



# HIDDEN SINS

REDEMPTION CREEK ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

EDIE JAMES

# HIDDEN SINS

REDEMPTION CREEK ROMANTIC SUSPENSE BOOK 1

EDIE JAMES

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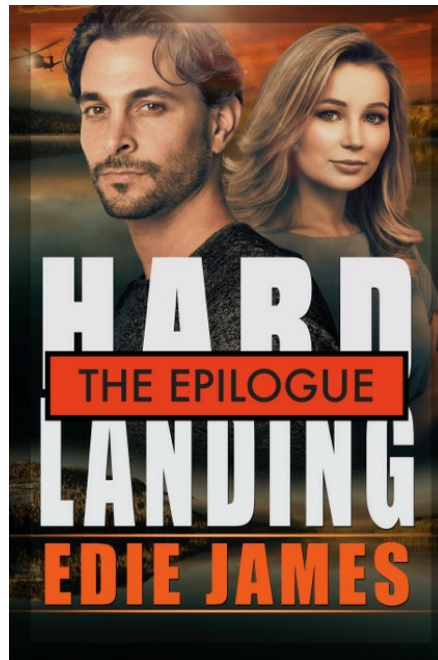
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*THIRTY DOLLARS FOR A SALAD? What a waste.*

Bridger North tried not to let his eyes bug out as he perused the café's menu. Everything was stupid expensive. He could easily afford it, but the principle gnawed at him.

Food was food.

Irritated with the unnecessarily complicated descriptions, he tossed the menu aside and surveyed the other patrons, counting three tables of software execs in studied casual wear, two tables of ladies doing lunch, and several couples wanting to see and be seen.

No one but the plain-clothes security guy hovering near the entrance to the kitchen was armed.

He laughed at himself. There was no need for the recon, but old habits and all that.

A chef in the open kitchen swirled vegetables in a wide pan, dipping the edge toward the flame until the oil ignited. Once the fire crisped the food, he swirled the pan again, drowning the flames.

The patrons gasped in awe.

Bridger winced. What was he *doing* here? Three years into his forced retirement, he was slowly going insane.

Around him, the conversations stopped. Alerted by the sudden drop in volume, he checked the entrance. His old teammate, Tai, strode in right on time, looking more like a marauding Viking than a desperate foodie.

Heads turned. That happened everywhere the big man went. Not everyone was used to getting up close and personal with six and a half feet of former Marine Raider with two and a half feet of dark, kinky hair.



Tai caught his eye over the crowd and grinned hard. A few long strides brought him to the table. “Security guy in the gray suit’s carrying. A PPK or a Beretta. So’s the blonde at the corner table.”

Bridger turned casually and checked her out again. If she was armed, he’d missed it.

Tai smacked him in the shoulder. “I’m just joking. I do like making you squirm.”

Bridger massaged his arm. When would he learn not to take the bait?

Tai plunked down and unfolded his napkin, settling it across his thighs. “Dude. How’s things?”

Bridger debated voicing the truth, but he didn’t want to bum his friend out first thing. “All good. You?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

“Good to hear it.”

Tai blew out a breath. “I’m lying.”

“Me, too.”

The ridiculously expensive, high-tech mansion above Lake Washington was still full of boxes and cast-off furniture. With just him and his voice-activated artificial intelligence assistant in residence, getting motivated to make the place inviting hadn’t happened.

He was beginning to suspect even she was growing tired of his foul moods. Fact was, he missed his former life: the mental and physical challenges, the adrenaline rush, and the team.

Definitely the team.

A pallid waiter hovered next to their elbows, silver tray in hand. “Your drinks, gentlemen.” He offloaded two chilled glasses and the gourmet root beers Bridger had ordered. Then he set down his tray, ready to open the bottles.

Tai swiped one of them. “I got this.”

He waved the man away, tore the cap off the bottle and took a long swig then tipped his head back, swilling the soda around in his mouth before swallowing hard. “Do you think this fancy root beer’s really better than the cheap stuff?”

“A thousand percent.”

Tai set the bottle down on the table. “I’m not so sure. We should do a blind taste test.”

Bridger slid down in his chair until his butt was on the very edge. Is this

what it had come to? They used to be soldiers. The best of the best.

Tai slumped down in his own seat, mirroring Bridger's body language. His movements sparked alarm in the wealthy patrons.

Bridger could see why. Between the height and hair, Tai looked more like an angry pirate than a highly-trained operative.

Not that Bridger would be mistaken for a typical millionaire, either. Not to brag, but he was too fit, and too alert. In his business—his former business—a guy had to know his assets. And his flaws.

Tai rubbed the jagged scar that ran from elbow to wrist and eyed the over-decorated dining room. "We're pathetic."

"At least we're rich."

Tai tipped his bottle in Bridger's direction. "That's way better than being plain pathetic."

Bridger picked at the label on his soda. Was it really? Last time he'd checked—first thing in the morning—the balance in his Swiss account still had seven zeros behind it.

Tai's dark eyes bored into his. "We earned that money," he said, reading Bridger's mind, like always.

Of course, they had. And then some. The whole team had. Working Special Ops for an offshoot of an offshoot of the CIA had been dirty, disheartening work.

The ops had been sketchy, but the cause was noble. Or so they thought, until they realized they were being used. Instead of making the world safer, they'd been making a cabal of billionaires richer.

No amount of zeros in a bank account could change that.

The shadowy figures pulling the strings had used Bridger's elite team for their own political ends. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it but accept the buy-off and fade away.

Well, there was one other choice. He could have refused the money and gone to prison.

Almost did, but he figured it would put the rest of the team at risk. Either all seven of them signed the nondisclosure agreement and took the payments, or the offer would be withdrawn.

So they were rich. And bored.

Tai stared him down. "We need to figure out what to do with this loot."

Bridger ripped a strip off the bottom edge of the label. "I'm all ears, brother."

Tai grunted. “We’ve been praying on this for three years. I’m ready for action.”

“You have a plan there, Einstein?”

“Nope. You?”

“I got nothing.” He literally had no idea what to do with his money. At least he’d gotten right with his Savior. One out of two goals licked. Goal two was to figure out how best to disseminate twenty million dollars. Forty, if he counted Tai’s portion. There were so many worthy charities. So many needy people. The choices paralyzed him.

The waiter hovered, eyes wide, as if afraid to approach. Bridger was about to wave him over when his phone chimed in his pocket.

Tai sat back up. “You better check that. Might be your tailor.”

“I don’t have one.”

Tai tipped his chin at Bridger’s threadbare tee. “You should.”

Rather than respond, he dug out his phone.

His heart knocked against his ribs. “It’s a text from Jason.”

Tai’s jaw dropped.

They both perused the space around them without moving their heads, the surveillance automatic. Jason Reilly, their demolitions specialist, had gone radio silent the minute the money hit their bank accounts. To be fair, everybody on the team had scattered, but with Jason, it felt...different.

Tai jabbed a finger at Bridger’s phone. “Encrypted?”

He tilted the screen so his friend could see the gibberish.

Tai whistled softly. “Full military-level code.”

“Yup.” Jason would trust that Bridger still had an untraceable phone, and the software to decode the message.

Tai toyed with his bottle, keeping watch so Bridger could run the decryption app without anybody getting close enough to see his screen.

Adrenaline surged through his body, lighting him up. This was the closest he’d come to an op in years.

“It’s probably a wedding invitation or something,” Tai mumbled, his attention on the other patrons.

Bridger ignored him, frowning down at the screen as the words unscrambled.

*Yo, Cap:*

*If you’re reading this, I’m in the wind.*

*Wish I had more time to fill you in, but I gotta jet. Chickens coming home*

*to roost and all that.*

*Someone's got it in for me. Could be the Consortium. Or not. I pulled more than my share of solo jobs over the years, so this could be personal. Either way, it's possible it'll be lethal. Kind of a me-or-them type of thing.*

*Anyhoo, not why I'm writing. I'll get this handled, but while I'm gone, I need your help.*

*Since our "retirement," I've been helping folks. People who need our particular talents. And I hate to leave a job undone.*

*If you could see your way to finishing this op I started, I'll be in your debt.*

*Not that you need the money. Hehe.*

*Relevant info is in a burn box under the kitchen sink. My will's in there, too. Everything goes to Jane. I don't know if these guys on my tail are coming your way or not. Watch your back, and tell that Jarhead, Tai, to watch his six, too.*

*I owe you, Cap. I'll be in touch once I shake these goons.*

*Stay safe, my friend. And go with God.*

*J.*

Bridger stared at the words until his neck ached. His body thrummed with suppressed energy. Battle energy.

Tai glowered at him. "You gonna fill me in, there Fly Boy?"

Bridger slid the phone toward his friend. "We've got a mission."

Two, actually. Complete Jason's op, then find him...or his killer.

Tai's expression hardened as he read the text. "Looks like a road trip's in order."

Bridger stared out into the thickening mist. Another late spring day in Seattle. He wouldn't miss the gloom. "Get your shopping list ready, son. We're hitting the road in the morning."

Tai's eyes widened. "How big a list?"

"Whatever you need."

Jason's hometown was barely big enough to merit a pinpoint on a map. There wouldn't be any supplies there. Not the sophisticated electronic kind Tai might need for surveillance.

The guy grinned like a kid on Christmas morning. "Roger that." He rose. "Jason's still based back in that dust spec of a hometown, I take it?"

Bridger nodded. "Redemption Creek."

Tai grimaced. "No sushi then, is what you're saying."

“We’ll be roughing it.”

“Good.” Tai grinned. “Just like the old days.”

“ARE these tea towels still on sale, dear?”

Jane Reilly took the package of flowered towels from the gray-haired woman at the counter. Mrs. Lattimer’s faded blue eyes were clear today, at least.

She smiled at the sweet older woman. “It’s your lucky day. You just caught the tail end.”

The towels hadn’t been reduced for months, but Mrs. L lived off her husband’s railroad pension. That didn’t stretch nearly as far as it had when the man retired over twenty years ago.

The grin she got in return more than made up for the two-dollar loss she’d take on the transaction.

Lots of folks in Redemption Creek had fallen on hard times since the mine closed. That was the second wave of economic hardship. Ranching had fallen off decades earlier, after Los Angeles siphoned off the valley’s water, leaving the fertile soil dry and useless.

At least they had the mountains. The great Sierra Nevada jutted up thousands of feet from the valley floor, breath-taking spires of snow-tipped granite that brought all manner of tourists. Climbers, anglers, through-hikers and RVers filled the streets almost year round, buying equipment and souvenirs, and packing the local restaurants and motels.

Jane was happy to have them. Most months, she sold more fishing rods and camping gear than lumber and nails. Not that her heart was in either.

The store had never been her dream. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy the work, and certainly her loyal customers, but she wanted more. Things she’d never have. She quickly dismissed the stray yearnings.

When she handed over the bag, Mrs. L leaned close. “There’s a man in town, asking about Jason. Ben Whitehorse overheard him at the Gas and Grill, and Fallon, the afternoon checker at Martinelli’s grocery, told me he was in there, too. I hope everything’s all right.”

So did Jane. She was sick with worry over her brother. She hadn’t heard a thing for almost a week now. That wasn’t like him. No matter how far away his work took him, he took care to text every few days.

The sharp jangle of the bells on the door wrenched her attention back to the store. A tall figure was silhouetted against the glass. He pushed hard, finally unsticking the thing.

She sighed. Time to re-hang it. Again. The building was older than Mrs. Lattimer, and even saggier. An easy fix for an accomplished carpenter like her, if she ever found the time to get to it.

The woman eyed the newcomer, then jerked her head around. “I think that’s him,” she whispered. “The one who was asking about Jason.”

Jane patted the woman’s hand. “Nothing to worry about, Mrs. L.”

But there was.

She wasn’t a former soldier like her brother, but she had a sense for people. The man striding toward the counter looked hard. Scary, in that way Jason could be, when the ghosts were chasing him.

Like he’d seen awful things. Maybe done them, too.

Movement in the back by the gardening equipment caught her eye. Paulo was straightening rakes. She waved her young helper over. “Can you see Mrs. L to her car?”

The high schooler took the grandmother by the arm. “Sure thing.” He escorted the woman past the newcomer and out the door.

Never taking her eyes off the stranger, Jane reached under the counter and brushed her fingers over the claw hammer resting there.

He stopped a few feet away. Just out of range. He didn’t look straight at her, but she could tell he was studying her.

Tall and lean, like her brother, he moved with the same confident grace.

He put his hands on the counter, spreading strong-looking fingers. “You’re Jane Reilly, right?”

She had to stop herself from grabbing the hammer. “Something I can help you with?”

He studied the aisles on each side of him, which didn’t fool her in the least. No way the stranger was here for a garden hose or a grease gun.

“I was hoping for some information.”

Her stomach clenched. This was about Jason. And it wouldn't be good.

“Have you heard from your brother lately?”

She wanted to groan. Sometimes she hated the Reilly intuition. “Sure.”

“Really?”

“I'm a Christian. I don't lie.” Very often. White lies, to spare people's feelings occasionally. Or times like this, when a loved one's safety might be threatened. The Lord would surely understand.

He extended a hand. “Bridger North.”

“Of?”

That earned her a faint smile. “Nowhere special. I'm a friend of Jason's.”

“Then why are you asking about him all over town?”

A single eyebrow rose to his hairline. “Made it onto the local radar already, have I?”

On purpose. Of that, she was certain.

He turned his back, perusing the street beyond the parking lot, his body relaxed, as if he had nothing but time.

Jane tried to imagine the scene through a stranger's eyes. To her, Redemption Creek was a thriving small town, but she was well aware that most city folks saw nothing but a quick convenience stop in a long valley filled with dust and sagebrush squeezed between the Sierra Nevada and the White Mountains to the east. Spectacular scenery, homey restaurants, and over-priced gas.

Which suited her just fine. The tourists could ooh and aah and spend their money, and drive straight on up the road. The real Redemption Creek—the town beyond the businesses fronting the highway—was about family. And community.

Whatever the mysterious Mr. North wanted here, he didn't belong.

He whirled back around. His speed took her breath away. “Your brother could be in trouble. I'm here to help.”

The first part of the man's statement, she believed. The second? No way.

One hand on the hammer, she fussed with the mug of pens next to the cash register. “I'll let Jason know you're asking about him.”

This time, when he caught her eye, he held her gaze. No pretense about it. “Has anyone else been asking about him?”

“Not that I'm aware.” She fingered the claw end of the tool.

His lips flattened. The first sign of frustration she'd seen. “If he's in



danger, you could be, too. Maybe even your family.”

Her fingers dug into the cold steel. “Is that a threat?”

“No! No,” he repeated more softly. “It’s a warning. Jason and I—our team—dealt with some dangerous people in the past. I’m just trying to figure out how close they’ve come to locating him. Any information you have could be helpful.”

Most of what North said rang true. Jason had been involved in covert ops for years, ever since he graduated from SEAL training.

From the moment he earned his trident, he’d been close-mouthed about his assignments. For years now, she suspected he worked for agencies far higher up the food chain than the Navy, but she couldn’t have said why. A little sister’s sixth sense, maybe.

Whatever his official designation, Jason grew even more guarded over the years, and the shadows beneath his eyes darkened.

And now this stranger was poking around. In *their* town.

North ran a hand through his thick hair. It stood on end, making him look like a little boy.

Not that she was fooled. Former friend, or not, Bridger North represented a threat. She didn’t know how, or why, exactly, but she trusted her gut.

He grabbed a paper bag from the end of the counter and took a pen from the cup, scrawling his name and number in big, bold strokes. “I’ve taken up enough of your time. I’m staying at the Redemption Creek Inn. I’ll be in town a couple more days.”

He slid the note in front of her and backed away from the counter. “Call any time.”

She stared down at the note, willing the man to leave, refusing to look up until she heard the scrape of the ill-hung door digging into the old pine threshold. His wide back receded across the parking lot.

She would not be calling Bridger North. Not before she did some sleuthing of her own.

WHEN BRIDGER GOT BACK to the motel, Tai was already there, his long legs stretched out, feet hanging over the edge of the bed, hand in a bag of potato chips. Barbecue, judging from the smell.

He tossed Bridger a bag of chips. "So?"

"I got nothing."

Tai narrowed his eyes. "You know what I meant. What's Jane Reilly like? I can't picture a guy as tough as Jason having a sister. Is she burly?"

Bridger concentrated on opening the chips, inhaling the sweet, tangy scent of artificial smoke and spices.

A pillow, rifled at high speed, hit him in the shoulder. He glared. "Watch the chips."

Tai sat up. "What's Jay's sister like? I need deets."

Bridger stuffed a chip in his mouth, buying himself time to formulate a response. "Impressive," he said after swallowing.

"That's a nice way of saying ugly."

