinn took a deep breath, fighting against the memories.

The officer stopped the cruiser at the entrance to the small parking lot where Reid’s car was parked.

“Let me get my car, and I’ll follow you to Quinn’s house,” Reid said.

Quinn didn’t argue. She had accepted that she was going to need all the help she could get. Reid followed the cruiser to her two-story duplex with not much of a front yard. Quinn and JJ got out and stood next to the cruiser.

“If you’ll hand me your keys, I’ll go inside and look around.” The officer held out his hand.

“I don’t have my keys with me. They’re in my purse at the diner, but I have a key hidden under that plant.” She pointed to one of the flowerpots on her porch. He went up the steps and picked up the potted plant, grabbed the key, and then turned to

the front door. The officer fiddled with a note stuck to the door before going inside. It must not have been too important because he left it where it was.

Reid parked his vehicle across the street and sauntered over to where she and JJ stood. “He checking the place?”

“Yes.” Quinn pulled JJ closer. “He said it was just a precaution.”

The officer stepped onto the porch and waved them in. Quinn led the way up the porch steps, and Reid brought up the back.

“Everything looks okay. No sign of a disturbance.” The officer pulled the sticky note off the door and handed it to Quinn, along with her key. “It looks like you missed a delivery.”

“Thank you.” She looked over the note and stuck it in her pocket before sticking her hand out to the officer. “Thank you for checking out the house. It makes me feel a little better.”

He shook her hand. “No problem. Call if you need anything.”

Quinn turned to JJ as the officer headed back to his cruiser. “Why don’t you go inside and turn on the TV? I think today calls for no school.”

His eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Really. Now, go.” She patted his back as he walked into the house.

“Why was Joe here?” She turned to Reid and crossed her arms. She sized him up. He stood about three inches taller than her. Broad shoulders but not muscle bound. He looked like he took care of himself but didn’t spend his life in the gym. She needed answers, and now was the time to get them.

He crossed his arms, matching her stance. “Like I told the detective, he didn’t tell me.”

She searched his face, looking for a hint that he was being dishonest.

“You know everything,” he said. A car drove slowly past the duplex. Reid followed it with his gaze until it disappeared around the corner. “We need to go inside. I don’t like that we’re standing out here in the open.”

She dropped her arms as she looked up and down the street. “Of course. Up until today, I would have thought you were being paranoid.” She turned and walked inside. The thought of her neighborhood and her home not being safe laid heavy on her heart.

Once inside, he shut and locked the door. “Keep the door locked at all times. We don’t know if and when they will strike again. And no more keys hidden outside.”

“They’re going to come back, aren’t they?” She sank into a dining room chair.

Reid looked toward JJ, who had come in and parked himself in front of the TV in the adjoining living room. “I’m afraid they will until they get what they want.”

“I don’t know what they want.” Desperation filled her voice.

“Unfortunately, neither do I. And with Joe gone, the only other people who do are the attackers from the diner.”

“So, it’s up to us to figure it out so we’re not sitting ducks.” Her voice was stronger with that statement.

“This obviously has something to do with Joe. He’s the one that texted me and had me meet him at the diner where you work. Then, he called to tell me to get you and JJ out of there because he knew people were coming.”

She nodded. “But how are I and JJ connected?”

“What’s your relationship with Joe now?”

Quinn looked at her son, who was engrossed in some cartoon. Hadn’t Reid heard her at the police station? “We don’t have a *relationship* now.” She lowered her voice. “Joe was a mistake. But that mistake gave me the two greatest gifts.”

Reid’s brow furrowed, and he started to speak, but before he could say anything, glass shattered in the front room and

something landed on the floor just feet from JJ before bursting into flames.

JJ screamed as flames licked the carpet, following an unknown trail. Quinn jumped from her chair, heart in her throat, and raced for him. Reid beat her to him, scooped him off the floor, and ran back to the safety of the dining area.

He put JJ down. “Do you have a pitcher we can use to douse the flames?”

It took a moment for the words to sink into her brain. “Yes. In the cabinet next to the sink.”

Reid opened the cabinet, retrieved the pitcher, and filled it with water. Quinn knelt in front of JJ and started inspecting him. “Are you hurt?”

“No, Momma.” Little tear tracks lined his cheeks.

Reid passed by her with the pitcher and started to douse the flames. Popping came through the same window, breaking more glass, and bullets slammed into the wall across the room. JJ screamed and jumped into her arms.

“Get down!” Reid threw the pitcher at the flames. “Let’s get out of here before they decide to come in.” He picked up JJ, grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward the sliding glass doors in the dining area.

The glass shattered, sending pieces cascading down the gauzy curtains that covered the sliding door. Reid turned to shield JJ from any flying glass and whatever else may come through the door. He pushed her into the kitchen, out of the line of fire. “They’ve got both exits covered, and we have no way of putting out the fire.”

Her stomach tightened. They were trapped. “What are we going to do?”

Reid untwined JJ’s arms from around his neck and handed him to her. “You and JJ get down low on the ground.”

He was right. The air quality would be better lower to the ground. She set JJ on his feet and told him to lie down.

Reid started opening drawers. Then, the kitchen faucet turned on, and moments later, he was handing her two wet kitchen towels. "Put these over your mouths and noses." He demonstrated with a third towel. "I'm going to try to lure them away from the back door. When you hear the glass break upstairs, count to twenty and then quietly sneak out the back door." He handed her his cell phone. "Call 911 while I'm making my way upstairs."

She handed JJ a towel and grabbed the proffered cell phone. Reid didn't say anything else. He just turned and ran toward the flames. With shaky fingers, she dialed 911.

"911. What's your emergency?" a calm voice asked.

"My name is Quinn Matthews, and I'm at 1232 Willow Lane, Side B. Someone has thrown something through our front room window."

More popping noises came from the front of the duplex. No doubt whoever was watching from outside had seen Reid's shadow pass through the front room. She tried to make herself as small as she could while covering JJ.

"There's a fire, and someone is shooting at us from outside. We can't get out."

"I have dispatched police and fire. How many people are there with you?" the dispatcher asked.

"There are three people in the house." Quinn clenched her fists, fighting the panic that was trying to take control.

"Is there a back door you can get out?"

More shots rang out from beyond the sliding glass doors, as if to reinforce that the door was still being watched.

"We tried, but there's someone shooting at us from there, too." Her throat burned. She wasn't sure whether it was from fear or the smoke. JJ coughed beside her. She reached over and pushed the wet towel back over his mouth and nose. What was taking Reid so long?

"Please help. We're trapped!" she cried into the phone.

Glass shattered on the second floor. Reid had made it.

“We’re going to try to get out,” she told the dispatcher and then put the phone in her pocket.

One.

Two.

She grabbed JJ and stood him up. “Get ready to run. Do as I say.”

More glass shattered upstairs.

Ten. God, let us get out. Keep Reid safe.

Nineteen... Twenty. It was time to go. She tiptoed to the sliding glass door and cautiously peered out. No bullets came whizzing her way. She surveyed the yard and didn’t see anyone. With JJ tucked behind her, she stepped out the door and headed toward Mrs. Stevenson’s side of the duplex.

Sirens sounded in the distance. Her limbs immediately felt lighter. Help was on the way. More gunshots reverberated through the yard, followed by two muffled bangs. Quinn pushed JJ in front of her and shoved him forward. “Run!”

With her body between JJ and the gun. Hopefully, he would be safe. They made it to the edge of the yard, and JJ struggled with the latch on the old wooden fence. The wailing siren grew closer. *Lord, let them make it in time.*

The latch finally released, and the gate flew open. JJ ran ahead as a man came around the corner from the front of the duplex, put his arm out, and caught JJ, keeping him from getting away.

“Let him go!” She lunged at the man with all her might, knocking them all to the ground. She swung her fists, throwing punches at the man lying under her. If she could hold him off just a little longer, the police would be here. “You’re not taking my son. I don’t care who you are or what you want. You’ll never get him.”

A police car squealed to a stop in front of them, and it wasn’t too much longer before she was being pulled off the attacker. Another officer rolled him onto his stomach and cuffed him.

Quinn frantically looked for JJ as a melee of officers arrived on scene. “My son?”

“He’s all right, ma’am. Another officer has taken him to safety.” The officer pointed to where JJ sat with a uniformed woman, his legs dangling out of the back seat of a cruiser.

Quinn didn’t even spare another glance at the man being arrested. She spun to the officer that had helped her up. “Reid Lucas is still in there!”

“I’m down here,” Reid said from her left.

Heat rushed to her face. Reid was the one in cuffs.

CHAPTER THREE

Reid worked to catch his breath after the small struggle with Quinn. He didn't know where her strength came from, but she could have been a linebacker in pro football. The way she'd tackled him when he'd grabbed JJ and then pummeled him. It had to have been adrenaline and the mama bear reflex, but that didn't stop the air from being knocked out of him.

She had started yelling immediately after tackling him and didn't give him a chance to explain until she was pulled away by a police officer.

"No. You've got the wrong guy," Quinn pleaded with the officer that had saved Reid from her defensive attack.

"Ma'am, this is the man you were fighting with when we arrived." The officer raised his eyebrows.

A sheepish grin slid across her face. "I know, but I didn't know who it was. I just saw someone grab my son, and all I knew was I had to protect my baby."

Handcuffs weren't the most comfortable things. They'd be coming off soon enough. The police would get everything worked out. He just needed to be patient.

Ten minutes went by while the police confirmed his identity and what had happened. Then, the cuffs finally came off. Reid rubbed his wrists. It wasn't his first time in cuffs, but it was by far the shortest amount of time he'd been in them, thanks to a past that still haunted him. He shook his head, ridding his mind of painful memories.

He strode over to where Quinn and JJ were seated in an ambulance. The scene had been secured, and now, the firefighters were doing their jobs. "How's everyone doing?" He looked from JJ to Quinn. JJ's face was pale, but he'd quit crying almost immediately after the cavalry arrived. Quinn's

cheeks were tinged pink; strands of hair had escaped her ponytail and danced in the breeze.

“No worse for the wear.” She stood, looked up at him, and slowly reached toward his hair. “You’ve got grass in your hair.” She plucked a piece and showed it to him.

“You do, too.” He copied her actions, not allowing himself to linger and test the softness. He pulled a longer blade and showed it to her. “I believe it’s your fault, too.”

Her cheeks grew pinker as she looked down at her feet. “Sorry about that.”

A chuckle rumbled from his gut. “It’s all right. I understand the mama bear reaction.”

“Thank you for helping us get out.” Her pale green eyes started to glisten.

He had done and seen some things that would have made any other man tuck tail and run, but there was one thing he couldn’t stand to see, and that was a crying woman. Not typical tears from pain or tears to get her way but tears that were connected to her heart.

“Don’t mention it.” He squeezed her shoulder.

“Really—”

“It seems that the two of you are at the center of another disturbance today.” Detective Jacobs moseyed up to them, withdrawing a notepad from the breast pocket of his department-issued blazer.

“I think I speak for Quinn when I say I wish we weren’t.”

Quinn nodded in agreement.

“Okay. Tell me what happened.”

Reid relayed everything that had happened since the officer had dropped Quinn off. He even gave the make, model, and partial license plate number of the car that had driven by. It may be unrelated, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

He finished by telling him about going upstairs and breaking the windows before sticking sheets out the windows

to draw the attackers away from the back door.

Detective Jacobs jotted notes. “Did either of you see anyone?”

Quinn shook her head.

“I didn’t see them,” Reid said, “but I think their car was parked on the street behind the house. Once the sirens got close, I heard two doors shut and tires squealing.”

“It seems these guys have graduated from attempted kidnapping to attempted murder.”

Reid watched as the color drained from Quinn’s face.

“Murder?” She sank onto the edge of the ambulance. She must be connecting everything. Going through the ordeal was one thing, but now, she’d had time to digest it. Detective Jacob’s words made it real.

“Do you know anyone that would want you dead?” Detective Jacobs looked at Quinn.

She shook her head again.

“What about you?” His attention turned to Reid. “You run across enemies in your profession, I’m sure. Anyone want you dead?”

“Not that I can think of off the top of my head.” Reid crossed his arms over his chest.

“And neither of you can think of a reason to target Ms. Matthews?”

Reid waited and watched Quinn. She closed her eyes, probably searching her memory, sighed, and opened them. “No.”

A fireman joined their group. “The fire’s out, but there’s significant damage to the front room. You’ll want to get the windows boarded up and find somewhere else to stay until you can get an insurance company out here.”

Quinn’s shoulders sank. “I’ll let my landlady know. Thank you.” She smiled weakly as the fireman walked away.

“What do you mean I can’t go in there?” A high-pitched voice broke the silence. “That’s my house smoldering.”

“Oh, that’s her now.” Quinn craned her neck.

“Let her in!” Detective Jacobs bellowed.

Quinn pushed past the officers and headed straight toward the older lady, who had her arms outstretched like a mother reaching for her baby. Quinn just walked in and all but collapsed against the woman. “I’m so sorry.”

Mrs. Stevenson patted Quinn’s back. “What’s this about, sweetheart?”

“It’s all my fault.” Quinn pulled back and looked the woman in the eyes.

“Now, dear. I’m sure it was an accident. Nothing my insurance won’t cover.” She patted Quinn’s cheek.

“No. Someone set the house on fire. They were trying to get to me and JJ.”

“Why would they do that?”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea,” Quinn mumbled.

“Ma’am,” Detective Jacobs interjected. “If I can get your information, I can get out of the way.”

“Of course. Of course.” Mrs. Stevenson scuttled to stand next to Detective Jacobs.

They started talking, but their words faded. Quinn wrapped her arms around her midsection and gave the tiniest of shivers. If Reid hadn’t had control, he’d have wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to his chest, warming her with his strength and determination, making sure she knew she was safe with him.

But after years as an unwanted, he’d learned to keep to himself. So, he leaned against a police cruiser, crossing his arms over his chest and his legs at the ankles, rooting himself to one spot.

Quinn stood rooted to her spot, staring off into the distance, no doubt sorting through various emotions and

questions, while Mrs. Stevenson talked with the detective.

“Momma?”

She dropped her arms from her midsection and shook them out as she stepped back to the ambulance, where JJ sat. “Yes, baby?” She sat at the ambulance entrance and wrapped an arm around her son.

“What’s going to happen now?”

“I’m not really sure right now.” She squeezed him. “The police and firemen are going to finish their jobs here, and then hopefully, we’ll be able to go in and get some things, and then, we’ll find somewhere else to stay. Maybe a hotel.”

“With a swimming pool?” Excitement filled his voice.

Poor kid. He didn’t understand the gravity of the situation they were in, which would be good in the long run, at least for him emotionally. In his mind, they were on an adventure. But something as fun and innocent as a public swimming pool wasn’t a good idea until they figured out what was going on. Reid took a breath to interject and list the ways that was a bad idea.

“We’ll see,” Quinn said before he could speak. The universal response of mothers when the answer was probably no.

“No. No. You won’t be staying in a hotel.” Mrs. Stevenson stepped over and ruffled JJ’s hair. “How about a cabin in the woods?”

JJ’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. “Really?”

Where could they get a cabin? Isolation seemed safe at the moment, but then, would they be too isolated? Being hard to find when hiding was a positive, but if they were found by the wrong person, being hard to find could be tragic. He’d still take the cabin over a hotel. Even if it didn’t have a pool.

“Of course. You can stay in my cabin over by the lake.”

“You have a cabin?” Quinn asked.

“I do. It was my husband’s old hunting cabin.” She perched on the other side of JJ.

“Where are you going to stay? You can’t stay here. What if they come back?” Panic filled Quinn’s face.

“Don’t worry about me,” Mrs. Stevenson said. “I think it might be time for me to go visit my son.”

Quinn’s face relaxed.

“The detective told me that he thinks you’ll be able to go in and get some stuff in a while. Until then, why don’t we go over to my place?” She lowered her voice and leaned closer to Quinn. “I don’t know about this young man or that handsome fellow standing over there watching you, but I’m hungry.” She nodded in Reid’s direction.

She hadn’t lowered her voice enough, though. He wasn’t sure what to make of Mrs. Stevenson’s comment. Did she find him attractive? That was weird. She was probably old enough to be his grandmother. Did Quinn find him attractive? His neck heated as she gave him the once-over. She met his gaze and jerked her attention to Mrs. Stevenson. Obviously, she was rattled being caught checking him out.

“That sounds like a good idea to me.” She picked up JJ from the ambulance and looked over to Reid. “Mrs. Stevenson has invited us to her part of the duplex to wait on the police to do their thing, and then, we can pack a bag.”

“I think we should take her up on the cabin offer.” He didn’t budge. “It’s not connected to you or me on paper, so it will be hard to find. These people are going to look for us anywhere they can find us.”

She studied him.

“Look. Two attacks in one day prove they aren’t going to stop until their job—whatever it is—is done. Disappearing will also give us time to figure out who they are and why they’re after you. If we can do that, then we could put a stop to all of this.”

“Momma, are they really going to try to hurt us again?” JJ whimpered in her ear.

“Oh, baby. I’m not going to let that happen.”

Reid had no doubt she would give her life for her son, but he would make sure it didn’t come to that. “I’ll be there to help, too.” He patted JJ’s back.

“JJ, how about you come help me cook lunch and we let your momma and—” Mrs. Stevenson eyed Reid.

“Oh, Edna Stevenson, this is Reid Lucas. A... friend,” Quinn said. “Reid, this is Edna Stevenson.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Reid extended his hand to Mrs. Stevenson.

“Likewise.” She shook his hand and then reached for JJ. “Come on. I’ve got some cookies to bake, and I sure could use some help.”

JJ wiggled in Quinn’s arms. “Can I?”

Quinn set JJ down. “Yes, but wash your hands with soap and water first.”

“Yippee!” He grabbed the older lady’s hand and walked toward her duplex.

“Why don’t we go sit on the back porch and try to figure some things out?” Reid motioned toward the porch. Quinn fell in step behind Mrs. Stevenson, and he followed.

Reid’s throat itched, and he coughed. He must have got more smoke than he thought. Quinn walked through the living room and into the kitchen, grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge, and turned to Reid. “Here. Let’s go outside and talk.”

Reid accepted the water and followed Quinn through the sliding glass doors, then closed them behind him. They had a lot to talk about, but he wasn’t sure how much time they had. Once the police finished what they needed next door, they would need to pack bags and get out of the area quickly.

He opened the bottle of water and gulped half of it. The cold water soothed his itchy throat. He’d been careful while running through the house, but he’d still managed to inhale quite a bit of smoke.

Reid's plan had worked. Everyone was safe for the time being. He needed to figure out how to make it a permanent thing, though. And answers to his questions would start with the beautiful woman sitting before him.

"Before that thing came flying through the front window, you had said Joe Lockhart was responsible for two of the greatest things in your life. Is there another child somewhere? Should we be worried about his or her safety?"

Quinn drank from her own bottle but only a sip. She shook her head as she set her bottle down. "No. JJ's my only child. The two greatest gifts I got from Joe was my son and my salvation."

"How is that?" Reid wasn't all that familiar with religion, but he was pretty certain a person couldn't save another, at least not spiritually.

She fidgeted with the label on the bottle of water. "When I told him I was pregnant, he told me he was married. He didn't want anything to do with me or the child I was carrying. Turns out, my mother didn't, either. She'd been after me for years to join her at church. It wasn't something I wanted, and her reaction to my pregnancy was exactly the reason."

"And that led to you finding Jesus?" This was probably an intriguing story, but they didn't have time to delve much deeper.

"Joe was a catalyst." She finally succeeded in peeling the label free.

"And he hasn't been in touch since you told him you were pregnant?" he asked.

"Not really. I mean, he's never met JJ. He's never called or anything. He's been sending money since I told him, though. I guess he thought money would solve the issue."

How noble of him. Joe had always seemed to be a straightforward kind of guy, but he hadn't struck Reid as the type of man to abandon his child. Especially since he and his wife, Victoria, hadn't been able to have children of their own.

"He's never said anything to you about JJ?"

He looked at her delicate features. There was no hope or expectation written on her face. She was simply asking a question.

“No.” He had expected some sort of change in her demeanor. Sadness, maybe. But nothing changed. It was as if he had told her the sun was yellow. She already knew the answer.

“So, he asked you to meet him at my diner and then called to have you get us out but didn’t tell you anything else?”

“No.” He wished Joe had told him, had said something.

“Okay. I’ve not heard from him in any way other than the money he provides to help take care of JJ.”

“Did he send a note or anything with his last payment?” Joe hadn’t contacted him until this morning, so it was a long shot he’d been able to give Quinn a heads-up. But still, if he’d had even an inkling, maybe he’d said something.

She shook her head. “He never sends notes. The money is direct deposited into a bank account he had set up. I’ve had no contact with him since I told him about JJ. Sometimes, I think it’s hush money.”

“No emails or texts?” How could a man completely abandon his own flesh and blood?

“Nothing.” She slammed the bottle down on the small patio table.

He reached over and squeezed her forearm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She placed her free hand over his, dipped her head a little, and looked him in the eyes. “No. I’m sorry. I let my frustrations get the best of me.”

They sat in silence, watching each other for a few seconds before she pulled her hand away and shook his from her forearm.

He missed her hand. It was like her touch calmed something deep inside him. His pains were eased, and all he could focus on was the warmth of her hand.

“What about you? Did Joe email you?” She picked up her bottle and took another drink.

“Not as of this morning. I checked my email while waiting at the diner. We both know he wouldn’t have been able to afterward.”

She winced. The sliding glass door opened behind them. They both turned to face Mrs. Stevenson.

“Excuse me, dear.” She wiped her hands on an apron she must have donned after he and Quinn had stepped outside. “The police are ready for you.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Quinn stood from her seat at the patio table and walked on unsteady legs to the front door. The police were done and would be letting her in to get stuff. She wasn't all that sure she wanted to.

"Ms. Matthews." Detective Jacobs nodded as she met him at the front door. "We're done with the house for now, and we're fixing to seal it up but wanted to give you a chance to grab some things before we did."

"Thank you." She swallowed around the lump in her throat.

"Follow behind me and watch your step. We've got a pathway marked out for foot traffic."

The smell of smoke mixed with burnt wood still lingered in the air. She crossed the threshold of her house, and her gaze traveled to the spot where JJ had been when the window broke. The carpet was charred where he had been sitting. Her son had come so close to being hit. Their lives could be completely different right now. JJ could be fighting for his life, or he could even be dead. Her knees buckled, almost sending her to the floor.

A warm hand rested on her shoulder and gave it a small squeeze. "He's okay," Reid whispered behind her. He must have known where her mind had gone. The what-ifs. She couldn't live in a world of what-ifs. They would tear her down. The important thing was that JJ was unharmed and sitting next door with Mrs. Stevenson.

She took in the living room. The damage was extensive. Burn marks raced up the wall and covered the ceiling. Her couch was nothing more than a charred wooden frame. Soot covered the remaining portions of the downstairs.

She took a deep breath, calming her racing heart, and followed Detective Jacobs. He led the way to the base of the stairs. The fire had been contained to the living room. The only signs of the terror that had been in the house hours earlier were the smell of smoke and broken windows.

“Get what you need for a couple of days. I’m not sure how long until you’ll be able to get back in.” Detective Jacobs stopped in the hallway.

She went to her room first, while Reid stayed in the hall. She grabbed a duffel bag from the closet and packed the essentials—a first aid kit, clothes, and toiletries to last for a few days. The last thing she picked up from her room was her Bible. She placed it on top and zipped her bag. Now, for JJ’s stuff. She crossed the hall, squeezing past Detective Jacobs and Reid, who had been having a steady, quiet conversation.

“Quinn.” Reid stopped her with a hand to her forearm. “Let me take that.” He reached for her duffel bag.

She handed it over. It wouldn’t hurt for him to hold it while she was busy with JJ’s room. Following the same pattern in JJ’s room, she grabbed several pairs of clothes—more than she had grabbed for herself. Boys could be messy. She packed a few books, toys, and DVDs to keep JJ occupied. As she was leaving the room, her gaze settled on JJ’s favorite stuffed animal. He always slept with the stuffed alligator. She couldn’t leave without it. The stuffed animal hugged to her chest, she stepped out of the room and joined the men. “I’m ready.”

They walked down the stairs and out to the porch in single file. She turned to shut and lock her front door like she always did when leaving but remembered she wouldn’t be the one locking up.

“Thank you,” Quinn said.

“You’re welcome. I’ve got your contact information. I’ll let you know if anything develops and when you’ll be able to get back in the house.” Detective Jacobs held out his hand. She shook it.

“You’ve also got my number,” Reid added as he shook the detective’s hand.

“Yes, sir.”

She walked back into Mrs. Stevenson’s house. JJ was seated at the dining room table with a cup of milk and a plate full of cookies situated in front of him. He looked up and caught sight of her carrying his stuffed alligator, and his countenance brightened. He was a little self-conscious about needing the stuffed animal to sleep.

“Sit, sit. Eat a few cookies.” Mrs. Stevenson pulled a chair out for her. “I’ll run upstairs to get the keys to the cabin.”

Quinn took the proffered chair and reached for a cookie. Melted chocolate oozed from the bite, and gooey chocolate dripped onto her chin. Chocolate chip cookies straight from the oven were the best. She used her index finger to wipe the chocolate from her chin.

Reid sat across from her, next to JJ. “That good, huh?”

She licked the chocolate from her finger—she never wasted chocolate. “Better. Try one.”

“Yeah, try one,” JJ echoed. “Mrs. Stevenson let me do all the mixing.”

“Then, I’m sure they’re good.” Reid grabbed his own cookie and ate it a little more gracefully than she had hers.

Quinn studied him. He had dark brown hair, long enough for him to run his fingers through on top. Bright blue eyes contrasted with the five o’clock shadow that framed his square jaw. He was rugged and handsome. He wasn’t muscular like the actors in the movies, but he was fit. He emanated strength.

His gaze connected with hers. Heat started at the base of her neck and rose to her cheeks. He gave a small smile. Butterflies swarmed in her stomach. Attraction should be the furthest thing from her mind right now. She tamped it down; she didn’t need a man right now. The only man in her life was JJ. He was the center of her world and would stay that way.

“Here we go,” Mrs. Stevenson sing-songed as she came down the stairs. She was carrying a large pile of blankets, pillows, and towels.

Quinn jumped up and met her at the base of the stairs. “Let me help.”

Mrs. Stevenson handed over the stack. “The cabin has been shut up for a while. I imagine all the linens there will be a bit dusty. These will do while you wash the others.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Quinn set the pile on the couch next to the front door, where Reid had dropped their bags.

Mrs. Stevenson held out a key to Reid. “The address is on the key tag there.” Then, she turned to Quinn. “Now then, Quinn, let’s gather a few groceries for you. I’ll be leaving soon. No reason to keep it here and let it go to waste.”

“You don’t have to do all of this.” Quinn followed Mrs. Stevenson into the kitchen.

“I know I don’t have to. I want to. Besides, I won’t be here to eat it.” She opened a drawer and withdrew several plastic sacks from the local grocery store. “I know you’ve probably been asked this many times today, but do you have any idea who is doing this?” She pulled some boxes out of the cabinet and put them in the sack.

“No. I don’t. I wish I did. I hate that I’m uprooting you. You can’t even stay in your own home.” Quinn squeezed her eyes shut, holding back tears.

“The reason I’m leaving isn’t the best, but it’s good for me. I need to go see my son. I haven’t seen him or my grandkids in a while.” She handed Quinn a couple of sandwich bags. “Go pack up those cookies to take with you.”