Bridger laughed silently. If only. Dark-haired like her brother, but with more delicate features, and a smattering of freckles dusting her cheeks, Jane Reilly was stunning. Earthy and practical and not easily intimidated. The woman radiated the strangest combination of energies, as if the sweetest den mother in the neighborhood had a black belt in Karate.

Not that it made any difference. His teammate's sister was off limits. Period.

Besides, she'd barely given him the time of day.

Not that he blamed her. If she and Jason were at all close, she knew something was off. Him asking around only cemented that belief.

Tai groaned. “You did that thing.”

“I didn’t do a thing.”

“Yeah, you did. You went in all aggro. You scared her, didn’t you?”

“Possibly.” He hadn’t meant to, exactly...

Tai groaned. “I told you not to dial this up.”

Bridger shoveled another handful of chips into his mouth. Tai had warned him. But the situation was too volatile for tact. Whoever had Jason on the run might try to locate him through the people he knew best. It happened all the time.

He tossed the empty bag in the trash and wiped his hands on his jeans. “I may have gotten her attention.” He’d certainly come close to getting whatever tool she had hidden under that counter upside the head.

Not a handgun. Her movements had been too jerky and imprecise. Nope. She had a mallet or a crowbar or a hammer stashed under there.

He bet she knew how to use it.

“What did you find out?” he asked, hoping to move the subject away from Jason’s stunning sister.

Tai liked talking about his drones almost as much as he liked teasing Bridger about women. The guy had enough drones to carpet half the state. And every one was different. Big drones for high altitude surveillance—or ordnance—should the need arise, all the way down to machines the size of house flies for close-in surveillance and just general mischief.

Tai laid back down. “Jason bought himself an old airfield outside of town. World War Two vintage. Mostly it’s a busted up wreck. The runways are trashed. Two of the smaller hangars caved in, but the big one’s still standing. It looks large enough to house a couple B-17s. My guess is Jay’s carved out living quarters there.”

“Security?”

“Standard stuff. Nothing we can’t handle.”

Bridger grunted. “Jason would have made sure of that.” He had his own house secured using equipment and codes known only to his teammates. The past could come calling any time.

“Any unauthorized guests?” he asked.

“Absolutely. At least two. Good-sized, judging from the footprints.” Tai made a face. “They trashed the place. Sloppy work.”

Interesting. He figured whoever chased Jason into hiding had already searched his place, but this confirmed it.

“So tonight?” Tai asked.

Bridger dropped down on the matching double bed and pulled his portable gun safe out from underneath. “Tonight.”

Tai watched while he extracted two pistols. “Expecting trouble?”

“Always.”

“Me, too.”

It’s what had kept them alive so long. All the training in the world was useless if you didn’t listen to your gut. And Bridger’s was screaming.

Because none of this fit. Why would someone come after Jason now, three years after the team disappeared back into the civilian world?

Tai checked the chamber of his weapon. “The sooner we figure out what happened to him, the sooner his sister’ll be safe.”

Too bad they didn’t have more actionable intel. They’d try their best to keep an eye out for any trouble in town, but there wasn’t much more he could do for their friend’s sister until she asked. At least he’d given her a head’s up.

All they could do now was get on with their plan. Spring had just begun. The sun would set early this time of year, and the moon wouldn’t rise for hours. They’d have plenty of time to retrieve Jason’s cryptic file, and search for any evidence that could help them find his trail.

*Get in. Get it done. Get out.*

Especially before he had to spend any more time around the man’s little sister. Jane Reilly would be a huge problem for a guy like him.

A guy who might still have a price on his head.

BY THE TIME Jane finished helping her last customer of the day, her feet were killing her. She forced herself to shrug off the tiredness. Her day was far from done.

After one last check of the exits, she shut off the lights, shoved the hammer in her purse and headed her harsh-riding old pick-up east, out into the desert.

Toward Jason's property.

The old airfield was his pride and joy. He bought it a few weeks after he left the service. She couldn't see the potential herself, but he had a way of describing the renovations he planned to make that made her believe.

Ice and heat and scouring winds had long since destroyed all but one of the runways, but Jason insisted the place had the potential to drag Redemption Creek into the new millennium. He envisioned a state-of-the-art regional air center, with runways capable of accommodating modern business-class jets.

"Think of the money," he told her. "All those wealthy folks just dying to explore the tallest peaks in the western US."

"Think about the cost," she always responded.

The renovations he dreamed about would cost millions. As in multiple millions.

But Jay would just smile and shrug and get that far-off look in his eyes as if he knew something she didn't. Most likely, he didn't want to admit that the whole airport renovation was a dream. A mental exercise to take his mind off the past.

But she saw no harm in him dreaming. Plus, she suspected he wanted a

home for the rusted-out WWII fighter plane he'd inherited from their stepdad. The years had not been kind to the old Mustang. The P-51 only sported one wing, and that was glued on with rust and a prayer. The engine lay on the floor of the old hangar office. The second wing was propped up near the hangar door, like an unused crutch.

Jane was pretty sure her brother didn't have the money to restore the thing, let alone the airfield. But he needed the dream.

He'd been a wreck when he limped back into town in a depression so deep she worried he'd never shake it. If a few old strips of asphalt and the wreck of a plane made him happy, she was all in.

Her headlights cut through the velvet darkness, illuminating the arid landscape. Once she turned off the highway the road narrowed to undivided blacktop. A single lane, a lane and a half if a person was feeling generous.

Eyes glowed in the beam of her lights: bobcats, raccoons and coyotes mostly. Night hunters.

She rolled down the window, breathing in the cold air. Spring brought a touch of green to the valley. The afternoon winds had died to a gentle breeze, wafting the scent of distant pines down off the mountains. If it weren't for worry over Jason, she wouldn't have a care in the world. Mostly.

No, she told herself, gripping the wheel tight. She didn't have any other worries. Jason was her only concern now. Kellen wasn't her concern anymore. She'd called Pete's bluff on that one. On their marriage, too. So he'd taken her stepson and disappeared.

His legal right, but the facts didn't ease her guilt. Maybe she should have given in to Pete's demands. If she'd mortgaged the store for his "seed money," he would have let her keep Kellen.

Or so he promised.

The ache of loss knifed her in the heart, even two years later. But she knew better. The only thing Pete kept his word about was not keeping his word. Once he got the money, he would have made other demands, each time holding Kellen over her head.

In the end, prayer had helped her see the situation for what it was: domestic blackmail. If Pete's son was meant to be hers, the Lord would have shown her a way. In the meantime, she texted whenever she could, and savored the boy's infrequent replies.

Knowing he was physically safe, at least, would have to do. For now.

She wrenched her mind away from her mess of a domestic life and pulled

up next to the hulking hangar.

She stood outside the truck for a moment, purse over her shoulder, and waited. The last few gusts of the dying breeze brushed her cheeks. No other sounds. Just her and the creatures of the night.

The back of her neck prickled as she punched in Jason's security code and opened the door. It should have squeaked. The hardware was older than the hinges on her doors at Valley Hardware, but Jason kept everything in top condition. No sagging doorjambs or sticking hinges for him.

She slipped inside, pausing a second before flipping on the massive overhead lights. Something wasn't right. She had a strange feeling, as if the cold air had been disturbed.

Dusty footprints led from the doorway, crisscrossing the hangar in several directions.

Warning bells clanged in her mind. Her heart slammed against her ribs, and her breath came in short, sharp sips.

Something was definitely wrong.

Jason was a neat freak. The hangar might be old, but his equipment and tools were neatly arranged along the far wall opposite the hulking fifth wheel trailer he called home. He'd never leave the floor a mess.

She raised the phone higher, sending the beam farther into the space. A set of well-defined prints led into the old office. Someone had been there. Maybe they were still inside.

She plunged her other hand into her shoulder bag, smashing her fingertips on the hammer as she backed out of the building. She'd lock herself in the truck, start the engine, and dial 9-1-1 as she headed back down the road to a safe distance.

She had just slipped out the door when a hand latched onto her upper arm.

Before she could draw a breath, a voice murmured close to her ear. "I'm here to help. Don't say a word."

Adrenaline lit up every muscle in her body. She stomped down. Hard. And opened her mouth to yell.

But a hand covered her mouth as she was pulled against a hard body.

"There's someone inside. Don't scare him away," the voice warned. "I'm a friend. I won't hurt you."

Deep, and definitely masculine, but neither angry nor frightened, the voice demanded to be obeyed.

And oh, how she hated demands. Her reaction wasn't conscious. She

kicked out hard. Her steel-toed boot connected with bone.

Her captor hissed, but he held on tight. “Not. Nice. Please stop kicking me. I’m here to help.”

The hand came away from her mouth. The man dug his fingers into her shoulders, turning her to face him.

Bridger North. The guy from the store. Jason’s supposed friend.

The sight did not make her feel any safer.



BRIDGER HELD onto Jane as tight as he dared without hurting her.

He hated manhandling a woman, but he had to get her out of the line of fire. Whoever was bumbling around inside Jason's hangar could be armed.

On the drive over, Tai deployed a couple drones he'd left on the premises. A man was inside. Judging from the drone footage, he was certainly inept. Scared, probably.

If the guy was armed, startling him wouldn't be ideal.

Jane wriggled in his hold. "Let. Go."

He set his jaw and circled his arms around her. Man, Jason's sister had some fight in her. Not that he blamed her. Grabbing her wasn't his first choice, but he'd just been about to drop in on the intruder when she drove up.

He tightened his hold and prayed she wouldn't take another whack at his shins. Then he lifted her up until her feet dangled and marched toward her vehicle. "You need to leave," he explained. "Things are a little complicated at the moment."

She wriggled again, her booted feet coming dangerously close to bone. "This is my brother's place. I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what you're doing."

"That's fair, but I don't have the time."

Nor could he afford the distraction. She smelled like sugar cookies and hardware store: freshly cut lumber, a faint hint of oil and the earthy aroma of the gardening section. If he wasn't a hard-core operative, he would have followed her anywhere.

The comlink in his ear drowned out her muttered response.

"How's things?" Tai asked over the link.

Jane chose that instant to try and wriggle out of his hold. He gritted his teeth and hung on. “Could be better. Give me a sec.” He set her down next to her truck.

Jane glared up at him, obviously thinking he was talking to her. “Why?”

He took one arm off her and pointed to his ear.

Her eyes widened. “You’ve got partners?”

“Only one. He’s a friend of Jason’s, too. We’re trying to figure out where your brother disappeared to. Obviously someone else is, too. They’re still inside.”

She snorted. “Right.”

“I’m serious.” He pressed his hand against the side of the truck, straightening his arm like a bar in case she tried to run. “When Tai and I arrived someone was already inside. Then you drove up. I headed out here to keep you from surprising them.”

The comlink sparked to life again. “Our bogey is a single male,” Tai said. “Fortyish. He’s a big dude. Biker-type. But it doesn’t look like he’s armed. You want me to handle this?”

Bridger wrenched open the driver’s door and pointed at Jane to get inside. “Affirmative.”

When she didn’t move, he shoved her gently, refusing to let up until she climbed behind the wheel.

A low growl came from inside the dark cab. “You can’t push me around.”

Oh, but he could. He turned away to hide his grin. Not that she’d notice out here in the dark. He thanked the Lord that the dome light on her older model truck was broken.

Tai’s heat-sensing drones hadn’t picked up any other signs of life within a mile radius at least, but Bridger wasn’t one to go all-in on technology. Computers went wonky sometimes or gave false readings. And people had ways of defeating sensors.

Tai was the best there was at close quarters combat, but things could always go sideways. At least if he had Jane in her truck, she’d have some shelter if Tai was wrong about the guy being unarmed.

“Watch your fingers,” he ordered, and shut the door.

“This is private property,” she said through the open window. “You can’t just do whatever you want.”

He leaned his hip against the door, just in case she thought about bolting, and watched the hangar exit. “Yeah, I kind of can.”

“Intruder is secured,” Tai said in his ear. “We’re on our way out.”

“Copy that. I’ll get the lights.” He pulled a flashlight off his tactical vest and shone it at the doorway.

The door banged open. A hefty, balding man with a long, dark beard exited, hands behind his head. He was almost as tall as Tai, but he had none of Tai’s presence. If he’d been wearing leathers instead of hiking pants, Bridger would have mistaken him for a biker.

Tai was right behind the guy, handgun at the ready.

Jane threw open the door of the truck, almost knocking Bridger over.  
“Pastor Zack?”

JANE SAGGED against the side of her truck, staring at the pale man bathed in the harsh light from Bridger's flashlight.

Why would the leader of the Redemption Community Church be sneaking around Jason's hangar?

The massive, wild-haired man behind Pastor Zack kept his gun trained on him. "Found him going through the desk drawers."

Bridger shot the beam from his light straight into the pastor's eyes, making him duck his head. "Looking for something, dude?"

The disrespect made Jane's temper flare. "He's Zack Myles. Our pastor."

"Huh." Bridger didn't seem impressed. "Whatcha looking for, Rev?"

"He's a friend," she insisted. "He and Jason are close."

Closer and closer over recent months. She'd been glad to see Jason taking an interest in church again. Watching his faith fade over the years had been painful. But once he came home, he'd come back to the Lord.

Pastor Zack had a huge part in that. Jason liked the calm, mannerly man immediately. Lately they'd been spending more and more time together, studying the Bible over lattes at Hattie's *High Desert Deli*.

No way she was going to let Bridger North or his pirate sidekick intimidate the man.

She pushed past Bridger and stalked straight up to his partner. "Put the gun away."

It wasn't until she spoke that she realized she was challenging a man over a foot taller than her. And at least a hundred pounds heavier.

The flashlight beam wavered.

She turned to see Bridger grinning. "You heard the lady, Tai. I should

probably make some introductions.” He wagged the beam over his big friend. “This is Tai Kaholo. He and I served with Jason.”

“Did he send you?” Pastor Zack asked. The fear on his face morphed into hopefulness. “Is he all right?”

Bridger took a step closer. “How about you tell us?”

The pastor shot her a pleading look. “I don’t know anything. All I know is Jason didn’t show up for our last meeting, a week ago. Since then, he hasn’t responded to any of my texts. Sorry about breaking in. Jason gave me a key. I thought I should look around before I talked to you. I thought I might be able to find something to explain his disappearance.”

Jane’s heart clenched. “That’s not like him. Jason wouldn’t just bail on someone.”

“No,” Bridger said, much to her surprise. “He wouldn’t.”

Tai waved a tattooed arm at the hangar door. “Yo, guys, maybe we should have this convo inside?”

“Negative.” Bridger replied. “We haven’t had a chance to sweep for bugs.” He turned to Jane. His hard stare made her take a step back. “Where can we talk?”

“My place is across the valley, about five miles away,” she said before she considered the wisdom of inviting two armed strangers into her home.

Bridger gestured at his partner. “That works.” He opened the door to her truck. “You drive.”

Tai holstered his weapon and jerked a thumb at Jason’s hangar. “I’ll get what we came for and bring the Jeep.” He disappeared inside.

She rounded on Bridger. “What is it you came for?”

He eyed the pastor. “Nothing we need to discuss now.”

She wanted to stand her ground, but getting the pastor somewhere they could have a more civil conversation seemed more important. She’d postpone giving the two spy-guys a piece of her mind for rifling through her brother’s things.

Ten minutes later, she let Bridger and the pastor into her cozy home. She was just closing the front door when Tai pulled up in a lifted Jeep that looked like it could tackle the Sahara. He headed after them, a black pack slung over one arm.

Pastor Zack had been at her place many times for Bible study and celebrations, but it had been a while. A couple years, now that she thought of it.

Kellen's seventh birthday. A month before Pete took him.

She shoved the painful memory away and headed for the kitchen. "I've got coffee or tea."

"Black, please," Bridger called out as he followed the pastor into her living room.

"Me, too. Sugar if you have it," Tai, the big man, said. His backpack thunked down on the table behind the couch.

Either the pastor didn't hear her offer, or he was so preoccupied he couldn't respond.

He looked afraid. For Jason, or himself?

Her nerves flared, making her skin hot. Neither answer would make her feel any better.

By the time she got the coffee machine working, the two operatives were sitting across from the pastor, studying some kind of journal.

When she strode in, mugs in hand, Bridger slapped it closed, but not before she caught sight of her brother's handwriting.

She gave him a pointed look. "What's that?"

Bridger shoved the journal between his thigh and the side of the couch. "It's something Jason wants help with. He asked us to retrieve it."

She set their mugs down with a sharp bite. "Could you be a little more vague? My brother's missing. I have a right to know what's going on."

Bridger locked eyes with her. Caramel brown—not that she should care. "That's why we're here. We're going to find him."

Any kindness in his expression disappeared as he swung his attention to the pastor. "Let's get to it. What makes you think Jason's in trouble?"