Mrs. Stevenson’s cheery disposition at going to see her son didn’t dampen the guilt that was eating at Quinn.

“That should hold you over for a couple days.” Mrs. Stevenson put four sacks on the kitchen table, then grabbed Quinn’s hand. “I’ve got to get my bags packed and get on the road soon. You three should go on before it gets dark. You’ll want to air the cabin out a bit.”

“Come on, JJ,” Quinn said. “We need to get going.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He shoved a whole cookie in his mouth and took a large gulp of milk. Quinn couldn’t help but smile at him.

“I’m going to carry this stuff out to the car,” Reid said as he started gathering the items piled by the door.

“Thank you.” Quinn turned to Mrs. Stevenson and gave her a hug. “And thank you.”

Quinn and JJ followed Reid to the car. “Get in while I load this.”

They did as he said. Quinn wasn’t too excited about being out in the open, even if a squad car still sat on the curb, waiting for the last fire engine to finish packing its equipment. After putting everything in the trunk, Reid climbed into the driver’s seat and plugged the address on the key tag into his phone. “Let’s get to the cabin.”

She looked at her hands folded in her lap and prayed.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll keep you two safe.”

She looked up at him and studied his eyes. “I believe you.” She didn’t know why, but she did. But God was her ultimate protector.

He turned right onto a silent street. She turned in her seat to face him. “Don’t we need to stop and get your stuff first?” She’d been thinking only of herself and JJ. Shame flooded her. Reid was putting his life on hold—and in danger—for them.

“No. I don’t live here, so when Joe called, I packed a bag and drove down. Everything I need is already in the trunk. It’s almost a four-hour drive. I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, when Joe texted. I packed a bag and hit the road within thirty minutes.”

“Okay.” Quinn turned toward the back seat to make sure JJ was buckled up properly. She’d grabbed the booster seat from her car, and he’d insisted on buckling himself.

Reid looked in the rearview mirror, then back at the road in front of them. Seconds later, he was back to staring at the

rearview mirror. He gripped the steering wheel and pressed the accelerator. “Quinn,” he said quietly. He split his attention between the road ahead and the car behind them.

Panic crawled up her spine. She glanced behind them and then back at him. “Are we being followed?”

“I’m not sure. I remember seeing that car parked a block down from your house, and now, it’s behind us. It could be anything.” He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. “I’ve sped up, and he’s been keeping pace. I’m going to make a quick turn up ahead and see if he follows. Hold on.”

The car behind them slowed and made its own sudden turn in the opposite direction. Quinn let out a big breath. “Just a false alarm.”

He pulled to a stop at the last traffic light out of town. A car pulled up in the right turn lane next to them. The windows were too dark to see inside.

“Come on.” Reid looked up and down the intersecting street. A car was heading their direction from the right. The car next to them hadn’t turned yet. Reid looked at her—no, past her—then stomped on the gas. Tires squealed as a loud pop sounded. She screamed, unsure of what was happening but knowing it wasn’t good.

Reid continued to drive at an alarming speed, but all Quinn could do was stare at a small hole in her window surrounded by spiderweb cracks. Something had come through it. *A bullet?* Everything went silent as the world started to spin.

“Quinn,” Reid said, panic in his voice.

She looked at him, then she twisted to check on JJ. He was lying in the back seat. Other than scared, he looked fine, too.

“Are you okay?” Reid glanced at her and then back at the road.

Am I okay? It was hard to tell. Physically, nothing hurt. She pulled the visor down and checked her face and neck. No signs of injury.

She once again turned to look at JJ. “Are you okay, buddy?”

He nodded. “Are you?”

“Yes. I am.”

“Are you sure?” His face crinkled with more tears.

She drew her eyebrows together. “Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because there’s a hole in your seat. It wasn’t there before.” He pointed to the headrest.

Breath whooshed out of her lungs as she turned and surveyed the headrest. Sure enough. There was a hole in it matching the one from the window. She twisted in the other direction and found an identical hole on the side by the window. A bullet had entered her window and gone through her headrest. She followed the trajectory and saw another hole in the back seat. She turned to face Reid. They needed to get to the police station.

Before she could say anything, she was jarred violently, and her head hit the window. Everything went black.

It was dark, her eyes were closed, and everything hurt. Every bump the car hit reverberated in her head.

Reid let out an expletive beside her. He shook her shoulder. “Quinn.”

His loud voice only increased the pounding in her head. “Watch your language,” she admonished as best as she could. “And please, don’t yell.”

“Thank God you’re okay,” Reid responded more quietly.

Cursing in one breath and praising God in the next? She didn’t want JJ learning those words—nor thinking it was okay to mingle the two.

JJ. She sat up fast and twisted around. Dizziness swept over her. She closed her eyes. Once her head stopped spinning, she opened them. *JJ* lay exactly like he had moments before. It didn't seem possible that he could have got any paler than he was before, but he had.

"Pull over," she said to Reid. She needed to hold her baby. The car never slowed. She looked to Reid. His jaw was clenched.

"I need you to pull over," she said a little more forcefully.

"We can't right now." He released the steering wheel and then squeezed it again, his knuckles turning white from the pressure. "We were rammed by another car. It knocked us around and you out. We can't stop until I know we're safe."

She longed to hold *JJ*, to assure him it was all going to be okay. Even if she didn't know whether it would. God had a plan, and whether it worked like she wanted it to or not, everything would work out according to His plan. She just prayed His didn't involve any more people dying.

She reached back and squeezed *JJ*'s knee. "We're okay, baby."

As she turned back around, she caught a glimpse of Reid. He sat stoically. His clenched jaw was the only thing showing he was feeling anything at all. She put a hand on his bicep. It twitched at her touch but relaxed a moment later. While his arm muscles relaxed, his face didn't. His gaze bounced from the road in front of them to the rearview mirror and back.

Heat consumed her, and sweat formed on her forehead. Her mouth began to water as nausea roiled in her stomach. "I'm going to be sick." She threw her hand over her mouth and willed her stomach to calm.

"Here." Reid handed her a large plastic cup he'd pulled out of the cup holder.

She barely had the lid off before she heaved. Her stomach felt better, but she was still on fire.

He took a hard left turn, jarring her and increasing the painful pressure in her head. She closed her eyes again,

praying the pain and nausea would ease. The car stopped, and then, the driver's side door opened and closed. She opened her eyes. He had pulled the car under an awning. Beside the car were sliding glass doors with the hospital emblem painted on them. Reid came jogging out, followed closely by two people in scrubs, one pushing a wheelchair.

He opened her door. "She lost consciousness for about a minute, and she just vomited," he said to the nurse who bent down in front of her.

"I'm fine. Just dizzy and a pounding headache." She looked at Reid. "We need to go to the police station."

He shrugged. "You need medical attention. The police can come to us." He opened the back door. "Come on, little buddy. Let's take you in and get you checked out, too."

Quinn's heart melted a little. Reid was taking such good care of them.

"Do you have any neck or back pain?" the nurse asked.

She shook her head, making it spin again. She raised her hand and pressed it to her head. "Just an awful headache."

"Don't move your head." The nurse started to put a cervical collar around her neck. "This is just precautionary. Okay. Can you get out and have a seat in the wheelchair?" The nurse reached across her and unbuckled the seat belt.

"Yes, ma'am." Quinn turned and stood.

The nurse grabbed her hand and helped her sit. The other nurse was busy talking to JJ. He clung to Reid. She'd never seen him cling to anyone else so tightly.

The nurses escorted them to an empty room. The waiting room at the hospital wasn't too busy. She would've felt bad if patients had been waiting and she'd been rushed to a room.

They spent the next couple of hours being checked. Detective Jacobs showed up and asked some of the same questions from earlier. Most of which neither she nor Reid could answer. Reid described the attack and gave the best

description he could of their attacker. The detective had the car towed, and it would be used as evidence.

The doctor gave them the all-clear to leave. JJ was fine. No injuries—just scared witless. She, on the other hand, would be sore from the jarring and had suffered a slight concussion. She'd been given some pain pills and muscle relaxers, filled by the hospital pharmacy.

Reid walked beside her, carrying a sleeping JJ. She had wanted to carry him out, but Reid had insisted. He didn't want her to have a dizzy spell and drop him.

“What about a car?” How were they going to go anywhere? The only car they had was now in police impound.

“I called a rental agency and had one delivered while you were gone for testing. I also requested they throw in a new booster seat.” He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and pushed a button, making a large SUV parked at the curb honk and flash its lights.

She turned and raised an eyebrow.

“If someone hits us again, I want us to be well protected, and you're not supposed to use a booster seat after it's been in a wreck.”

She saw the logic in that. He opened the front door for her, then positioned JJ in the back seat and helped him buckle up.

Pain shot across her back as she reached for her seat belt. She let out a small gasp. The amount of time in the emergency room had been enough for the adrenaline to wear off and her muscles to tighten. She took a deep breath, bracing herself for pain, and reached up, only to have a hand push hers back down.

“Let me help.” Reid grabbed the seat belt and leaned across her to click it. She caught a whiff of something tangy under the smoke smell from the fire earlier. She inhaled, trying to figure out what the wonderful smell was.

Reid pulled back quickly and stood, concern filling his eyes. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

Her cheeks grew hot. She'd been sniffing him, and he'd caught it. "No. You didn't."

He looked her in the eyes, his gaze steady and intense. It felt like he was staring into her soul.

"Let's get you buckled, then." He broke the connection and leaned across her. She was careful to keep her breathing normal, but she could still catch hints of something. Whatever it was, she'd like to know what cologne lingered beneath the smoke. She was addicted.

CHAPTER FIVE

While Reid waited for tests to be done on Quinn, he'd plugged the address into the GPS and found the way to the cabin from the hospital. Now, he followed a series of roads that led to the outskirts of town. What he was sure would have normally been a twenty-minute drive turned into nearly forty-five minutes. He'd taken a series of turns, driven in circles, and crossed the town at least twice, making sure no one was following them.

Satisfied they were safe, he navigated to the cabin. Quinn and JJ were asleep when they pulled in. The sun had set long ago, and the cabin was in a dense forest. The road, lined with trees on both sides, opened to a small bare patch of land where the cabin sat.

The headlights shone on the cabin as he pulled up. It had probably seen better days, but it didn't look too terrible. Weeds had invaded the old flower beds that lined the walkway up to the porch. The windows were dusty, so he couldn't see much inside. Mrs. Stevenson had been right—the place was a mess.

He looked at Quinn, her head leaned against the window. Her chest rose and fell in a steady pattern. He didn't want to wake her. She looked so peaceful, but she'd sleep better in a bed. He gently shook her. "Quinn."

She stirred and snuggled a little deeper into the seat. He shook her again. "Quinn. We're here."

Her head turned in his direction, and she slowly opened her eyes. She sat up and stretched, grimacing.

"I'm going to go inside and check the cabin and get some lights turned on. You and JJ stay in the car, okay?" While he hoped no one knew where they'd decided to go and there wasn't an ambush waiting for them, one could never be too careful.

She nodded and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

He dug the key out of his pocket and exited the vehicle. The porch step creaked as he put his full weight on it. The porch was covered in dirt, and dried leaves were scattered about. He unlocked the front door and opened it slowly, then groped along the wall until he found a light switch and flipped it on. The room was instantly cast in bright light. He stood in a large open area. On the left, a small hall led to what he assumed would be a bedroom and bathroom.

A large overstuffed couch and chair were situated in front of an old stone fireplace in the middle of the living area. Beyond that, there was a small table and four chairs. The far wall was lined with cabinets interrupted by a sink and small stove. A refrigerator stood next to the back door.

He stepped inside and walked to the hall, satisfied the common area was safe. He turned down the hallway—a bathroom lay to his right, and a door to his left led to a bedroom. He checked both rooms and then went back out to get Quinn and JJ.

Quinn was still seated in the passenger seat when he stepped onto the porch. He waved her in as he descended the steps. He climbed back into the SUV and shut off the motor. “All looks well. Go ahead and go inside, and I’ll get JJ.”

She unbuckled and twisted in her seat, grimacing again. “JJ. Wake up, buddy. We’re here.”

The boy had almost the same reaction Quinn had had a few minutes ago.

“Come on, big guy,” Reid added.

JJ groaned and opened his eyes.

“Let’s go inside and get ready for bed,” Quinn coerced from the front seat.

JJ unbuckled and opened his door. Quinn did the same. She walked around and met him in front of the SUV.

Since Quinn had taken care of getting JJ into the cabin, he’d carry in their bags. The crash earlier had damaged the

rear of his car and left the trunk gaping open. He'd been able to grab their bags, the groceries, and the extra blankets before the car was towed.

Quinn and JJ weren't in the main room when he entered. No doubt they were checking their new accommodations. He took his load to the couch and separated the things. The bathroom door was shut, and the toilet flushed as he entered the small hallway.

Quinn stood by the bed, looking at a painting hanging on the wall. He dropped their bags next to the dresser and set the blankets on the bed. "Let's get the bed made so you guys can get some rest." JJ joined them, and they worked silently as a team.

"Get your PJs on," Quinn directed JJ. "I'm going to use the restroom, and I'll be right back."

Reid went out to get the groceries he had salvaged from the car. The cold and frozen foods would be no good by now, but they still had some food and other supplies.

He got the food put away while Quinn and JJ got ready for bed. While he was outside, he had grabbed her prescription. He retrieved a bottle of water and the pills, took them to their room, and knocked on the closed bedroom door.

"Come in."

He entered the room. "I brought you a bottle of water and your pain pills."

She smiled weakly. "Thank you. I could definitely use one right now." She rubbed the back of her neck.

JJ already lay covered in bed, eyes closed.

"It doesn't take him long to fall asleep, does it?" Reid nodded at the sleeping child.

"Makes me jealous sometimes. His head hits the pillow and he's out. Me, on the other hand—I lay in bed and think of a billion different things before finally falling asleep."

"I know the feeling." He looked at the window. "I want to check that and make sure it's locked." Satisfied it was secure,

he backed out of the room. “Get some rest, and we’ll talk in the morning.”

Reid closed the door and stepped into the restroom. He needed a shower. He reeked of smoke. It couldn’t be too bad since Quinn had practically sniffed him after leaving the hospital. *What had that been about?* At first, he thought he had hurt her, but the pink tinge to her cheeks clued him in that she was embarrassed about something. The only thing he could think of was the sniffing.

It was probably the concussion. People don’t normally sniff each other. Especially after the day they’d had. He washed his face and brushed his teeth. That would have to do until morning. Right now, he was exhausted, but Quinn and JJ came first. He walked through the small area, making sure all windows and doors were secure. Then, he turned off the lights, gave his eyes time to adjust to the darkness, and peeked out the window. No one was going to get to Quinn and JJ tonight.

He fluffed a pillow on the edge of the couch, then sat down and made himself comfortable.

A few hours later, a noise startled him awake. He sat up, eyes trained on the window. He’d left the porch light on. No shadows danced in the light. He stood, crept to the window, pushed aside the edge of the curtain, and peered out. Everything looked just as it had earlier.

There it was again. A groan. It came from behind him. He raced across the living room and sprang over the couch. Quinn and JJ were in danger.

The door was shut. He didn’t bother knocking—just flung it open, prepared to fight. But the room was empty except for a sleeping Quinn and JJ.

Quinn groaned and moved fitfully. Her pain pill must have worn off. He stepped into the hallway, reached into the bathroom, and turned on the light. It would give him enough light to see what he was doing. He checked the time—4:45.

Back in Quinn’s room, he got a pill from the bottle and sat on the edge of her bed. “Quinn.” He gently shook her.

A grimace contorted her face, but she didn't open her eyes.

"Quinn, sweetheart."

Her eyes opened.

"What?" She blinked a couple of times. "The doctor said you didn't have to wake me up." Irritation filled her tone.

Reid bit back a laugh. "You were moaning in your sleep. I got you a pain pill."

"Thank you." Her grimace softened as she took the pill and bottle of water. After swallowing the pill, she handed the water back to him, rolled over, and cuddled up to a sleeping JJ.

Reid left the room, leaving the door open in case pain woke her again. He tried to make himself comfortable and go back to sleep. After an hour of tossing and turning, dozing and waking, he'd had enough. He remembered seeing some coffee in one of the bags last night, so he rooted around the kitchen, looking for a coffeepot.

Jackpot. He found an old pot under the sink. He washed the glass pot and started some coffee. He wasn't sure whether Quinn was a coffee drinker, so he made a larger pot than normal.

The pot gurgled and emitted the last drops of coffee as a drowsy JJ emerged from the bedroom.

"Hey, kiddo." The boy's hair stuck up in different directions. "Did you sleep good?"

JJ nodded and shuffled to the kitchen area, plopped a stuffed alligator on the table, then sat in a chair and lay his head on the alligator.

Must not be a morning person. Was Quinn?

Reid found his thoughts wandering to Quinn more than they usually would to a woman he'd just met. It was because of the commotion in the last twenty-four hours. That was all.

Wasn't it?

He poured himself a cup of coffee. “Want some?” He nudged the boy’s shoulder, trying to get a rise out of him. All he did was rock his head back and forth on his stuffed animal. “What about some breakfast?”

JJ sat straight up and vigorously nodded. Maybe, he was a morning person after all.

“Okay. So, we have some cereal but no milk—or peanut butter sandwiches.”

JJ rubbed his chin. “I want a peanut butter sandwich. Do you know how to make them right?”

There was more than one way to make a sandwich? “I think so, but why don’t you tell me how just to make sure.”

Reid chatted with JJ as he followed his instructions on how to make a sandwich. Turns out, the best way to eat a peanut butter sandwich is without crust and cut a certain way.

“Thank you,” JJ said as he put his plate on the kitchen table. “What about you?”

“I’m not hungry.” Reid rarely ate breakfast.

“You need to eat. Mom says it’s the most important meal of the day.” He took a big bite.

“Oh, it is, is it? Well, I guess I should, then.” Reid made himself a sandwich and joined the boy at the table.

Quinn emerged from the bedroom a few minutes later.

“Momma—”

“Quinn—” They spoke in unison.

“Mr. Reid made me a peanut butter sandwich.” JJ smiled before picking up his breakfast and taking a bite.

“You didn’t have to do that.” She pulled out a chair and sat. Reid was on her right and JJ on her left. “You could have woken me up. I would have done it.”

“It was no problem. I was already awake.” He smiled. “You needed the rest.” Reid stood and threw his plate in the trash can.

Quinn looked at her son. “JJ, did you say ‘Thank you’?”

His mouth was full, so he only nodded.

“He did.” Reid started preparing a sandwich for her.

“He made it just like you do.” JJ squirmed in his seat as he reached for his bottle of water.

“Is that so?” Quinn tilted her head and studied her son.

“No crusts and cut into two triangles.” Reid set the plate in front of her and grabbed a bottle of water for her before taking his seat again.

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s not the best breakfast, but since the accident and subsequent ER visit, I thought it would be best to chuck the cold food.”

“I agree.” She took a bite.

She was seated so the bruise that had formed on her temple was right in his line of vision. Purple and blue marred her beautiful face. Reid reached toward her and tucked her hair behind her ear. “You’ve got a nasty bruise.” His fingers trailed down her cheek to her chin. He gently tilted her head away from him, inspecting her battle wounds. “Let’s get you some ice.” He stood again, disgusted with himself for letting her get the bruise.

“Here you go.” He placed the makeshift ice pack in front of her. He’d used one of the plastic grocery sacks.

She picked it up and placed it to her temple. “What time did you give me a pain pill?”

“It was almost five.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“You didn’t. I was already awake.” She’d been through enough. She didn’t need to worry about him. Even if her concern for him made his chest feel light.

She placed her hand on his forearm. “After everything that happened last night, I didn’t even ask if you were okay.

Were you in pain?"

"It's understandable." He patted her hand. "You'd had a rough day. And no, I wasn't in pain. Sleep eludes me more often than not."

"Still, I'm sorry."

"I'm fine." He cleared his throat and looked away.

"Mom, can I go outside and explore? Mr. Reid said we were in a cabin surrounded by woods." JJ's eager eyes pleaded.

"Not right now."

He sat back in his chair and sulked.

Reid looked at her. "I'm sure you're sore. A hot shower and another pain pill should help. Why don't you go take a shower and I'll take JJ out to look around?"

JJ perked right up. "Can we, please?" He bounced in his chair.

"Yeah, Mom." Reid stuck his bottom lip out, begging, hoping he looked as convincing as JJ.

"Oh, all right. You boys go have fun."

"Yippee." JJ thrust a fist in the air. He rushed to get dressed in the bedroom and brought his socks and shoes into the front room. "Will we see bears?"

Reid wasn't sure how to answer that question. The possibility was there, but the probability was not. "I doubt it."

JJ must have asked a million more questions while he put his socks and shoes on. Once they stepped onto the porch, he went silent.

Reid watched as JJ walked around a large tree, studying it like a scientist would a discovery. The knot that had formed in Reid's stomach when he'd seen the bruise on Quinn's temple loosened. Deep purple marred her porcelain skin. Skin that was soft and warm. Sparks had shot up his arm as he touched her face.

Once Quinn was cleaned up, he'd suggest sending JJ for a bath so they could talk. The quickest way to end this whole thing was to find out what the attackers wanted.

He knew they wanted Quinn and JJ, but the reason wasn't clear.

"Look, Mr. Reid." JJ waved him over to the tree where he was crouched.

Reid squatted next to the boy. "What do you have there?" It was a black lizard with yellow lines that started on its head and ran the length of its body, stopping where a blue tail started.

"It's a blue-tailed skink," JJ said. "Isn't it neat?"

"Yes, it is."

"If it gets into trouble, it can drop its tail." JJ inched a little closer.

"Wow, that's cool. You sure know a lot about lizards."

"Yep. Mom found one in the kitchen and caught it with a cup to take it back outside. Only, it left its tail in the kitchen."

"I bet that was interesting." Reid could picture Quinn chasing a lizard around the kitchen.

"It was. But she wouldn't let me keep the tail."

A laugh escaped from Reid. JJ sounded like Reid when he was a boy, before he turned his curiosity to mischief and eventually worse. Hopefully, JJ would take a different path. Quinn seemed like the type of mom that cared and would steer him straight. Of course, Reid's mom had tried, but he'd rebelled.

A twig snapped to his right, and he was on his feet, ready to fight. To his relief, it was Quinn sneaking up on them, not another attack.

"Oh, man. Mr. Reid. You scared him off." JJ stood and walked around the tree, searching for his friend.

"I didn't mean to scare you." Quinn stuck her hands into her jean pockets. Her hair was pulled back out of her face. The

bruise looked worse out in the sunlight. Anger coiled in his stomach.

“It’s okay. Feeling any better?”

She shrugged. “My muscles don’t ache as much, and I don’t smell like an ashtray.”

She sure didn’t. He could smell tropical flowers every time the wind blew past her. He wanted to take a deep breath and take it all in, but he didn’t want to give himself away. Not like she had last night.

“I forgot I had this in my pocket from yesterday.” She handed him the delivery ticket that had been stuck to her door. “Maybe, it’s related?”

“Are you expecting anything?” He looked it over. It was a run-of-the-mill “Sorry we missed you” note.

“Not that I’m aware of. I’ll have to find a time to go get it.” She rubbed her palms on her thighs. “What do we do now?”

“Why don’t you have JJ take a bath? We can talk while he’s busy.” She might not talk as freely if her son could hear what she said.

“Sounds like a plan.” She turned to the boy. “Hey, bud, you need a bath.”

“Really? I had one yesterday.”

“I remember that. I had a flood to clean up, but you need a bath every day.”

JJ curled his lip and let out a grunt. “Yes, ma’am.” He headed into the house, and they followed.

Reid heard the water run a few minutes, then shut off.

A moment later, Quinn returned and sat next to him at the small table. “Should we go to the police station and see if they’ve got anything new?”

“It’s best if we stay put. The less you and JJ are out, the less likely you’ll be attacked.”

“I don’t think this has anything to do with us.”

Reid tried to interject, but she raised her hand.

“Hear me out.”

He nodded.

“Yes, they are after me and JJ, but obviously, we don’t have anything they want. I’m a single mom who works at a diner and rents a duplex from an elderly woman. I think it has to be because JJ is Joe’s son. Maybe, they came after us to get Joe to talk or do something for them.”

Her thinking was logical. “But Joe’s dead. Why keep coming?”

She shrugged. “Okay. Maybe, they don’t want to use us as ransom. Maybe, it’s revenge. He destroyed their lives.”

Definitely a possibility. As private investigators, they tended to make enemies, always getting blamed for ruining lives. In reality, they didn’t ruin anything. They just brought people’s indiscretions to light. It wasn’t like they forced people to do said indiscretions. “I’ll see if I can get a copy of his black hat list.”

“Black hat list?” She tilted her head.

“A list we keep of people who are troublesome or could be troublesome. It’s been used in cinema to distinguish the good guy from the bad guy. The good guys wore white hats, and the bad guys wore black hats. While we wait, I think it would be a good idea if you kept JJ out of school and you stayed away from the diner for a couple of days.” He didn’t want her to feel like a prisoner, but the fewer routine things they did, the less likely that an attack would occur.

She nodded. “I’ve already thought of that.”

“Momma,” JJ bellowed from the bathroom.

She disappeared into the bathroom, only to return a minute later. “He couldn’t find the soap. The bar sitting right in his line of sight.”

“Perhaps after the last twenty-four hours, he’s a bit scared.
Wants to make sure you’re still here.”

“He could be. I can’t blame him for being scared.”

CHAPTER SIX

What are we going to do now? Everything was a big question mark. They didn't know who was after them or why, and they didn't have any leads. JJ was missing school, and she was missing work. Their life was at a standstill.

Quinn shook her head. She shouldn't be focusing on the negatives. Positives—those were the things she needed to remember. They were safe for the time being, thanks to God and the man sitting beside her. A man she didn't know, but he still worked to protect her and JJ.

Worked. He was a private investigator like Joe had been. Maybe, he had an idea about what to do. “Now, what do we do?” She turned to face him.

“We think.”

What kind of response is that? “And what are we supposed to be thinking about? Because I have a lot of thoughts right now, and none of them are helping.”

“We go back to the beginning and think about everything. There's a connection somewhere. We just have to find it.”

“Is that what you do on all your cases? Think?”

“Yes. You can't just plow into things without knowledge. That's how people get killed.”

“But you did just that for Joe. And JJ and me.” She lowered her voice. Joe was dead. *Did he not think things through? Was he too quick to act and that's why he's dead?*

“There are people that you throw the rule book out the window for. I trust Joe with my life. Owe him my life, that is. He needed me. I didn't ask.” Reid clenched his jaw. He was a tense man. He'd just given her an insight into his and Joe's relationship.

“Let’s start thinking, then. Why would Joe call you? Do you work for him? Can you go back to the office and get his notes?”

He chuckled. The man chuckled at her questions. Indignation rose up. “What’s so funny about my questions?”

“Sorry. You just made it sound like a boring old desk job. He has an office, but it’s doubtful he left notes there. Our notepads are up here.” He tapped his temple. “What notes he wrote down would be in shorthand and kept close to him. Either on his body or in his trailer. And we don’t know where that is.”

She stared out the window. He was right. Even if they could find his trailer, the police had probably already been there and taken everything.

“I’m done.” JJ came into the kitchen, soaking wet on top, water trickling from his hair, and his shorts were on crooked.

“JJ, get in there and dry your body off.” Quinn pointed to the bathroom.

Reid couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t encourage him.” Quinn gave him the stink eye and then smiled.

He waved his hands. “Never.”