The pastor tugged at his frizzy beard. "Jason and I weren't just meeting to study Scripture. He was helping me."

Jane didn't like the way he avoided her gaze.

"With?" Bridger prompted.

"A personal issue."

Tai pulled a face. "A personal issue that required a guy with Jason's special ops training?"

"No! I had an old...issue. He offered to take care of it for me. It's only important because we've been talking a lot recently. That's why I noticed he was missing."

"And you didn't think to talk to his sister?" Bridger looked at her as he spoke.

The man had a point. She held her mug to her lips, waiting for the pastor to answer.

He shrugged helplessly. "I don't know why I didn't."

Bridger smiled. It wasn't nice. "I do."

Jane stiffened. He was a hunter, laying out the perfect trap and then waiting....

Pastor Zack finally looked her in the face. His blue eyes showed fear and something else. Something close to desperation. But that seemed silly. What would a man of God have to feel desperate about?

"I'm being stalked," he said. "It sounds stupid to admit it. I'm not a small guy. I should be able to handle these things on my own, but whoever it is has gotten bolder over the months. Jason noticed something was wrong, and he pressed me. I thought that with his military background, he might be able to help, so I filled him in."

Bridger set his mug on the table with exaggerated care and stared the pastor in the eye. "You're a really bad liar, Rev."

Tai licked the rim of his empty mug. "I've seen worse."

Bridger looked pained. "Seriously?"

Tai shrugged. "Sorry. I was trying to make the man feel better."

Pastor Zack sank back against the couch cushions, a sickly smile playing across his lips. "I get it. You're doing good cop, bad cop."

Bridger's gaze hardened. "You wish."

Tai shook his head, as if the pastor were too sad for words. "Tell us the truth, or you're about to see bad cop, bad cop." He grinned. A frightening sight. "It's my favorite."

The pastor's Adam's apple soared from the base of his neck to the top of his throat, then down again. He laced his fingers together in his lap. "I'm being blackmailed, and the threats are getting worse."

BRIDGER WINCED INWARDLY. *Not. Good.*

It was obvious Jane held the pastor in high esteem. She was about to get her admiration handed back to her in pieces.

In his experience, people targeted for extortion had dirty secrets to hide. Wasn't that the point?

Whatever the minister was about to confess, Jane wouldn't be able to think of the man the same way again. With her brother missing, she didn't deserve another blow.

He shot her a sympathetic look and prepared to dive into the pastor's seedy little secret.

He rested his forearms on his thighs and radiated intensity. "What are you hiding?"

The pastor's mouth opened and closed several times, reminding Bridger of a landed fish. "I had a gambling problem," he said finally, his eyes shifting up and to the left. "Years ago."

A truthful response. As far as it went. Lying and telling incomplete truths were not incompatible.

Tai nodded almost imperceptibly. He'd caught it too.

"It started when I was in seminary," the man continued, staring hard at the top of the coffee table. "By the time I got my first posting, I'd believed I'd gotten a handle on it, but under the stress..."

His rounded shoulders lifted in a huge sigh. "I was wrong. The rest is predictable. I got in debt to a loan shark. Then I got caught stealing church funds. Lost my position, of course, but the congregation was kind enough not to prosecute. I went into treatment, and with the Lord's help, I made



restitution. Never had a problem since.”

The man raised his head, focusing all his attention on Jane. “That was years ago, before I met Evangeline, and long before I took the post here at Redemption Creek.”

Jane looked dazed. Not angry, just shocked. “You never told the church board?”

The man hung his head again. “No.” The response was barely a whisper. “I didn’t have the courage.”

Bridger caught Tai’s attention over Jane’s head. Another nod. All truthful, so far.

The pastor ran his fingers through his thinning hair. “You can confirm my story. I’ll give you access to whatever you need.”

“You bet we will,” Bridger said. “And you best pray that everything you’ve just told us is the truth.”

The man nodded, eagerly now. “Yes, sir.”

Jane relaxed, which made Bridger’s stomach hurt. She thought the pastor had told them everything.

Far from it.

The man was trying hard to appear relieved, like someone who’d just unburdened himself, but the glistening sweat at his hairline told a different story. So did the tapping foot.

“Go for it,” Tai mouthed the words.

He would, but with Jane watching, he wouldn’t enjoy dismantling the pastor’s story.

“There’s more,” he insisted.

The pastor tried to hide his surprise, but no one could control all their tells. And the preacher wasn’t that good.

Bridger pulled out Jason’s journal. “Jay asked us to finish something he’s been working on. Turns out, he wants us to help you. He wrote down every detail of your case.”

The pastor squirmed like a kid caught snitching candy bars. He sighed again. The breath made his barrel chest round. “You’re right. There’s more. What I told you is true. It’s just not everything.”

Bridger waited, letting the guy stew.

The pastor nodded to himself. “The blackmailer’s threatening my wife. I’ve been paying, believe me, but now it’s not enough. He said if I don’t come up with a hundred thousand dollars, he’ll kill her.”

Jane gasped. Her knee hit the table, rattling the mugs. “That’s why you sent her away.”

The guy nodded. “It was your brother’s idea. I sent her three weeks before he disappeared.”

“So her sister’s not having a baby?” she asked, her voice strained.

“She is,” the man insisted. “But Evangeline’s not with her. I couldn’t bring that kind of danger down on an innocent family. I sent her somewhere else. Somewhere no one can find her.”

Bridger let his disgust show. “I’m sure the folks here in Redemption Creek are generous, but pastors don’t make a lot of money.”

“And you just admitted you wouldn’t stash her with friends or family,” Tai added, helping Bridger close in for the kill.

Jane eyed them warily.

The pastor just looked confused. “What’s your point?”

Tai gestured at Bridger. “Bring it home, Captain.”

Bridger leaned closer, putting himself square in the center of the man’s visual field. “Motel bills add up. How are you paying for this?”

The pastor paled. “It’s not that expensive. I sold—”

Bridger shot up a hand, cutting off the coming lie. “Either someone’s helping you, or you’re stealing again.”

The look of outrage seemed genuine. “I’m not stealing.”

Jane’s expression hardened. Bridger could see hopeful innocence fading. “Then how are you paying for this?” she asked.

“It’s one of my parishioners,” the preacher mumbled. “He could see that I was troubled, and he offered to help me send Evangeline away. He has no idea why. I swear. I didn’t want to put him in danger. I think he believes Evangeline has a substance abuse problem. He offered to pay her way for a few months.”

Neither he nor Tai reacted. Whether because she was too shocked, or too angry, Jane followed their lead, letting the man stew in his own misery.

The preacher shifted in the chair. “I was hoping Jason could have this handled soon. I can’t rely on the man’s generosity much longer, but now that Jason’s disappeared...” He offered Jane a sympathetic glance, but she looked away.

Bridger eyed his watch. “It’s getting late.”

They needed more details, but he wanted the man fresh. Eager to offer up the rest of the story. “We’ll give the pastor here a ride home,” he told Jane.

She crossed her arms. “And then you’ll come back, right? I want to hear about Jason.”

He glanced at the clock in the kitchen. “You must have an early morning. We’ll catch up with you—”

“I’d rather hear it now,” she insisted. “Tonight.”

“That’s fair.” Tai tossed him the Jeep keys. “We’ll be back in a few.”

Bridger groaned silently. He could lie on the fly, but he wanted to keep the dissembling to a minimum with Jane. He liked her. Respected her.

And, truth be told, he wanted her to like him.

Lying about her bro wasn’t going to win him any points later, when she discovered he’d bent the truth. And left things out. Important things.

But backing out now would look even more suspicious. He glared at his buddy. He owed the big man a good thumping.

Tai just grinned and shook his head. “Any time, bro. Any time.”

HAVING the house to herself again set Jane on edge. At least she had plenty to occupy her time. She dove into her chores, washing the dishes, straightening the kitchen and starting a load of laundry, moving at twice her normal pace. The house might be tidy, but her thoughts were far from calm.

It sounded like the pastor was involved with some nasty characters. Could they have Jason?

Whatever the situation, her brother was worried enough to call in serious help. Blackmail and threats might be way outside her experience, but Bridger and Tai were as tough as her brother.

Her heartbeat stuttered. Jay was just getting back on his feet. After a decade in special forces he'd arrived back in town shell-shocked and damaged. Fragile, she might even say, if she weren't talking about a superbly-honed fighting man.

And now this.

She closed her eyes, lifting a prayer for her brave, impulsive brother. "Please, Lord, keep Jason safe."

She needed her brother back. The town needed him. Jason was a bright spot in people's lives. Always had been.

He deserved peace.

And she deserved answers. An engine growled outside. She tossed the dishtowel on the counter and headed for the door, intent on doing a little interrogating of her own.

The door opened before she reached it. Bridger slipped inside, her keys in hand, a dark scowl marring his handsome face. "You should keep that locked."

She bit down on a snarky response. He was trying to help.

And he wasn't wrong. With Jason gone and a blackmailer in town, she probably should take more care with her personal safety.

Tai strode up her front steps. "Perimeter's secure."

The two men filled her living room. Not an insignificant feat considering it was a two-story great room. Resolving to interrogate these two had sounded way easier when they weren't taking up all the available oxygen.

She shoved her hands on her hips and prepared to drag some answers out of the men. "Why are you here?"

For the first time, she saw a crack in Bridger North's armor. It was the eyes. Concern, and something worse. Sympathy.

Her throat tightened painfully. Was Jason in trouble?

"Your brother asked us to come," Tai admitted.

Bridger stared him down, but the bigger man merely shrugged.

"To help find the blackmailer?" she asked.

"Yes," Bridger added. "He's got several cases going and he needed more boots on the ground."

"Where is he?"

"We don't know. That's the truth."

She snorted. "Part of it, I'm sure. I want to see that journal."

"We're not done studying it."

Anger overrode her fear. She cocked a hip and crossed her arms. "He's my brother."

If she'd thought Bridger couldn't look more stubborn, she'd been wrong. His expression hardened. "He's working on another case. It's not connected to the blackmail. I can tell you that."

"So it's from your past. Something to do with his Special Ops work."

That he didn't even bother to answer. He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and stared out into the moonlight.

With floor-to-ceiling glass, her house overlooked a rugged portion of the Sierra.

Sharp snow-covered peaks shimmered in the light of the nearly-full moon. Normally, she found the scene enchanting, but tonight, with Jason missing and the pastor's wife in danger, it looked cold and empty.

Nature at its most dispassionate.

Bridger faced her full on, arms akimbo, gaze penetrating. "I'm not trying to torture you."

She wanted to laugh. “And yet...”

Tai sank down on the sofa, rested a foot on his knee, and laced his hands together behind his head as if settling in for a good movie.

Bridger scowled. “Your brother’s more than capable of handling the preacher’s little issue, but another case came up. Something urgent. He asked Tai and I to come down here and wrap up Pastor Zack’s problem while he took care of it. That’s the truth.”

“All of it?”

He exhaled. “Ish.” He held his hands out, as if he could deflect her protest. “That’s all I’m prepared to say at the moment.”

Well it wasn’t all she was prepared to hear. She hugged herself tight, trying to rein in the flare of anger over his high-handedness.

“Jay’s our bro,” Tai said. “We’re on this.”

“We’ve never left a man behind,” Bridger added. “Not gonna start now.”

That, she believed. But she needed more info. No way they were going to stop her from helping. “Are you sure this blackmailer isn’t responsible for Jason’s disappearance?”

Bridger laughed softly. “No way.”

Tai nodded in agreement. “Highly doubtful.”

She wished she could be so certain. “I know Jason’s Special Forces, but anyone can lose a fight.”

Bridger shook his head. “Not your brother. Not at the hands of some two-bit blackmailer. Not in this lifetime.”

His certainty soothed her, a little. “So where is he?”

“No idea. He’ll contact us soon,” Bridger insisted. “Just hang tight. Let us handle this. Meanwhile, we’ll take care of your preacher’s little problem. For Jay.”

No, she would not wait for these two to handle things. She’d continue doing her own digging. Jason had kept his military life completely secret, so she had no idea who to contact, but she could keep an eye on Bridger and Tai.

They might be trained agents, but she’d bet anything they’d never been up against a tight-knit town. The Creek’s gossip line could rival the CIA. She’d know what they ordered for lunch at the Red Dog Saloon before the cook did.

Finally, something to smile about. Thank the Lord for a home court advantage.

A FEW HOURS LATER, Bridger was still struggling through the journal they retrieved from Jason's hangar. The man was as precise in his penmanship as he was with everything else he did, but trying to make sense of page after page of dense info—and the cryptic side notes Jay had left himself—made Bridger's head hurt.

He set the journal aside, peeled back the covers, and climbed into the tidy motel bed. The Redemption Creek Inn might not have five stars—or even one—but the place was clean. Smelling of disinfectant wasn't the worst crime. He'd spent the night in sketchier dwellings. Hellish places that still sucked at his soul.

At least the TV worked. He thanked his Savior for the small blessing. Tai loved his evening shows. It kept his mind from revving, which kept Bridger from having to field a million annoying—and annoyingly perceptive—questions.

Besides, the worn paint and tepid shower were more than compensated for by the stunning landscape and the friendly town.

And Jane Reilly.

He cupped his hands behind his head and grinned up at the ceiling. The woman sparked something in him he'd thought long dead. After his wife, Michelle bailed, he dove deeper into the world of black ops. Before he knew it, he was so far undercover he couldn't even think about another wife. Or friends.

The rest of his team was the same way. Their only relationships for the five years they served together were with each other. By the end, they were tighter than family.

Until they weren't.

Once they accepted the payoffs, they scattered. He and Tai stayed close, and they heard from Jason on occasion, but as for the other four, well, he didn't blame them for moving on.

From the other bed, Tai groaned and pointed the remote at the TV, switching it off. "I can't stand these shows. No operative would follow a suspect down a deserted dirt road without radioing in their position first."

Bridger laughed. "Not unless they were trying to end up dead."

"Which can't happen because they have a whole series to get through. The heroes never die, no matter how lame they are."

"How many times did we almost die, and we're not lame."

"You're sure about that?" Tai prodded. "Because I think we skirt the edge."

"Are you talking death or lameness?"

"Either. Both."

"Copy that."

A coyote howled in the distance, a low, mournful tone that quickly ascended to excited yips as other members of the pack joined in.

Tai eyed him. "Why didn't you tell Jane about Jay's email?"

"His issues are need-to-know."

"I think the woman needs to know."

"I don't."

Tai flopped onto his back. "It's your funeral."

"What's that mean?"

"She and Jay are close. Once she realizes you're holding out on her, she'll be on you like white on rice."

All buck twenty of her? That made him laugh.

"I'm telling you." Tai wagged a finger at him.

Bridger's jaw dropped. "Did you just...?"

"What?"

"Never mind." Pointing out that Tai was acting like a little old lady would not help. Besides, his friend was right. He really didn't have the right to keep Jason's situation from his sister.

After all these years, secrecy was bred into him. They had no idea who they could trust. Any organization powerful enough to force a soldier as brilliant as Jason Reilly into hiding could have operatives in Redemption Creek. Recruiting a local would be all too easy.



If he came clean with Jane, she could tip their hand without even being aware of it.

So he'd continue to play the bad guy as long as necessary. Her wrath would be well worth the cost if it kept her and her brother safe.

But Tai had a point. "Let's get this blackmail thing handled, then we can read her in on Jay's situation."

Bedclothes rustled. "If that's the way you want to play it." Disapproval laced each word.

"For now."

"Then at least let's secure the area."

"Copy that."

No harm in setting up a passive security system at the hardware store and her house. She wouldn't even know the cameras were in place. Or the tiny drones Tai could send up straight from his phone.

"I'll get on it at first light." Tai sounded relieved. "We'll read in the rest of the team, too. Right?"

"I already did." He'd sent a copy of Jay's email over the highly-encoded network their cyber-specialist created before the team disbanded. "Advisory info only," he stressed. "Just letting everyone know to watch their six."

Tai grunted. "Did everybody respond?"

"Yup."

"But Jay's the only one reporting contact?"

"So far."

Tai sighed, a sad, deep sound. "I'm hungry."

Bridger rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "There's a shocker."

"That steak was mighty fine, but I shoulda ordered two."

"Live and learn, bro." Hard to disagree, though. His belly was a little light, too. At least the food in town lived up to Jason's bragging. Good, honest ranch food. Beef and potatoes and...well that about covered it as far as he was concerned. A decent pizza would be nice. And a milkshake.

Jane would know if such things existed out here.

Tai's stomach growled. "What's your read on the pastor?"

"He's not lying."

"Agreed. But he's not telling us everything."

"Yet."

"I like the way you think."

"It's a gift." More of a curse, at times. His mind never stopped. Every

room he entered—and every relationship—had to be reconnected. Evaluated.

“So we pull this pastor’s rear end out of the fire, and then we find J-man.”

“Exactly.” They needed to stop the blackmailer quickly. There was no telling what kind of trouble Jason was running from. They needed to get on that. Immediately.

“You think it’s the Consortium.” Tai wasn’t asking.

“Don’t you?”

“Unfortunately. It doesn’t make a lot of sense, but my gut’s telling me it’s them.” Tai dragged the covers up over his chest. “Why would they pay off the team then come after Jason three years later?”

“Who knows? Maybe he did something that made them twitch. Those guys are easy to spook. If they have the slightest concern someone’s gonna talk...” He didn’t finish the thought out loud. Tai would be thinking the same thing. They’d make the poor soul disappear, just to be on the safe side. “Jay knows better,” he added.

The bed sheets rustled as Tai tried to get comfortable. “Agreed. Maybe this has nothing to do with the Consortium. Jay admitted he ran some independent ops. He leave any decent intel in that journal?”

Bridger thought about the cryptic notes. Either Jason hadn’t yet figured out much about the shadowy people pursuing him, or he’d made the notations purposefully obscure.

Both possibilities concerned him more than he wanted to admit.

He switched off the bedside light. “Whatever the reason, we need to find him.”

“And hope the rest of us don’t have to disappear again. That’s getting old.”

No joke. Not that leaving would help. If the Consortium intended to silence them, there’d be nowhere to hide.

SLIPPING BACK into her brother's hangar before the sun crested the White Mountains might not have been Jane's smartest plan. The old propane furnace barely kept the place above freezing. She shivered. After an hour of digging through the mess left by whoever searched the place, her hands were chilled through. She flexed her stiff fingers and waggled her insulated mug. Empty. She was discouraged, and in need of more coffee.

And she was completely convinced she wasn't going to find a way into her brother's mysterious past. Not without help.

Luckily, she had another avenue to pursue. It was possible Jason's absence had something to do with Pastor Zack's blackmailer. Anyone who'd threaten a man's wife could certainly threaten the good Samaritan trying to help.

Either way, she had no intention of sitting by while Bridger and Tai handled things. She was a doer. Like her only sibling, she thrived on action.

And Bridger North wasn't the boss of her.

No one was, save her Lord and Savior.

Her breath misted in the cold air as she checked her watch. Her best employee, Wes, would be opening the store today. If she skipped her bookkeeping for the morning, she could grill the pastor. Alone.

She'd known the man since he took the post, six years ago. He'd be far more likely to admit things to her than to two scary-looking strangers.

Intent on her plan, she locked the hangar and swung by Hattie's for a couple lattes on her way out to the church. She passed the Redemption Creek Inn, wincing at the sight of Bridger's hopped-up Jeep. Even though it was too late, she slumped down in her seat until she could barely see over the steering

wheel. Some spy she was, driving straight past their place.

She should have taken the back roads. Still, what were the odds they'd be watching the highway? Even if they did see her, it wasn't like they knew where she was going.

It was just past eight when she pulled into the gravel lot between the church and the parsonage. The sun had crested the brown peaks, glinting on the windshield of the two church vans, and the pastor's SUV, the only cars in the lot.

Drinks in hand, she headed for the door. It opened before she could set down a cup to knock. Pastor Zack poked his head out, fully dressed, his hair freshly combed.

"Jane!" He covered his shock with a thin smile. "What can I do for you?"

She thrust a latte at him. "We need to talk."

He continued to block the doorway. "I wish I could. I've got somewhere to be in a few minutes."

Wow, she was tired of taking no for an answer. Ignoring his hint, she continued forward, the hot coffees serving as a kind of battering ram. Inch by inch, she forced her way into the room.

"This won't take long," she insisted.

He looked ready to argue, but then his expression softened. He led the way into the bright breakfast nook.

"What's on your mind?" he asked the instant she sat.

"Jason."

"Right. Of course." He took a seat himself. "I thought his teammates were helping?"

"They are. I'm more interested in your case. I'm not convinced it doesn't have something to do with my brother's disappearance."

The pastor shook his head. His complexion seemed pasty in the early morning light. And there was something around his eyes. Fear, maybe?

"Doesn't seem like it."

"Even so. It's worth looking into."

He raised the cup to his lips. "What can I do to help?"

The man really did look pale. Gray, even. "Tell me what you told Jason. How does the blackmailer contact you? Where do you leave the money?"

"He contacts me by text. A different number each time. I drop the cash at a different location every time, too."

"When was the last time you paid?"

The pastor fingered his thick beard. “A month ago. That’s when they said the next payment had to be a hundred thousand. They said they’d leave me alone after that, but if I didn’t come up with the money in a month, they’d hurt Vangie.”

“And you have no idea who it is?”

He shook his head.

“It has to be someone who knew you at your previous posting. The one you stole from.”

“I thought of that, but until your brother offered to help, I had no way of investigating. The church council back in Pennsylvania knew, of course, and the youth pastor.” He stared out at the brightening landscape with dead eyes. “Folks gossip. Lots of people in the church could have known.”

“What about here? How did you get the post in Redemption Creek?”

“Only Mr. King knew. He was in charge of the hiring committee. The chair of my old church council told him everything. He was straight up with me, said that except for my indiscretion, I had a fantastic record. He figured Redemption Creek wouldn’t be a desirable posting. They’d be lucky to find someone like me.”

He stared down at the table, cheeks pinking. “Not sure I agree, but I wasn’t about to turn my back on a sign from my Savior.”

The old rancher had been a wise, steady soul. More of a listener than a talker, he probably knew more about the people in town than anyone. And he’d been dead over two years now.

She could imagine the man hanging onto the information, and watching his new hire closely, but she couldn’t picture him as a blackmailer. “Did you give Jason a list of potential contacts?”

“First thing.”

“I want it.”

He hesitated.

Anger, and a deep disappointment tightened like a band across her chest. Really? After all this, the man was more concerned with saving himself than helping find Jason?

She swallowed her anger. It wouldn’t get her what she needed. “I’m not going to spill your secret.”

The pastor met her gaze. The intensity in his red-rimmed eyes was unmistakable. “I’m not trying to save myself. Believe me. I’m going to confess. The Lord is guiding me to it. I just need to make sure Evangeline,

and your brother, are safe before I do.” He pressed his forearms into the table and leaned close. His bulk obscured the window behind him. “As soon as they’re safe, I’m coming clean.”

She believed him. And it made sense. If he destroyed the blackmailer’s leverage too soon, there was no telling what could happen.

She toyed with the plastic top on her to-go cup. “I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“You shouldn’t be. I’ve earned your distrust. Your disgust, too.”

“I have no right to judge.” She smiled, a genuine one this time. “Looks like the Lord nudged you to the right place.”

He laughed softly. “Nothing like a two-by-four upside the head. Redemption in Redemption Creek.”

His smile faded as he checked the clock above the stove. “I have to run. I’m sorry. It’s an important appointment.”

She rose, fighting a renewed wave of skepticism at his eagerness to leave. “So you’ll get me that list?”

“I’ll email it to you as soon as I’m back this afternoon.” He rose stiffly, painfully, even. “I know I’m not in a position to make demands, but would you pray with me?”

*Pray. Of course.* The man was a church leader. He was probably on his way to offer comfort or counsel to one of their own. And she was delaying him. She held out her hands, feeling like an idiot.

He gripped her hands lightly. His own felt cold and clammy. The physical sign of stress soothed her, oddly. It corroborated his story. Even thinking about confessing publicly would make her dizzy with fear.

He bowed his head. “Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you for this blessed day, and we offer you our faith and our trust in you as our Savior as we pray for the safety of my wife and Jane’s brother. You are the final measure in all things. Give us the strength to do your bidding.”

His words filled her with hope—for both him and Jason—like the clear morning sun pouring into the valley behind them.

She snatched up her unfinished latte and followed him out the front door. While the pastor paused to lock it, she continued on to her car.

The early morning sun blinded her. She lifted a hand to shield her eyes. The next thing she knew, she was surrounded by a rush of heat, and a wind so intense it threw her to the ground.

As her consciousness faded, the world exploded in a fury of sound.

BRIDGER GRABBED the wheel of his Jeep, barely waiting for Tai to get buckled in before he floored the accelerator. “Did I not tell the woman to hang tight?”

Tai pressed down on the plastic cover on his coffee cup. “I believe you did.”

Whatever else the man muttered got lost to wind noise as they hurtled down the highway toward the Redemption Community Church. Probably for the best. He didn’t want to have to smash his bro in the face.

When he caught that flash of Jane’s truck heading past, an icy dread had crept up his spine. Those were the worst kinds of feelings: the shots of intuition that hit for no reason.

Even the most clueless combat vet knew those were the feelings to trust.

Especially since the tracker Tai dropped in her bag the other night stopped transmitting a few minutes later.

He zoomed around the only vehicle on the road, an eighteen-wheeler loaded down with hay. *Please, Lord, let this be an equipment glitch. I don’t buy it, but let me be wrong.*

Tai pointed out the windshield. “Smoke at two o’clock. I don’t like the looks of that.”

Black smoke, the noxious, charcoal-colored kind created by burning plastic and man-made materials billowed into the air from behind a line of trees. Whatever was on fire, it was roaring. He could picture the kind of combustion needed to produce that amount of smoke. The flames would be high and hot and voracious.

*Jane.*

Tai dug his fingers into the dashboard and eyed his phone, sucking in a breath. “Smoke’s coming from her last known position.”

Bridger pressed the accelerator to the floor. The vehicle surged forward. “ETA?”

“Two minutes. I’ll dial up emergency services.”

“For what that’s worth.”

Bridger risked a glance at the ranch lands on both sides of the road. Redemption Creek wasn’t big enough to support a paid fire department, let alone state-of-the-art emergency services.

He’d bet the two of them had more training than anyone in a fifty-mile radius.

From the tight look on Tai’s face, his partner obviously agreed. He wagged his phone. “I’ll call it in anyway. Can’t hurt.”

Bridger urged the Jeep on faster, not bothering with a reply. He should have insisted she let him and Tai guard her. Should have swept her truck for IEDs. Should have....

He shoved the unhelpful thoughts into the black box that held all the useless emotions he refused to dwell on. The only thing that mattered now was Jane.

By the time he took the exit on two wheels, he’d reviewed his field training. Stabilize the patient, then transport.

Stabilize. Transport.

If she was still alive....

Tai shot him a look. “We got this. She’s okay, and we got this. You hear?”

He nodded tightly. He couldn’t bear to consider the alternative.

The whitewashed exterior of the church loomed ahead. Smoke poured out of the windows of the one-story house on the east end. The front door yawed open, hanging from a single hinge. Flames filled the opening, roiling out along the upper jamb and licking the shingled roof.

Jane’s truck sat clear of the mess.

*Please, Lord.*

“I see her!” Tai yelled. “On the ground between the vehicles. Pastor dude, too.”

Body thrumming with adrenaline, he slammed on the brakes, skidding into the parking lot. Tai was out of the vehicle, gun in hand, before it stopped.

Bridger followed instantly. Heat blasted him. Broken glass littered the lot.



Jane lay face down, arms spread, feet closest to the house. He recognized the position. She'd been blown forward, away from the structure.

Tai raced to her side. "I got a pulse," he shouted over the roar of the fire. "It's strong."

Bridger stopped, mid stride, and lifted a prayer of thanks, then he ran toward the pastor. The big man lay in the same position, only closer to the house.

When he reached him, the man groaned and tried to turn over. Bridger knelt next to the man and pressed a hand on his back. "Don't move. We need to stabilize you first."

The man made another groaning sound. "Where's Jane? Is she okay?"

"Affirmative," he said as he checked the man's pulse. Fast and thready, but he'd do.

Glass shattered as the last chunk of a window hit the front steps. Radiant heat from the fire seared his skin.

He bent close to the preacher's ear. "Is there anybody else inside?"

"Just us. Nobody else." The big man's voice was thin with terror.

Bridger patted him lightly on the back. He ached to see to Jane, but Tai was a premier medic, and he couldn't risk the pastor trying to rise. The man could have a spinal injury or internal bleeding. Until the local ambulance showed up, neither of them were going anywhere.

He began feeling for broken bones, moving slowly and gently from the man's feet on up. Tai was doing the same with Jane.

"She's still unconscious," he called over when he caught Bridger looking his way. "Pulse is strong, though."

The sharp whine of a siren rose over the roar of combustion. A few seconds later, an ambulance appeared, disgorging a young guy in a blue uniform, crookedly buttoned.

"Fire trucks are a few minutes behind us," the kid announced breathlessly. "So's the sheriff."

Bridger jogged over to meet him and grabbed a backboard out of the back of the ambulance. "Sounds good."

He and Tai would be long gone before the sheriff arrived. No way he'd hang around with Jane on her way to the closest hospital. They could consult with law enforcement later.

Once the group reached them, Bridger helped load Jane and the pastor into the back of the ambulance. Except for the part where she was

unconscious, she looked all right. A few cuts on her face and hands from the gravel, but other than that, she'd do.

Heart thudding, he lifted another prayer. Of all the ways this could have gone south....

The pastor groaned. He looked okay. Unlike Jane, he was awake, and mostly coherent and his color was good. "I don't know what happened," he kept repeating. "I just locked the door. Then everything exploded."

Bridger stood outside the ambulance while the techs secured the gurneys, making sure he was in the pastor's line of sight. "Did you have any other visitors this morning?"

"Just Jane," he said, his voice hoarse and weak.

"How about last night?"

The pastor shook his head. Blood trickled down the side of one cheek. "Not that I know of."

Huh. The guy was more perceptive than Bridger had given him credit for.

Tai jogged around from the back side of the burning building. He reached Bridger just as the attendants hopped out of the back of the ambulance.

"We'll take them on to Buttermilk Valley," the kid told them. "They've got the closest trauma center." He started to swing the door closed.

Bridger held up a hand, stopping him. He leaned in and planted a kiss on Jane's dirt-streaked forehead. She looked so fragile. So innocent. The urge to smash something with his fist warred with the need to hold her.

"I'm right behind you," he whispered.

Her eyelids fluttered. "What happened?"

He smiled down at her. "Long story. I'll tell you later."

Fear and tension widened her eyes. "There was a blast."

"A big one. But you're okay. The pastor, too. You're on your way to the hospital to get checked out."

She clutched at his hand. "Don't leave."

"There's no room for me in here," he said. "I'm following right behind. See you at the hospital. That's a promise. Okay?"

"Okay."

She looked up at him with such trust, his heart slammed against his ribs. The medic shuffled his feet, waiting to close the doors. Bridger backed out of the way.

Tai watched him as the attendants buttoned things up. "You okay?"

"Not even close." He swiped the sweat running down his face. "What'd

you find?”

“Not much, yet.” Tai wiped his own face with the hem of his tech shirt. “My guess is IED. Good sized one, judging from the mess here.”

The flames had reached the church itself now. Accidental explosions weren’t unheard of, for sure, but with the exception of large city gas mains or tanker trucks, they weren’t this big. Propane tanks and domestic gas lines didn’t put out this kind of explosive force.

Tai squinted at the remains of the front door. “I saw pieces of a plastic timer. No way this was accidental.”

“Copy that.”

A whole slew of sirens were audible now, wailing in the distance.

He slapped his buddy on the arm. “Time to make tracks.”

“We’re not waiting?”

The ambulance’s taillights disappeared around the corner. “That’s a negative, son. We’re heading for Buttermilk Valley.”

Tai looked from him to Jane’s debris-covered truck and back. “Oooh, somebody’s sweet on the hardware store lady.”

He growled low in his throat and headed for the Jeep. Sweet hardly described it. Concerned? Check. Feeling guilty about this? Check. Scared out of his mind? Double check.

Tai buckled in and clutched the grab bar. “You know the preacher was the likely target, right?”

Bridger reversed out of the lot and shot out onto the highway, sights on the boxy white ambulance a mile up ahead. He gritted his teeth so hard, his jaw ached.

He wanted it to be the preacher, and it made sense. But until he was certain the bomb was intended for the pastor, he’d be in Jane Reilly’s back pocket.

THE MAN BIT down on a scream of rage. It took everything he had not to hurl the expensive binoculars to the ground.

The pastor wasn't supposed to be home when the bomb went off. He should have been at the church, setting up for the Gamblers' Anonymous meeting that started at nine. Pastor Zack never missed.

He struggled not to vomit as the paramedics loaded the man into the back of the ambulance. No blood showed through the white sheets. That was something, at least. Maybe he wasn't dead.

He wiped the sweat out of his eyes and readjusted the binoc's focus. Nope. No blood. At least none that he could see. And the pastor seemed to be conscious.

He lowered the glasses, letting them swing from the neck strap while he wiped his face again.