“Seriously, we’re just going to sit here until the police call?”

“Momma. I’m bored.” JJ came up and laid his head on her shoulder. His hair was still a little too wet, but he’d dried off his torso.

“Sorry, kiddo.” She gave him a kiss on the forehead.

“Can I play that math game on your phone?”

Quinn dug her phone from her purse. She found his math game and handed the phone to him. If his nose was in the game, maybe he wouldn’t hear too much of her and Reid’s conversation.

“We’ve already established my connection with Joe. You and I are connected because of Joe. The bad guys are after us because of Joe. He is the answer, but he’s dead.” She let out an exasperated breath.

“The answer is going to lie in the connection between you and him.”

“Why do you say that? I haven’t seen or heard from him in seven years.” She crossed her arms over her chest, tired of beating this dead horse.

“I know you’re frustrated, but there’s a link there. We just have to find it.” Reid glanced at her before pulling his phone from his pocket and making a call. “Hey, Emily.”

Quinn couldn’t hear the other side of the conversation.

“I’m here now. Look. Can you email me Joe’s black hat list?” Silence. “Has he had any trouble with any clients recently?” More silence. “Great. Thanks.”

“Who is Emily?”

“She’s Joe’s part-time secretary. She’s going to send me the list.”

“Hello?” JJ spoke from the living room.

“What, baby?” She hadn’t heard him trying to get her attention. She’d been too distracted.

“Yes, Mommy’s here,” he said.

Quinn whipped around in her seat, and her muscles protested against the sudden movement.

“Hold on, and I’ll give her the phone.” JJ started to pull the phone from his ear but put it back. “Okay. Bye.” He ended the call.

“Who was it, buddy?”

“Just some guy. He said to tell you that it’s not over.”

Lead weighed down her stomach. “Give me the phone.”

JJ brought it to her, and she took it from his hand and unlocked it. Recent call list showed her last call as *Private*.

“Who was it?” Reid asked through gritted teeth.

“There’s no number. Just says *Private*.” She laid the phone on the table and rubbed her temples.

“People can dial star 67 before the number they are calling to hide their phone number. Probably what our caller did.”

“Momma, what did the man mean when he said it wasn’t over? Is he going to try to hurt us again?” He climbed into her lap.

Tears stung her eyes. He was so smart. She couldn’t lie to him, but the truth hurt too much. Emotions clogged her throat. What could she tell him?

“He might try to hurt you, but as long as I’m here, I won’t let him succeed.” Reid’s face had gone from gentle giant to mad dog.

“You promise?”

Reid pulled the kitchen chair over next to them and sat so he was eye level with JJ. “I promise.”

JJ smiled and threw his arms around Reid’s neck.

More tears threatened to spill over. She whispered a thank-you and turned away, trying to compose herself. She couldn’t let JJ see she was scared.

“JJ, don’t answer the phone anymore, okay?” Reid said.

“Yes, sir.” JJ nodded.

Quinn wiped her face, took a deep breath, and turned back to face him. An upbeat melody started from the phone. She just stared, afraid to touch it.

“Hand it here and let me answer.”

Quinn scooped the phone from the table and held it out to him like it was disease ridden.

He flipped the phone over. “There’s a phone number. I doubt it’s our mystery caller.” Reid swiped to answer and put the phone to his ear. “Hello?” His face softened as he listened.

“Just a moment.” He handed the phone to her. “It’s Detective Jacobs.”

Quinn frowned. “This is Quinn.”

“Ms. Matthews, there’s been a few developments about what happened yesterday, and we may have identified the people behind it. Could you come in and take a look at some mug shots?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll have Reid bring us in.”

“Good. Just come in like you did yesterday and ask for me.”

“We’ll be there in a few minutes.” She disconnected the call and set the phone back on the table. She nudged JJ off her lap. “Go get your shoes and socks on.”

Reid waited until JJ disappeared into the bedroom. “What did he want?”

“He said he thinks they’ve found the people who attacked us but wants us to come in and take a look to confirm.”

Reid took her hand in his. “Maybe, this is the end. They could arrest these guys, and you can get on with your life.”

She held her breath. Her hand burned in Reid’s. She’d never had a reaction like this to a man before. It was like he was branding her with his touch. She wouldn’t mind being his. JJ came stomping into the kitchen, scaring some sense into her. Now was not the time to entertain thoughts of how Reid made her feel. She needed to get herself under control. JJ was her world. No room for anyone else.

JJ spent the ride to the police station talking about lizards and all the things he’d seen on his short expedition around the cabin. Quinn glanced at Reid every so often. He was zeroed in on the road and their surroundings. He probably hadn’t heard a word that was said.

He pulled into the station parking lot, and everyone climbed out of the car. The station doors opened just as they reached them. A man in a black suit exited, followed by a

blond woman, her head down and hair in a tight bun. Reid stopped abruptly. “Victoria?”

She lifted her head, lips pursed and eyes closed. “Yes.” There was a hard edge to her voice. When her gaze met Reid’s, her face softened. “Reid. The police said you were in town.” She stepped toward him.

He opened his arms and gave her a comforting hug. “I’m sorry about Joe.”

She pulled back and wiped her eye with a tissue she’d been holding. “Thank you. I can’t believe he’s gone.”

“Victoria, this is Quinn Matthews and her son, JJ. Quinn, this is Victoria Lockhart.” Reid stepped back and put his hand on the small of Quinn’s back.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she managed to croak. Guilt, shame, grief, anger, and embarrassment swirled through her, opening a pit in her stomach.

Quinn fidgeted next to Reid, feeling awkward. She didn’t know Victoria, and apparently, she hadn’t really known Joe that much. But that didn’t stop the grief other people would be going through. Grief that was evident on Victoria’s face.

“Thank you. This is my brother, Andrew.” She gestured to the man who had preceded her. He only nodded in return.

Victoria was pleasant, considering the circumstances, seemingly oblivious to Quinn’s role in her husband’s life. No staring daggers or harsh words. Joe must have never told Victoria about Quinn or JJ. They had been a well-guarded secret.

“What happened yesterday?” Victoria’s gaze searched Reid’s.

“Joe texted me to meet him at a diner here in town. He didn’t show. Just called and told me to get Ms. Matthews and her son out of the building.”

Victoria dabbed her eyes and looked at Quinn. “Why?”

“I wish I knew, Mrs. Lockhart.” She wiped her palms on her jeans.

“Joe helped us get away from some guys that were trying to kidnap Ms. Matthews and her son. He wasn’t able to get away, though.”

Victoria hiccupped and covered her mouth, stifling a sob.

Andrew wrapped his arm around Victoria and pulled her close, hugging her tightly. “She’s had a rough time since she got the call.”

Victoria sniffed. “I knew there was a possibility of danger with his job. I just never expected him to die.”

“It’s not something we expect in our line of work,” Reid said. “Did he tell you anything about this job?”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t even know he was on a job. He’d told me he was going camping for a couple of days.”

Reid paused a moment. “When did he leave?”

“About midmorning the day before last. He packed his stuff in the camper, kissed me goodbye, and left.” Tears streamed down her face, and her brother hugged her closer.

“I think we should go.” Andrew looked at Reid pointedly.

“I understand. Let me know when the arrangements have been made.” Reid patted Victoria’s shoulder.

Andrew led Victoria away. Reid turned to Quinn. “Shall we?”

The process was the same as yesterday. Walk in, ask to speak to Detective Jacobs, wait, and then get taken to a room to wait some more.

They were now sitting in the same room they’d been in yesterday morning. After seven minutes—Quinn had timed it—Detective Jacobs opened the door, holding a manila folder and accompanied by a uniformed officer.

“Ms. Matthews. Mr. Lucas.” He nodded to both of them.

“Sir.” Reid nodded back.

“This is Officer Porter. He’s one of our K9 handlers.” Detective Jacobs turned his attention to JJ. “I thought JJ might

want to meet Officer Porter's partner, Cruz, and learn a little about their job."

JJ practically bounced in her lap. "Can I?"

She smiled and kissed his forehead. "Yes, you can, but you better follow directions."

"Yes, ma'am." He threw his arms around her neck and squeezed.

"Let's go find my partner," the officer said as the two left the room.

Detective Jacobs shut the door. He placed the folder on the table and took a seat across from them. "We looked into that car you reported seeing before the fire. The owner works at a factory across town and reported it stolen after getting off work and discovering it missing. I put an APB out on it."

"Were there surveillance cameras in the parking lot?" Maybe, they could see who had taken it, determine whether it was the same people from the diner.

"One of our officers spotted it this morning and investigated." Detective Jacobs opened the folder. "He discovered two bodies. We were able to use a portable fingerprint scanner and determine their identities. Fortunately, they had criminal records. They matched the descriptions of the men who attacked you at the diner." Detective Jacobs pulled two color photos from the folder, turned them around, and slid them across the table.

Quinn gasped. With a shaky hand, she picked up the photo on the right, the one closer to Reid. She put it back down and jabbed the photo. "That's him." She'd never forget his sinister dark eyes and crooked nose.

Reid took her hand in his, steadying it. She turned her hand and grasped his fingers. He gave her a reassuring squeeze, and she returned it, an innocent gesture that made her heart do a funny dance.

"That's the man from the alley." Reid used his free hand to point to the man she had pointed to. Then, he tapped the

second photo. “That’s the man I subdued in the diner. How’d they die?”

Detective Jacob’s words sank in. *Bodies*. He’d said “bodies.”

“Single gunshot to the head.” Detective Jacobs returned the photos to the folder. “Based on rigor mortis and body temp, they had been dead approximately eight hours.”

The hope that had filled her when they walked in vanished, replaced by dread. “This is only just beginning.”

“What makes you say that?” Detective Jacobs asked.

“Because we got a call about two minutes before yours telling us it wasn’t over.”

Would this ever end? Quinn rested her head in her hands. Her pain pill had worn off. Her head pounded and her back hurt. They’d explained the phone call to Detective Jacobs. He’d taken her phone and left the room. He said something about tracing it. She wasn’t sure whether he would be able to track the number. God willing, they would, but then, chances were the owner of the number wasn’t using a personal phone.

The door burst open, and JJ came in. He looked like he’d been to the fair and won all kinds of prizes. “Look what I got, Momma!”

He laid his loot on the table and started spreading it out. She took it all in. There was a rubber bracelet with the police department logo on it, fruit snacks, a frisbee, a small bottle of water, an autographed picture of the K9, stickers, and a key chain.

“Wow. You got a lot of stuff there.” She pulled him onto her lap and snuggled him.

“They gave me a badge, too.” He pulled his shirt out to show her the plastic police badge. “I’m not a real officer, though. But I will be one day.”

She kissed the top of his head. “You can be whatever you want to be.”

“I want to be a K9 officer, just like Officer Porter. I’m going to have my own doggy partner.” He opened his fruit snacks and popped one in his mouth.

She loved his enthusiasm about the future. She didn’t have much at the moment.

Detective Jacobs came in with her phone. “Here you go. The call was made from a burner phone. Chances are the guy has already thrown it away and moved on to another phone.”

She accepted her phone. “Thank you.”

He sat across from her and looked her in the eyes. “In light of recent events, it’ll be a good idea for you to find a quiet place and lay low for a couple of days. We’re working hard, but with the original guys, uh, indisposed, we have more questions than we had before and fewer answers than we need.”

That’s exactly the thing she wanted to hear. Not. The police were supposed to be the heroes. Solve all the problems and save her. What was she thinking? She was relying on the wrong people. God was in control, and He would handle everything. *Forgive me, Lord. Let me lean on You and trust You.*

“We’re done with your house and have released the scene. Your landlady has already called people to board up the windows. It’s not ready for you to go back to living in, but if there’s anything you’ve forgotten, you can go in and get it.”

“Thank you.” She sagged. She and JJ were essentially homeless. How was she supposed to provide for JJ?

“Call us if you think of anything new or if something else happens.” Detective Jacobs walked to the door and opened it for them.

She helped JJ collect his goodies, and they followed Reid out of the building and to the rental. Her phone rang, sending goose bumps over her body. What if it was their mystery caller?

Reid placed a hand on her forearm. “Do you want me to answer it?”

She shook her head. It was just a phone call. When she pulled her phone from her purse, a local number flashed on the screen. She took a deep breath and answered. "Hello."

"Is this Quinn Matthews?" a husky male voice asked.

"It is."

"This is Aaron with Speedy Deliveries. You have a letter from a Joe Lockhart."

Her heart raced at the mention of Joe's name.

"We tried to deliver it twice, but no one was home. You'll have to come in and sign for it."

"Okay. Is it there now?"

"Yes, ma'am. You'll also need to bring in a photo ID."

"We'll be there in a few minutes. Thank you." She ended the call and turned to Reid. "Joe sent me a package."

Reid quirked an eyebrow. "Says who?"

"That was Speedy Deliveries. Remember the missed delivery note? Turns out it's from Joe."

Reid put the car in reverse and backed out of the parking spot. "Where do I go?"

She gave him directions. Reid pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later. The lot was vacant except for a dark sedan and a white utility van. Goose bumps crawled up her arms. They were about to find out what all this was about so they could put the whole thing to rest.

Reid turned to her. "Let's make this quick. I want to get as far away from here as soon as possible."

She unbuckled and stepped from the car. Reid corralled JJ and steered him to the sliding doors. Quinn entered first, followed by JJ and then Reid. No one was manning the front desk, and the lobby was void of customers. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

She turned just in time to see a man bring the butt of a gun down on the back of Reid's head. "No!"

He crumpled to the floor, unmoving. The gun was then aimed at her. She grabbed JJ and pulled him behind her, using her body as a shield. He hugged her tightly, burying his face in her shirt.

“You and the boy are getting in the car.”

Her blood ran cold, and nausea swirled in her stomach. They couldn't leave with this man. They were as good as dead if they did.

She looked over her shoulder. Maybe, they could escape out the back. Another man walked around the counter, his own gun aimed at her, ending her thoughts of escape.

From his position on the floor, Reid started to groan. The man who'd hit him raised his gun and took aim. Quinn inhaled sharply, turned, and pulled JJ against her, covering his eyes and ears.

“What are you doing?” barked the man who had come from around the counter.

“I'm taking care of loose ends.”

“Don't be stupid. You know we need him alive.” He yanked JJ from her grasp. “Help him get your boyfriend into the car.”

“No!” She tried to grab JJ, but the man shoved her away.

JJ struggled against the man's grip. She took a deep breath and fought the rising panic. Reid was alive for now, but how long would any of them live once they got to their destination? “It'll be okay,” she told JJ before turning and walking to Reid's prone body.

She needed to do exactly as these men told her. She didn't want them to hurt JJ or kill Reid. He may be unconscious now, but maybe, he'd be able to get them out once he was awake. She helped roll him over and carry him to the trunk. The man with JJ never let go of him. Reid was deposited into the trunk. She watched as the lid was closed on Reid and on any possibility of him rescuing them. They were on their own now.

She looked around the parking lot. It was empty. She fought the urge to scream for help as she and JJ ran away, but both men had guns. She couldn't risk one of them shooting JJ. She needed to stay calm and think of a way to escape. She climbed into the car, praying God would rescue them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The pounding in Reid's head matched the pounding in his chest. What had happened? One minute, he was following Quinn and JJ into the delivery place, and the next thing he knew, he was here. Wherever here was. His body was cramped. He straightened his legs, but they didn't get far before hitting something.

His body swayed as the object beneath him bounced. Road noise echoed around him. It was dark. Occasionally, he'd see a flicker of light. He was in the trunk of a car. He felt around, hoping to find something to defend himself when whoever put him in here came to let him out. There was nothing but carpet. The spare tire and jack were probably under the carpet in the spare tire well. No doubt a tire iron, too, but he wouldn't be able to get to it while lying in the trunk.

No weapons. And he was alone in the trunk. Were Quinn and JJ in the passenger portion? Had the person who'd knocked him out killed them? His stomach soured at the thought. They weren't dead. He knew it. He was still alive. So, Quinn and JJ had to be. He was going to be used for something. Either Quinn and JJ had gotten away and he was going to be used to lure them back, or they hadn't, and he was going to be used to make them do something. He needed to get out and know for sure.

He wanted to yell and pound on the lid, but he wouldn't. He didn't want to cause a stir and put them in danger if they were in the passenger portion.

A faint glow came from above him—the glow-in-the-dark emergency trunk release button. It was a way of escape, but he was going to work with the assumption that Quinn and JJ were up front, and he needed to find a way to save them once he was free.

He didn't know how long they had been traveling. The important thing was getting the car stopped. He started tugging at the carpet that covered one of the brake lights. If he could disable the lights, it would attract the attention of the highway police, if it didn't get them rear-ended and him hurt first. That was a chance he was willing to take.

He quickly removed the bulb and squirmed until he could reach the second one. Disabling both lights was the best option. Now, to sit and wait.

He'd been too focused on trying to find a way out that he hadn't noticed how hot it was in the trunk. A film of sweat had formed on his forehead, and his shirt clung to his back. Would now be a good time to pray? He was sure it was something Quinn would be doing or, better yet, was doing. She seemed so steadfast in her faith. Despite the odds stacked against her, she believed God would see them through.

Would God answer his prayers? A man who'd done so many horrible things. No, He wouldn't. But maybe, He'd answer Quinn's prayers and keep her and JJ safe.

Reid's body swayed as the car began to slow. Was it possible the police had already pulled them over? Squealing tires and a loud bang sounded as Reid was violently jarred in the trunk. Pain shot through his head as it made contact with the trunk wall. They'd been rear-ended. He braced himself. They'd pull over, and he'd make his move. Adrenaline coursed through him. He didn't have a weapon, so he'd have to make a move fast. He maneuvered himself so he'd be able to climb quickly from the trunk.

The car limped on, scratching and thumping sounds coming from under Reid. Light slivered in from the bottom of the trunk lid. The car had definitely been damaged. How much longer until they stopped? Would they even stop? He hadn't thought about them continuing, not stopping and getting themselves involved with police. The car finally came to a stop. Angry voices sounded from the front of the car, followed by a slam. Someone had left the passenger portion. How many people had captured them? Hopefully, only one person was left with Quinn and JJ.

He estimated they'd traveled about a quarter of a mile before pulling over. The car that had hit them wouldn't be up against them. He reached for the emergency release handle and waited. More angry voices filtered in, low at first, then getting louder.

The person who'd hit them, no doubt. A second door shut. Quinn and JJ were alone now. At least, he hoped so. Now was the time for him to make his move. He pulled the emergency latch and pushed up with his other hand.

The lid didn't move. He pulled again, harder this time. Still no movement. He started banging on the trunk lid. *No. This can't be happening.* Panic rose as he fought with the emergency latch. How was he going to save them now?

The car lurched forward, the sudden movement sending him sprawling forward, and his face slammed into the metal of the trunk wall again. Pain spread from his nose and radiated to his eyes. He felt for blood, but there wasn't any.

The car picked up speed, and the noises under him grew louder. They were forcing the car to drive despite the damage. But they couldn't be. He'd heard two doors shut, and surely, there hadn't been more than two people in the car with Quinn and JJ. Had Quinn been able to steal the car and make a getaway? He hoped so. The car slowed and came to a stop. He heard the trunk mechanism sound, but the trunk never opened.

A car door shut. A second later, there was a knock on the trunk. "Reid?"

Relief filled him. She was okay. "I'm awake, but the trunk is jammed. Can you lay down the back seats?"

"I'll give it a try."

He rolled to face the back seat and waited. Light began to shine in as the seat lowered, revealing Quinn's face. "Thank God you're okay," she said before she backed out of the car.

He maneuvered his way onto the back seat and out of the car.

She hugged him. "Thank You, Lord, for keeping him safe."

He knew God would answer her prayers. He just hadn't expected her to be praying for him.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Those involved in the accident no doubt called the police. "Where are we?"

She pulled back, dropping her arms to her side. He missed the way they felt around his neck. "I drove a couple miles down the road, enough to get away from them. I was afraid the car might catch on fire or fall apart with you in the trunk. I told JJ to stay in the car while I checked on you."

He looked into the car and saw JJ huddled in the front passenger seat. "Let's get out of here."

She had left their kidnappers stranded, but that didn't mean there weren't more of them out looking for Quinn and JJ. He needed to get everyone to a safe place.

A large, black SUV in the distance caught Reid's eye. It was moving fast, and then, an arm appeared from the window. Something was in the hand, and then, the back windshield of the car shattered. A scream ripped from Quinn. Reid pushed her to the ground and then pulled JJ out of the car and pushed him to her before squatting with them.

She grabbed JJ and held him tight. The metal tings came faster. Reid wrapped an arm around JJ, the other around her, and covered them with his body.

The SUV drove by, and then, it was eerily quiet. Reid stood and looked in the direction the SUV would have gone. He could still see it in the distance, brake lights shining. He wasn't sure whether they were going to turn around and come back, but he wasn't going to wait around and find out.

"Hurry, before they come back." Reid held JJ in one arm and grabbed Quinn with the other. "Run." He tugged her forward. "This way." Reid pulled her along. The buildings here were set apart quite a bit, and it was going to be a lot of time out in the open. The ting of bullets hitting metal started and was quickly replaced with muffled thuds as they hit the dirt around them. Reid led them to the closest building, one hundred feet away.

Reid let go of her hand and pulled the handle on the old shop door. It didn't budge. Locked. Bullets started flying at them again. The glass door shattered, and Reid groaned as glass shards sliced his hand.

"Go around." He pointed to the side of the building. Blood covered his hand.

Quinn ran around the building and was trying to open the back door. It was locked as well. Where could they go now? He turned and saw trees about fifty yards behind the building. His pulse pounded in his ears. Could they make it?

Two car doors slammed at the front of the building. He couldn't waste any more time. He ran to Quinn and pointed toward the trees. He prodded her toward them. JJ hugged him tightly around the neck as they ran, clinging for dear life. Literally.

Maybe, they'd be able to lose the shooters in the trees. Only a few more feet. They'd just passed the first trees when a shot rang out, the bullet splintering bark from a tree to his right.

They ran a few more feet. He pulled JJ free from his neck and set him on the ground. "Take JJ, and you two run."

Quinn paled. "What are you going to do? You don't have a gun. They'll kill you."

"I'm going to lead them away from you."

"Don't." She picked up JJ and grabbed Reid's uninjured hand. "We need you with us. Please." She pleaded with her eyes.

Her words nearly choked him. He was needed. That was a first.

"Okay. Go." He turned her around and nudged her forward. He started jogging, and she kept pace. Soon, they were running. There hadn't been any more shots since they entered the trees. Quinn struggled in front of him. JJ wasn't very heavy, but carrying additional weight while running was wearing her out.

“Here.” He took JJ from her. Eventually, their running slowed to a jog and then stopped. He set JJ down behind a large oak tree. “Quinn, hide behind the tree while you catch your breath.”

She knelt next to her son, her breath coming in heaves.

Reid listened. The only sound was their heavy breathing. Slowly, nature’s melody of chirping crickets and singing birds reached his ears. They were safe for now. He leaned his back against the tree and tilted his head, resting it on the rough bark and taking deep breaths. His hand burned like it was being repeatedly stung by wasps. He raised it above his head, slowing the blood flow to it, but it wasn’t long before blood began to roll down his arm.

“Let me see your hand.” Quinn stood and reached for his raised arm.

He brought it down. She looked at his palm and turned it over to inspect the back of his hand. It was hard to tell how bad the damage was because there was a lot of blood. “There are several cuts. You could have shards in them.”

He pulled his hand back and wrapped it in the bottom of his shirt. Her touch was too tender. “I’ll be fine. We need to get help. Can you call 911?”

“No. I left the phone in the car. The forest runs parallel to this side of town.”

“Let’s start walking that way, then.” He pointed toward town. They walked for about ten minutes before making a ninety-degree turn and heading toward what should be the edge of the trees. A clearing came into view. “Wait here. Let me check it out and make sure no one is watching for us to come out.”

He walked to the clearing, surveyed the surroundings, took a deep breath, and then slowly stepped out. The clearing opened to the back of a row of buildings. No one in sight. “It’s safe,” he called to Quinn and JJ.

Blood had soaked his shirt, but his hand wasn’t throbbing as much as before. He led them to the front of the buildings

and entered a clothing boutique. The employee stood staring at them with her mouth wide open.

“We need help,” Reid said.

She looked at the blood soaking Reid’s shirt and jumped into action.

The next hour was a flurry of activity. The police were called, and an ambulance came with them. Detective Jacobs wasn’t too far behind.

The rest of the afternoon was spent telling the story to the police. Again and again. Reid refused a trip to the hospital and instead asked EMTs to clean his hand and put some bandages on the wounds.

The adrenaline wore down, and his body ached. He didn’t normally have this much action in his line of work. He slumped against the chair, exhaustion taking over the fight-or-flight response. He took a deep breath and released it. Everyone was okay.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It had been a long and exhausting day. After getting JJ bathed and ready for bed, Quinn grabbed her Bible for a quick read while Reid showered. She sat at the kitchen table and started reading the faith chapter in Hebrews. Exhaustion clung to her. The muscles in her back were tight and achy, her eyes were heavy, and her soul was weary. *Lord, I'm tired. Not just physically but emotionally. I pray for Your guidance and protection in this situation. Help me to remember that You are my rock and fortress. In Jesus's name, amen.*

Reid came back to the kitchen a short while later, already dressed but still rubbing his damp hair with a towel. Quinn glanced up in time to catch the look of skeptical disdain on his face. She'd seen expressions like that before when she'd tried to share her faith with nonbelievers. She moved the Bible's ribbon bookmark to save her place and closed it.

"Thank you again for rescuing me and JJ today. I'm thankful God was looking out for all of us."

Reid frowned. "You're welcome, of course, but I've seen too much to believe there's a God. There's so much evil in the world."

"Of course, there's evil out there. We live in a fallen world. We weren't meant to live in this, but sin has invaded and darkened people."

"Isn't that the truth." He harrumphed and took a seat at the table.

"For all the evil things you've seen, haven't you seen just as much good? Not just good people but unexplainable and wonderful things."

"I've encountered a few good people, but in the end, they usually end up disappointing me. Even the ones I thought

never would.” He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, obviously thinking about someone specific.

She placed her hand on his forearm. “That’s the thing. People are bound to disappoint you, but God never will.”

“So you say.” He stood and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. “Want one?”

“No, thank you.” What she wanted was to dig deeper into the man standing across from her. There were some mighty hurts he was hiding. She wanted to help but got the impression he wouldn’t welcome it. The best thing she could do was to pray for him.

“Let’s talk about what happened today. Did you get to see the envelope?”

“One of the men shoved an envelope in his jacket before we left.”

“Can you describe it to me?”

She wasn’t sure what good it would do, but she’d try. “It looked like a normal envelope.”

“Was it like the size of a number 10 envelope, or was it a larger one? One that would hold 8.5 by 11 sheets of papers laid flat?”

“It was a big one.”

“Okay. Was it thick like it was full of paper or thin like just a sheet or two?”

“It was thin. He folded it in half easily.”

“So, it could have been a check, maybe? He used a large envelope to disguise it.”

“But why would he send me a check? The money is always direct deposited into the account he had set up.”

“That’s a good question. Maybe, Joe’s wife would know.”

The last thing Quinn wanted to do was talk to Victoria again. It hadn’t been Victoria’s fault that Joe had duped Quinn, but she still held bitterness about the whole situation. She

would do anything to protect her son, though—even face a painful past. She busied herself checking on JJ while Reid made the call.

“She said she’d meet us at the diner in the morning.” Reid laid his phone on the table.