The sour smell of his own sweat made him want to heave.

He wasn't cut out for this. The plan sounded so good a few weeks ago. Every time they talked it through, his confidence rose. And his determination. Getting rid of the pastor would earn him the life he'd always wanted.

It was the last step. Dead, Reverend Zack Myles held the key to his future.

Stupid Jane Reilly. Why'd she have to show up? She made the pastor late. Almost too late.

The bomb required delicate timing. And he was hardly an expert. The articles on the web made it seem easy. Building it was, but making it go off.... What a headache.

He needed it to detonate just after the pastor left for the meeting. Close

enough that it would seem like a mistake that the guy wasn't killed.

He wasn't ready to take Myles out yet. He had more ground to lay—more pieces of evidence to drop to misdirect the police—before he actually killed the man.

For one thing, his alibi for the actual murder wasn't in place. It was highly doubtful he'd be a suspect, but "doubtful" didn't mean a hundred percent certain.

No way he'd take the slightest chance of going down for murder. He had someone else in mind to play that part. But the timing had to be right. He had someone with the perfect motive. All he needed to do was set a few more things in motion, and wait.

If Jane Reilly didn't ruin everything first.

Or wait. He froze, afraid the slightest movement would whisk the brilliant new idea straight out of his mind.

Maybe she could help. He'd never considered that.

The ambulance tore out of the drive so fast gravel spurted out from under the back wheels. He watched the boxy white vehicle trundle down the road toward the highway, new possibilities filling his mind, each scenario better than the last.

He could use this mistake. He could use Jane Reilly.

He grinned, releasing the anger. If she wanted to interfere, he'd let her. She'd add the perfect twist to the case.

Especially when they both died.

“HOW’RE YOU FEELING?”

Bridger’s gentle question only made Jane want to moan.

Pain pulsed behind her eyes, making the drab walls of the tiny exam room in the Buttermilk Valley ER vibrate strangely. Every muscle ached. She felt like she’d been bucked from a horse.

Despite her discomfort, she offered words of thanks to her Savior. She and Pastor Zack were essentially unharmed.

A miracle, given that the explosion probably wasn’t an accident.

No one had said it directly, but she wasn’t an idiot. The deputy who questioned her was obviously worried about the possibility that the blast had been man-caused.

*A bomb.*

The thought made her stomach cramp. Could this have something to do with Jason’s disappearance? But how? And why would a blackmailer try to kill his target? None of it made sense.

Hushed voices rose just out of view. She turned her head. The movement sent pain shooting through her skull. She gasped. Her forehead pulsed strangely. She raised an arm to check, but a strong hand stopped her.

Bridger stared down at her, watchful. “Take it easy,” he ordered, and released his grip.

The doctor who first examined her stepped back into the room. With her steel-gray hair and no-nonsense demeanor, the woman instilled confidence.

She caught Jane’s eye. “Your CT scan came back clear. So far, there’s no abnormal bleeding, but you’ve got a whopper of a concussion.” She turned to Bridger and Tai. “I don’t want her alone for at least twenty-four hours.

Seventy-two would be preferable.”

“We’re on it, Doc.” Bridger answered the woman, but his gaze was on her.

“We’ve seen more than our share of concussions,” Tai added. “Nausea, dizziness, slurred speech.” He ticked off symptoms of head injuries on his fingers.

“We’re former special forces,” Bridger added. “We got this.”

The doctor studied the men. If she wondered why they were so concerned for Jane, she didn’t let on. “Works for me. I’ll get the discharge papers started.” She headed out.

*No. Wait.*

Jane tried to catch the doctor’s attention, but she felt like she was moving through molasses. Bridger and Tai in her house? Not a great plan.

They set her on edge—well Bridger did. She couldn’t handle all that energy. All that bossiness. She’d kill him before dinner.

“Who’s going to stay with Pastor Zack?” she asked, to have something—anything—else to focus on. If the blast was purposeful, he was in danger.

“The assistant pastor arranged for him to stay with a couple from the church,” Tai told her. “Can’t remember their names, but they live up in the foothills, I think they said.”

“The Creighton’s,” she guessed. An older couple with a ranch high up toward the base of the mountains. He was a retired cop from Los Angeles.

Tai snapped his fingers. “That’s the name. The sheriff’s office has already set up a regular patrol around their place. Just in case,” he added quickly.

His slip confirmed her suspicions. The blast was no accident.

A deputy had taken her statement the minute they wheeled her into the ER, but she hadn’t had much to offer. She didn’t see a thing. Nobody but the pastor. No strange vehicles. Nothing amiss at his home.

Bridger sat on the foot of her bed and folded his arms over that impressive chest. “Once we’re sure your head’s not busted, we’ll make a plan.”

“I don’t need babysitting.”

Bridger shot her a hard look. “Yeah, you do.”

A hard glare from a battle-hardened man. It might intimidate most people, but she wasn’t most people. Between spending her life in a hardware store in a working ranch town, and practically being raised by a brother tough enough to become a Green Beret, she didn’t scare easily.

Bridger sighed. The slow, deep sound made her stomach flutter.

He pointed at her head. “Even with a clean CT scan, you’re not out of danger yet. You could develop a brain bleed. That would be all kinds of trouble. Unless you know someone with emergency medical training, you’re stuck with us.”

Except for Jason, she didn’t. The downside of living in a thousand-person town an hour away from the nearest hospital.

She clenched her teeth, but that made her head pound harder. She sighed.

Tai clapped a hand on Bridger’s shoulder and squeezed tight. “Rein that in, sailor. You’re scaring her.”

The intensity in Bridger’s eyes clicked up a notch as he stared her in the face. “Exactly my plan.”

Tai rolled his eyes. “‘Cause that’s a great way to earn her cooperation.”

Bridger ignored him. “You know I’m right.” He challenged her.

All too true. She couldn’t be alone. And she couldn’t ask her friends to drop their busy lives to babysit.

“Your brother would kill us if we let anything happen to you,” Bridger added.

Tai’s eyes bugged out. “No joke. I, for one, plan on living a good long while. I got things to do. People to see. Women to charm.”

Bridger looked pained. “He might be lame, but he can cook. You won’t starve.”

Tai grinned proudly. “Cook, clean, and hit a bullseye at a thousand yards.” He brushed a thick chunk of hair off his shoulder and preened. “And I look good doing it.”

Jane laughed. The movement sent another shaft through her head. She sucked in a breath.

Bridger shot off the stool. “How about we get her home in one piece?”

Tai winked at her. “Copy that.”

She pulled herself up a little higher in the bed, taking care not to let the pain show on her face. “And we’ll find the pastor’s blackmailer? And Jason?”

“No.” Bridger looked prepared to double down on stubborn.

She glared right back at him, but he didn’t seem to notice. Her annoyance bounced off him like sunlight off a newly-waxed fender.

“We won’t be doing anything,” he announced. “Tai and I will help your preacher. Then we’ll figure out how to contact Jason.”



Oooh, that tone. Jason still tried to intimidate her with it. Hadn't worked since she was six, and it wouldn't work now.

"Great." She smiled up at him. "I want in."

Bridger's mouth went slack.

"I know this town. No one's going to talk to strangers."

"She's got a point," Tai muttered.

Bridger didn't look impressed.

He obviously was more used to giving orders than taking them. Not a problem. So was her brother. Over the past couple years, she'd gotten pretty good at standing her ground. It was the only way to deal with alpha men like Jason, and his former teammates.

She raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Fine. You guys handle things your way, and I'll handle them mine."

That got Bridger's attention. "What's your way?"

"What's yours?"

"I asked you first."

"We're not twelve."

He tapped a foot on the floor and looked to his partner for help, but the big man shrugged, making no attempt to hide his amusement.

A muscle jumped in Bridger's jaw. "Fine. Partners."

Close to what she wanted, but she couldn't let up yet. Not until they spelled it out. "We learn something, we share it."

He nodded stiffly. "Fine."

She relaxed against the pillows. "Okay then. Tell me why my brother disappeared. It has nothing to do with the blackmail, does it?"

The two men shared a quick glance, then Tai shrugged helplessly. "She's obviously got Jay's brains. We might as well come clean."

Bridger ran a hand over his chin, his palm rasping against stubble. "It's a long story." He tipped his head toward the open doorway. "We'll tell you once we're alone."

Right. Her throat went dry. He didn't know it, but he'd just answered her biggest question. He didn't believe Jason's disappearance had anything to do with the blackmail.

"You're still going to help the pastor, right?"

"Affirmative. We promised Jay."

One worry down. The pastor had shown poor judgment in hiding his past from the community, but she had no right to judge him. Only the Lord could

do that.

Moving slowly, she folded her arms over her chest and eyed the two big men as if she'd caught them stealing candy bars from the box next to the cash register. "One of you want to tell me why you think that explosion was set on purpose?"

BRIDGER HAD BEEN HOPING Jane wouldn't think to ask about the explosion just yet, but so far today nothing had gone his way. No reason for this to be any different.

He was trying to decide how much to tell her when shadows filled the doorway.

"Hey, Sheriff." Tai shot out a cheerful greeting.

The short, stout man flanked by two frowning deputies didn't even pretend to crack a smile. He tapped the edge of a manila envelope against one thigh. "You gents got a minute?"

Despite the polite tone, it wasn't really a question. Before he or Tai could answer, the sheriff jerked his head toward the hallway.

The deputies lingered in the doorway.

Bridger shoved his hands in his pockets. "We'll be back in a few minutes," he told Jane, and headed out, Tai on his heels.

The sheriff was waiting at the far end of the hall. He ushered them into a small conference room. His men waited outside.

The sheriff eyed them with displeasure. "What were you doing, leaving the scene of a crime?"

Bridger met his hard gaze. "Was it a crime?"

The sheriff grunted, his expression souring even more. Not someone who suffered fools. "Let's cut to the chase. I'm familiar with your files. Bridger North and Tai Kaholo. You're ex-special forces. Your backgrounds have been wiped so clean they squeak."

Bridger revised his opinion of the small-town LEO. Just because the man ran a ten-deputy department didn't make him an idiot. He wished he'd been

as thorough in examining the sheriff's background.

The flicker in Tai's eyes told him his partner was thinking the same thing.

The man pressed his knuckles into the tabletop, leaning forward until his taut belly rested on the edge of the wood. The overhead light glinted off his name badge. "What brings you to Redemption Creek?"

Tai gestured at the door. "Besides the scenery?"

Sheriff Hammond ignored that. Bridger would have done the same in his position. "I'm guessing your business here has something to do with Jason Reilly's disappearance."

"Who says he disappeared?"

That comment earned Bridger a pained look. "Right. I forget how close to the vest you Special Ops types like to play things. Well that's not how things work in my county. I ask the questions. You answer. We can have this discussion over at the jail, if you'd rather. You two left the scene of an explosion. Sure makes you look like plausible suspects. I'm sure I can come up with plenty of reasons to hold you overnight."

Tai pulled out a chair and plopped down. He patted the seat next to him a little harder than he needed to and looked up at Bridger. "Sit."

Bridger debated holding out, but stubbornness wasn't going to get him anywhere. Just because Sheriff Hammond reminded him all too much of his own stiff, unbending father wasn't a good enough reason to get himself locked up.

And he couldn't leave Jane. Not with a potential bomber out there.

He sat. "We shouldn't have left. You're right. But I didn't want to risk letting Jane out of our sights."

That didn't seem to surprise Hammond. Of course, he'd already checked on their backgrounds. He'd know they were close with Jason.

He stared them both down for a minute, sizing them up, before continuing. "Jane gave me a good description of the scene. Our preliminary investigation backed up her observations. I'm guessing you didn't leave before you checked out the damage. I want to know what you're thinking."

"I had a look around," Tai admitted. "Enough to see what was left of a timer."

The sheriff pulled out a chair and sat. "I'm not sure I like you two, but I like Jason, so I'll reserve judgment."

Bridger grinned. He hoped he looked more appreciative than cheeky. "Thanks for that."

“Don’t be.” The man didn’t look impressed. “You’re one more stupid stunt away from getting locked up.”

Bridger nodded sharply. “Copy that.”

The sheriff slapped a manila envelope down on the table between them and tapped it with his index finger while he studied the two of them with hooded eyes. The air system kicked on, whipping up an artificial breeze that whistled through the cracks in the ill-fitting door.

The man flicked the envelope across the table toward him and Tai. “You didn’t see this.”

Bridger grabbed it. Inside was a plastic evidence bag containing a printed note. He held it up to the light.

*Sinner. You have failed to heed my warnings. Money will no longer save you. The price of redemption has risen. Now, you’ll pay with your life.*

He whistled softly and turned the page so Tai could read it.

“Huh.” Tai slid him a look. “Guess we don’t have to wonder if the blackmailer’s our bomber.”

Sheriff Hammond rubbed his eyes. “Myles says this is the first threat he’s received, other than the threat to his wife. Do you have any information that suggests otherwise?”

“Negative,” Bridger answered immediately. “The only threat Jason knew about was the one to the wife if the pastor didn’t come up with that hundred thousand.”

The sheriff sank back in his seat and raised his gaze to the ceiling. “And now the blackmailer goes from wanting a hundred grand to trying to kill the man. What set him off?”

Bridger regarded the sheriff. Behind the good-old-boy features, the man was sharp. Far sharper than he’d given him credit for. “A good question.”

“Crazy doesn’t need an explanation,” Tai said.

Hammond eyed Tai with renewed respect. “Fair enough. Maybe this never was about the money.”

An excellent point. And a frightening one. Greedy people were easier to figure out. And far safer to deal with. Their motives were predictable, if their methods weren’t always logical. But crazy....

He groaned silently. Dealing with crazies was like playing Russian roulette. All you could do was prep for contingencies and hope you didn’t miss one.

The sheriff took back the sheet and stuffed it into the envelope. “Pastor

Myles told me you two were helping him look into the extortion. Said Jason had offered to find the guy.”

“Yeah. Jay’s been called away on business and he asked us to finish this up.”

The sheriff concentrated on closing the envelope. “Any reason neither he nor you thought to report this?”

“The pastor asked him to be discreet.” Bridger beat. “I’m sure Jay would have turned over any evidence he collected.”

“And you boys?”

“Of course.”

“Absolutely.” Tai chimed in, too.

The sheriff didn’t look convinced.

Bridger couldn’t blame him. Before the bombing, he wasn’t planning to turn the blackmailer over to the authorities. Whatever the preacher wanted to do would have been okay with him. But the violence changed everything.

“Any reason you two were following Jane this morning?”

Bridger sucked in a breath. The man was a far better interrogator than he would have expected out here in the middle of nowhere. “Jason asked us to keep an eye on his sister while he’s out of town.”

The sheriff grunted. “Strange, given Jane’s done just fine on her own for years.”

Bridger shrugged. “He worries.”

“And you two suspect this explosion has something to do with Jason Reilly’s disappearance?”

“No!” Bridger answered immediately.

While he wasn’t interested in sharing Jason’s business with the man, he had no intention of misleading the sheriff in his investigation of the bombing.

The man weighed his response for a long time before nodding. “I don’t know Major Reilly well, but I do know his sister. She’s a wonderful woman. Until proven otherwise, I’m inclined to give him—and the two of you—the benefit of the doubt. I don’t think this incident had anything to do with the Major’s past, or yours. But if I find out you’re withholding evidence in this investigation, your rear ends are mine. You follow?”

Bridger had to stop himself from saluting. “Understood.”

Tai nodded solemnly. “I hear you, sir.”

The man rose. “One other thing. Keep an eye on Jane. I have a hunch her brother’s business is the kind that creates collateral damage.”

Bridger feigned surprise, but the sheriff wasn't buying it. "I told you I saw your records. It's not what was in them that has me worried. It's what got left out. People with careers like yours end up dead. Sometimes their families, too." He tapped the edge of the envelope on the doorframe. "Jane's special. Keep her safe." He disappeared.

Tai whistled softly. "Hammond's not an idiot."

Bridger stared at the open doorway. "Not even close."

And the sheriff wasn't wrong. People like him and Tai and Jason had no business having families.

CUBING potatoes took way more effort than Bridger would have guessed. His knife skills in a combat situation were way better than average, but stick him in a kitchen, and things went sideways.

He bit his cheek and tried to concentrate on chopping uniform pieces so Tai would stop glowering at him.

Jane sat on the far side of her breakfast bar, watching the two of them work. They'd only gotten back to her tidy farmhouse ten minutes ago, but her complexion had already brightened. The skin beneath her eyes looked bruised with fatigue, but at least she didn't seem to be in pain anymore.

Tai whistled as he worked, juggling three pans: bacon, eggs and a skillet full of sliced onions. For a big guy, he was surprisingly agile. Graceful, even.

Watching Tai charm Jane with his cooking skills soured Bridger's mood. Sure, the smell of frying bacon made his mouth water, but he envied his buddy's laid-back style too much to ignore.

He snagged a chunk of red pepper from the cutting board and chewed harder than necessary. He could be charming. Kind of. Somehow, around Jay's little sister, his brain short-circuited.

Unsettling, for sure.

He couldn't put a name to the feeling, but he didn't want the woman viewing him as some uptight commando.

"We're all secretive," Tai told Jane. "Comes with the territory. But J-man..." He shook his head. The movement threatened to loosen the man bun at the nape of his thick neck. "Your brother is like a vault inside a triple-locked room guarded by a platoon of Special Ops dudes."

Jane's eyes sparkled with humor. "That's Jason. When we were kids,



he'd lock me out of his bedroom and threaten me with all kinds of dire consequences if I snuck in." She wrinkled her nose. "As if I wanted to steal his collection of old snake skins, or his codebooks."

Bridger joined in. "So Jay was into codebreaking early, huh?"

"Elementary school. He and his friends wrote secret notes all the time. They had passwords for everything." She laughed to herself. "One time, he rewrote Mom's shopping list in code, only he lost the key. He didn't get dessert for a week."

He snagged another chunk of bell pepper. "He's a brilliant guy."

She smiled shyly. The shadow that darkened her expression quickly after made his heart hurt.

Whatever her brother was running from, it was serious. Bridger wanted to charge off after him, but searching blindly risked alerting Jay's pursuer. He and Tai would lose any tactical advantage.

Not acceptable. Yet.

If Jay didn't drop them a hint to his location soon, they'd have no choice. In the meantime, they'd catch the pastor's extortionist.

That bacon was starting to smell better and better. Maybe he could dredge up enough appetite to do justice to Tai's hash.

Jane motioned to him to hand over the cutting board. "Let me do that."

Tai sighed. "How's he ever gonna learn?"

Bridger shrugged. "Who says I have to?" He tried not to sound too smug.

Jane lined up a potato half, her slender fingers moving gracefully as she cubed it into precise shapes with a few quick slices of the knife.

Bridger figured he could watch her work all day.

Normally, he'd be fidgeting about now. After hours at the hospital, and another hour in the car, he'd be twitching with the urge to move, to run or swim or pound a heavy bag until his body was slick with sweat and his heartbeat hit the red zone.

But there was something about Jane's pretty, tranquil home that soothed him. Something about the woman herself, that made him want to linger.

Her home was exactly as he would have expected, and yet not. It was pretty and put together in a welcoming way he'd expect from a woman whose store appeared to be the hub of her community.

It was the artwork that surprised him. Stunning photographs filled the walls. All landscapes. Local places, he suspected. Whether shots of the desert to the east, or the soaring, snow-covered Sierra Nevada to the west, they were

far more than typical tourist shots. Like any great art, they added their own power, bringing out the majesty of their subjects.

Tai pointed the chef's knife at the toaster. "Think you can handle the bread, sailor?"

"I'll give it a whirl."

How was it he'd never gotten the knack of preparing food? He could field dress a wound, set a broken leg, and shoot almost as well as Tai. What was it about knives that weren't weapons that eluded him?

Jane finished the potatoes, set her elbows on the counter, and stared him down. "What makes you think the explosion wasn't an accident?"

Tai gave the frying pan an expert shake. "Besides the evidence of a timer and propane tanks in the hall closet? There was a note."

The knife slipped out of Jane's hand. "What?"

Bridger slid the knife away from the edge of the counter. "The sheriff showed us. Looks like the blackmailer is into revenge of some kind. He accused the pastor of sinning. Said no more money. Myles would have to pay with his life now."

Jane pressed a hand to her chest. "That's awful! He's going to have to confess about the blackmail."

"He already has. Deputies interviewed him while you were getting your CT scan. They'll do their best to keep the info under wraps while they conduct their investigation, but it's going to come out. Pretty soon, everyone in town will know."

She nudged a few cubes of potato into a line. "It needs to."

"Whatever the motive, it's clear your preacher was the target," he said. "We're not going to ignore the possibility that the bomber went after Jay, too, but it's doubtful. The threat was really specific. Definitely intended for Pastor Myles."

She licked her lips. "Should we tell them Jason's missing?"

"No." He didn't have to think about that one.

Her eyes narrowed. "Because?"

He searched for an explanation that didn't involve the truth. "We don't know these local cops. What if one of them is the bomber? Letting on that Jay's missing might get them thinking he's out investigating the case. We'd be putting a potential killer on his tail."

Her body tensed, making him wince. He hated being the one to imply her close-knit community might hold some sinister characters, but she'd be safer

knowing she needed to watch her back.

Tai plated the food and they sat around the table. The minute he finished saying grace, Jane pounced. “Where do we start with the pastor’s case?”

Bridger served himself a heaping portion of country potatoes. Tai slid the hot sauce his way. “We’ve got a few people to question. I’ll let you know when we need your help.”

She snorted. “No, you won’t.”

Tai laughed. “Lady’s got your number, dude.”

Yeah, she did. And she had his big friend wrapped around her little finger, too.

Ignoring his manners, he planted his elbows on the table and stared her down. The look melted most people, but Jane just narrowed her eyes and stared back, completely unintimidated.

Which was exactly the problem. She should be concerned, if not about him, about the case. Questioning folks about the pastor would stir up trouble.

Jane waggled a slice of bacon. “There can’t be many people in town who know about Pastor’s past.”

“An excellent point.” He could afford to give her that. “I’m not saying it’s someone in town, but if it was—”

“Do I have any guesses?” She completed his question and chewed on her bacon, eyes on the ceiling. “None,” she said finally. “It’s possible someone could have gotten the info from his last church, but I can’t imagine it would have stayed secret long. Pastor Zack’s been here six years already.”

“What about the old guy, the one who hired him?”

“Warren King. No way. Besides, he’s been dead for two years.”

Another good point. “Anybody come into a slug of money recently?”

She snagged a second piece of bacon. “Nobody except the Manolos. But they sold a ranch that had been in the family for generations. Other than them, I can’t recall anybody.”

So if the blackmailer was a local, they were smart enough to keep their head down. That didn’t sound like someone angry or desperate enough to plant a bomb.

Bridger dug into his meal, letting his gaze wander over the montage of photos on the wall across from him. These were family photos, many sun-faded, none of the artistic quality of the larger works professionally displayed around the house. People of all ages smiled down at him, many with Jane and Jason’s wide, ready grin.

His attention kept circling back to one shot. Jane and Jay as kids in the cockpit of a vintage P-51. The wide, toothless grins showed how little the kids cared that the dented, dust-streaked fuselage was far from flight-ready.

The plane in Jay's hangar. Restored, it would be worth millions, but he doubted his friend had money in mind. Clearly, the Mustang was a family heirloom. He wondered what had steered Jason into the Army instead of Navy flight school.

Jane's rich voice interrupted his musings. "We Reillys come by our love of flight naturally."

"Are you a pilot?"

She reached for the last piece of toast. "Used to be."

Bridger looked from the photo to Jane. "Why no more?"

She shrugged. "Time, and money."

"I hear you. Flying's not a skill you can let rust."

"You fly?"

"Used to." He echoed her words.

"He was one of the best," Tai boasted. "I'd say the best, but I only make endorsements like that for a price. Hard cash."

Bridger shook his head. "I wasn't bad. Made it through flight school. Not the best in my class. Not the worst."

Turned out he was way better at reading enemy combatants, interrogating insurgents, and setting up sophisticated undercover operations. After BUD/s, the Navy decided he'd be more valuable as a black ops agent than a second-string fighter pilot.

He studied the sunny, open smiles in the photos. Had he ever been so innocent? So full of optimism? If so, he couldn't remember it.

Tai scraped his chair back and started clearing the table.

Bridger tore his gaze away from the photo and hurried to help, but he couldn't outrun a pang of regret. He'd gone into the Navy determined to serve his country and build a career he could be proud of.

Not how things turned out.

He couldn't help wondering what kind of life he would have had if he'd been a better fighter jockey.

THE NEXT MORNING Bridger awoke muzzy-headed and grouchy. Despite Tai's offer to take a shift, he couldn't stop himself from checking in on Jane every hour or so throughout the night.

Unlike his ragged self, Jane looked fresh and well-rested. Her color was excellent, and she reported that her headache was gone.

None of that made the idea of leaving her at the hardware store for a few hours any easier. It wasn't like she'd be alone. Her assistant manager, Wes, worked the day shift with her on Mondays. Still, by the time the three of them downed a quick coffee, his stomach was twisted in knots.

Watching her sleep had intensified his feelings. He'd never spent so much time around someone so innocent, so untouched by the ugly world of lies and treachery he'd inhabited for far too long.

Irrational, for sure, but he didn't want to let her out of his sight.

Tai glanced up from loading the dishwasher. "Not to worry."

"I'm not worried."

Tai stared him down. "You're losing your edge, dude. I can read you like a book."

"Yeah, right." He was a master at concealing his emotions. The big Hawaiian was...not.

"Suit yourself." Tai punched the on button and headed out of the kitchen.

He would. So what if it was obvious that Jane intrigued him? It wasn't like he'd do anything about it. One, she was Jay's sister. A total no-fly zone. And two, she didn't deserve him and his wagonload of baggage.

No matter how much she made his heart sing.

Jane appeared in the hallway, huge purse slung over one shoulder. "Are

you okay? You look exhausted.”

“Didn’t sleep much,” he answered quickly.

She dipped her head. “Because of me.”

He wished he could erase the guilty look shadowing her pretty features.

“Not necessarily. I don’t sleep.”

“At all?”

“Not well,” he clarified. “Never have.”

“That’s sad.”

“Is it?” He generally figured sleep was wasted time. Best to do as little of it as possible.

She clutched the shoulder strap of her bag. “A cozy bed on a lazy Saturday morning? You bet. I’ll be in the Jeep.”

She turned on her heel and headed for the door, leaving Bridger to wrestle with the sweet, exhilarating, and deeply moving images her words painted.

If only he was her kind of man. An idea he mulled in silence all the way to her store.

After making sure her assistant manager was there, and Jane was settled in, he and Tai headed out for their real objective. Pastor Zack.

Sure, he’d told Jane they were going back to the hangar to do a more thorough recon. That wasn’t untrue. It just wasn’t the whole truth.

The pastor was first on their agenda. Jane made it clear she wanted to be included in the investigations, but from what he knew of the players so far, prying info from Pastor Myles would require a little intimidation. No need for Jane to be around for that.

While he wound the vehicle up into the foothills, following Tai’s directions, he considered how best to interrogate the preacher. But thoughts of Jane at the hardware store, with only her assistant manager for protection wrecked his concentration.

The higher they climbed out of town, the antsier he got. By the time they reached the Creightons’ street, he’d given up on crafting an opening. Their sheer presence would have to do. It usually worked, especially with civilians.

“That’s the house.” Tai pointed at a low slung ranch house on the right side of the road. Then he gave Bridger one of those penetrating looks. “The woman’s fine. She’s got a store full of sharp tools, and she knows how to use them.”

On nails and wood and stuff. Fighting off an attacker was a whole different thing. But this wasn’t the time to argue. He grunted and pulled in

behind the pastor's SUV.

The front door opened before he and Tai were out of the vehicle. A white-haired man came out, shotgun in hand.

The sight of the weapon kicked Bridger's pulse up a notch, but the man's relaxed posture reassured him. The guy was ex-law enforcement. He handled the firearm with the same ease Bridger or his teammates would have used.

He waved at the man. "We're friends of Jason Reilly. We're here to help the pastor."

The man took his time considering the two of them before lowering the weapon and nodding. "Pastor told me you might be by. Come on in."

Once inside, the man led them into a living room stuffed with decades of family memorabilia and retreated. "I'll tell Pastor you're here."

As if the guy hadn't heard them drive up. This high into the mountains, silence reigned. No way Myles hadn't heard the Jeep approaching.

Tai shot him a knowing look. Bridger nodded back. Jane's pastor was nervous, taking his time to gather his thoughts before facing them.

Which meant he had something to hide.

Not that Bridger didn't already know that.

The big man entered, filling the doorway, his body language stiff.

Good.

Bridger plunged straight ahead, hoping to keep the guy off balance. He gestured at the well-worn couch, his movements purposefully impatient.

"Have a seat."

The pastor gulped, hard, but obeyed without a word. Once he was seated, arms on his thighs, Bridger closed in, looming over him. Tai hovered between them and the doorway, blocking the only exit.

"Have you heard anything about the bomber?" the man asked.

Lots of folks made that mistake, talking first, as if that meant they were seizing control of the moment.

Bridger ignored the question. "We're here to finish what Jason started. He promised he'd help you end this. To do that, I need every piece of info you've got. Every fact. Every theory. Everything."

The man nodded slowly. "Why would the blackmailer try to blow me up? It makes no sense."

"No, it doesn't." He crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"I don't know anything," the pastor insisted. "My wife's life is at stake, too. He threatened her first. If I knew anything, I'd tell you."

Maybe. Bridger didn't know the guy. Even men of God could be killers. Or want their wives dead. The note implied Myles was a sinner. But what sin? Maybe the man was guilty of trying to have his wife killed. His job now was to gather intel. Evaluating it would come later.

"Go over the timeline for me," he instructed. "When did the blackmail start?"

The man looked almost relieved. Reciting facts was easier than dodging uncomfortable issues.

Exactly why Bridger asked. He'd let the man get comfortable, then hit him with what he really wanted to know.

"I got hired a little over six years ago," the pastor said. "The blackmail started around two years later. The demands were fairly small, at first. A thousand dollars a month. Two, a couple times."

Bridger did the math in his head. "So the guy's soaked you for close to fifty thousand. I wouldn't call that a small ask."

"Closer to twenty thousand," the pastor corrected him. "The demands stopped after two years. Eighteen months, actually."

Interesting. An intermittent blackmailer. Not a technique he'd ever encountered. "And they started up again when?"

"Six months ago. At first, they were the usual, a thousand a month, until a month ago. That's when I got the text demanding a hundred thousand dollars or they'd hurt my wife."

Tai's eyes widened. He set down the porcelain shepherdess he'd been studying. "That's a whole lot more zeros."

"No kidding." Bridger was thinking the same thing. Something about the on-off nature of the extortion didn't sit right.

The pastor's upper body had relaxed. Unpleasant as the topic was, he clearly felt on safe ground discussing details.

Time to stir things up.

Bridger opened his mouth as if ready to speak, but paused until he sensed the bigger man growing concerned. "You said someone in your congregation's helping you financially. Who is it?"

The pastor's mouth flattened in a stubborn line. He shook his head, two short, sharp movements, and avoided Bridger's eyes. "I can't say."

The moment of truth. Normally, Bridger lived for this part of the interrogation. Choose correctly, and the interviewee spilled their guts. Choose the wrong technique, and the info he needed got buried deeper.



The pastor was a man used to being in charge, used to a certain amount of deference to his opinion.

So Bridger would do the exact opposite. Going straight at the guy might rattle his cage. “You just said you’d tell me anything I wanted to know. Who’s writing the checks?”

Wide eyes blinked in surprise. Good. Off balance already.

“I can’t tell you. I promised I’d keep his name out of this. Jason doesn’t even know.” The pastor’s voice came uncomfortably close to a whine. “Besides, my benefactor has nothing to do with this.”

Bridger slapped his thighs and shrugged at Tai. “Whelp, looks like we’re done here.” He sketched the pastor a salute. “Good luck. You might want to keep your head down.”

“And say ‘goodbye’ to your wife,” Tai added.

Bridger turned his back on Myles and followed Tai toward the door.

The pastor jumped to his feet. “You can’t leave.”

Well, yeah, they could. Not that they would. Bridger turned slowly and cocked an eyebrow.

The man twined his fingers together and squeezed until his knuckles turned white. “I need your help.”

“Then tell us what we want to know.”

“But I promised...”

Bridger shrugged. “That’s not how this works. Our investigation, our rules. No exceptions.” He turned to leave again.

They had the guy now. He counted silently.

*One. Two.*

“Fine.” The man eyed the doorway, as if concerned he’d be overheard. “Randall Dressler offered to help with my...expenses. His family’s been well-blessed. They’ve owned the largest ranch in the county for going on a hundred years.”

Bridger acknowledged the preacher’s concession with a nod. “Thank you.”

“But you don’t need to interrogate him, I hope. Randall doesn’t know the details. He writes the checks to me. I’m the one who leaves the money at the drop off point. He doesn’t even know where it is. There’s no need to—”

“We won’t bother Mr. Dressler unless we have good reason to do so,” Bridger assured him. “You’re going to have to trust us on that.”

The pastor didn’t look happy, but what could he do?