“Do you think that’s wise? I mean, we’ve been told to lay low. Look at what happened today.” She felt safe at the cabin. No one knew where they were.

“I think the police can only do so much. Right now, their focus is on who is doing this. Yes, they’ll be looking for a motive. Maybe, Victoria knows something that can tell us the motive, and it will help the police find the suspects.”

She wasn’t so sure, but Detective Jacobs had said they had limited manpower. What harm could come of talking to Victoria?

“I’m a private investigator, remember. This is my job. Investigating people and things.” He placed his hand over hers.

His touch sent a shiver up her spine. Blood had started to soak through his bandages. “Your hand is still bleeding.”

He looked at his hand. “I’ll have to get some new bandages tomorrow.”

“Hold that thought.” She went to her room and grabbed the first aid kit. She laid the plastic box on the table. “Let me see your hand.” She held hers out.

“Why?”

“You need a fresh bandage, and I’ve come prepared.”

“You packed a first aid kit?”

“I’m raising a boy. A first aid kit is considered an essential item.” She grinned.

He sat up, turned, and gave her his hand. She could feel him watching her as she worked. She peeled the tape, and trying not to jostle him too much and irritate the wounds, she gently unwound the gauze from his hand, then tossed it into

the nearby trash can. She applied another layer of antibiotic ointment and fresh gauze. Reid spent most of the time staring at her hands, but she caught him studying her face, which made her cheeks grow warm.

“There you go.” She looked him in the eyes. He leaned forward, studying her intently. Would he come close enough to kiss her? Would she let him? There was a current in the air, and breathing became hard. Something sparked. She wanted him to kiss her. They sat, staring at each other, hypnotized by attraction. Or maybe, that was just her.

“Momma.” A groggy JJ ambled into the living room, startling Quinn, breaking their connection.

JJ had had a nightmare. It wasn't a surprise with all that had happened in the last couple of days. She bid Reid good night, not a moment too soon. She'd been entertaining crazy thoughts about kissing him, and she didn't need to. The news was full of stories about mothers' boyfriends or new husbands abusing children. She'd rather be alone the rest of her life than bring someone like that into her son's life. Besides, she'd loved once, and the only good that came from that was JJ. She didn't want any more heartbreak.

Reid had put his life on the line. Several times. Maybe, he was different. Maybe, he could be a loving father figure to JJ. But now wasn't the time to focus on misguided thoughts of her love life.

She climbed into bed with JJ and held him as he fell back to sleep. She wouldn't be going back out to the living room tonight. Too much electricity in the air. Instead, she used the time to pray.

Thank You, Lord, for Your love and saving grace. Thank You for this. She squeezed JJ. For protecting us every step of the way. Thank You for bringing Reid into our lives. Heal his hand. And his heart. Please continue to keep us safe and help us find who is responsible. Amen.

CHAPTER NINE

The following morning, Reid and Quinn sat in a booth at the Sunrise Café. Considering what happened forty-eight hours ago, Quinn seemed to be holding it together pretty well, being back where it all began. They watched the front door, waiting, while JJ sat in the manager's office. Apparently, that was his hangout when he visited Quinn at work.

Victoria stepped through the door as the bell above it rang. She scanned the diner and found them. He stood as she got to their booth. "Victoria."

"Reid." She shook his proffered hand and slid into the booth. He slid into the small booth next to Quinn, their thighs touching.

"They're releasing Joe's body today." Victoria fiddled with the rolled-up silverware in front of her. "That's where Andrew is. He agreed to meet with the funeral home for transport. I just couldn't do it." A tear slid down her cheek.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Quinn said.

"Thank you." Victoria put the silverware down. "How did you know my husband?"

"Um. I met him several years ago." Quinn's leg started bouncing under the table.

"So, you were a client?"

"No, ma'am." Her leg bounced faster.

Reid put his hand under the table and placed it on her knee. His touch had the reaction he was hoping for. Her leg quit bouncing. He, however, hadn't expected the jolt of electricity that bolted up his arm. He quickly moved his hand.

"I, um, dated him a few years ago."

Victoria straightened and pulled her shoulders back. “Ah, yes. You must be the indiscretion he told me about.”

“He told you about us?” Quinn’s knee resumed bouncing.

“Yes. He’d come home after an extended case here in town, confessed his weakness, and promised me it meant nothing and that it’d never happen again.” Victoria placed her hands in her lap.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know he was a married man, or I would have never gotten involved with him.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. Honestly, you weren’t the first one, and I’d be surprised if you were the last.”

Quinn’s leg stopped moving. “He’d cheated on you before?”

Reid was stunned at the revelation. That was so out of character for the man Reid had known. He must have never really known Joe, then.

“Yes, while we were dating. I’d forgiven him then, like I did with you.” She reached across the table and patted Quinn’s hand.

Victoria hadn’t mentioned anything about JJ. Had Joe told her the complete truth? He’d told her about the relationship, but did he tell her about the product of it? Reid didn’t want to be the one to volunteer that information. It wasn’t his place. But they needed to know why Joe had sent something to Quinn.

“Do you know why he would have shipped a letter to Quinn after all of these years?” Reid asked.

Victoria folded her hands on the table. “It was probably a forgiveness letter.”

“A forgiveness letter?” he and Quinn asked at the same time.

“Yes. About two years ago, Joe started gambling. We were going to lose everything to his addiction if he didn’t stop. We fought a lot, and that led him to drink the problems away. I told him to get help or I was leaving. I can forgive a lot of

things, but I wasn't going to sit by and watch him drink himself to death."

Reid hadn't kept in touch with Joe all that much after splitting ways and starting his own business. Cases brought them together a few times over the years, but he'd had no idea Joe had spiraled out of control like that.

"He checked into a rehab center and sobered up. While there, he connected with a self-help individual. He continued seeing the man after his release." Victoria picked up the silverware again and started peeling the sticky tape. "One of the things he had Joe do was go through things in his past and write letters to those he'd wronged. The man said the first step in self-forgiveness was to ask others for forgiveness for his past mistakes."

Quinn went rigid beside him. Was it because Victoria was referring to Quinn as a mistake? Wasn't she the one that had called Joe a mistake?

"Given your past relationship," Victoria continued, "I assume he was asking you for forgiveness."

"That makes sense, but why would someone kidnap me to steal the letter?"

"Oh, you poor thing." Victoria grabbed Quinn's hand. "I don't know. Are you sure it was about the envelope?"

"Yes. They kidnapped her when we went to pick up the delivery." Reid's gaze bounced between Victoria and Quinn.

"I don't know, dear." She pulled her hand back. "Unless... Joe was down here on a case when he met you. Maybe, whatever or whoever it was about was mentioned in that letter, and whoever they were didn't want any details leaked."

That was a strong possibility. It wouldn't be the first time a PI was attacked by an angry client. "Do you remember anything about the case he was working on?"

"He never talked work with me. When he confessed about your relationship, he did say it was a case that would have a huge fallout when it came out. You were seeing him at the time. Did he say anything to you?" Disdain laced her words.

Quinn shifted beside him, bumping him with her shoulder. This was obviously an uncomfortable conversation.

A phone beeped. Victoria pulled one from her purse and checked it. “That’s from Andrew. He’s done.” She slid out of the booth.

He stood. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She turned to Quinn. “I hope they find whoever is after you.”

“Thank you.”

“Reid’s a good guy. He’ll keep you safe.” She patted his shoulder.

“Let me know when the services are,” Reid said.

“I will.” She dipped her head, turned, and exited the diner.

“Well, that wasn’t as helpful as I’d hoped,” he said, “but it did give us a place to start.”

“It did?” Quinn’s voice was low and soft. She had sat back down in the booth, dazed. Tears pooled in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just a lot to take in.” She stood again. “Let’s get JJ and get out of here.”

He let her go get JJ alone. Something Victoria said had gotten to her, and she probably needed a moment to gather herself.

Just as he expected, when she and JJ came back out, Quinn had reverted to the carefree mother she was around JJ. It must be hard playing two roles. The mother who comforts her child and tells him everything is going to be okay—and the woman who isn’t so sure.

Together, they walked to the car. He would add the lead Victoria had just given him to the list he’d gotten from Emily yesterday. He’d gone through it when he’d woken up in the middle of the night. It contained mostly cheating spouses who blamed Joe for ending their marriages. There were a drug

dealer and a murder suspect on the list, too. Definitely people to check out if Victoria's lead didn't pan out.

CHAPTER TEN

Once inside the vehicle, Quinn let her mind wander. Victoria had spoken of Quinn and Joe's relationship as if it was a mistake. Quinn knew it had been a mistake to get involved with Joe so quickly. She'd thought he was the one. But she'd never thought of herself as a mistake in the whole thing. She'd genuinely cared for Joe and thought he'd felt the same way toward her. Knowing now that she was just a fling hurt even more than his leaving.

"Quinn?" Reid's voice waded through her muddled thoughts.

"Sorry."

"I said, Victoria mentioned Joe had said he was working on a case when you two were together and that it was going to be huge after the fact. Were there any breaking news stories in the months after Joe left?"

She hadn't been sure of anything after he left. It wasn't until the beginning of her third trimester that she pulled herself out of her depression. Or more accurately, God had pulled her out.

Victoria's words had caused those dark clouds to reappear. "I don't know. After he left, I was a little preoccupied. I didn't pay attention to the news."

"That's something we should look into. In the meantime, I'd like to lay my eyes on his trailer."

"There are only two places in town he could park it. Would you recognize it if you saw it?"

"Unless he got a new one, yes."

She gave him directions to the nearest campsite, but it was a bust. There were several larger luxurious trailers. Reid had said Joe's was small and generic. They were driving through

the back portion of the last place he could have parked. She slumped in her seat. This was going nowhere.

“There it is.” Reid pointed as he pulled the car into the parking area by the trailer.

She sat up straighter, a weight lifting from her chest. The trailer sat alone in the back corner of the RV camp. Secluded. It was a run-of-the-mill small trailer. One door and a small window on the side facing the gravel road. They climbed from the car. She kept JJ close to her as she walked to the door. It was locked. Not a surprise. Quinn turned and started looking for a hidden key. Did people do that with travel trailers? She didn’t want to, but if all else failed, they could break a window. Yes, it was illegal, but at this point, she would do anything to protect her son.

Creaking noises came from behind her. Reid had opened the door. “How’d you do that?”

“Let’s just say I’ve learned a few things that most people haven’t.”

“Do they teach you to pick locks in private investigator school?”

Reid let out an exasperated breath and shook his head. “Just get inside before someone sees us.”

She climbed the two stairs and entered the small space. A chair and TV stand created a small living room on her right. To the left, there was a kitchenette and breakfast booth. Two closed doors past the kitchen area probably led to a bedroom and bathroom.

Reid zeroed in on the papers scattered across the top of the breakfast table. “Take a look through these papers, and see if anything could be related. I’ll go take a look in the bedroom.”

“JJ, go ahead and have a seat.” Quinn patted the back of the chair in the reading area and gave him her phone.

She sat at the breakfast table and rummaged through the papers. There was a pile of receipts for gas and food. The top

one was a receipt from the Sunrise Café dated the day before the attempted kidnapping. It was for after her shift.

Joe had been in town and had waited until mere moments before they were kidnapped to do anything. Anger built in her.

At the bottom of the stack, there was a receipt from the delivery company that had shipped her envelope. “Reid, I found something.”

“So did I.” Reid came back into the kitchen area. Two manila folders landed on the tiny table in front of her. The top file was labeled *Quinn Matthews*. She knew what the label on the second file folder would say, but she looked anyway. *Joshua Matthews*.

She opened JJ’s file, and a chill ran up her spine. There on top was a copy of JJ’s preschool graduation picture. How had Joe got that?

The next picture was of JJ playing T-ball. He was up to bat. The helmet swallowed his head. It was a wonder he could see out of it at all. She thumbed through the rest of the file. It contained photos of JJ at various ages. There was even a photo of JJ in the hospital, the white band visible on his tiny leg. The pictures were worn, like he’d looked at them often.

Anger turned to disgust as her stomach churned. He’d been following them for years. At the bottom of the pile were papers. JJ’s shot records and birth certificate. Joe had written his name in for the father, whereas the original certificate was blank.

“What does all of this mean?” She closed the file and shoved it away from her. Her body heated as anger grew.

“I’d guess that he wasn’t as detached as he appeared to be. Maybe, the support money was just that—support—and not hush money as you’d speculated.”

She turned to check on JJ. He had his nose buried in whatever game he was playing on the phone. “If he wanted to support JJ, he should have been here. In person,” she whispered.

“I’m not saying what he did was right, but maybe, that’s all he could do.”

“He could have done more. He obviously had the time to stalk us. I didn’t ask for his money. I’d give it all back if it meant he’d be there for JJ from day one.” It was true. Yes, the money helped, but in the long run, it was a father that JJ needed. She’d instilled in him from a young age that he had a Father in heaven that loved him and would do anything for him. It would be nice for him to have an earthly father to demonstrate the same, though.

“Victoria can’t have children.”

Where had that come from? “What does that have to do with JJ?”

“Think about it. Joe cheated on her. That betrayal cuts deep. But he created a child in that betrayal. A child they had spent years trying to have.”

He was torn between the woman he loved and a child he’d always wanted. He couldn’t have both without hurting someone. Would Victoria have accepted JJ, or would she have resented him? Quinn understood how Joe could have warded with his decision.

She would have worked with him. Allowed visitation, as long as Victoria held no ill feelings for JJ. Would that have been possible?

Curiosity got the better of her. She grabbed her file. There weren’t as many photos of her. The one on top was a strip of pictures of her and Joe in one of those photo booths in the mall. They looked like they were in love. But she had been the only one. Below that was a picture of her and JJ in his cap and gown.

The remainder of her file was paperwork. Bank statements for JJ’s account, her employment records, a credit report, and a background check. Things a person would expect to find in a PI’s file. But why did he have a file like this on her?

“You said you found something.” Reid placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Oh. Yeah.” She shuffled the files to the side and handed him the delivery receipt. “It’s from the delivery company for my envelope. It looks like he shipped something else that day, but I don’t recognize the address.”

Reid frowned. “Whatever it was, it was sent to me.”

She stood, excitement coursing through her. This could be the break they needed. “It has to be related. It can’t be a coincidence that the day before he contacts you to help me, he sends us both packages.” A weight lifted from her shoulders. Maybe, they could find out what was going on and put an end to everything.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“There’s only one way to find out. Can I borrow your phone?” He hadn’t had a chance to replace his since it had been taken after he’d been knocked unconscious.

Quinn handed the phone to him. He opened the browser and navigated to the delivery company’s website and entered the tracking number. What came back was just what he’d been afraid of. It showed that it had been delivered. Someone had forged his signature and picked up his package. So much for checking IDs.

The search of Joe’s trailer was a dud. They should turn their focus to the list provided by Emily. The funeral would take place in the next day or two. They could question the names on the list while they were in town.

“Can I use your phone to check my voice mail?”

Quinn nodded.

The automated voice told him there was one message from this morning.

“This message is for Reid Lucas. Joe Lockhart said, if something should happen to him, that I should call you. Don’t bother checking caller ID. I’m using a payphone. I’ll call you.” The message ended.

He needed to get a new cell phone—right now. It was too late to go to the provider. He’d have to settle for a cheap phone from a gas station. “I have bad news and what could possibly be good news.”

Quinn slid the phone into her pocket. “Hit me.”

“Someone picked up my package. But I had a voice mail from a man who said Joe told them to call me if he died.”

“Do you think it has something to do with his death or with me and JJ?”

“We won’t know until he calls back. I need to get a new phone and change my voice mail, leaving the new number. Hopefully, whoever he is will call the new number.” He picked up the manila folders and tucked them under his arm. He needed to go through them more closely. He was getting warring vibes about Joe’s character. “Depending on what our mystery caller has to say, I think we should check out the names on the list. Today’s Wednesday. We can spend tomorrow interviewing people, stay the night at my house, and be there for the funeral on Friday or Saturday. I’m sure Victoria will want to have it as soon as she can.”

“Okay.” Her voice was almost as hollow as Victoria’s had been. The pressure was getting to her.

“I’m going to be with you guys every step of the way. I will keep you both safe, okay? Now, let’s get me a new phone and some food.” He drove them to a gas station for a phone and then drove through and got some food.

Quinn distributed it among them at the table in the cabin. Once they all had their food, she turned to JJ. “Do you want to say grace?”

He nodded before closing his eyes and bowing his head. Reid wasn’t a prayer. He couldn’t remember whether he’d ever prayed as an adult. He had memories of his mother praying with him as a child.

Quinn bowed her head and waited on her son to start.

“Grace.” JJ giggled and opened his eyes, earning a smile from Reid. The boy was definitely a jokester.

“You’re so silly.” Quinn winked at JJ.

“What about Mr. Reid?” JJ turned to him. “You say grace. But not like I did.”

Reid’s throat went dry, and his hands turned clammy. “Um.”

“I’ll say it.” Quinn saved him. Then, she closed her eyes and bowed her head. JJ followed suit.

He studied her profile. The bruise, dark and gruesome yesterday, seemed like it might be slightly better today.

“Thank You, Lord, for this day. Thank You for Your continued protection. Thank You for sending Reid to us. Lead us and guide us and bless this food. Amen.”

JJ echoed her amen.

Quinn looked at JJ and smiled before taking a bite of her food.

Reid and Quinn ate in silence because JJ was extra chatty, talking about what he'd seen around the cabin, and then, he moved on to talk about superheroes. Quinn had to interrupt him a couple of times to remind him not to talk with food in his mouth. When they finished eating, Quinn took JJ for a bath while Reid set up his new phone.

Once the phone was working, he called his old number and changed the voice mail message to include his new number.

“Momma, can we watch TV?” JJ brought out a DVD and gave it to his mother.

“Just one episode. Then, it's off to bed.” She started the DVD and joined Reid at the table. “I thought I'd search for news stories from the time Joe and I...” She took a deep breath. “When we were together. Maybe, Victoria was right. Maybe, whatever Joe was working on back then has come back to haunt us.”

“That's a good idea. Now that the phone is set up, I can look, too. When were you and Joe together?” He knew the year, but knowing the month would narrow his search tremendously.

“We started dating in April, and he left in June.”

A flash of the television screen caught his eye. “Is that a dancing vegetable?”

Quinn laughed. “Yes, it is.”

“I'm not going to ask.” He shook his head and went back to searching. A few articles came up but nothing helpful. “I'm

not finding much. Looks like a new mayor, some really bad car wrecks, and a bank robbery.”

“The local newspaper may keep their old articles archived online. Thanks to feeling bad for the local paperboy, I get the daily paper, complete with online access.”

He continued looking but kept coming back to the same articles. He put the phone down and rubbed his burning eyes. “Any luck?”

“Nope. Same as you. Wrecks, drugs, and bank robberies.”

“How many banks are there in town?” Were the robbers clearing out the town?

“Two or three, but these weren’t in our town. One was two cities east in March, and the other two cities west in July.”

It couldn’t be a coincidence. The article he’d read was for a bank here in town in May. Three robberies in close proximity every other month. “Was anyone arrested for the robberies?”

She shook her head. “Not that I’ve found.”

Would the robberies spread out more? His phone vibrated in his hand before the default ringtone sounded. Caller ID showed *Private*. “This is Reid.”

“Reid Lucas?” The voice on the line was the same from his voice mail.

“Yes.”

“Joe Lockhart said if anything happened to him, I should call.”

“Why?”

“He said you’d know what to do. If he was murdered, it was connected to a case.”

“Okay. What case?” This was an odd conversation. Why hadn’t Joe called him himself? Why get a third party involved?

“He didn’t tell me. All he said was the answer was in his office and that you’d know where to look.”

“That’s all. He didn’t—” The phone disconnected. The number was private, so there was no way to call him back. And he didn’t give his name.

Quinn looked at him expectantly as he put the phone down.

“Sounds like Joe knew whoever killed him and has proof.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s time to go home.”

Reid’s house stood dark on the otherwise well-lit street. Not sure what to expect when he left or when he’d be coming back to his house, he hadn’t left his porch light on like he normally would. There weren’t any notes stuck to his door, so whoever had picked up the package hadn’t left anything alerting him to a missing delivery. He would run across the street and check the mail after he got Quinn and JJ settled in. The boy had fallen asleep once they had hit the open road.

Quinn couldn’t get him awake enough to walk himself up to the house. She stood behind Reid, holding her sleeping child. He’d give them his room and sleep on the couch. That’s where he slept most of the time anyway.

He turned on the lights and showed Quinn to the bedroom. She laid JJ down, then removed his shoes and set them on the floor.

She pulled the covers over him and kissed his forehead. “When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet,” she whispered.

“That’s a nice good night saying. Does it work?” Everyone had good night rituals. He remembered his mother

reading him a story before tucking him in every night.

“It’s not a saying. It’s a verse in Proverbs. I think it helps him sleep, or at least, it’s my prayer for his sleep.”

“You believe that?”

“Believe that he’s not afraid? I want him not to be afraid. He knows I’m here to protect him, but more importantly, he knows God is protecting him.”

Reid had to control himself, or an exasperated sigh would escape. He turned and walked down the hall.

“I know you’re not a believer and that you’ve seen too many bad things to believe in the good.” She followed him.

He turned to face her, stopping them in the middle of the hallway. Was she really going to talk about a loving God right now? “What about this situation? Someone is trying to kill you and your child. You still believe God is good?”

“I see God’s goodness in all of this. He brought you to us. Without you, I don’t think we’d have made it this far.” Her eyes had tenderness in them.

She truly believed God was using him. He almost pitied her belief. God would never use a man like him for anything. “If you say so.” He scoffed.

“You don’t think God can use you?” She took a small step toward him, studying his eyes.

“A man with a past like mine can’t be used for anything other than a lesson.”

“You’re not too far gone to be loved and used by God. He loved you even in the midst of this past that haunts you.” She pressed her palm to his cheek.

He wanted to lean into it, to believe what she said, but he couldn’t. That’s not how things worked. He grabbed her hand, removed it from his face, and turned back toward the front of the house.

“Wait.” She tried to squeeze past him.

He stretched his arm out, stopping her, and took a step toward her. She took a step backward and hit the wall. His hand rested on the wall next to her head. He leaned in, never taking his gaze from hers. "I've done some unforgivable things in my life."

She studied him.

"Let. It. Go." He enunciated every word, going for intimidation.

But she wasn't affected. Quite the opposite, actually. She stood a little taller and squared her shoulders. "I'll stop this conversation, but you can't stop me from praying for you."

Now, he was the one intimidated. He licked his lips. She was standing so close he could feel the warmth of her breath as she exhaled. He let himself relax as he studied her face. Here was this beautiful woman in the fight of her life, and she was going to pray for him. Behind the fire, sincerity filled her eyes, like she was fiercely determined to protect him.

His gaze traveled to her lips. Pursued at first, they relaxed when she took a deep breath. She lifted her head a little. His body reacted without asking his brain for permission.

He leaned down and grazed her lips with his. It was just a whisper of a kiss. He wanted more but knew it was a mistake. He pulled away. "I'm sorry." He took a couple of steps back.

She didn't say anything, just nodded.

"I'm going to go check the mail." He didn't wait for her to respond, just spun and walked straight outside. The night air was cool, and stars sparkled in the sky. He needed to clear his head. He'd kissed Quinn. It would be a lie if he said he hadn't enjoyed it, but he shouldn't have done it.

There was a whole list of reasons. The top one being that his past haunted him day and night. Drugs, parties, promiscuous lifestyle. That wasn't even the worse part. He was a murderer. He'd killed a man. The police and the courts had deemed it justified. But that didn't make it any better. He wasn't worthy of love.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Quinn stood in the hallway in shock. Reid had kissed her and then practically run from the house. Why had he kissed her? Was it just to shut her up? It was unexpected and the opposite of what she would have expected from him. She assumed it'd be fierce and commanding like him. Definitely not tender and enticing. Not that she'd thought about kissing him. While she enjoyed the kiss, she didn't need a man in her life. JJ was her life. She needed to remember that.

The shock wore off, and she continued to the kitchen. She needed a drink, and then, she'd turn in. They'd decided to leave as soon as possible and spend the night at his house instead of waiting until morning.

The front door clicked shut, and Reid joined her in the kitchen, throwing his mail on the table.

"I hope you don't mind, but I'm thirsty." She opened a cabinet, hoping it was the right one.

"No problem. The cups are in the other cabinet." He pointed to the correct one. He didn't look her in the eyes. His neck was a slight shade of pink.

He shouldn't be embarrassed. The kiss was sweet. *No, don't go there. JJ is the only person you need.* She grabbed a cup, filled it with water, and drank half of it.

"I thought we'd go to Joe's office first thing in the morning. I also want to find out where his funeral is."

The funeral. She hadn't thought about Joe being Reid's friend and him wanting to say his final goodbyes. As much as she had loved Joe, she didn't want to attend his funeral. No one may know about their relationship, but she didn't feel right attending. Plus, she wasn't ready to take JJ to a funeral. Even if it was his father's. He didn't know the truth, and she wasn't going to share it now.

“You don’t have to go to the funeral.” He must have sensed her unease. “You and JJ can stay here.”

“Okay.” She finished her water and put the cup in the sink. “I’m going to go to bed now.”

He nodded. She walked past him and caught a whiff of that cologne she liked so much.

“Quinn?”

She turned to him, and he just stared at her.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Good night.”

Quinn woke and glanced at the clock next to the bed. It was 6:30. She slipped from the bed as quietly as she could and changed out of her pajamas. Her muscles weren’t as sore this morning as they had been, but certain movements caused sharp pains. She gritted her teeth and finished.

The front room and kitchen were empty. Reid couldn’t be in the bathroom because the door was open and the light off. A kitchen chair was missing. The only other place he could be was outside. The front door was unlocked, confirming what she thought. She opened it and found Reid sitting on the missing chair at the edge of the porch.

“Mornin’.” He nodded.

“Good morning. How’s your hand?” She closed the door behind her and leaned on the jamb, placing her hands between herself and the wood.

“Fine. You?”

“I’m better than I was yesterday.” She shrugged.

“Good.”

He was a man of few words this morning.

“I bet the sunrise was beautiful. Too bad I missed it.”

“It was.”

She followed his gaze, not seeing anything particularly interesting. “Amazing, I’m sure. God’s masterpiece coming to life.”

Reid grunted in return. Obviously, God still wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have. Maybe, one day. Would he say anything about last night’s kiss? Or would he ignore it like an elephant in the room?

“I found Joe’s obituary in the paper this morning,” Reid said.

Elephant it was.

“They’ll be having the service tomorrow. It gives us all day today to search his office and do those interviews.”

The sooner they got started, the better, she supposed. “I’ll go get JJ up.” She turned and headed back into the house.

Within the hour, the three of them were pulling into a strip mall. Joe’s office was sandwiched between a nail salon and an insurance company. Quinn’s stomach churned as Reid produced a key from his pocket and let them in. Then, he disarmed the alarm. “Joe said he trusted me enough to let me keep a key after I branched off. Said we’d probably need to work together a few times anyway. He had a key to my place, too.”

The bare office Quinn expected based on the film noir private detective movies she’d seen wasn’t what was before her now. Instead, it was a well-decorated waiting room. A receptionist’s desk, four chairs, and a small coffee table filled the room. Pictures portraying the ocean adorned the walls. Behind the receptionist’s desk was a door, and there was another door on the wall to the right of it.

“Let’s start in Joe’s office. I doubt there’s anything in the conference room.” After locking the front door, Reid walked across the waiting area and opened the door behind the desk.