Bridger didn't mention that he planned to question this Dressler guy ASAP. He'd get his old cyber expert to dig into the guy's past associations. If there was a connection, she'd find it, but in the meantime, he wanted to know why a congregant would be so generous and insist on such secrecy.

Tai looked faintly astonished. "Are you saying you actually put cash in a hidey hole? Is this blackmailer from the nineteen eighties or something?" He eyed Bridger. "Haven't they heard of PayPal?"

Bridger shrugged. The detail seemed odd to him, too.

"I get the demands via text," the pastor said.

Bridger shared a look with his friend. "Untraceable number, I'm sure."

Tai nodded. "No doubt."

Interesting. Hard to know what went through the mind of a blackmailer. Maybe the person had other fish on the line for a while. Or maybe they bought a new boat and needed to tap Pastor Zack for money again. There could be a million possible reasons for the inconsistency.

But then to turn to attempted murder. Weird.

Either way, he had enough info to start with. More than Jason had started with. All the pastor gave him was a list of the phone numbers the blackmailer used. "Let's get to it," he told Tai.

The big pastor looked wrung out, and relieved, when they left.

"Where we headed?" Tai asked as he contorted himself into the Jeep.

"Time to visit Mr. Randall Dressler."

Tai showed his phone to Bridger. The map program glowed on the screen, an address already captured by a red pin. "I knew you were going to say that. We should swing by the hardware store. Jane'll want to come along."

Bridger backed the Jeep out of the driveway. "Not gonna happen."

Tai snorted. "I knew you were gonna say that, too."

RANDALL DRESSLER WAS nothing like Bridger expected. Given the short bio Tai read on the drive up to the man's palatial home on the plateau overlooking the valley, he imagined a local boy complete with tattoos and a beer belly. But Randall was slender and clean-shaven. More Wall Street chic than small town cowboy.

From his close-cropped blonde hair to his uniform tennis tan and gleaming white Nikes, the guy screamed wealth and sophistication.

So why hang out in a thousand-person town a four-hour drive from the nearest metropolis?

Whatever the reasons, Bridger disliked the guy on sight.

The fact that Dressler came outside to meet them, shutting the door behind him, only added to Bridger's irritation.

Dressler folded his arms across his chest and widened his stance, obviously not planning to let them in. "The pastor just called. I'm not sure I have anything to say to you."

Bridger nodded amiably. "Fair enough."

It took less than half a second to assess the target. Intimidation wouldn't work with this guy. Bridger could threaten the man with lawyers, though from the looks of the outsized mansion, Dressler probably had plenty of those on retainer, too.

Still, everyone had a pain point. What was this guy afraid of?

He eyed the street behind them. The few sprawling homes in the subdivision were completely out of eyesight. Engine noise caught his ear. A lone mail truck struggled up the steep road.

Bridger smiled to himself and stepped into the man's personal space. "It

might be best if we talked inside. People love to gossip....”

Dressler’s pale eyes widened. He paused just long enough to pretend this was his idea, then led them inside, stopping in a foyer big enough to seat twelve for dinner.

“What is this about?” he asked the second the door was closed. “Pastor Myles told you I’m helping him out. He’s a great guy. An excellent spiritual leader. A town like ours is lucky to have him. There’s nothing more to it. Besides, I couldn’t stand by while the monster threatened his wife.”

“So you don’t know anything about the blackmailer?”

“Just that the person started out demanding a thousand dollars a month.”

“But now he wants a bigger chunk.”

Dressler ran a hand through his pale hair and gripped the back of his neck. “Apparently.”

*Tension.* Interesting. There must be a limit to the checks Dressler could write.

Dressler shifted from foot to foot and set his hands on his hips, staring up at the plastered ceiling. “It’s getting to be a lot.”

He met Bridger’s gaze, his own expression now sheepish. “I don’t mind helping, don’t get me wrong, but I thought it would be a few months. I was under the impression the pastor was going to go to the authorities and get this handled. I’m hoping that’s why you’re here.”

Bridger had no intention of breaking the sheriff’s trust and cluing Dressler in that the extortionist had moved on to wanting Myles dead.

Tai stepped into the man’s line of sight. “Affirmative.”

The man relaxed. “Great. That’s great. Do we have a timeline? This is costing me a bundle. And with this new demand...” He spread his arms. “I don’t have it. Not at the moment.”

Bridger studied the massive canvas above the credenza. Bold slashes of color, it looked like something a kid would paint. The kind of thing that sold for somewhere north of five zeros, he had a hunch.

Dressler noted his interest. “Most of this isn’t mine. The family corporation owns the property. My dad’s not the most generous man. If he knew my allowance was going to help the pastor....”

“Not a religious guy?”

Dressler laughed. “Not even close.” He scuffed a perfect shoe across the perfectly waxed marble. “That’s why the secrecy. If he knew I was writing those checks he’d blow a gasket.”

“Or cut you off.”

“Or that. I’ve got enough stashed away to live comfortably. Not like this.” He gestured at the vast living room with its breathtaking view of the valley a thousand feet below. “But I’d be okay. Not that I want to test that theory.”

“Who would?” Bridger agreed heartily. He had Dressler’s number now. Spoiled, and definitely on the lazy side.

And the guy clearly had no details about the blackmailer. Bridger studied the view while he let his impressions of Randall Dressler flit through his brain. Snippets of information, impressions and hunches, sometimes fit together in a tidy picture.

Not today.

Dressler wasn’t his kind of guy, but that didn’t make the man guilty of anything more than being rich and entitled. Which was too bad. He needed a lead, and he wanted an excuse to rough up that pretty face.

Tai grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the door. “We’ve taken up enough of your time, Mr. Dressler.”

“Yeah.” Bridger yanked his arm out of Tai’s grip. “Thanks.”

Dressler’s fancy running shoes made no sound on the tile as he followed them to the door and held it open. “No thanks necessary. I appreciate you two looking into this. It needs to end. For my sake, but mostly for the pastor’s. He doesn’t deserve to be tortured like this.”

An interesting choice of words. But not untrue. Waiting for his secrets to be revealed—or for his wife to be harmed—had to be a hard way to live.

No wonder Jay-man had taken the preacher’s case.

As they headed out of the house, the back of his neck prickled, in the bad way, that nasty, sharp-edged feeling that hit him when he was about to walk into an ambush.

“You gonna fill Jane in on this?” Tai asked as Bridger pulled the Jeep out onto the street.

“Eventually.”

Tai tapped out a rhythm on the armrest. “Soon would be good.”

Bridger couldn’t disagree with that. He tapped out his own beat on the steering wheel. The sharp prickling at the back of his neck disappeared, only to be replaced by a spurt of dread.

Jane might concede that he got more out of Myles and Randall Dressler without her present, but she wouldn’t be happy about it.

THE OLD RANCHER set the rake on the counter and shook his head, pinning Jane with faded blue eyes beneath a sweat-stained Stetson. He jabbed a finger at the shiny red tines. “Used to be tools lasted a lifetime, but this junk don’t make it through a season.”

She smiled patiently and rang up the sale. It was more likely last summer’s monsoons were to blame. Violent thunderstorms had plagued the valley for months, sending cascades of debris-filled water down from the mountains. For every rock a rancher or farmer removed from a field, ten more were deposited, on the Griebs’ land more than most. With a hundred acres spanning several drainages off the mountain, their place took a bigger hit from the storms than those in the center of the valley.

“I hope you have better luck with this one,” she said and handed the man his receipt.

The doors behind him opened. Tai and Bridger ambled in. Their energy—and the fact that they were tall and broad and hard to miss—drew the attention of all three of her current customers.

The rancher’s eyes widened, showing a quick flash of surprise, before he drew his hat down and gathered his things. The elderly Benbow sisters had been arguing over the selection of wildflower seeds, but all was forgotten when Tai smiled at them.

He offered a short bow. “Ladies.”

Lettie, the oldest of the two at eighty-four, smiled with delight. “Where you from, stranger? They sure grow ‘em big wherever it is.”

He grinned harder. “I’m the runt of the litter.”

The sisters tittered, elbowing each other before following Hal Grieb out

the door.

Jane bit down on a groan. She hoped the two men didn't plan on any stealth reconnaissance. They might as well have been Butch and Sundance for all the attention they'd get in town.

Bridger headed straight for her, planting his hands on the countertop. "How're you feeling," he asked, his voice heavy with concern. "Any nausea? Dizziness?"

She tried to fight the delicious surge of emotion his attentiveness created, but it was like trying to stop the runoff from a high-country creek. Best to go with the flow.

"Fine," she answered. To her surprise, it was true. Her headache was gone, replaced by a healthy pang of hunger.

His shoulders relaxed. "Good to hear."

Tai picked a pre-packaged s'mores kit from the display of camping supplies. He frowned down at the cellophane covered packet. Everything someone needed to make the messy treats—except the actual campfire.

"They're for tourists," Jane explained.

He put the item carefully back. "Man, kids have it easy these days. We had to cut our own sticks. Build our own fires."

Bridger laughed. "Yeah. That was tragic. Playing with pocketknives and fire. No fun at all."

Tai snorted. "Seriously. These kids don't know what they're missing."

"I'm thinking their parents do." She couldn't help pointing out.

Tai's face lit with recognition. He cocked a finger at her and perched on a stool at the far end of the counter, sending his partner a meaningful look.

"I'm hungry. You gonna tell her, or do you want me to do it?"

Bridger's hands curled into fists, and his jaw tensed.

Jane's stomach dropped. Whatever he needed to say, it couldn't be good.

"We had a talk with Pastor Zack." Bridger fired out the words.

"And the guy writing the checks," Tai added.

Bridger looked away. "Randall Dressler."

Jane's mouth dropped open. Randall was helping the pastor? The sleek trust-fund baby was the last person in town she would have picked as a savior.

"Surprised us too," Bridger said. "Guy seems like a lightweight, but apparently he's got a big heart."

Apparently. She had to force herself not to glare at the two men.

She wasn't shocked that they ran off to investigate without her. She just didn't expect it to happen so quickly. One day in, and they dropped her like a hot potato.

Resentment, and a dose of good old-fashioned hurt, squeezed her chest. It wasn't polite of her, or gracious, but she was just plain mad.

They were only trying to help. Still, she hated being relegated to the sidelines. People in The Creek looked after their own. Besides, she'd never been one to sit back and let others do all the work.

Still, she had no right to be so ungracious. She grabbed a pen from the canning jar next to the register and tapped it on the counter, her fingers pistoning up and down like a sewing machine needle. "I get that Randall felt more free to talk without me there. No problem. But you should have told me you were going."

Bridger's cheeks bulged as he held in a breath. After a minute, he nodded. "Fair enough. It won't happen again."

She hadn't expected him to cave so easily. "Okay."

He met her gaze. "Okay."

The anger drained away. She had no right to be mad. They were helping her. Helping Jason. "Did you ask Randall about the county fair?"

The fleeting look Tai and Bridger exchanged was clearer than any denial. Score one for her.

"It was years ago," she said. "The week the pastor and his wife got into town. They went to the fair. Randall was there, too. He saw a pretty woman and proceeded to flirt with her."

She paused for effect, waiting for her audience to lean in before she continued. Growing up in cattle country had given her a strong appreciation for a story well told.

"Randall was the town bad boy back then. He was still drinking in those days," she said once she sensed she'd let the tension ratchet up enough. "Doing drugs, too, is my guess. Anyway, he talked the woman into walking around the arena. As it turns out, the woman was Evangeline Myles, the new pastor's wife. By the time the pastor found them, she was trying to fight Randall off. The pastor ended up with a broken nose and Randall spent the night in the drunk tank."

Bridger whistled between his teeth. "Not a great introduction to Redemption Creek."

She straightened the pens in the jar. "Nope. Randall apologized, but the



damage was done. He caused the pastor and his wife a lot of unnecessary embarrassment. Word around town for the longest time was that he and Evangeline planned to meet all along.”

It was years before the older townsfolk believed Vangie. Some probably still didn't, though most people, including Jane, had been won over by Vangie's willingness to pitch in. She was the ultimate pastor's wife: helpful, kind, and generous with her time.

Bridger stared into the distance, rubbing his knuckles over the day-old stubble on his chin. “And now the guy bails the pastor out of a huge hole. I guess I can see where old Randall might feel obligated to help.”

Jane had always had a soft spot for the reckless Randall, not to mention a powerful high school crush on the older boy. It wasn't his fault his parents spoiled him rotten. She had always hoped he felt badly about his mistake. The Randall she'd known in high school would have. After he had a good laugh about the situation.

Tai scrunched up his nose. “Prob'ly woulda been helpful to know about this before we barged in on the guy.”

Bridger shot his friend a look. “Copy that. I guess I miscalculated.”

If that was what he wanted to call hiding information from her.

She cocked an ear in his direction. “Is that an apology? Because if so, it's sub-par.”

Tai made a soft, choking sound. “The little lady lands a bull's eye.”

Bridger muttered something she couldn't hear. “I'm sorry.” He repeated when it became obvious she'd missed his mumbled reply.

She nodded regally. “Thank you.”

She might have gotten their attention, but she could see how things would go from here. They'd make command decisions and she'd continue to play catch up, running after them like she used to chase Jason and his friends when they were small.

Always two steps behind.

Somehow, she'd have to figure out a way to get out in front.

BRIDGER DIDN'T like Jane's skeptical expression. Nothing he could do about it, though. Besides, her distrust was likely to get a whole lot worse when she found out he was keeping Jason's situation from her.

Tai gave Bridger one of his sad-sack looks and slapped his belly. The sound echoed through the store.

Bridger sighed. "Okay. Hungry. I get it."

He leaned an arm on the counter and studied Jane's face. No signs of pain, but she looked a little drawn. She had to be tired, and still aching from getting thrown off her feet. "Where can we take you to lunch?"

"I can't leave the store."

He took his time eyeing the empty aisles. "Wes is here, right? I think he can handle the crowd."

Anger flashed in her eyes. He kind of liked that. She didn't simper or rush to agree with him.

"I guess," she said, clearly reluctant.

He raised his arms, spinning slowly. "Is it the clothes? I could change."

Tai snorted. "Yeah, he's got another set of clothes that looks exactly like this one."

She wrinkled her nose. "Everything you guys own is tech gear?"

Tai smoothed the front of his tight tee. "Tactical apparel. We're stylish and ready for danger. It's how we roll."

That drew a laugh, and a spurt of envy from Bridger. He'd give anything to make her grin like that.

"It's not the clothes," she insisted, still laughing. "Okay. It is."

Really? With her softly-worn jeans and plaid jacket, he would never have

taken her for a fashion queen. Not that he was complaining. He *liked* a woman who dressed for the outdoors.

She gestured at the two of them. “It’s *everything*. You guys look like you just walked off the set of a Tom Cruise movie. Anywhere we go, you’re going to draw attention.”

“That’s the point.”

She shot him a puzzled look.

“I want this guy to know you’ve got protection.” He privately included anyone that might be responsible for Jay’s disappearance in that list.

Her jaw dropped. “You think the blackmailer’s local?”

“Not necessarily.” He patted his own stomach, ready to change the subject. “How about we make a plan of attack over burgers?”

She lifted a finger. “I’ll tell Wes we’re heading out.”

The local bar looked identical to the hang outs in most tiny towns. The decor, if you could call it that, ran to dusty deer and elk heads and faded bumper stickers with snarky sayings. And like in most small towns, the food was outstanding. Living in Redemption Creek without gaining a few pounds would be tough.

Burger devoured, he pushed away his plate.

Jane studied him from behind her soda. “So. What’s our next move?”

Move. Right. He sifted through the options he was willing to mention. She’d already shown a penchant for tearing off on her own. He didn’t plan to give her any ideas. Not any good ones, at least.

Her brows lowered. “You think a lot before you speak.”

Tai laughed and wiped a smear of ketchup off his lip. “He’s trying not to stick his foot too far down his throat is all.”

Bridger teed up a clever, cutting response, but the buzzing of his phone ruined the moment. He glanced at the screen. A text from Paige Penderson, the former cyber-expert on their team.

*No leads on J-man yet. He’s gone deep for sure. Usual Consortium channels quiet. No one else on team reporting contact. I’ll monitor situation. Call if you need further assistance. ATAW, Paige.*

Even without her sign off assurance, *Any Time Any Where*, Bridger knew he could count on her. Like the rest of the team, he’d always known she was only a call away.

*Bravo Zulu.* Bridger responded with Navy slang for well done and deleted the conversation.

Tai sipped an iced tea, watching him quietly.

Bridger exchanged a long look with him. Tai nodded almost imperceptibly before shifting his attention to the massive backbar with its silvered mirror.

Jane was picking at her food. “Why would the blackmailer want the pastor dead?”

Bridger stared down the mournful elk on the wall behind her. “The sheriff showed us a note. Something about the pastor being a sinner and needing to die. Any idea what that’s about?”