Joe’s office was decorated in the same navy blue and gray. A large oak desk sat in the center of the room, two armchairs

sat directly across from it, and the left wall was lined with filing cabinets.

“Why don’t you sit right here and play the math game?” Quinn patted one of the armchairs and handed JJ her phone. He hopped into the chair and started playing.

“I’ll start with his desk.” Quinn didn’t want to look through the filing cabinets. She felt like she was invading people’s privacy. Not like going through Joe’s desk wasn’t an invasion, but it was different. Reid had worked for Joe. He’d most likely seen most of the files. It wasn’t like breaking confidentiality.

“If you see anything you think is relevant, let me know. I’m not entirely sure what we’re looking for.”

That didn’t exactly fill her with hope. She sat in Joe’s chair, facing his desk. A laptop sat closed in the middle of the desk. A phone to the left. A picture frame with a photo of a man and woman on their wedding day sat on the right.

Guilt grew in her stomach. She wasn’t to blame. She swallowed hard and saw a calendar lying open with various entries, mostly names and times and appointments scrawled across it. She opened the middle drawer. Pens, pencils, and other basic office supplies. The drawer to the right held empty manila folders and legal pads. The drawer below it had folders labeled for bills, accounts receivable, and bank information. Nothing at all useful.

The top left drawer held a metal lockbox, the lock open. “Reid?”

He closed the drawer he was thumbing through and came to her side. “That’s where he kept his gun.”

“Gun?”

“Yes. He liked to carry a gun for protection. He had a concealed carry license.” He lifted the lid. It was empty except for a box of ammunition.

“Do all PIs carry guns?” She looked at him.

He shrugged. “Some do and some don’t.”

“You don’t.” She hadn’t seen him with a gun this whole time.

“I don’t like them.” He dropped the lid and went back to the cabinets.

He didn’t like guns? That was interesting.

She lifted the box. Nothing lay underneath it. The drawer beneath it held various files. She thumbed through them and didn’t find anything. She sat back up and focused on the wedding photo. “Were they happy?”

Reid looked up from the drawer he was searching and stared at her, brow furrowed.

“Were Joe and Victoria happy?”

His face softened and filled with compassion. He walked over and laid the picture frame facedown before sitting on the edge of the desk next to her. “Don’t blame yourself.” He looked at JJ and then leaned in closer to her. “Joe made his decisions for his own reasons. He betrayed you and Victoria. Neither of you deserved that.”

“I know.” She flung herself back in the chair, and it began to wobble. She jerked, overcompensating, and started to fall backward. A squeal escaped her, and her arms waved as she tried to catch herself. The chair tipped over with her in it. Reid grabbed her wrist but slipped. She hit the ground hard, jarring her back and causing a fresh wave of pain. Good thing it was a high-back chair, or she’d have hit her head. She’d not dealt a lot with headaches—surprising given how the bruise on her temple looked.

“Are you okay?” Reid peered over her legs, which were in the air.

She struggled to get up until he reached out and helped her up. He didn’t immediately let go of her. She liked the feel of his hand holding hers.

“Are you okay, Momma?”

JJ. Quinn pulled her hand free. “Yes, baby.”

Reid stepped around her and righted the chair. “Looks like a broken wheel.” He fiddled with the wheel, trying to stick it back where it belonged. It wouldn’t go. He continued to mess with it until something fell out of the leg. “What the—” Reid stopped, looking first at her and then at JJ.

He picked up the object and held it in his open palm.

“A hidden thumb drive,” she said. “That must be what you’re supposed to find.”

“We’ll know soon enough.” He opened the laptop, powered it on, inserted the USB drive, and waited for the folder to appear. It contained several PDF documents. He clicked on one, and a newspaper article popped up. “Bank Robbery Shocks Town.” Quinn read over his shoulder. The article described a bank robbery where the robbers were able to get in and out in less than five minutes. No one was injured, and the article did not release the amount of money taken.

He opened a different PDF. Another article on a bank robbery. All the articles he clicked were about different robberies. A text document had a chronological list of the robberies. “He must have connected all of the robberies, and that’s why he was in town when you met him. He cracked their pattern.”

The bells above the front door jingled. She had watched him lock the door behind him. Someone else had a key.

He shut the laptop, pulled out the USB, and shoved it in his pocket. “Hide,” he whispered as he pushed Quinn toward the opening beneath the desk. He grabbed JJ and gave him to her before pushing the chair in.

She wasn’t sure where he was going to hide or whether he was going to hide. She couldn’t see anything. JJ whimpered in her lap. “Shh.” She hugged him tight. “We’re going to be okay.” She prayed she was right. A woman’s voice grew louder as she entered the room.

“I stopped at Joe’s office.” It was Victoria’s voice. “I wanted to grab his laptop. I’m going to have to start calling his clients.”

Quinn's heart beat in her ears. Would she just reach across the desk and grab the laptop, or would she walk around and pick it up? They should be safe so long as Victoria didn't sit down.

"Yes, I know the funeral is tomorrow, but I'll be so busy with that I won't have time to get the computer. Besides, I was in the area." She must be talking into a cell phone.

Quinn heard scraping across the top of the desk as Victoria grabbed the laptop. Her footsteps grew quieter.

"Okay, guys. Let's get out of here," Reid said from his hiding spot. By the time Quinn and JJ crawled from under the desk, Reid was standing by the office door, watching the front door. They quickly exited Joe's office and climbed into the waiting car. "Let's go see what else is on this USB."

The drive back to Reid's house was silent. Quinn's mind raced with possibilities of what could be on the USB and how bank robberies had anything to do with her and JJ.

Reid placed his laptop on the kitchen table. Quinn pulled a kitchen chair close to him and sat. She was close enough she could feel the heat emanating from his arm. He plugged the USB in and maximized the time line document. Together, they scrolled through it. "There were three bank robberies every six months. All in close proximity. Then, they'd move on to another area and rob three more banks in six months." She pointed at the screen. "The notes are for two years. That's twelve robberies."

He clicked on a folder titled "Photos" and started a slideshow. Photos of the outside and inside of various banks rolled across the screen. Every photo was time-stamped, and they were all within a two-week time period, so they weren't taken at the time of the robberies.

The Sunrise Café popped up on the screen. "That's my diner."

The next picture was of the bank down the street from the diner. Her bank. Then, there were photos inside and out.

Followed by photos of individuals either entering or leaving the bank.

“Do you recognize any of these people?” If Quinn did, then chances were they weren’t the robbers because they’d already determined it was a traveling crew responsible for the robberies.

“I recognize several of them, but I couldn’t tell you their names or anything about them. Just that I’ve either seen them in the diner or around town.”

“Let me know who’s unfamiliar.” He grabbed a pen and paper from his junk drawer.

She nodded and leaned closer. “Him.” She pointed at the screen.

Reid wrote down the image name.

Another person filled the screen. It was her pastor. Two more photos scrolled by, containing people she’d seen in the diner. “Her.” She pointed at a brunette woman.

Reid wrote that image name down. Altogether, she pointed out eleven people she didn’t recognize. “It doesn’t mean they were in on the robberies,” Reid said. “It could just be a coincidence. But if they were in on it and they killed Joe, perhaps they’ll show up at his funeral tomorrow. It isn’t beyond the realm of possibilities that the killer will come back and admire their handiwork.”

A new bank with new faces started scrolling, and she didn’t recognize anyone else. It was safe to assume Joe had moved on to a new town. “Why don’t we take a break?” Her eyes were burning from staring at the screen for too long.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JJ lay up against her on the couch. Quinn and Reid had looked at the information on the thumb drive until their eyes burned. She'd come into the front room and sat down with JJ. He'd wanted her to read to him, and then, they settled in for a movie. He fell asleep about thirty minutes in. He wasn't usually one to take a nap, but the last couple of days had been the opposite of normal. She swiped her hand over his forehead. He felt slightly warm. She hoped he wasn't coming down with something. They were four hours from home and his pediatrician.

Reid had gone back to the kitchen to keep looking through what they'd found. She gently stood up and laid JJ on the couch. There was still a slideshow running across the computer screen. She recognized the face that came into view. "Stop."

Reid jumped at her voice.

"Sorry." She stepped behind him and put her arm on his chairback. Leaning in, she pointed to the face. "Isn't that Victoria's brother?" The hair color was different, but the facial features were the same.

Reid didn't say anything for a moment, just stared at the photo. Finally, he looked up at her. "I think you're right."

"Do you think he was in on the robberies?" That could explain why nothing ever came of this huge case Joe was working. If it was his brother-in-law, he couldn't turn him in. That wouldn't be good for his marriage.

"I hope not." He restarted the slideshow. "I'd hate to think he had anything to do with Joe's death."

"Wait. That's one of the guys that kidnapped us. Andrew and this guy must have worked together years ago. Now, he's back and after me. Andrew has to be connected." She wanted

to be relieved that they might have found the thing that could end this, but her heart broke knowing someone close to Joe could be responsible for his death. It had just got more complicated.

“Looks like it.”

“Why don’t you like guns?” She wasn’t sure where that question had come from or why she’d decided to ask it right now.

Reid closed the laptop, stopping the photos. “It’s a long story.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’ve got plenty of time.”

“You don’t want to know about my sordid past.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Yes, I do. But only if you want to tell me.”

“Why? Why would you want to know?”

“So I can understand you better.” If she knew him better, perhaps she could help him see that he wasn’t too far gone for God’s love.

“You won’t look at me the same once I tell you.” He stood and walked out of the kitchen.

He’d endured something terrible. That was for sure. She followed him and gently grabbed his arm. “You know it doesn’t matter what I think of you. God loves you. He loves you so much He sent His Son to die for you.”

His shoulder sank under her hand, and he let out a long breath before turning around. The pain that filled his eyes broke her heart.

“You don’t know me. You don’t know what I’ve done.”

“You’re right. I don’t know your past. But I know you now. I know that you’ve done everything you can to help protect me and my son. You’ve put your life on the line a couple of times. You are a good man. You’re not the man from your past. Everyone has a past. The past is who you were, it’s

helped define the person you've become, but it's not the person you are now."

He cocked his head and studied her. Was she going to be able to break through that tough exterior? It didn't matter if she broke through. Her job was to plant the seed. God would reap the harvest in His time.

"I'm too far gone. No one can save me."

"You think you're the only person who has done bad things? The Bible is full of people who have sordid pasts. Saul went around murdering Christians until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Then, God used him to further His kingdom, and He can use you, too." She placed her hand on his cheek, praying for peace for his soul. *Lord, please be with Reid. Let him see who You are and that he is loved by You. No matter what he thinks.*

He placed his hand over hers, held it to his face, and closed his eyes, taking in her words. He opened them and stared at her before removing her hand from his face. "I don't believe it."

Her heart cracked. *Lord, even if I don't get to see the harvest, let me plant this seed.* "You don't have to believe it. It's true. Just don't completely give up and resign yourself to a life of torture." She stood on her toes and placed a kiss on his cheek, then went to join JJ in the living room.

Reid disappeared to his bedroom for a bit. Presumably to compose himself. He gave her a wide berth the rest of the evening.

The next morning, Reid walked into the kitchen, dressed in pressed black dress pants, a white button-up shirt, and shiny black shoes. His hair was damp and combed back. He'd shaved the stubble that had grown over the last couple of days and removed the bandage from his hand. He cleaned up well. She couldn't take her eyes off him. Butterflies started swarming in her stomach. He was wearing that cologne—it was strong and intoxicating.

“You look fancy, Mr. Reid,” JJ said around a mouthful of cereal.

“Thank you.” Reid smiled at her son.

“Where are you going?” JJ asked.

Reid looked at her, waiting for her to answer.

“Reid has to go to a funeral. While he’s gone, you and I are going to stay here.”

“Okay.” He went back to his breakfast like he’d just asked what time it was. He didn’t ask what a funeral was.

Reid lifted an eyebrow. She shrugged. *Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.* JJ was young, and Quinn had lived with him alone since birth. JJ didn’t know what funerals were. She wasn’t trying to protect him from the harsh realities of life. It’s just that she hadn’t had to attend a funeral since he was born. She didn’t have many friends or family members.

“I’m going to go to the funeral and then come straight back here. I’ve downloaded the photos of people you didn’t recognize and sent them to my phone. I’ll see if any of them show up. I also want to see if maybe I can talk to Victoria’s brother.”

She nodded.

“Don’t answer the door for anyone. Stay inside, and keep the doors locked.”

“Yes, sir.” She felt like a child getting the speech about staying home alone for the first time.

He angled his head toward her. “I know I’m telling you things that you already know. I’m sorry. I’m just—” He rubbed the back of his neck. He seemed to do that when he felt a little uncomfortable.

“You’re worried.” She was, too, but no one knew they were in town. They hadn’t seen anyone since they’d been here. They’d see Reid at the funeral, but they’d have no reason to believe she was in town, too. At least, she hoped that was true

He put one hand on the back of her chair and the other on the table before leaning down, eye to eye with her. "I am."

Her stomach flip-flopped at his nearness. He leaned in a little closer. Was he going to kiss her again? She wanted him to. Really wanted him to. Her heart and her brain warred. His head changed trajectory, and he planted a kiss on her forehead. That tender kiss was almost as intimate as a kiss to the lips. It was a kiss of protection. Something much deeper than attraction. To her, it was a more emotionally connected display.

He pulled away and stood.

She looked at JJ sitting across the table from her. He had a wide grin on his face. Was he plotting against her?

"I'll be back as soon as the funeral is over." He rubbed JJ's head before walking out of the kitchen. She heard the front door shut.

JJ swallowed his food. "He loves you."

"And just how do you know this?" Her cheeks were on fire.

"He kissed you like you kiss me."

Her heart melted a little. Her son understood protection.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

What was he thinking? Reid gripped the steering wheel. He'd almost kissed Quinn. Again. He'd leaned down close to her in the kitchen, and his mind went back to the kiss from Wednesday night. Her lips had been soft and warm. He wanted to know whether she'd let him kiss her again. He'd almost done it, intoxicated by her, but he changed course and softly kissed her forehead instead. He had to remember she needed his protection and not his heart. His heart was no good.

Reid arrived at the funeral home an hour early. He wanted to see who showed up, and it would be easier to watch everyone from outside. There would be no one to bother him or ask why he was staring at everyone.

Victoria arrived at 10:30. A black sedan dropped her off at the entry and then proceeded to a parking space that wasn't part of the procession. Andrew exited it and walked to the funeral home. He and Victoria wouldn't be in their personal vehicle during the processional because they'd be in the limo. An elderly couple arrived moments later. He couldn't be sure because he'd never met them, but he believed they were Joe's parents. The man favored Joe.

The rest of the mourners began to trickle in at 10:45, and the closer to 11:00 it got, the quicker they came. If he had to guess, he'd say about one hundred people were in attendance.

Waiting until exactly 11:00, Reid stepped out of his car and made his way to the service. After signing the guest book, he stood at the back of the room with a few other men. There weren't many seats available. He surveyed the crowd. There were ladies crying and men sitting solemnly. No one stood out, and no one's countenance screamed, "I did it. I killed him."

Victoria cried throughout the service. As did the elderly woman he'd figured to be Joe's mom. Others dabbed tears but not as many as those two ladies.

The service ended, and the mourners lined up to offer their condolences. Every person in attendance gave hugs or shook hands. No one left without speaking to one of the family members standing by the coffin.

Reid brought up the rear of the line. Victoria was pale, her eyes red-rimmed, but she no longer cried. She'd probably cried all the tears she could for the time being.

"Oh, Reid." She gave him a hug. "I'm so glad you could make it. You were one of Joe's closest friends."

"I'm sorry for your loss." He squeezed her before backing up and taking her hand.

The elderly couple turned and disappeared through the doors at the side of the large room. Funeral home workers closed the lid of the coffin and prepared to wheel it to the hearse.

"Please, forgive me, but I need to use the restroom before we head to the cemetery." She squeezed his hand. "It means so much that you're here."

She turned, picked up her purse, and followed the route the elderly couple had taken.

"Andrew. Can I ask you a question?" Reid put his hands in his pockets.

He furrowed his brow. "I guess."

"I've seen a photo of you at a bank four hours away from here. A bank that ended up getting robbed two days after you were there."

His jaw tensed, and his eyes darted from side to side. "How'd you get that?"

"That's not important. What's important is why were you there, and does it have something to do with Joe's death? There's also a photo of your partner. The same man who just so happened to kidnap Quinn."

"It absolutely does not," he spat through gritted teeth.

"Andrew." Victoria appeared at the doorway.

“Not here. Not now. After the funeral.” He turned and marched to where Victoria waited.

Reid followed them to the parking lot, climbed into his car, and waited. He wanted to be the last person in the procession.

Half an hour later, Reid stood at the edge of the cemetery. Watching for any newcomers or for anyone to veer off from the group. Neither of which happened.

Victoria sat in a chair by the grave opening. Andrew tried to comfort her, but she gently pushed him away. He stood to the side, waiting. He glanced around and spotted Reid. Several long strides later, they were face to face.

Andrew crossed his arms over his chest. “I can only assume Joe kept the photos and surveillance he collected.”

Reid shrugged.

He looked at Victoria, then turned his back to her. “Joe had been hired to find out who had robbed a specific bank,” he said, his voice low. “He was able to find a pattern and track us down.”

So, Andrew was a bank robber. “Go on.”

“Victoria and I are close. After our parents died, we only had each other. Joe didn’t want to turn me in. He knew it would destroy her. He told me he’d destroy everything he had but I had to promise to stop.”

“Did you?” Reid wasn’t completely buying the story.

“I did. I gave the crew my portion and cut ties. As far as kidnapping, I don’t have an answer to that. I haven’t seen those people since I quit.”

Victoria stood and tossed a rose into the open grave.

“If you’ll excuse me, my sister is devastated. I need to tend to her.” He turned and met her by the grave, then led her to the waiting limo.

Andrew was the only suspect they had. He still had a motive for wanting Joe dead, but there was nothing to connect

him to Quinn. Maybe, they were missing something. He wanted to look at Joe's surveillance again.

After cleaning up their breakfast dishes, Quinn grabbed the laptop and settled on the couch with JJ. She felt useless. Reid was out doing legwork, so the least she could do was look through the photos again.

She started with the photo of the Sunrise Café. She looked at every detail in every photo. She got to the photo of Victoria's brother and paused. It was definitely him. A different hair color and a pair of reading glasses, but it was the same square jaw and pointed nose. She looked at the other people in the photo. Everyone else was unfamiliar. She started to move on to the next picture, but a black peacoat and teal-and-brown purse caught her attention. Quinn had been in the bank when Andrew was there. Was that a coincidence? She shifted and rubbed the back of her neck.

She looked at the time stamp. It was March, right before she got involved with Joe. It did look like Andrew was watching her. But why would he be? She searched her memory, trying to remember any details but unable to grasp any. Had Joe started seeing her because she was in the photo?

It was definitely something she'd bring up to Reid when he got back. Is that how they were all connected?

Everything was conjecture at this point. They didn't have anything connecting Andrew to the robberies. She moved through the remaining photos. Joe changed towns. Andrew was there again. He'd changed hair color again, and instead of glasses, he had a thin goatee. She was almost positive it was him.

She pulled out her phone and sent Reid a quick text telling him Andrew was in more than one of the banks. Maybe, he could corner Andrew and ask a few questions.

I KNOW, he texted back.

How did he know?

A loud boom shook the front door, causing her to jump and almost drop the laptop. Another boom. Someone was trying to break it down.

She pulled the thumb drive from the computer and grabbed JJ, then ran to Reid's room. She shut and locked the door and pushed a dresser in front of it.

Crashing came from the front of the house. Whoever was trying to get in had succeeded.

She opened the closet door and moved things around on the top shelf, making room for JJ. She set him up there. He was crying, no doubt scared for his life. She wiped the tears. "Stay here, and be absolutely quiet, okay?"

JJ hiccupped and nodded.

"I love you, sweet boy." She moved a blanket over him and then closed the door.

She opened the bedroom window and pushed out the screen, getting ready to lead their attacker away, then pulled out her cell phone and called Reid. *Please, pick up. Please, pick up.* She surveyed the room, looking for something to defend herself with while she waited.

"Hey," Reid answered.

"Someone's broken into the house." She screamed when banging started on the bedroom door.

"I'm almost there." Reid's voice had a note of panic.

"I don't know your address. I couldn't call 911."

"It's okay. I'll be there in less than five minutes."

The bedroom door shook, and the dresser rattled as whoever was on the other side tried to break through.

"I don't know if we have that long."

"Hello," a voice snarled from the open window.

She whipped around as a large man started climbing through the window. She threw the lamp as hard as she could,

and it hit him on the head. He dropped back out the window, letting expletives roll free.

“Reid, they’re coming in through the bedroom window.” She dropped the phone and ran for the window before he could climb back through, but it was too late—he was halfway through the window again. She looked for something else to defend herself with and zeroed in on the dresser. She pulled a drawer from the dresser and flung it at him. He ducked, and it crashed against the wall behind him.

He rushed her and slammed her into the dresser she had moved. He raised his hand and brought the back of it to her cheek in a quick swing. Pain radiated through her skull, and a metallic taste filled her mouth.

“Where’s the boy?”

“I’ll never tell you!”

“Yes, you will.” He wrapped a meaty hand around her throat and squeezed, cutting off her air. She tried desperately to pry his fingers from around her throat. Her vision blurred as her lungs begged for oxygen.

He released his grip, and she gasped for air. “Where is he?”

She shook her head. He squeezed again. Over the roaring in her ears, she heard a whimper. He let go of her and turned toward the closet. She collapsed, breathing deeply for much-needed air.

He ripped the door open and rummaged through the bottom of the closet, looking for JJ.

She stood on shaky legs, then charged him, jumped on his back, and wrapped an arm around his neck. She squeezed as hard as she could, praying she’d be strong enough to restrict his airflow. He straightened and stumbled backward, then turned and slammed her into the wall.

Pain forced her to let go, and she fell to the floor. He grabbed her around the throat with one hand and lifted her up. Her feet barely touched the floor.

She reached out and dug her thumbs into his eyes. He howled and let go, immediately rubbing his eyes. Then, she took aim and kicked him in the groin as hard as she could, sending him to his knees.

The person who had tried to come through the door was now trying to climb through the window. She shoved him through and closed it. Then, she grabbed JJ from the closet and held him close. He clung to her, crying into her neck. With a strength she didn't know she possessed, she moved the dresser from the door with one arm and darted out.

She ran straight into Reid.

“Quinn.” He grabbed her by the upper arms, steadying her.

She saw the second man come storming through the front door. “Behind you!”

Reid spun quickly and took a punch to the face. He stumbled a bit before regaining his balance and threw a punch of his own, hitting the man's nose with a sickening crunch. He screamed as he fell to the floor.

“Come on.” Reid grabbed her free hand and pulled her and a hysterical JJ toward the front door. They jumped into his car and sped off, intent on getting as far from his house as they could.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Reid's jaw ached from the punch he'd taken in the scuffle. But it wasn't as painful as hearing the hysterical cries coming from JJ in the back seat. Reid's heart ached. Quinn had pulled JJ close and was whispering words of reassurance to him.

Reid hated himself for allowing this to happen. Quinn's neck was red and swollen. What would have happened had he not made it in time? He shuddered to think about it.

His home was now compromised. Where could they go? It was four hours back to Mrs. Stevenson's cabin. They could go back there, but they had more questions than they had answers. He knew the answer to this lay with Andrew. And one thing was for sure—he wouldn't leave Quinn and JJ alone again.

He pulled to the back of a gas station, hopped out, and opened the back door to check on Quinn.

JJ had calmed down and now lay against his mother, hiccupping. Reid placed a hand on Quinn's shoulder. She looked at him, and tears pooled in her eyes. Then, she leaned back against him. He wrapped his arms around her and her son. He stood there holding this little family, one he'd grown to care for.

JJ's breathing slowed to normal as he finally gained his composure.

"What do you say we go in and get something to drink?" Reid patted the boy's shoulder.

He sniffled and nodded.

Reid pulled away and took a step back. Quinn's neck still glowed a bright red. He touched it lightly, and she flinched.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You just scared me."

“No. I’m sorry this happened to you. I should have been there.” Guilt gnawed at his stomach.

She raised a hand to her neck but stopped before touching the raw flesh. Instead, she placed her hand against his cheek. “It’s not your fault.”

He wasn’t going to argue with her. Technically speaking, she was right. He hadn’t been the one to choke her, but he hadn’t been there to prevent it, either. That was an internal battle he would fight on his own.

She pulled her hair down from the messy bun it had been in and wrapped the loose strands around her neck, hiding the marks. Then, she scooped JJ from the car and carried him inside.

Reid bought a cup of ice, grabbed a handful of napkins, and created a makeshift ice pack with a plastic sack. It would help the swelling.

He helped settle her and JJ back into the car. “We really need to call this into the police. Not only did they break into my house, but they physically assaulted you this time.” He cracked his neck as he swallowed the lump in his throat. “They could have killed you.” His voice was a whisper as the lump landed heavily in the pit of his stomach.

She only nodded as she comforted JJ. The hiccupping breaths had stopped, but he still clung to his mother.

Reid made the call and agreed to wait at the gas station for an officer to come take their statements and photos of Quinn’s injuries.

By the time the officer was done, the sun was sinking. It was too late to head back to the cabin. With all the excitement of the day, exhaustion clung to everyone. Staying at his house was out of the question. So, they opted to rent a hotel room. The only room left was a double queen. It was a little cozier than the cabin. Quinn and JJ couldn’t have their privacy, but Reid could stand guard outside if he needed to.

She said they were fine at the moment, but he still stood staring out the hotel window while she did her good night

ritual with JJ. The one that included that Bible verse about not being afraid and sleeping sweet. How had she built a faith so strong while she faced insurmountable odds?

He wanted to meet Andrew in a dark alley. He must have called and had his buddies pay a visit to the house, knowing Reid had been at the funeral. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

He was convinced more than ever that Andrew was responsible for Joe's death and everything that had happened since then. What else could explain the goons showing up at his house and attacking? The motive was there. Joe had connected him to at least a dozen robberies. Photographic evidence.

A hand rested on his shoulder. He turned to see Quinn standing behind him. "What are you thinking about?"

"How I know Andrew is behind this."

"You texted earlier and said you knew he'd been at the bank. Did he tell you?"

He nodded and filled her in on his conversation. "Plus, after he talked to me, you were attacked."

"I looked a little harder at the pictures while you were gone and found another photo of him scouting out a different bank, and there's a photo of one of our kidnappers."

"All we have are them at two banks that ended up getting robbed. Honestly, I don't think that's enough to want to kill Joe. If he had the evidence, why would they be targeting you and JJ?"

"I also noticed that I was in one of the photos. I recognized my coat and handbag."

"Okay. Maybe, Andrew finds out about you and Joe, and then, he's got something on Joe. They've both got something to hurt Victoria but to also protect themselves." He rubbed his hand down his face. "That still doesn't explain why they keep coming after you now that Joe is dead."

“I don’t think they want me.” Quinn sat on the edge of the hotel bed and stared at her fingers. “When we were attacked at your house, the man asked where JJ was. He only wanted him.” She looked at her sleeping son, and a tear slid down her cheek. “Why do they want my baby?”

Reid’s chest tightened. He moved to the bed next to her, pulled her close, and held her. He kissed the top of her head. He’d grown to care for Quinn and her son. Much more than he ever would have expected.

They sat like that in silence. She molded to him, like she was meant to be in his arms. But he knew better than that. His arms were destined to be empty. He’d better put his feelings in a box and lock it up. Get back to the problem at hand.

What did a dozen bank robberies have to do with a six-year-old kid? All of them occurred before he was born. He could see that maybe they thought Joe had given Quinn something, but what?

“I’m trying to put pieces together. I know you said Joe was never in JJ’s life and that he only sent money to a bank account monthly. Did he ever send any gifts? Any small trinket that meant nothing?”

“No.”

“What about you? Any jewelry or something someone could hide stuff in?”

“No. He was a flowers and chocolates kind of guy, and even then, it wasn’t very often.”

“What if the USB drive wasn’t even meant for us?” Reid was thinking out loud. “What if whatever he wanted us to find is still out there?”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Maybe, we’re way off base. We’ll just have to go back and see what else we can find.” She yawned.

“Why don’t you get some rest? You’ve had a long day.”

“So have you.” She looked up at him with big green eyes.

He moved his hands to cradle her face, causing his fingers to tangle in her hair. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay.” He

tilted her head down and placed another kiss on her forehead.

He'd done that a couple of times now, despite knowing she would one day decide he wasn't worthy. What he really wanted was to feel her lips against his again. They'd never talked about the kiss at his house. She hadn't admonished him for it. Could she have enjoyed it as much as he had?

He pulled his hands away, pulling strands of her hair with them. He shook the hair free and tucked it behind her ears. "Sleep." He nodded to the queen-size bed where JJ was sleeping soundly.

She climbed into the bed and snuggled with the boy.

Reid took the chair he'd been sitting in and set it in front of the hotel door. If he got tired, he'd prop his feet up on the second queen bed and relax. Right now, he was on guard duty. If anyone came after JJ tonight, they'd have to go through him first.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Quinn opened her eyes and came face to feet with JJ. He'd managed to turn his body ninety degrees. It was a miracle he hadn't kicked her in the face yet.

She rolled onto her back and looked at the ceiling. Light was beginning to stream through the hotel window. She looked toward the window and saw Reid sleeping in a chair, legs propped up and crossed on the bed, his hands resting on his stomach.

She studied him. He was still wearing the clothes from the funeral, although he'd lost the tie a long time ago. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to his upper forearms, and the top button was undone. His face was relaxed and soft—no hint of a five o'clock shadow. His hair was mussed. She wanted to stare at him, study every plane and angle, memorize the lines of his face.

Just as she feared, a foot connected with her head, Luckily, she'd rolled, or she might have a bloody nose right now. The other foot joined the first, tangling in her hair. It was time to move before he moved again and pulled her hair.

She stood and made her way to the bathroom. After taming her hair, she opened the door and found Reid sitting up in his chair. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. I've been awake for a while."

She wasn't going to argue with him. If he had been awake, then he knew she had been staring at him. If he hadn't been awake and she told him so, then he'd know she'd been staring at him.

He stood and stretched. "I've been thinking."

"About?" She took one of the disposable plastic cups, removed the wrapping, and filled it with tap water.

“I can’t shake the feeling that we’re missing something.” He ambled over and grabbed his own cup.

She understood the feeling. Nothing was connecting, and she couldn’t think of another angle. What would anyone want with a six-year-old boy? “Did you think of anything helpful?”

He shook his head. “I’ve gone back to the beginning of everything. Your relationship with Joe. The birth of JJ. The robberies. Nothing leads me to kidnapping a child. It would be different if Joe were still alive.”

“How’s that?”

“Ransom. Hold Joe’s son and get money or information. But Joe’s dead. They aren’t going to get anything out of him.”

“But I’m still alive. They could be trying to get something from me.”

“Okay. Spill. What do you have that would be worth all of this?”

Nothing. She had nothing. She didn’t own a house, and she worked as a waitress. They lived comfortably. All their needs were met. And thanks to Joe’s monthly contribution, she was building up a nice savings account for JJ with what they didn’t need. But was it enough to justify what had been happening? She didn’t think so. “I’ve been saving for JJ’s college, but my most valuable possession is over there.” She nodded toward her sleeping son.

“I really doubt that they are after him to get something from you.”

“What about your relationship with Joe?” Reid knew about her and Joe. It appeared that whoever was after them knew about it, too. But she didn’t know much about Reid and Joe.

“That beginning is not something I want to rehash.”

Indignation rose. “You have asked me questions about a time I didn’t want to revisit. I think it’s time you tell me yours.”

“It won’t do any good.” He set his empty cup on the table and pulled a chair out.

“You don’t know that. We’re all connected in this deadly game. And I, for one, don’t want my son to be the next victim.” Her heart constricted.

“You’re not going to like what you hear.” His eyes darkened, the muscles in his jaw ticked, and he lowered his head.

She pulled the second chair out, moved it closer to him, and placed her hand on his shoulder. “We’ve all got pasts. Some are harder than others, and some darker, but it’s not a person’s past that defines them. It’s their present. Your past may have built the man you are, but it is the man that you are today that matters.”

He sat up and leaned back. “Are you sure?” His eyes seemed to plead with her.

“I’m sure, but if it’s not something you want to talk about, I understand. But it could be the link we’re missing.”

“I killed a man,” he whispered.

Those weren’t the words she expected to hear. Instead of disgust, she felt sorry for him. It was an action that had deeply affected him, and he obviously held remorse. *Lord, give him the strength and courage he needs.*

“I rebelled in my teens,” he continued. “I hit high school and got mixed up with the wrong people. They introduced me to things that I loved more than myself. Drugs, alcohol, and girls. Things I thought I needed. The lifestyle had a tight grip on me on the inside.” He took a deep breath. “It was a miracle I survived high school, much less graduated. Despite all the things I had done, I’d had very few run-ins with law enforcement. I spent several years high, doing anything I could to feed the habit.” He sat up straighter. “Fast-forward to about eight years ago. I was laying on my buddy’s couch, high as I could be, not a care in the world. Some dude bursts in the apartment, waving a gun around, demanding to see my friend.”

Quinn braced herself for what she was about to hear. It wasn't going to be good.

"The guy was convinced my buddy was stealing from him. He shot him and then turned to me. I was able to wrestle the gun away. That's when he pulled a knife out and charged me. I shot him."

"That's horrible but not your fault." She laid her hand on his forearm.

"That's what the police said, but it doesn't make it any better knowing I took his life."

"How does Joe fit in?"

"Joe had been in town for his father's funeral and was visiting someone in the apartment next door. He heard the first gunshot and came to check on everything. He was ex-military and wanted to see if everything was okay. He caught the end of the fight and was my witness. If he hadn't been there, I might have been charged with double homicide." Reid took a deep breath.

"He helped me get clean. Found me a rehab center. I wouldn't know until later, but he paid for it as well. He saw something in me, I guess. After I got out, he offered me a job to help get me back on my feet. At first, it was just running the office while he was out working cases. After a year, he started training me."

He looked at her, his jaw tight and shoulders rigid, like he was waiting to be told how horrible he was. He really believed that.

She hugged him. He stayed statue-like, unaccepting of her love. Like he was unaccepting of God's love. "You. Are. Worthy."

His body twitched, but he said nothing.

"You are worthy of love. Of God's love." She squeezed him tighter. Just as she was about to let go, he relaxed and wrapped his arms around her, returning the hug. "Thank you for sharing."

“Like I said, I don’t think it’s me connecting this whole thing.”

“No, but thank you anyway. Now, I know you a little better.” And what he’d said hadn’t made her think any less of him. It only solidified her feelings. He was a good man. A man she could see as a permanent fixture in their lives.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Reid had been sure that once his past was out, Quinn would put as much distance between them as possible, but she hadn't run from the room screaming. Nor was she cowering over JJ, protecting him from a monster. He wasn't sure how he felt about it. He was hopeful that maybe he wasn't as unwanted as he thought. She said he was worthy of love. Could *she* love him? Was he really worthy of the love of God?

"What do we do now?" Quinn asked.

The word *we* gave him solace. She wasn't going to change her mind about him. "We start looking at Joe's black-hat list." He pulled open the document from Emily. "While you two were sleeping, I did some internet research. Trevor Samson was high on my list. He was a high-level drug dealer that Joe helped find and bring to justice. I looked at the Department of Corrections online inmate search and found where he died in prison a year ago."

"It obviously wasn't him."

"Then, there's Cole Clarkson. His girlfriend was found dead in their apartment, and Cole was nowhere to be found. Joe tracked him down. Turns out he witnessed the murder and went into hiding. He testified against the real murderer."

"If he ended up not being the bad guy, why is he on the list?"

"The list isn't made up of just bad guys. Sometimes, the clients don't get the results they want, so they get angry. Or something happened during the case that was dangerous. In the Clarkson case, he was known to carry a gun and wasn't afraid to use it."

She shook her head. "I don't think he's our guy."

"Me neither." He scrolled through the list. "Everyone else is a cheating spouse, except Betsy Cotton." He stopped on the

picture of Betsy and showed it to Quinn.

“I know her!” Quinn said. “Only, her name isn’t Betsy. It’s Madison. She works at my bank, and she’s in the photo of Andrew and me.”

Reid’s heart thrummed. Was this the break they needed? He scrolled through her information. “It says she was suspected in the first robbery, but they didn’t have any proof, so the bank hired Joe when the police couldn’t get any more leads.”

“Why is she on his list? Is she dangerous?”

“Looks like she had gotten physical with Joe once. Shoved him and threatened to do more if he didn’t leave her alone. Then, she started calling his office and harassing Emily.”

Quinn shook her head. “I’ve seen her a lot in the bank. She’s always been so nice.”

“Probably, the face she wants you to see.”

They were back at the bank robberies. But they still didn’t have a connection to JJ. “You said she works at your bank?”

“Yes.”

“And we know she was in the photo of Andrew, the one where you were in the background.”

“Yes. Where are you going with this?”

“She has access to your accounts. She can see how much money you have and where it comes from.”

She nodded.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how much money are we talking about?” He didn’t really want to pry—that was between her and Joe—but maybe, that’s how JJ was connected.

“Joe has two thousand dollars deposited every month. I use a thousand for rent and bills and put the other thousand in a savings account for JJ for college.”

They were looking at quite a large sum. “You said he’s been doing this since you found out you were pregnant?”

She nodded again.

“JJ is six, so that’s what—\$81,000 in his account?”

“Somewhere in there. I’ve had to use some for emergencies, like when he broke his arm and I had to take him to the emergency room, but then, there’s been some months where my tips were enough for bills, so I wouldn’t take as much out.”

Eighty-one thousand dollars was a lot. It was enough to kidnap someone for. But even more than that, if Joe was alive when JJ was kidnapped, he could have been used as ransom. They could have asked for a far greater amount from Joe. Joe’s death wasn’t planned. When he died, they had to kidnap JJ and settle for the amount in the account now. “You were wrong when you said you didn’t have something worth kidnapping for. They’re after JJ’s savings account.”

“But Madison works for the bank. Can’t she just take it and disappear?”

“It’s not that simple. There are safeguards in place to keep tellers from doing things like that.”

“Makes sense. Does that mean Andrew told her about us and that they’re working together?”

“It’s a strong possibility. We’ll need to talk to Andrew again.” He dug his phone out of his pocket. Chances were that Andrew was with Victoria. Reid didn’t have his number, and he didn’t want to call Victoria for it. She didn’t need to be dragged into the middle of this right now. He typed out a quick email to Emily and asked whether she had the number. Hopefully, she would check her email and send the number quickly.

For the time being, they were at a standstill. JJ had been watching television since he woke up. He’d been a trooper through all this. The math game Quinn had on her phone had kept him occupied a number of times. “Hey, big guy. What’s that math game you’re always playing?”

“It’s a game that uses math to play. You do math problems and earn coins. Then, you use the coins to play special games.”

“Well, since your mom’s phone is at my house, what do you say we download it on my phone and you can show me how to play?”

JJ’s eyes brightened. “Yeah!”

“Okay.” Reid sat on the bed and leaned against the wall, letting JJ show him which game it was.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Reid had made JJ so happy with one act of kindness. The two were sitting huddled together on the bed, hunched over his cell phone. Her heart was full. Reid was doing so well with JJ. He'd already shown her he was a protector. Now, he was showing his heart for children. He would ask JJ for help with a math problem, and JJ would answer it, and then, they'd giggle over whatever game they unlocked. Multiple high fives were exchanged, and Reid would tell JJ how smart he was and praise him on what a good job he'd done. When JJ made a mistake, Reid would tell him that it was okay, that people make mistakes and he needed to keep trying.

As she watched them together, she knew he truly was a good guy. When this was all said and done, she'd honestly be able to say she was glad God had sent him to their aid.

She wished Reid would take his own advice, though. He was held captive by a past that haunted him. He'd made mistakes. Someone else had made a mistake and paid with his life. But it wasn't Reid's fault. He'd learned and grown from that, and he was obviously making better decisions and trying harder.

Reid's phone chimed, and he turned it upright. "I need to look at this email, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Reid stood and joined her at the small hotel table. JJ went back to his cartoons. "I've got Andrew's phone number."

Her heart rate picked up. Now, they'd be able to ask question and possibly put this whole thing to rest. The idea of someone kidnapping another person, especially a child, for money made her nauseated. Add killing a person to the mix, and she was sick. "Let's give him a call and see what he has to say."

Reid dialed the number, put the phone on speaker, and laid it on the table.

“Hello.” Andrew answered on the second ring.

“Andrew. This is Reid Lucas, and I have Quinn Matthews with me. I have a couple of follow-up questions about what we talked about at the cemetery.”

“Why should I even entertain the idea of talking to you and my brother-in-law’s mistress?” Disdain spilled over the line.

Reid bristled beside her. Quinn would be lying if she said his words didn’t cut deep. But she had to remember that it wasn’t important what other people thought of her. She was a forgiven woman.

“Because you may inadvertently be involved with Joe’s death.” Reid probably wouldn’t come right out and accuse him. They wouldn’t get anywhere like that.

“I’ve already told you. I quit that, uh, particular activity seven years ago.”

“Yes, but do you know a Betsy Cotton or a Madison...” Reid paused.

“Lindsay,” she said, supplying the last name she’d seen on Madison’s name tag.

The line was silent. The seconds ticked by. Andrew finally cleared his throat. “Why do you ask?”

Oh, he knew her all right.

“She’s in one of those pictures we found, and she’s on a list of names Joe kept of troublesome people he encountered.” Reid squeezed his hand closed and then relaxed it.

Andrew sighed. “Her name is Madison Lindsay. Betsy Cotton was an alias she used to get a job at the first bank that was robbed.”

He didn’t admit that he’d robbed it. Obviously, he wasn’t going to incriminate himself in case someone else was on the line or they were recording the call.

“She worked at Quinn’s bank back then, and she’s still there.”

“Yeah, we were a thing back then. When I quit my, uh, job, she wasn’t happy. Harassed Joe and blamed him for it. She finally calmed down. We stayed together for a couple of months. Then, she abruptly dumped me.”

“Any idea why?”

“I assumed it was because she found someone else to work for her.” Andrew emphasized the word *work*. “I vaguely remember her saying something about a bigger payday than I could provide.”

“Have you seen or heard from her since?” Quinn asked. So far, Reid had been asking all the questions.

“Not a peep.”

“Any way you can prove it?” she asked.

“Short of asking her yourself, all I have is my word.” Andrew huffed.

“That doesn’t help.” Reid tapped his finger on the tabletop.

“It’s all I’ve got,” Andrew said.

“Thanks for talking to us.” She wanted to end the call on a positive note. They may need to talk to him again later, and he wouldn’t be inclined to do so if they were hateful.

“I had nothing to do with Joe’s death. I promise you.”

Quinn wanted to believe he was telling the truth, but she didn’t.

“We shall see,” Reid said.

“Goodbye.” Andrew hung up.

“What do you think?” Quinn asked Reid.

“It’s hard to determine if he’s telling the truth.”

She nodded. She hated that people lied so often.

“I think we should go back to the cabin. We can stop at my place. You and JJ can wait in the car while I run in and get your phone and our bags.”

“Do you think it’s safe?” She didn’t want to put them in any danger for a few changes of clothes and a phone.

“I think so, but I don’t know for sure. You can drive. If I take too long or something happens, you can drive off.”

“Okay.”

They checked out of the hotel. Quinn drove, following Reid’s directions. They turned onto his road.

“I want you to drive past my house slowly and then turn around and make another pass. I’ll look for anything out of the ordinary.”

She slowed the car as they approached the house. Goose bumps covered her arms. It didn’t look like something horrible had taken place inside twenty-four hours ago.

Reid studied the house and then looked at the neighboring houses. “Okay. Turn around up here and pass by again.” He continued studying his neighborhood. He also watched the rearview mirror. Nothing was different on their second time passing by. “Turn around again. This time, pull up to the curb, but don’t pull into the driveway. Keep the car in drive.”

“Okay.” She did as he instructed.

“I’m going to go inside. Lock the doors when I get out. If anything gets hinky or if I’m not back in five minutes, drive off.”

“I can’t leave you,” she argued.

“You have to think about JJ.”

He was right. JJ was their number one priority.

“Watch the mirrors. Five minutes.” He exited the car and jogged to the front door, which was shut.

She locked the car doors. The digital clock showed 1:24.

Reid had to pull the keys out of his pocket and let himself in. Sweat was forming on her forehead. Her palms were sweaty against the steering wheel. She looked from the front door to the side mirror and the review mirror. She repeated the process. The clock showed 1:27.

Quinn bounced her left knee. She didn't want to leave Reid behind, but she would if it meant keeping JJ safe. She checked all the mirrors again. Looked around the neighborhood.

“Look, Momma. Here comes Mr. Reid.”

Reid was coming out of the house, carrying their bags. He shut the door and jogged to the car, opened the back door, and put the bags next to JJ.

“Go,” Reid said once he was in the front seat and the door was closed.

She didn't hesitate and mashed down on the accelerator. The farther they got from Reid's house, the more her body relaxed. She was almost certain the steering wheel had permanent indentions from squeezing it so tight.

“It's okay.” He patted her forearm. “Want me to drive?”

“No, I think I'm good for now. Just get me to the highway.”

She followed his instructions, and soon, they were on the open road.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Quinn pulled into town about a quarter to six. She'd driven the entire way. When they stopped for JJ to use the bathroom, she insisted on continuing to drive. He didn't argue. He used the time to take a quick nap.

They needed to find Madison, but it was Saturday, and the banks were already closed and wouldn't be open tomorrow. They'd have to wait until Monday.

As soon as they parked at the cabin, JJ jumped out of the car and ran to the tree where he'd seen the lizard.

"JJ! Don't run off like that," Quinn said. "You need to stay with me or Reid at all times. Okay?"

"Yes, Momma."

They walked up to the porch, and Reid let them into the cabin. Everything was just as they'd left it. The cabin was a sanctuary in the woods.

"Mr. Reid." JJ tugged on his arm.

"Yeah, buddy." He looked down at the small boy.

"Can we go explorin' again?" The boy's eyes were pitiful. Now, Reid understood the effect of the puppy dog eyes. How could he say no?

"Ask your mom." Let her be the one to break his heart.

"Can we, Mom?" He gave her the same look.

"If Mr. Reid is okay, then I'm okay."

Well, he was suckered. "Okay. Let's go."

"Yippee!" JJ took off for the tree again. Then, they walked around the cabin. Every so often, JJ would squat and look at various bugs and plants.

Reid pointed out poison ivy and told him to stay away if he was allergic. JJ found a rock shaped like an arrowhead and then found a dandelion and plucked it.

“Make a wish,” Reid prompted.

“No, I’m gonna give it to Momma and let her have the wish.”

The boy’s declaration startled him. “Why?”

“Because she always lets me have the wish.”

JJ was a good kid.

“Reid. JJ,” Quinn called from the porch.

“Your momma’s calling. We better head back inside.”

“Yes, sir.” JJ skipped ahead. “Here, Momma. It’s your turn for a wish.”

“Oh, is it?” She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. Make a wish and then blow. But don’t tell us what it is.”

“Okay.” Quinn took the weed, closed her eyes for a few seconds, opened them, and blew. The seeds flew everywhere as JJ cheered.

What was her wish? If it had been Reid’s wish, he’d have wished for this. Quinn, JJ, and him. Safe and together. He’d never thought he’d be able to make a wish like that. His past had driven his future, but then, Quinn came along. She gave him hope.

She looked at him and smiled. His heart did a dance.

“A lightning bug!” JJ ran off the porch and captured the bug that was flying over a bush. He brought it up to the porch.

Reid knelt in front of him. JJ opened his hands, and the bug crawled across his little fingers. It lit up and then flew off. JJ giggled. “God’s funny. Who’d have thought to make a bug’s butt glow?”

Reid wasn’t sure about the God part, but lightning bugs were definitely odd.

“Come on, guys. Supper’s done,” Quinn said.

“Supper?” She’d been cooking while they were outside.

“It’s not much. Spaghetti without meat. I figured it’d still be okay since we had the noodles and sauce.”

It sounded delicious.

He watched as Quinn and JJ interacted during the meal. There were stories and a couple of jokes. Quinn would giggle, and Reid’s chest loosened as he grew comfortable with the situation. She would direct questions or jokes to him, including him in their lives, even if it was for just this moment.

He longed to be a part of it for more than just this moment, though.

After the meal, Quinn ushered JJ to the bath and then came back to the kitchen, where he was doing the dishes. “I was coming back to do those.”

“You cooked. It’s only fair I help with the dishes.”

“I’m not going to argue.” She sat at the small table. “Do you think we could go to church tomorrow?”

His stomach tightened. He didn’t want to go to church. Hadn’t gone since his momma dragged him as a child. She’d finally given up and let him stay home.

“I mean, we’ll be around other people. That would deter them, right?”

He rinsed the soap from his hands and dried them on the kitchen towel before turning to face her. “The diner had other people.”

Her shoulders slumped. “You’re right.”

He leaned forward, put his hands on the back of a chair, and bent slightly. “What if we find a sermon online?” What had he just suggested?

She sat up straighter and smiled. “We could do that, couldn’t we? Some churches livestream their services.”

What had he got himself into? He'd offered to watch church just to make her happy. Maybe, he could excuse himself and find something else to do when it came time.

Quinn laughed. He enjoyed the sound of it.

He sat at the table, and the folders from Joe's camper caught his attention. He opened Quinn's folder and flipped through the pages.

"Why do you think he had files on us?"

"I think, despite what you think, he loved JJ. He knew he couldn't be in his life, but he still wanted to see him grow up."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "If he had just sat down with me and explained everything, I'm sure we could have worked something out. JJ needs a father."

"Despite not having a father around, I think you've done an excellent job with JJ."

Her lips turned up slightly. "Yeah. But there's a day coming when he's going to need a man in his life. To teach him man things." She leaned her head back and stared at the ceiling.

When this was all over, would she let him stay around? Let him be a part of JJ's life? A part of hers?

He wanted that but knew there was no way there was room in their lives for someone like him. Someone so far beyond redemption. He'd spend his life making up for the things of his past—unless Quinn was right. If God used a murderer of Christians, could He use Reid?

He set her file aside and opened JJ's. The boy did resemble Joe in some ways, but he looked more like his mother. The silence carried on. "So, Joshua Jeremiah. I assumed it was Joseph Junior."

And just like that, the atmosphere changed. She shook her head. "I've always liked the name Jeremiah, and Joshua is after my grandfather."

"Oh." What else could he say?

“I think I need to check on him and then get him to bed.”

“Okay.” There was definitely something different now.

She disappeared into the bathroom and then took JJ to the bedroom and shut the door.

Quinn had to pray for forgiveness after leaving Reid alone last night. Now, she needed to apologize to him. She'd abruptly left the room last night without an explanation. His assumption that she'd named JJ after Joe had stung. She'd wanted JJ to be as different from his father as he could.

Reid was sitting on the couch, messing with his phone. His blanket was folded and placed on top of his pillow, both lying on the table.

She took a seat at the opposite end of the couch and turned to face him. “I'm sorry.”

He looked at her, brow furrowed. “For what?”

“I got upset when you said you thought JJ was named after Joe. I mean, it's a logical thing to think. I'm just a bundle of nerves right now, and it shocked me.”

“You don't have to apologize.” He set his phone aside. “I shouldn't have said anything. I know how Joe hurt you, and it was a foolish question.”

“No. No. I shouldn't have gotten upset about it. It's really silly. No hard feelings?”

“None.” He smiled, and suddenly, it was hot in the cabin. Her stomach flip-flopped in response to the heat.

“Okay. I'm going to see if I can find a sermon we can watch.”

“Great.” His tone told her he thought it was anything but great.

She and JJ watched the service while Reid did whatever he did at the kitchen table.

The church she had chosen to watch sang some of her favorite worship songs, and then, the preacher gave his message on being too far gone for God to use. He referenced Saul, who would become better known as Paul. God had led her to the right service to impact Reid.

She'd heard some huffs from Reid's direction, and at one point, he went to the bathroom and shut the door a little more forcefully than he had before, but he didn't slam it. She'd hazard a guess that he was listening from the kitchen and the preacher had gotten close to home.

The rest of the day was spent like a normal family would spend a Sunday afternoon—watching television, playing games, sitting outside and enjoying the sunshine. Except, they weren't a normal family or a family at all. Reid was really good with JJ. Could she have been wrong about staying single? She wanted to avoid the hurt she might endure when another man she loved left, and she'd used the excuse of protecting JJ to justify her reluctance. But what about what JJ needed? He needed another person in his life to love him. To teach him. It wouldn't have to be a stepfather but just a role model.

Could Reid be that for JJ? He was strong physically and emotionally. He was kind, smart, and compassionate. Things she wanted JJ to develop.

Maybe, Reid would stay after everything was over. If not for her, for JJ. She'd fallen for the man.

Quinn left Reid in the front room, fiddling with the antennae on the television, while she got JJ ready for bed. Once he was settled in, she made her way to the kitchen. She distinctly remembered seeing Mrs. Stevenson put hot chocolate in one of the grocery sacks.

She made a cup for herself and one for Reid, then took it to him. He was sitting on the couch.

“Thank you.” He took the cup she offered.

She sat on the opposite side of the couch and pulled her legs up under her. A black-and-white Western movie was playing on the television.

“Sorry.” He nodded at the TV. “It’s the only channel I could get to come through.”

“This is perfect.” And she meant it.

“A fan of cowboys, huh?” He took a sip from his mug.

He had no idea. “I’m a fan of anything that’s not a cartoon.” She laughed.

“Ah, mom life.”

“Yep. My life revolves around cartoons, toys, dirt, and boogers. It’s nice to have some adult time.”

“Boogers?” He wrinkled his nose. The action softened the rough planes of his face. He was quite handsome.

“You have no idea.” She shrugged.

He laughed. She liked the sound of his laugh. She took a drink, and the chocolate slid down her throat, warming her from the inside out.

“So, other than a booger-free zone, what does adult time look like?”

“Usually, I get JJ in bed, clean up the kitchen or catch up on the laundry, then sit down for some television or a good book. I don’t stay up too late since I’ve got to work the morning shift.” She rested the hand with the mug on the edge of the couch.

“How long have you been at the diner?”

“Way too long.” She laughed. “I hadn’t planned to work there this long, but it turns out I love the job.” She got to meet so many people, and the hours were perfect for her and JJ.

“That’s good. Have you thought about doing anything else?”

She had a time or two, but she really enjoyed her job and the people she encountered. “Not really. What about you—

ever thought of giving up the PI business?”

“Nope. Like you, I enjoy my job.”

“I can see where it can be a good job. Doing something to help others get closure on things or find missing objects or people.”

He nodded and took another drink. “It definitely helps when I’m able to close a case with positive results.”

“What do you do when you’re not investigating a case?”

“I don’t really do a lot outside of work. I pretty much live the job. The hours aren’t exactly 8:00 to 5:00, Monday through Friday.”

“That’s true, I guess.” A gunfight erupted on the screen, catching their attention. The credits rolled a bit later. Quinn’s eyelids had grown heavy. “I think I’m going to hit the hay.”

“Good night, Quinn.”

“Good night.” She took her cup to the sink and then went to bed.

They pulled into the bank parking lot at 9:30 Monday morning and walked up to the teller window belonging to Madison. JJ sat on the floor in front of the counter and played his math game.

“Hello, Ms. Matthews,” Madison said in her normal cheerful tone. She looked at Reid and then back at Quinn. “What can I do for you today?”

“Hello, Madison,” Quinn said.

“Or is it Betsy Cotton?” Reid asked.

Madison’s face turned white. She opened her mouth and closed it.

“We have some questions for you,” Reid whispered, leaning in.

Madison looked around the bank lobby and then at her fellow tellers. They were all going about their business, oblivious to their conversation. “I can explain,” she croaked.

“We’d like it if you did.” Reid rested his forearm on the counter.

“I was desperate and had let my friends talk me into it. It was only supposed to be one time, but they owned me.”

“You’re talking about the work you did with Andrew Montilio?” Reid had said he didn’t want to cause any problems while they were at the bank. No unnecessary attention. Quinn handed her the check she had written to cash. They wanted to look like they were conducting business.

“Yes.” Madison took the check and tapped on her keyboard.

“Care to explain Joe Lockhart?”

She passed the check back. “Sign the back, please. Andrew quit. I was desperate. How was I supposed to keep”—she looked around—“working without him?”

Quinn signed the check and slid it back across the counter. “Why so desperate?”

“Because I had a loan shark to pay. When I finally paid him off, my coworkers decided they weren’t going to let me find new employment.”

Quinn was seeing red. “Are you desperate enough to kidnap a child or kill a man?” She gritted her teeth.

Madison’s eyes widened, and she shook her head. “No. Never.”

Quinn wanted to yell at the girl across from her, but she took a deep breath. *Lord, give me patience.*

“Blackmail, maybe?” Reid said. “You notice Quinn has a reliable deposit and find out where it’s coming from, and there’s a lot more. So, you decide to do a little kidnapping for ransom.”

Madison shook her head vigorously, and tears pooled in her eyes. “No. I swear.”

“Andrew says you dumped him for a bigger paycheck.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That weasel. I didn’t dump him. He left me. Took all the money we’d earned with him.”

“So, you were able to find new employment, then?”

“Look. Andrew and I worked with a man. He wouldn’t let us go. Then, one day, he’s picked up on some murder charge. Andrew and I were free—only, Andrew wanted to keep working. When I told him no, he skipped town. I liked this town, and I already had a job. So, I thought *Why not?*”

They were going in circles. First, it was Andrew, but then, it wasn’t, and now, they were back to Andrew.

A throat cleared behind them. Quinn turned. The lobby had filled up since they showed up. “I’ll take that in twenties.”

Madison finished the transaction and counted out the cash.

Reid tapped the counter. “One final question. Who was the man?”

“I don’t know his real name. We called him Ben.”

“Thank you.”

“Come on.” Quinn patted JJ on the head.

They exited the bank and made their way to the car. There was a loud pop. Pain exploded through her leg, and she hit the ground. Her vision went white and then black.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Quinn!” Reid watched her crumple to the ground after a gunshot. He pushed JJ down onto the ground and shoved him against a parked car. “Crawl under there.”

JJ did as he was told. “Mommy!” he cried.

“Stay there.” Reid crouched, using the car as a shield. He peered over the hood of the car, and another shot rang out. He ducked back down. Quinn needed help. He couldn’t tell where she’d been shot. All he knew was that she was lying motionless.

He crawled to the front of the car. She was about two feet in front of it. If he could just grab her ankle, he could pull her to him. He steadied himself and prepared to reach for her. He could barely hear sirens over his heart pounding in his ears.

Quinn stirred. She was alive but wouldn’t stay that way if she started moving around.

“Quinn,” he whispered loudly. “If you can hear me, remain perfectly still. If they think you are alive, they’ll shoot. I’m going to draw the gunfire away. When they start shooting, take cover.” He prayed she was able to hear.

He switched directions and crawled toward the opposite end of the car, taking a moment to reassure JJ. He continued to the end of the car, took a deep breath, stood, and ran as fast as his legs would take him. A series of pops and shattering glass followed him. Then, the gunfire stopped. He ducked behind another car and took inventory of the situation. He’d made it about 150 feet. Quinn had pulled herself behind the protection of the car and lay on the ground next to JJ. *Thank You, God.* Not something he’d ever thought he’d say.

The police cars stopped about a hundred yards on the other side of Quinn and about fifty yards from him, setting up a perimeter. Had the shots stopped because the police were

here or because there wasn't a target to shoot? He didn't want to wait to find out. Every minute they waited was a minute Quinn may not have.

He braced himself and stuck his hand up in the air, making it visible over the hood of the car. No shots. He let out the breath he'd been holding. He was going to stand and reveal his location. He'd be vulnerable, and it may be the last thing he did, but if he did get shot, it would give away the shooter's position. Then, it would be only a matter of time before the person was taken down. He took a deep breath, ignoring the pulse pounding in his ears, raised both arms, and stood.

Complete silence.

He turned and faced the officers closest to him. "There's a woman down."

There was another shot. Reid closed his eyes and waited for pain to start or darkness to claim him. But it didn't.

"Suspect down!" an authoritative voice said.

A few officers began walking slowly down the road, making sure there were no additional threats. "Hands." Two officers approached him, guns raised, fingers resting next to the triggers.

Reid did as he was told.

"Turn around and interlock your fingers behind your head. We're going to pat you down for weapons."

A click indicated that one of the guns had been holstered. Then, a hand grabbed his interlocked hands and the pat-down began. He watched as officers headed toward Quinn and JJ.

"Okay." The officer released him, and another click followed.

"Quinn Matthews has been shot." Reid pointed to the spot where an officer knelt in front of Quinn. She had managed to sit up and was leaning against the car. "Can I go to her?"

"Give us a quick statement first. There's an ambulance here to tend to her."

Reid relayed the events from the time they walked out of the bank until they searched him.

Quinn was being placed on a stretcher, and he bounced on the balls of his feet. He needed to be with her. “Can I go now?”

“Yes. We’ll have someone meet you at the hospital.”

“Call Detective Jacobs. He’s familiar with us,” he said over his shoulder as he jogged to where the paramedics were wheeling Quinn to the waiting ambulance.

An officer walked next to the stretcher, carrying JJ.

“Mr. Reid!” JJ reached for him.

Reid opened his arms, accepted the boy, and squeezed him tightly. He was okay. *Thank You, God.* That was the second time he’d thanked a God he didn’t believe in.

He turned toward the stretcher. Quinn was strapped into it in a sitting position. Her pant leg was missing, and gauze was wrapped about midway up her thigh.

The stretcher was placed in the ambulance, and the paramedic took JJ and strapped him into a seat next to his mother. Then, she showed Reid where he could sit. Reid grabbed Quinn’s hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it. “How are you?”

“Better now that you’re here.”

Quinn was tethered to an IV and lying on her left side in a hospital bed as a doctor stitched up the wounds on her leg. The bullet had gone in on the right side of her right thigh and out on the left side. It had missed all major arteries and blood vessels and the bone, and when it exited, it didn’t hit her left leg. A miracle.

Reid had taken JJ to the cafeteria for some lunch so he didn’t have to see the stitching. He had been clinging to Reid

ever since he carried him to the ambulance.

“There you go, Ms. Matthews. I’ll have the nurse finish up the bandaging, and then, we’ll work on getting you discharged.” He removed his gloves, tossed them in the trash, and walked out of the room.

She closed her eyes. *Lord, thank You for divine intervention.*

“Knock. Knock.” Detective Jacobs knocked on the partially opened door.

“Come in.”

“How are you?” He seemed genuinely concerned, not like he was just doling out pleasantries.

“Fine right now. That might be a different story when the numbing medication wears off.”

“Yes. It’s gonna smart.” He sat in the chair by the door and pulled out his notebook and pen. “Tell me what happened.”

“I’ll tell you what I remember. We had just left the bank and were walking to the car when there was a pop and then a pain in my leg like I’ve never felt. The next thing I know, Reid is telling me not to move. My leg was on fire. He told me what he was going to do and that I needed to get to cover.” He’d been willing to sacrifice his life to save her. Not once but twice. She’d seen him raise a hand before standing up in the open. Thank God an officer had seen the shooter. “You know what happened after that.”

“We have identification on the shooter. I’m going to show you a picture. Tell me if you recognize him.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket, tapped on it a couple of times, and then turned it toward her.

The man had shaggy brown hair and a square jaw covered in a thick beard. “He definitely looks familiar, but I can’t place him.”

Detective Jacobs tapped a few more times and showed her another picture. “Now?”

The man in this picture had the same eyes and square jaw, but he was clean shaven with shorter hair. Electricity hummed through her. “I know him. I mean, I don’t know him personally. He’s one of the men that attacked me at Reid’s.”

“I don’t recall another report of an attack on you.”

“We had gone to attend Joe’s funeral. Well, Reid attended the funeral. I didn’t. A couple of guys broke in and tried to take JJ.” She felt the hollow of her neck. It had been red but hadn’t bruised.

Detective Jacobs took some notes. “Okay. Did you file a police report?”

She nodded.

“Had you ever seen him before being attacked?”

“Yes. I’ve seen his picture.”

“Where did you see the picture?”

“Joe had it.” He’d been in a few of the bank photographs.

The detective quirked an eyebrow. “I thought you hadn’t seen Joe in years.”

“I haven’t. But Reid and I found a thumb drive in Joe’s office with pictures on it. He was in a few of them.”

“A thumb drive?”

She nodded.

“Momma!” JJ burst through the door and raced to her bedside.

“Hey, buddy. Did you get enough to eat?” She gave him a quick hug.

“I did. We brought you a chicken sandwich.” JJ turned to Reid, who was standing in the doorway, holding a to-go container.

Detective Jacobs stood and stuck out his hand. “Mr. Lucas.”

Reid shook it, came into the room, closed the door, and leaned against the wall. Detective Jacobs took his seat again.

while JJ climbed onto the bed and cuddled up to her.

“Ms. Matthews was telling me about a thumb drive you found.”

Reid nodded.

“It would appear that our shooter’s picture is on that.” Detective Jacobs showed Reid the clean-shaven picture of the shooter.

“He’s on there all right.”

“Okay. Tell me what’s going on.”

Quinn lay in the bed, stroking JJ’s hair, as Reid explained what had happened since they left town.

“I’m going to need that thumb drive and Andrew Montilio’s phone number.”

Reid stuck his hands in his pockets. “The thumb drive is at the cabin. I can bring it to the station sometime tomorrow.” He pulled out his cell phone and gave Detective Jacobs the phone number.

“I’ll be waiting. In the meantime, I’ll pull the robbery file and give this Mr. Montilio a call.” He said goodbye and saw himself out.

The nurse came in a few minutes later with discharge papers, prescriptions, and crutches. They wouldn’t let her use them. Instead, they insisted that she be taken to the exit in a wheelchair. A taxi sat idling at the curb.

“Your chariot awaits.” Reid helped her stand and put her arm around his neck. There it was again. Spice. She inhaled deeply.

Reid leaned in. “You really need to quit sniffing me,” he whispered. “You’re going to give me a complex.”

Chills raced down her spine at his nearness but were quickly replaced by heat as embarrassment consumed her. She got situated in the back of the taxi the best she could. The numbing medication was starting to wear off. While her body

had quit burning with embarrassment, her leg continued to burn.

Reid buckled JJ into the back seat and then rode up front with the driver.

Back at the bank, the transition from the taxi to the rental car was quite a feat. The rental was a taller SUV. Reid had to pick her up by the waist and lift her a little so she could get in the seat without putting weight on her injured leg. Then, she wiggled until she was fully seated. The warmth of his hands lingered on her waist.

The ride down the old road to the cabin was jarring, and with each bump or pothole, pain would shoot down her leg. She couldn't wait to be at the cabin. Not only that, but she was also beginning to feel a little awkward wearing half a pair of pants.

Reid parked the car and turned to her. "Wait right here. I'll go open the cabin and then come back to help you out."

"Momma, can I go with Mr. Reid?"

"Yes, baby." There was no sense in making him wait in the car with her.

Both boys got out of the car and walked up the stairs. JJ grabbed Reid's hand. Reid didn't try to pull away. Then, he was picking up JJ and whispering something in his ear. After unlocking the door, he put JJ down and turned back toward the car.

She opened the door and turned, her feet hanging out. Reid grabbed the crutches from the back of the SUV and set them against the car. "Let me help."

She scooted to the edge of the seat. He grabbed her waist and gently slid her to the ground. Heat spread from his hands and through her body. Her knee grew weak, and she staggered, grabbing his biceps to catch herself. His strong hands remained on her waist and steadied her.

She stared into crystal-blue eyes. His breath hitched, much like hers just had. She wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing his lips closer to hers. His breath washed over

her face. She rose and closed the distance. When their lips met, fire blossomed in her stomach. Small, tender kisses turned her to mush. Reid's arms encircled her and lifted her slightly. She was floating, immersed in the moment. It was just her and Reid. Two lives intersecting at a beautiful moment. Feelings laid bare. She didn't want this moment to end, but she knew it had to.

She pulled her mouth free. "Wow," she whispered into his cheek.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Wow was right. He hadn't expected her to kiss him, and he definitely hadn't expected his body's reaction to her kiss. His pulse thudded in his ears, and his chest had a fullness he'd never experienced

They rested cheek to cheek. He still held her slightly off the ground. "What do you say I put you down and we go inside before JJ comes out looking for us?" His voice was husky.

She nodded.

He gently placed her on her feet and made sure she was steady before reaching for her crutches. She took them and started toward the stairs. He followed close behind, making sure she didn't fall.

"Go on to your room. JJ is supposed to be getting you a pair of pajama pants."

"I definitely want out of these pants. I'm not trying to start any new fashion trends." She laughed as she maneuvered to the bedroom.

JJ came out and shut the door. "Momma's going to change." He plopped down on the couch.

Reid hovered close to the bedroom door. He was worried she'd lose her balance and fall. She's been through so much already.

She'd grown to be much more to him than just a woman who was in danger. She was smart, compassionate, and everything he hadn't known he was missing in his life. Then, there was this little red-haired boy who'd captured his heart like his mother had. His chest ached with joy.

Something clattered to the floor, and Quinn grunted. He knocked on the door. "Everything okay in there?"

“I’m fine, but I’ve dropped a crutch.”

“Do you want me to send JJ in?”

“I’m dressed. You can come in.”

He opened the door, and she sat on the edge of the bed, her cheeks red from exertion.

“I think you need some rest. How about you lay down?”

“Oh, I can’t. I’ve got to check on JJ.”

“Let me tend to him. You rest.” He picked up the crutch and stood it and the second one against the nightstand. “Lay back.” He pulled the covers over her once she was lying comfortably.

“I should probably take a pain pill. My leg is throbbing.” She grabbed the pill bottle from the nightstand and took a pill with the bottle of water she’d left there. “Thank you.” She looked at him with appreciation.

“You’re welcome.” He leaned down and brushed a kiss across her lips. “Dream sweet.”

She bit her bottom lip. “I’m sure I will.”

He closed the door behind him. “Well, it looks like it’s you and me for a little while. Your momma needs some rest.”

“Okay.” JJ sprawled across the couch.

“Do you need a nap?” He hadn’t seen him take a nap, but he sure looked tired.

His face contorted. “Naps are for babies.” His eyes widened. “And mommas when they don’t feel good.”

Reid laughed. “Nice save. What do you want to do, then?”

“Hmm. Can we go exploring again?”

“You mean you haven’t seen everything yet?” Reid asked, teasing.

“Nope.” His answer was matter of fact.

“Okay. Just for a little bit and just by the porch. We don’t want to go too far in case your mom needs us.”

He jumped up and ran out the door, not even bothering to make sure Reid was behind him. He spent the next two hours collecting sticks and rocks. He found a rock big enough to use to dig and dug quite a large hole. There was probably more dirt on the boy than there was in the yard.

“Hey, kiddo. It’s getting late. What do you say we head inside and get cleaned up before your mom wakes up and sees the mess you’ve become?”

“Too late.” Quinn’s voice startled him. How had he not heard her coming on the crutches? “Sorry,” he said in mock apology.

“No, you’re not.” She giggled. “Looks like you two had fun.”

“We did.” JJ threw a handful of dirt into the air.

“Alright, young man. Time to wash up. It’s probably best you take a shower. A bath will just turn the tub into a mud pit.”

Reid warmed up the leftover spaghetti while JJ showered and Quinn sat on the couch, her legs propped up. He fixed her a plate and took it to her, then took the plates he’d made for himself and JJ to the coffee table. They all sat in the living room and ate dinner.

JJ yawned really big. “Ready for bed?” Quinn asked.

He shook his head. “Can we watch cartoons?”

“I don’t see why not,” she said. Reid found the DVDs they’d brought. He didn’t recognize any of them. It looked like they were all Bible based.

“That one.” JJ grabbed the ragged container. It was obviously his favorite.

“Why don’t you get it started and I’ll make a bed for you on the floor?” Reid moved the coffee table into the kitchen. He grabbed the pillows and blanket from the bedroom and made the bed perpendicular to the couch.

“Sit down.” JJ patted the empty spot next to him. Reid couldn’t say no. He sat, leaning against the middle of the

couch.

“You don’t have to,” Quinn whispered.

He was close enough he could reach over and caress her face. “I want to.” He smiled.

Despite knowing what waited on the television, he wouldn’t miss this moment. JJ sat up and leaned against him. Reid wrapped an arm around him, and they watched television. It wasn’t long until JJ was asleep. Reid laid him on the pillow to keep him from getting a neck cramp.

“Quinn?” He’d had a question weighing on him since he’d heard the sermon yesterday.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Yeah.”

His mouth went dry, and a lump formed in his throat. “Can God really use a man like me?” He felt so childish asking.

“He already has.”

He turned his head to look at her. “How?”

“He’s had you here with us. Protecting us. You’ve done so much. JJ adores you. You’re a godsend.”

“But I’m not godly.”

“God doesn’t want you to be godly to come to Him. He wants you to come to Him and let Him mold you. The Bible is full of sinners God used. Prostitutes, murderers, thieves.”

“What about the man he talked about—the preacher from Sunday?”

“Saul. Would you mind bringing me my Bible? It’s on the nightstand.”

Reid retrieved an old, worn Bible and handed it to her, then took his place on the floor.

She opened it and handed it to him. “Start there.”

And he did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Quinn fell asleep on the couch. JJ was sleeping on the bed Reid had made for him, and Reid was sitting next to her, reading her Bible.

She woke up a little bit later, and he was still reading. Her heart swelled knowing he was asking the questions he was. She got up to use the bathroom, and Reid sent her to bed, insisting JJ would be fine on the pallet. She took a pain pill and went to sleep.

Morning came and, with it, throbbing in her thigh. She'd taken the last pain pill early this morning. Reid had to take the thumb drive to Detective Jacobs. She'd go with him, and they could stop for the prescriptions she'd got yesterday.

She was getting used to having Reid around all the time. Actually, she enjoyed it.

Reid drove with his left hand on the steering wheel and his right on the console. She studied it. He'd removed the bandages, and the cuts were healing nicely. They'd all been superficial but had bled like they'd been deeper. Would it hurt him if she tried to hold his hand? She laid her arm next to his and placed her hand pinkie to pinkie with his.

He looked at their touching hands and then at her before placing his on top of hers with his palm down and his fingers between hers. She leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes, focused on the feel of his hand on hers, the warmth that spread from her fingertips through her body and to her toes. They rode hand in hand until the pharmacy drive-through. Once she had the bag, she took a pill.

Reid parked the SUV in the police department parking lot. "I'm going to run this into Detective Jacobs. I gave him Andrew's phone number last night."

She nodded.

He leaned over like he was going to kiss her, but then, he glanced toward the back seat. He sat back, raised her hand to his lips, and brushed his lips across the back of her hand. "I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the building. She leaned her head on the window and let the sun warm her face. Maybe, she'd been wrong about dating. Reid had countered all her fears. He'd been so good to JJ. And to her.

The driver's door opened.

"That was quick." She turned, but it wasn't Reid in the driver's seat. "Andrew, what are you doing?" She gulped and looked around the parking lot for help.

Andrew threw the car in reverse, backed out of the spot, and sped out of the parking lot.

"Where are you taking us?" Quinn's body shook. He was here to kill them.

"I'm saving you." He looked in the rearview mirror.

"By kidnapping us?"

"If that's what it takes."

"It's been you all along. Joe wouldn't give up the thumb drive, so you planned to kidnap his son and hold him for ransom. Then, he died, and you still didn't have it. It was in his office the whole time. You could have left my son alone." She gripped the handle on the door. They were going to die if she didn't do something. She glanced back at JJ. He was watching the exchange between her and Andrew. His small face was distorted in fear. She needed to get him out of the car.

"It's not about the thumb drive."

"Your partner is dead. Don't tell me it's not about that."

"Yes, he's dead, but it has nothing to do with the bank robberies."

"So, your partners know about the thumb drive, and they're the ones coming? We were at the police station. The safest place to be."

He looked in the rearview mirror again. His grip on the steering wheel was so tight his knuckles were turning white.

“Pull over and let us out. We won’t say anything. We’ll wait until you’re far away and then call a taxi.”

“I can’t let you out of my sight. It’s not safe.”

Maybe, she could disable the SUV somehow. Turn off the ignition. Would he have to put it in park to turn it back on? That would be enough time for JJ to jump out, run, and hide.

“Joe sent me an envelope that explained it all. I’ve been so busy taking care of Victoria that I haven’t been home to check my mail.”

Quinn didn’t believe him. He knew what was in the envelope. Why else would he take the ones sent to her and Reid? She looked in the back seat. JJ hugged his knees to his chest, her phone clutched in his hand. Turning back around, she saw they were on a straightaway. If she was going to do anything, it had to be now. She reached over and turned the key, causing the car to shut off.

“What did you do?” Andrew slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a stop.

“Run, JJ!”

Andrew reached to restart the car, and Quinn fought with him, buying JJ more time. He hadn’t moved yet.

“JJ, unbuckle and get out!”

He jumped at her scream and finally did as she had told him.

“Stop.” Andrew brought his arm back, slamming her against the seat. He put the car in park and turned to her. “What have you done?”

“I’ve saved my son.”

“No, you haven’t. You’ve only made it worse. We have to find him before she does.”

“Who?”

“Victoria.”

Reid pulled the USB out of his pocket and laid it on the information desk. “Detective Jacobs is expecting this.”

“He’s with someone right now.” The officer grabbed a white envelope. “Name?”

“Reid Lucas.”

He wrote the name on the envelope. “Phone number?” He wrote it down as Reid recited it. Then, he put the USB in the envelope, sealed it up, and set it to the side. “I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“Thank you.”

Reid walked out of the station. The SUV wasn’t where he’d left it. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. Something was wrong. Quinn couldn’t drive. He dialed her number. She didn’t answer. He turned and came face to face with Victoria. She’d just walked out of the building.

“You must be the person Detective Jacobs was meeting.” He dialed Quinn again.

She nodded. “He thinks Andrew is the one who killed Joe.”

“I’m afraid that’s what it’s looking like.” Quinn still didn’t answer. “Excuse me. I have to go back inside.” Reid’s phone vibrated in his hand. Quinn’s name popped up on the screen.

“Quinn, where are you?”

“Mr. Reid.” JJ’s small voice quaked.

“Hey, JJ. What happened?” Reid’s pulse sped up.

“A man took us.”

Reid stormed through the doors. “Are you okay?”

“Momma stopped the car and told me to run. I’m scared, Mr. Reid.”

“It’s okay, buddy. I’m going to get the police.” He marched up to the information desk. “Do you know where you are?” Reid moved his mouth away from the mouthpiece. “Quinn and JJ Matthews have been kidnapped. Get Detective Jacobs out here now.”

“No. We stopped in the street, and I just ran and hid.”

The officer picked up the phone and called for the detective.

“Can you tell me what’s around you?”

JJ sniffled. “No. I just ran and hid behind a big trash can. Mommy’s still with the man.”

Detective Jacobs came rushing out from the back. “What’s going on?”

“Someone has taken Quinn and JJ, but JJ was able to get away.”

“It’s Andrew, isn’t it?” Victoria stood in the lobby, clutching her purse.

“JJ. Do you know who the man is?”

“No, but Momma called him Andrew.”

Reid turned to Detective Jacobs. “It’s Andrew. I need to get to them.” He grabbed a fistful of his hair. Agony. The two people he’d come to love were missing and in danger, and he was helpless.

“Reid. You can use my car.” Victoria placed a hand on his shoulder.

He nodded. “JJ, we’re coming to find you, okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

Reid followed Victoria to her car and climbed in the passenger seat while Victoria got behind the wheel. “JJ, do you remember which way you went after leaving the police station?”

“We passed the diner.”

“Turn right,” Reid instructed Victoria. “Okay. Can you remember anything else?”

“No.” JJ hiccupped into the phone. “The man is coming. He’s yelling my name.”

“Stay hidden.”

“He’s getting closer.” JJ whimpered. “I have to run.”

There was a clattering noise. “JJ! JJ. Answer me, buddy.”

No response. He’d dropped the phone and run. Reid slammed his fist against his leg and let out a growl.

“Where am I going?” Victoria asked.

“I don’t know.” Reid leaned back and closed his eyes. *Lord, help me find JJ and Quinn. I haven’t gotten to tell her the best news. She needs to know, because of her, I know I’m not too far gone. And that I love her and JJ.*

JJ said they’d passed the diner and he was hiding behind a trash can. “Stay on this road.” Reid was certain they hadn’t left the immediate area. Once he got past a certain point on this road, houses were spread out. He diligently looked out the windows, searching for JJ. He didn’t want to miss him. He dialed Quinn’s number again. Maybe, JJ had gotten the phone back, or someone had stumbled upon it. They could help search for the boy.

“Slow down.” He didn’t want to miss him. Maybe, he should search on foot. That way, he could call his name. But they could cover more distance in the car. Still no answer.

“What is he wearing?” Victoria scanned the area.

What had he been wearing? He’d never thought he’d need to remember. He closed his eyes and pictured JJ climbing into the SUV. “He had on a pair of black basketball-type shorts and a dark green shirt.”

“Okay. I’ll keep looking.”

“Thank you.” Reid dialed Quinn’s number again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Quinn stumbled out of the SUV and hopped until she could get a crutch out of the back. The pain had begun to dull but had come back with a vengeance, thanks to her panic over JJ and being jostled around.

Andrew was walking down an alley. “JJ. Come out, buddy. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Quinn used the crutch to steady herself and walked as quickly as she could to the alley. Andrew had stopped at the other end of it and was looking up and down the street. She headed toward him, picked up the crutch, and swung it like a bat, hitting Andrew across the back, sending him sprawling to the ground.

“Leave my son alone.” She wasn’t going to be able to do much, but she was going to do what she could to give JJ time. She raised the crutch again.

“Stop.” Andrew rolled over and put his arm up, protecting himself from another blow. “I told you it’s Victoria. We have to find JJ before she does.”

“Why should I believe you?” She held the crutch over her head, ready to bring it down if needed.

“I can prove it. Joe had a will. JJ gets everything if he survives thirty days.”

“What?” She lowered the crutch and then leaned on it.

“He’d made some good investments years ago. Amassed a large sum of money. It all goes to JJ as long as he survives Joe thirty days.”

“Why would he do that?” Quinn’s stomach roiled.

“Because JJ was his son. Despite not being in his life, he loved him.” Andrew stood and dusted himself off. “Victoria is in town. We have to find him before she does.”

“If you knew this, why didn’t you go to the police?”

“I didn’t know until last night. That’s why I’m here now. I saw her go into the police station, and then a few minutes later, you pulled in.”

“Where’s the will?” She wanted proof. She didn’t know whom to trust. If Andrew was lying, she couldn’t let him get close to JJ.

“I left it in my car at the police station. I panicked when I saw Reid go inside.” He started looking around for JJ.

Lord, what do I do? Is he telling the truth? She didn’t know what to think. She needed to call Reid. “If you’re telling the truth, leave me here and go back to the police station. Take that will inside, and do what you came to do.”

He stopped and stared at her. “What about JJ?”

“I’ll find him. Tell the police where you left me.”

She wouldn’t be able to travel far with one crutch, but JJ would come out if she was alone. Andrew hesitated, jogged back to the SUV, then pulled out the other crutch, brought it to her, and left. She prayed he was going to the police and not driving around for JJ. If she were JJ, where would she hide?

“JJ, if you can hear me, it’s okay. You can come out.” She waited with bated breath. Nothing. “JJ!” She turned in a circle. Her heart beat in her throat as heaviness settled on her. Where was her baby?

She took the crutches and walked back up and down the alley, making sure she didn’t miss anything. Then, she turned back toward the police station. Hopefully, she’d chosen the right direction.

“JJ!” She’d yell his name and wait for a response. Nothing. Her arms were growing weaker, her armpits hurt from the crutches’ rubber cushions, and her thigh screamed in pain.

A muffled noise came from somewhere. She stopped and listened. It was her ringtone. Her phone was close by. JJ must be, too.

She followed the song as fast as she could, but it stopped before she found it. “No. No. No.” Pressure built in her chest. She took a deep breath and then another. Focus. She kept going the direction she’d been heading. There it was again. Louder this time. It was coming from behind some trash cans. “JJ?” Her stomach dropped when she found only her cell phone.

She tried to maneuver the crutches so she could bend over and pick up the phone, but she lost her balance, fell, and landed on her right knee. Pain shot up her wounded leg, and her vision blurred. She fell forward and caught herself before face-planting on the concrete. She scrambled to right herself, and the music ended. She picked up the phone and fumbled it. Her hand shook. The ringing started again. Reid’s name flashed as the screen illuminated.

“Reid.” Her voice quaked.

“Quinn, where are you?”

“JJ’s gone. I can’t find him.” The tears she’d been holding at bay released, and she sobbed into the phone.

“Quinn, calm down. We’re looking for him. Are you okay? Did Andrew hurt you?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I told him to go back to the police station.” She took deep breaths, calming herself. She was no good to anyone hysterical.

“Why would you send Andrew to the police station?”

“Because—”

“I found JJ,” Reid said. “There he is.”

Tears welled in her eyes again, and she pressed a hand to her chest as a weight lifted.

“There he is. Victoria, pull over.”

“No! Get JJ away from her.” She shook her head as lead filled her stomach, and she couldn’t breathe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Reid opened his window. “JJ!” The boy stopped and turned toward him. “Why?” he asked Quinn. Victoria stopped the car, and Reid jumped out.

JJ’s face contorted, and tears started rolling down his face as he ran to him.

Reid’s chest tightened as he held out his arm and caught JJ. “You’re okay, buddy.”

“Reid, get him away from Victoria. It’s dangerous.” Panic filled Quinn’s voice.

“I don’t understand.” Andrew had been the one to kidnap them.

“It’s Victoria. She’s responsible.”

“How?” He turned back toward the car. His heart clenched, and he squeezed JJ tighter. Victoria stood five feet away, aiming a gun at them. Reid’s throat went dry.

“Reid, did you hear me?” Quinn asked.

“You should have listened to her. Now, drop the phone.” Victoria gestured to the phone with the gun.

Reid let it slide from his hand. It fell to the ground with a thud. “Why?”

“Shut up, and get in the car.” She was eerily calm.

He didn’t budge.

She gritted her teeth. “Don’t make me shoot you both right now.”

A car drove by and slowed. Victoria shot at the vehicle, making Reid jump. The car squealed its tires as it sped off. The gun was now aimed at them again. “Put the boy in the back seat, and you drive.”

Victoria had gone mad. She followed him as he put JJ in the back seat. She opened the passenger door, keeping the gun trained on him until he was in the car. The car was still running. “Where am I going?”

“Out of town.” She never wavered with the gun.

“He’s just a child.”

“He’s taken everything from me.” The gun shook in her hand.

JJ was in the back seat, curled up in the fetal position. He didn’t deserve any of this.

“Keep driving until I tell you to stop.”

A police cruiser pulled to a stop on an intersecting side street. Victoria lowered the gun, keeping it aimed at him but making sure no one outside the vehicle would see it. “Don’t think about doing anything heroic.”

Too bad the police were out looking for Andrew. They wouldn’t spare a second glance at them. Just as he feared, the car turned the opposite direction.

He needed to think of something. Victoria had the upper hand. He could wreck the car, but that would put JJ at risk of injury. It wouldn’t be a guarantee that she would be hurt or that she wouldn’t shoot him during the wreck. Maybe, he could talk her down, convince her to let JJ go.

“You don’t have to do this.” He gripped the steering wheel.

“I do.”

“But why this? Isn’t there another way?” She’d never get away with it. Even if she succeeded in her plan, the police would know it was her.

“Not since the idiots I hired killed Joe.” Disdain dripped from her voice. “They were supposed to take care of the boy. No one would have been the wiser.”

If Reid could keep her talking, would she let her guard down? “Why JJ?”

“Because my unfaithful husband went out and created a child. We tried for years, and I couldn’t get pregnant. He has a fling with some waitress, and she gets pregnant.” Spit flew from her mouth. “Do you know how I found out about him?”

Reid shook his head. “No.”

“My idiot brother. He knew all these years and never said anything. I overheard him talking to someone on the phone. Assured them Joe would keep some secret because he had a secret child.”

Reid grimaced as he imagined her overhearing the conversation.

“I did some snooping around Joe’s office and found a bank statement and a copy of a will. He didn’t tell me he had a will and that he’d left everything to that brat. If he lived.”

“But none of this is JJ’s fault.” Reid couldn’t understand how anyone could blame a child and then want him dead.

“He took my husband from me. The child we always wanted but couldn’t have. Joe followed them around, wishing he could be a part of the child’s life. But I wouldn’t let him. And now, the boy’s taking my money. I’m not going to let it happen.”

“You won’t get away with this. They will catch you.”

“It doesn’t matter as long as the boy dies and doesn’t get the money.”

JJ sobbed in the back seat.

Victoria lowered the gun as she turned toward JJ. “Shut up!”

Reid took the opportunity to grab the barrel and try to pull it from her hand as he slammed on the brakes. They jerked forward, deafening pops sounded, and gunpowder and talcum powder filled the air. His face stung where the airbag had hit him. Victoria began screaming and punching him, trying to get the gun he’d taken from her. The deflating airbag made fighting her hard.

The rear passenger door opened, and JJ jumped out.

“No!” Victoria stumbled out of the car to chase JJ.

Reid dropped the gun to the floorboard as he fought the airbag to get out of the car.

Victoria reached JJ before he could dart down an alley and before Reid could reach her. She grabbed his arm, yanking him to a stop, and spun to face Reid, her back to the alley.

“We’re going to disappear, and you’re not going to follow us.” She jerked JJ again.

Something in the alley drew his attention away from Victoria. Quinn hobbled toward them, crutch raised as a weapon.

Reid held his hands up. “Don’t hurt him. I’m sure we can figure something out. I bet Quinn would agree to splitting the money.”

“He doesn’t deserve a dime,” she spat.

Quinn reared back and swung the crutch like a baseball player. It connected with Victoria’s head, causing a sickening crack, and she fell to the ground, letting go of JJ. He ran into Reid’s arms. Quinn dropped the crutch and reached for them. Reid hugged JJ tight and then put him down. “Go to your momma.”

JJ raced to his mother, almost knocking her over. “JJ.” She picked him up and hugged him tightly, kissing him again and again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Quinn pulled back and looked her baby in the eyes. “Are you okay?”

He nodded and then hugged her around the neck. Relief washed over her. JJ was safe and with her.

Victoria lay moaning on the ground.

“Stay down,” Reid growled.

Quinn pulled her phone from her pocket and handed it to him. Nausea roared in her stomach, and her body flamed. Her legs grew weak. “Reid,” she managed to say. He caught her by the arm before she fell and dropped JJ. He eased them to the ground.

“Your leg.”

She looked at her leg. There were two large red spots on her pants. She must have ripped her stitches.

“Lay back. Help is on the way.”

Dizziness swirled. She closed her eyes and fought the waves of nausea that pounded her stomach. Her leg throbbed in rhythm with her heart.

“Stay with me.” Reid’s voice trembled.

She grabbed his hand, squeezing in reassurance.

There was a deafening pop, and Reid’s eyes widened before he spun and faced the direction the noise had come from.

JJ screamed and threw himself next to Quinn, burrowing close. Blood poured from a wound in Reid’s back.

“You can’t have my money!” Victoria aimed her gun at them.

Reid lunged at her just as another gunshot split the air. Quinn sat up, and waves of dizziness caused her head to spiral out of control. She had to get JJ away from here. When the world stopped spinning, her vision came into focus. Victoria lay on the ground, Reid kneeling on her back.

“Quinn,” Reid mumbled before slumping over.

The gun lay several feet away. As soon as Reid hit the ground, Victoria scrambled for it. With renewed strength and ignoring the pain in her leg, Quinn raced her for the gun. Faint sirens reached her ears. She just needed to hold Victoria off until the police arrived. She was within feet of the gun. Quinn would never beat her to it. She did the next best thing—she tackled Victoria, jumping on her back, snaking an arm around her throat.

Victoria stopped her forward momentum and tried to buck Quinn off. Only, she held on tighter. The sirens grew louder as the seconds ticked by. Quinn let out a groan as Victoria’s elbow connected with her stomach. She wasn’t going to give up that easily. Her son’s life was at stake. She squeezed tighter, causing Victoria to claw at her arms.

When that wouldn’t work, Victoria started punching Quinn’s side. Her fist slammed into Quinn’s injured leg. Stars filled her vision as pain exploded. She relaxed her grip, allowing Victoria to break free.

Lord, protect JJ. Don’t let her win. Quinn fought through her pain and blurry vision to stand. As an answer to prayer, a police cruiser pulled to a stop. An officer jumped out and aimed his gun. “Stop,” he commanded over the blaring siren.

Quinn raised her arms. Victoria stopped mid crawl, mere inches from the gun.

“Lay down on your stomachs, both of you, arms out to your sides,” the officer said.

Quinn struggled to get down but managed it.

“Now, you. Lay down.”

Victoria had yet to comply.

More cars showed up, more officers with more guns drawn. Victoria must have calculated her odds because she finally lay down. Officers descended on them. Detective Jacobs came to Quinn's side as other officers secured Victoria and the gun.

"Reid's been shot." She scrambled to check on JJ. She grabbed him and pulled him close. Sobs wracked his body. He'd seen so much.

Quinn held her breath as Detective Jacobs checked Reid for a pulse. "Get me a medic!"

He rolled Reid onto his back, exposing a second wound on his abdomen. He was so pale. Quinn couldn't tell whether he was even breathing. *Lord, help him. Please heal him. We need him. I need him.*

Paramedics rushed to his side, and it was a matter of minutes before he was loaded into an ambulance and taken away. She had refused treatment at first, wanting everyone to focus on saving the man she loved. Would she ever get to tell him that?

The remaining paramedics cut open the leg of her pants to get access to her wounds. Just like she'd expected, the wounds had opened in all the strenuous activity. Detective Jacobs took a brief statement while they worked and said he'd be at the hospital later. She was loaded into the ambulance, JJ by her side.

By the time the ambulance pulled into the hospital, she had an IV and a dose of medication to take the edge off the pain.

It was horrible déjà vu. A second trip to the emergency room in twenty-four hours and a third in barely more than a week. Only this time, Reid was a patient, and she wasn't sure he was going to make it.

The doctor had given her a couple of numbing injections and said he'd be back in a few minutes, giving the medicine time to make her good and numb.

Quinn pushed the call button. She needed to know about Reid.

A nurse came in a few minutes later. “Yes?”

“A man was brought in a few minutes before me with two gunshot wounds. I need to know how he is.”

“Are you family?”

“No.” Quinn shook her head.

“I’m sorry. I can’t release any information on a patient.”

Now was not the time to deal with privacy laws. “Please,” she begged. “He saved my life.”

“It’s okay.” Detective Jacobs entered the room. “I’ll give her an update.”

The nurse nodded and then left the room.

“How is he?” She was going to jump out of her skin if she didn’t find out something soon.

“He lost a lot of blood and is in surgery. They don’t know much right now.”

Quinn couldn’t stop the sob that bubbled up. She cuddled JJ and cried, praying for Reid. He couldn’t die now. She hadn’t been able to talk to him about eternity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was dark, and his limbs were filled with lead. A sweet voice spoke to him, giving him directions, telling him it was easy. He tried to open his eyes, but they wouldn't open. Then, he nodded off to sleep.

He awoke again. This time, his arms were freer. He opened his eyes and stared at white ceiling tiles. Beeping came from his right. What was going on? Then, memories came flooding him. Victoria had a gun and wanted JJ dead. He sat up straight and growled as pain spread through his abdomen and back.

“Reid. It's okay.” Quinn placed a hand on his shoulder and gently prodded him to lie back down.

Quinn was alive. “JJ?”

“He's right over there asleep.” She pointed to a couch pushed against the wall to his right. A little red head poked out from under a hospital blanket.

He leaned back, closed his eyes, and let out a deep breath. Everyone was safe. “How bad is it?” He opened his eyes and looked at Quinn.

“The bullet managed to miss all vital organs, but there was some intestinal damage. It was touch and go there for a bit.” A tear slid down her cheek.

“I meant you.” He reached up with his left hand and wiped the tears away.

She gave him a weak smile. “You're too good to be true.” She shook her head. “I just ripped my stitches. You stopped Victoria before she could hurt us.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her down onto the bed.

“Thank you. You saved my son.”

He squeezed her hand. “Any time.” And he meant it.

Reid spent the next two days in the hospital. Detective Jacobs stopped by a couple of times. Andrew had a copy of Joe’s will. Victoria had known about his bank robbing past, and when she found out about the will, she hired his old crew. When the first two messed up, she had them killed.

His wounds were healing nicely, and he was able to leave. This time, it was him being wheeled to a taxi. Quinn opened the back door. “Your chariot awaits.”

The sun sat low in the sky. “What do you say we get some food and get back to the cabin?”

“Do you feel up to it?” Concern etched her features.

“What do you say?” Reid looked at JJ.

“Can I have a chocolate shake?”

Reid chuckled. “You can have whatever your little heart desires.”

“But only today.” She gave him a pointed look and then smiled. She obviously didn’t want Reid spoiling him.

“Yeah, what she said.” He smiled at JJ.

Quinn made him sit on the couch as soon as they got to the cabin. She didn’t want him to move too much and rip open his stitches. She fluffed a pillow on the couch and had him sit and prop up his legs. Then, she passed out the food. She was getting along well using only one crutch.

She set JJ’s food on the coffee table and took hers to the end of the couch by Reid’s feet. He made room for her. She didn’t need to be sitting on the floor just yet. The cabin was quiet save for small talk sprinkled throughout their quick meal.

“JJ, throw your trash away and go get your jammies and get ready for a bath.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He did as he was told and disappeared into the bedroom.

Quinn turned, placed her hand on Reid’s shin, and gave it a squeeze. “I’m going to use the dish soap and make him a

bubble bath. He needs a sense of peace and innocence after this week.”

“Dish soap?” Reid couldn’t say he’d heard that one before.

“Yep. Makes the most bubbles.” She smiled, and his heart did a little dance. “Do you need anything before I go?”

He shook his head, afraid of how husky his voice might sound if he spoke.

She disappeared, and minutes later, he heard the water running in the bathroom. It wasn’t much longer before he heard laughing and splashing. Whatever they were doing in there, they sure were having a lot of fun.

He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and listened to the animated chatter and the giggles that filled the cabin. He enjoyed every minute of it. Joy warmed his heart. Could this be the beginning of something?

He wanted to hear this every night. He didn’t just want to hear it; he wanted to be a part of it. A part of a family. This family.

The giggles died down, and then, the bathroom door opened, and Quinn came and stood at the edge of the couch. One look at her, and he lost control, letting out a laugh from his gut. Her hair was plastered to the right side of her head, and her shoulder was soaking wet while the rest of her shirt was thoroughly splashed.

“What’s so funny, huh?” She laughed with him.

“Did you guys leave any water in the tub?”

“Nope. Hurricane JJ hit land and flooded the place.”

“I believe it.” His wounds started to hurt after the laugh.

“I’m going to go change. I’ll be right back.”

He heard the bedroom door click. “Mr. Reid.” JJ wandered into the living room.

“Yeah, buddy?”

“Will you read me a bedtime story?” JJ handed him a book.

Emotion clogged Reid’s throat. “I’d love to.”

JJ knelt next to the couch and laid his head on his arms on top of Reid’s legs. He listened as Reid read the story. It was a story about how God had made each person special. Reid closed the book and found Quinn standing at the doorway, watching them.

JJ grabbed the book. “Thank you.” Then, he turned around, leaned against the couch, and started looking at the pictures.

Quinn took Reid’s trash and threw it away. She paused behind the couch, leaning on her crutch. “Can I get you anything? Water? Pain pill?” She stifled a yawn.

“No, thank you. I’m fine.” He patted her hand. “You and JJ go to bed.”

She tilted her head. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I’m fine. A little tired but fine.”

“Yell at me if you need anything.” Compassion filled her eyes.

After brushing their teeth, they bid Reid good night and went to bed. Reid lay on the couch and tried to sleep.

He couldn’t. His mind kept going back to the voice and instructions he’d heard while he was semiconscious. He looked over and found Quinn’s Bible still lying on the coffee table. He picked it up and opened it.

Throbbing in her leg woke her. She looked at her phone—it was time for another pain pill. She took one and started to roll back over when light from the front room caught her attention. She slipped out of bed and grabbed her crutches.

Reid was sitting on the couch, her worn Bible in his lap. He looked up. “Hey, sleepyhead.”

“It’s 3:00 in the morning. What else would I be doing?” She crutched over to the couch and sat. “What are you doing?”

“Just reading.” He shrugged.

“Find anything interesting?” She wasn’t going to push him to talk. It was his walk. She planted the seed, and God would reap the harvest in His time.

“A lot actually. I found that I’m not too far gone, thanks to you.”

“I was just a catalyst.” She smiled. “Do you have any questions?”

He laughed. “So many.”

“I can try my best to answer them,” she said.

“Why would God want me? I’ve done so much wrong.”

“You’re not the only one. In fact, we are all sinners, separated from God by sin.” She grabbed his hand.

“But you’re a good person.”

She smiled. “Being a good person doesn’t give me salvation and freedom from the punishment of sin.”

“What’s the punishment for sin?”

“Death and eternal separation from God.”

“You mean hell?” Reid frowned.

“Yes.”

He looked Quinn in the eyes. “If everyone is a sinner, how do they get past the punishment from sin? How does a person get salvation?”

“Through Jesus. John 3:16–17 says, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.’”

“How did Jesus save the world?”

“He was the ultimate sacrifice. He died for our sins even though He had not sinned. He conquered death and rose again on the third day.”

Reid was quiet for a long time. She just sat, holding his hand, letting it sink in. “I want this.” He picked up the Bible.

“You can have that one. Or we can get you a new Bible, and you can make your own notes.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant I want eternal salvation. How do I get it? I heard someone talking to me while I was in the hospital. Telling me it was easy. An angel maybe?”

Quinn’s heart thudded, tears sprang to her eyes, and she covered her mouth.

“What is it?” He turned fully toward her and stopped a tear on its trek down her cheek.

“You heard me?”

“Was it you?”

She nodded. “Some people believe that people can still hear what’s going on around them while they are unconscious like you were. I had to try.”

“I didn’t hear everything, so I’m not sure how it goes.”

“It’s easy. You just have to admit that you’re a sinner and ask for God’s forgiveness, believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again on the third day, and confess that Jesus is Lord. Would you like me to lead you in prayer?”

He nodded.

She grabbed his other hand and led him in the sinner’s prayer, then hugged him after saying “Amen.”

“Thank you,” he whispered into her hair.

No. Thank you.

She leaned back. Silence stretched.

Now that this whole ordeal was over, what would happen to them? He’d kissed her, she’d kissed him, they’d held hands,

but that was all that had happened. Would they go their separate ways? Would Reid stay? Her stomach clenched at the thought he might move on without them. They hadn't discussed their relationship, if that's what she could call it. Maybe, they needed to define what was going on between them before worrying about what happened next.

"Now what?" She finally asked the question she'd been thinking about all evening.

"I'm new to this. You tell me."

"That's not what I meant. What about us? Is there an us?"

He grabbed her hand. "I want there to be." He looked sheepish.

"Me, too." She tilted his head up with her free hand and leaned in to kiss him.

He pulled back a smidge. "That settles it. Quinn is officially my girlfriend, and I'm the luckiest man alive." Then, he kissed her again. Long, slow, and tender. Sparks ignited and spread through her body.

"You should go to bed. You need your rest." He pulled back and looked at her.

"You, too." Maybe, he would sleep now.

"I will." He cradled her face in his hand and gently kissed her good night. "Dream sweet."

EPILOGUE

Reid had spent a lot of time with Quinn and JJ over the last couple of weeks. Quinn had sought an attorney and got the probate of Joe's estate started. JJ was going to get a huge inheritance. Victoria had a whole slew of charges from kidnapping to murder. She'd be behind bars for a long time. Andrew and Madison had been charged with the bank robberies, and they faced their own prison sentences.

JJ was adjusting well to all that had happened. Mrs. Stevenson let Quinn and JJ stay with her in her extra bedroom while repairs were being made to Quinn's side. Reid was staying in the cabin. He couldn't go home; it didn't feel right. Home was with Quinn and JJ.

He'd taken Quinn on several dates, just the two of them, and a couple that included JJ. They were in church every chance they could get.

Right now, he was sitting exactly where he'd been weeks ago when this all started—in a diner, watching a waitress. When the red-haired boy came running in, he didn't plop down at the counter. Instead, he chose Reid's booth.

“Good morning, Mr. Reid.”

“Mornin', JJ.” He smiled at the boy.

Quinn was right behind him, delivering their breakfast. Reid had already ordered, and Quinn had preordered JJ's food like she did every morning.

“Thank you.” Reid smiled at her.

“You're welcome.” She bent and kissed JJ's head.

“Mornin', Momma.”

She straightened, then leaned toward Reid, put her hand on his shoulder, and gave him a peck on the lips. “I have to get back to work.”

He watched her walk away. She'd been off work for a couple of weeks while she'd gone from depending on the crutches to walking with a slight limp. He couldn't see it now. Reid took a bite of his eggs. He'd healed nicely. No additional medical issues other than a couple of gnarly scars.

"Do you love my momma?"

Reid choked on his eggs. Leave it to kids to be forthright. He nodded. "I do." He hadn't told her that yet. He'd even gone as far as to purchase a ring. It was actually in his pocket, waiting for the perfect time.

"She loves you, too," JJ said around a mouthful of food.

"She does, does she?" He folded his arms across the table. "And she's told you this?"

"No. She must love you."

"Why do you say that?" His curiosity was piqued.

"She kisses you," JJ said. "She's never kissed anyone but me."

Children were so perceptive. "I was thinking about asking her to marry me. Be my wife." Why was he confessing to a six-year-old?

JJ squealed. Reid looked up and made eye contact with Quinn. She'd heard the squeal. He bent over. "Shhhh. Here she comes," he whispered.

He grinned and nodded.

"What are you two up to?" She refilled his coffee cup.

"Nothing," Reid said, his tone innocent.

"You better behave." She went to take care of other customers.

"JJ, would you like that? Me marrying your mom?"

He nodded. "Then, you'd be my daddy."

Reid's heart exploded at the way JJ said "daddy." "Yes. If that's okay with you."

"Yes." He threw his fist in the air.

“You’re going to get us caught. I have a plan. You want to help?”

Reid and JJ were having a good time this morning. She’d have to ask Reid about it later. He was going to come over this evening to help move their stuff back to their duplex. He’d said he’d help, but she’d already got some men from church to do it. Reid didn’t need to be lifting anything. He’d spent a lot of time with them, seemingly oblivious to the fact he had a home four hours away. He’d practically moved into Mrs. Stevenson’s cabin.

She looked at her boys. Yes, her boys. She loved each of them so much. God had sent the right man to her. He’d known her fears—or excuses—and sent someone to dispel each of them.

They were hunched over the table, deep in conversation, their empty plates pushed to the side. She walked to the booth and grabbed the plates. “What are you two planning?”

“Nothing.” JJ gave her a toothy smile.

“Uh-huh. Let me take these plates back. JJ, you have ten minutes until the bus comes.”

His shoulders slumped. “Okay.”

She took the plates, headed into the kitchen, and dropped them off with the dishwasher. JJ was at the counter when she went back out. “Can Mr. Reid take me to school?”

Reid had taken him a couple of times before. “I guess if he wants to.”

“Yay.”

Reid ambled up to the counter. “I, um, made a mess. Can I get a towel?”

Quinn sighed a happy sigh. “I’ll clean it up.”

“JJ, I dropped my phone under the table. Will you help me get it?”

“Yes.” JJ was too eager. They were definitely up to something. Unlike the first time Reid pulled this prank, there actually was a mess on the table. It wasn’t big, just a small coffee spill.

JJ climbed under the table, searching for Reid’s phone while she cleaned up the mess.

“I don’t see it, Mr. Reid.”

Reid knelt and looked under the table. “What about over there?”

“Here it is.” JJ wiggled out from under the table and turned toward her with a small black velvet box in his hand. “Will you marry Mr. Reid?”

Reid was still down on one knee, looking at her. Then, he nudged JJ. “Open the box.”

“Oh.” JJ opened the box, revealing a beautiful solitaire diamond ring.

“Quinn Matthews, I love you. More than I could ever imagine a man could love a woman. Will you marry me?” He took the box from JJ and removed the ring.

“Say yes!” JJ jumped up and down.

She couldn’t speak. Emotion clogged her throat. All she could do was nod and hold out her left hand.

Reid slid the ring on her finger, stood, and kissed her with a sweet intensity that made her toes curl. When he came up for air, he leaned his forehead against hers. “I love you, Quinn Matthews.”

She smiled. “I love you, Reid Lucas.”

“What about me?” JJ asked.

Reid bent, picked her up, and placed her between the two of them. “And we love you.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer currently lives in Arkansas with her husband and two children. Her debut novel, *Hidden Danger*, is a 2019 Selah Award winner, and her second novel, *Expecting Danger* is a 2019 Selah award finalist. *Deadly Connection* is her third novel. She is a member of American Christian Fiction Writers and River Valley Writers.

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