Shock widened her eyes. “No. I can’t imagine. Pastor’s been here six years. I’ve never heard a word about any scandal. Do you think he’s referring to the stealing?”

“Maybe.” But probably not. Embezzlement on the scale the pastor perpetrated didn’t generally inflame people to murder. Especially not ten years later.

Her gaze flitted between the two of them. “I have no idea what Pastor Zack could have done to make someone so angry.”

Tai downed another slug of tea. “Maybe he hasn’t done anything. Crazy doesn’t need a reason.”

“I don’t know anybody in town who’d fit that description,” Jane said, but the fear on her face told Bridger she wasn’t completely convinced.

He eyed the elk again. It stared back, glass eyes offering nothing in the way of insight. Bridger sighed. He wanted to get the pastor safe and move on to helping Jay.

Jane sat quietly. Processing, no doubt. This wasn’t her wheelhouse, for sure. For a minute, he thought she might need to hurl. He and Tai studied the other tables, giving her what space they could while the elk kept watch.

After a minute, she puffed out her cheeks, then let out a huge breath. “Is it possible the bomb was meant for me?”

“No way.” He and Tai answered at the same time.

“The note targeted your pastor specifically. No mistaking that.”

Tai turned his glass one way, then the other. “Even without the note, no way the IED was meant for you. It took time to set up. A demolitions expert could do it in about five minutes, assuming they had a propane tank, a timer, and a detonator handy, but an amateur....” He shook his head.

“An amateur would need a lot longer,” Bridger added. “No one knew you were heading to the church that morning, right?”

She laughed ruefully. “I didn’t even know until I woke up.”

“So they couldn’t have expected you there ahead of time. And again, unless we’re dealing with an expert, even if the guy followed you to the church, there’s no way they would have had time to slip into the pastor’s place, construct the bomb and sneak away.”

Tai made a noise. “Even J-man would have had trouble getting that done, and he’s the best of the best.”

She relaxed visibly. “Right. That makes sense.”

Unless there was something she wasn’t telling them. “Anything you want to confess?” he asked. “Is there a stalker we need to know about? An ex-boyfriend or an angry business partner?”

Tai shot him a puzzled look.

Yeah. Not a smooth delivery. He’d own it. But her question shot off all kinds of alarm bells. Could she be the target? He didn’t see how, but the idea terrified him.

“No!” She looked confused.

Well he was confused, too. Heading out to the church on her own was a bone-headed thing to do, but he’d worked with lots of operatives—professionals—who’d done dumb things. He may or may not have done a few himself. But he’d never gotten this angry about it before.

She shrugged helplessly. “I just thought, maybe the pastor would be more forthcoming with someone he knew...”

“So you drove out there on a whim,” he prodded, unable to curb his tongue.

“Not a whim. A hunch.” Anger flashed in her eyes again. “Look. I know we agreed to stick together, but you broke your promise first. Plus, I thought I’d be better at getting information out of the pastor. You do remember that my brother’s missing, right? Anything I can do to get this case solved quickly so we can find Jason works for me.”

Tai nodded. “That’s fair.”

So what? He didn’t care about fair. He cared about keeping Jane safe and finding her brother. In that order. His promise to Jason notwithstanding, Pastor Zack and his self-made problems were way down the list.

If he wasn’t doing a favor for Jay, he wouldn’t even bother cleaning this up. A good thing for the reverend that he’d never walk away from his duty to a friend.

Jane spread her hands. “Anyway, we’re getting off the subject. What’s

our next move?”

Bridger speared a leftover bit of lettuce with a toothpick. “Until the sheriff’s department or the ATF come up with some clues on the bombing, we concentrate on the blackmail part. This guy’s been at it for a couple years, on and off. There’s got to be a clue somewhere.”

Jane considered that. “But the pastor came clean. Won’t the sheriff investigate now?”

“Sure.” Bridger slid his empty plate away from the edge of the table. “And he’s got what, two detectives?”

Jane shook her head. “One. Buster Ramirez. That’s it.”

“So your sheriff’s got one guy to investigate a major crime plus whatever else is going on in the county.”

Tai shook his head sorrowfully. “Let’s just say the good guys could use some help.”

Jane lifted a french fry from her plate. “The sheriff won’t like it.”

Tai snatched the last two. “The sheriff won’t know.”

“We’ll keep out of his way as long as possible,” Bridger added. Don’t ask, and they can’t say “No.” He’d learned that lesson long before the Consortium recruited him.

“Works for me,” she said.

Her response surprised him. He figured her for more of a rule-follower. But maybe that wasn’t fair. She was a Reilly.

Then she leaned on her elbows, her gaze intent as she lasered both of them with those pretty eyes. “Whatever it takes to solve this for Pastor Zack so we can get back to finding Jason.”

He found himself nodding. Tai, too.

“Yes, ma’am,” the big man mumbled.

Bridger sat back and folded his arms. The muscles at the back of his neck clenched. Trouble coming. He wanted to whisk Jane out of danger so badly, his gut ached.

And there was no way she’d agree. He’d have to keep her in sight and out of trouble.

He groaned silently. The elk stared him down. That thousand-yard glare gave Bridger the willies. He knew the feeling. Trouble was brewing. When it hit, it would come fast.

“WHAT’S OUR FIRST STEP?” Jane fired the question at Bridger and Tai the minute they got out onto the sidewalk.

She knew that if Bridger could whisk her out of town, he would. He hadn’t said as much, because he wasn’t an idiot, but his thoughts were obvious. The only way to deal with an arrogant, hard-headed man like that was to stick close and hang on. Not unlike many of the horses she’d ridden in her day. Grab a handful of mane...and pray.

Bridger shoved his hands in the pockets of those fancy tech pants and did a slow, 360. From his easy body language, a casual observer would assume he was checking out the scenery. But she knew better. She admired his acting skills.

“Let’s talk back at the store,” he said, and led the way back down the street.

Tai flanked her, discreetly sandwiching her between the two of them.

She had to hurry to match Bridger’s pace. “Not an admirer of the great outdoors?”

“Not an admirer of making myself a target,” he said over his shoulder. *Right.*

Her back prickled. Someone had planted a *bomb* in pastor Zack’s house. For the first time since Bridger told her, the reality hit. Really hit.

That bomb came within seconds of blowing her apart.

Her legs turned to rubber, suddenly refusing to obey her brain.

“Easy there.” Tai caught her under the arms, saving her from landing on her rear right there in front of Phoebe Caine’s *Yarn N’ Things*.

Bridger hurried back to her. “Are you okay? Are you dizzy? Nauseous?”

She shook her head. “Just a little...” She had to pause and lick her dry lips. She couldn’t seem to form words.

He wrapped an arm around her from the other side. Between the two men, her feet were barely touching the ground.

His gaze steady, Bridger commanded her full attention. “It’s okay. It’s a lot.”

She nodded, her eyes suddenly filling with tears.

Her awareness started to expand again. Tire noise. Cars. They were standing right out on Main. Tai eased her out of his hold, leaving Bridger to prop her up.

She tried to pull away from him, too, but he held firm.

“I got you,” he said.

“I can do this myself.”

“I’m not so sure about that. How about we head back into the bar?”

“No need. I can make it two blocks.” She jutted her chin at the store.

*Valley Hardware*. The sign rode the shake shingles on the ridge cap, red letters gleaming against the white enamel background. Their grandparents’ store. Their father, an only child, almost succeeded in running it into the ground before he disappeared to Los Angeles with the neighbors’ sister. Their mother had spent her life keeping it going. For her and Jason.

And now she would do the same. Not her dream life, for sure, but it was a pleasure and a privilege to continue their legacy.

By the time they reached the parking lot, her legs were working normally. She stepped out of Bridger’s hold. Leaving his strong arms was harder than she would have guessed. The man might get on her every nerve, but something about him called to her. Whether his faith or his strength of character or his plain, stubborn loyalty to his own word—and her brother—she had no idea, but the effect was like a jolt to the heart.

Funny, when Pete left, she’d been more relieved than anxious. Except for missing Kellen, she didn’t miss not having a man in her life.

Until now.

With the notable exception of Jason, she’d never had a man fuss over her. Protect her.

But Bridger wouldn’t be staying. Not for one second longer than he had to.

So they best get on with helping the pastor. Wanting to show that she was fully recovered, she sped up, beating the two of them to the entrance. After



thanking Wes, and sending him off for an extra-long lunch break, she circled around behind the counter and perched on the well-worn stool behind the antique register.

“Where do we start?” she asked, her voice sharper than she intended.

Tai set down the fly-fishing rod he was admiring and waited for Bridger to speak.

Bridger settled a white Stetson onto his head from the display by the work clothes and bent down low enough to check his reflection in the mirror on top of the sunglasses display. He frowned, taking the hat off and settling it back in place with great care. “We start with you.”

“I thought you said that bomb wasn’t meant for me?”

“I’m not talking about the bomb. I’m talking about the preacher. You know him pretty well. His wife, too, I’m guessing.”

“As well as anybody in the church, I suppose.”

“Anybody dislike the man?”

“Not that I know of.” She thought back six years, when the council was going through the recruiting process to replace the old pastor. “There was a faction who favored the other candidate, but that’s normal.”

“Who was the other contender?”

“Billy Peckham.” Now that she recalled, there was a lot of bad blood over Pastor Zack’s hiring. “Billy was a local boy. Bright enough and well-liked. His father’s family is one of the wealthier clans in town. They hold a lot of political power. There are Peckham judges, and more than a few county administrators, plus two sheriff’s deputies and a retired school principal. A number of folks thought adding head of the local church to their collection was a step too far. Plus, Billy was young. Redemption Creek would have been his first position after seminary. That didn’t sit well with many people, either.”

“So the council hired Zack Myles instead.”

She nodded.

“Any other viable candidates?”

She had to think about that. She and Pete were dating at the time. She’d been in her own world back then. Except for the store, the town had been on the periphery of her life.

“None that stick in my mind, but we could ask Petra Moscovitz. She was the town clerk for years. Long retired now, but if I remember right, she was on the hiring committee.”

She trusted Petra. Valued her opinions. Old enough to be her grandmother, the woman had been in Redemption Creek for over fifty years.

Bridger strolled back to the counter, his movements fluid, belying the way he studied the empty parking lot. “Sounds like a good place to start. I think I’ll head over. Tai can hang here with you.”

Uh, no. There he went again, trying to dictate terms. “Petra’s my friend. I’m going, too.”

Tai was wriggling out of a too-small fishing vest. He paused, the garment halfway down his muscled arms and watched the two of them.

Bridger ran a hand down his face, pressing so hard she could hear the rasp of stubble against his palm. “Fine. Sure. Better to have you where I can see you.”

She straightened the tiny American flag in front of the register. “Right back atcha.”

Tai turned away, hiding a grin.

Was that a tearing sound?

She sighed to herself. The man was sweet, but it was like having a bear in the store.

Tai put the vest back on its hangar with exaggerated care. Definitely a tearing sound. She’d have to put the thing on the sale rack.

“It’ll be good to have you there,” Bridger said. “You can provide an opening. Start the conversation rolling.”

His words were way more optimistic than his tone.

No problem. She was a baby sister. She knew how to ignore impatience and exasperation. Bridger’s moods were nothing compared to Jason’s during the dreaded teenage years.

“You’ll get way more info from Petra if you let me do the talking,” she said. “She’s a smart woman, and she doesn’t suffer fools. If she likes you, great. If she doesn’t, there’s not a thing you can do to change her mind.”

Bridger muttered something she couldn’t quite make out.

“Great,” she said brightly, refusing to take the bait. “I owe Petra a hay delivery. I’ll show you where to load it in the trailer.”

Bridger rubbed his elbow and slid Tai a look. “Perfect.”

The bigger man brightened. “Sounds like a good workout. I’m in.”

CLOSER TO EIGHTY THAN SEVENTY, Petra Moskovitz was everything Jane described, not that Bridger had any intention of letting Jane know she'd been right to come along.

Tiny as Tai was big, the vibrant, white-haired woman greeted them at the door to her single-story home in worn jeans, cowboy boots, and an over-sized work shirt that dwarfed her petite frame. She smiled welcomingly, but the glint in her green eyes told him she was no fool.

"Come in for some lemonade," she insisted once the three of them had unloaded the hay.

After the niceties, Jane brought the subject around to Pastor Zack's hiring.

"This have anything to do with that explosion?" the woman asked.

Bridger whistled silently. She was quick, for sure. "The sheriff's just beginning his investigation."

Petra didn't bother to hide her skepticism. "I figure someone had it out for the pastor. Poor man. Seems like I was right."

"What do you mean?" Jane asked.

The woman shot her an impatient look. "I'm old, not stupid. Houses don't just up and explode."

Bridger tried to keep the surprise off his face.

Petra swirled her glass, making the ice tinkle as she eyed the three of them before focusing on him. "You think this has something to do with the blackmail."

Tai poked him with an elbow. "News travels at lightning speed out here."

Petra grinned. "We might be low on tech, but we're big on gossip."

Tai laughed and took a gulp of lemonade.

Bridger considered the woman. From her shining eyes to the determined set of her chin, she radiated interest and intelligence. He bet she was a keen observer, and he liked her style. Measured but to-the-point. She'd make a great intelligence asset, if Redemption Creek were his new assignment.

He set down his glass and fixed her with the full force of his attention. "Do you think it's someone in town?"

"Not because I know of anyone in particular. A person would have to have a powerful hate to want to blow someone up."

Or a powerful need the preacher's death would fulfill. He'd have to chew on that ugly notion for a while. "Jane thought you were on the church council when Zack Myles was hired."

"Herman was. My late husband," she added, shaking her head. "That was a bitter business."

"Because of the Peckhams?" Jane asked her.

Bridger pressed his palms into his thighs, fighting the urge to butt in. He wished Jane hadn't been so specific. Good interrogators didn't feed their subjects answers.

Petra sat back against the over-stuffed couch cushions, her gaze distant. "They're a pig-headed bunch. Bill Senior wanted his son for the position. He tried to bulldoze the rest of the council, but Herman and Warren King weren't having it. The Peckhams—and a good handful of their friends—left the church over it. Not that it hurt my feelings any." She drank the last of her lemonade, setting the glass down with a faint click. "That was six years ago, though. Why would someone want to kill the pastor now?"

Tai grunted. "Good point."

"What about blackmail?" Bridger asked. "That's been going on for a while. If it's not someone from the pastor's past, it's someone who knew about his indiscretions."

The older woman pursed her lips. Bridger liked the way she gathered her thoughts before she spoke.

She clasped age-spotted hands in her lap. "Herman had no idea. I can tell you that. The man couldn't keep anything from me. If he found out, he would have told me. My guess is no one in town knew. I can't imagine a thing like that staying secret for so long."

Jane frowned, obviously thinking. Probably the same thing he was. According to Myles, the only person in Redemption Creek who knew was the

head of the council, Warren King. And he'd been dead for a couple years now.

Bridger rubbed his chin. He'd only been investigating for two days, and he was already weary of hunting through the weeds for clues.

"I know the Peckhams were bitter about Billy not getting the job," Jane said, "but they wouldn't be angry enough to kill over it. Not after all this time. Besides, Nora's forever bragging about the wonderful position Billy got in San Francisco."

Petra's expression softened. "I guess you haven't heard."

Something in the elderly woman's voice made alarm bells clang in Bridger's head. Her breathing accelerated. Not a lot. Probably not noticeable to most people, but he was on the lookout for tells. And he was good. Trained by the best interrogators in the world. Literally.

The elderly woman's cheeks flushed. "I hate to gossip, but this could be important." She fussed with the cuff of one sleeve. When she spoke, she stared down at her hands. "Billy Peckham's back in town."

Jane's lips parted. "I didn't know that."

"Most people don't. He's staying out at the family compound with Nora and Bill. His parents," she added for Bridger and Tai's benefit. "My guess is his latest position didn't work out. None of them do."

Jane glanced his way without moving her head.

"What're you thinking?" Bridger prodded her.

She shrugged. "Even if Billy is back in town, that doesn't mean he's involved."

Tai rose and started gathering the used glasses. "Doesn't mean he's not."

Jane winced. "You have a point." She shook her head sadly. "None of this makes sense."

Not yet. He could feel the tension ratcheting up, like thunderclouds building. Something would shake loose.

Tai snagged Bridger's glass. "A blackmailer turning into a killer is weird."

"The whole thing makes no sense," Petra insisted. "Who'd be dumb enough to blackmail the head of a small community church? The pastor here doesn't make even fifty thousand dollars a year. Of course, he gets housing, but still."

"Can't get blood out of a turnip." Tai interjected another of his old timey witticisms.

Bridger had long ago given up wondering where the guy came up with them.

“Right.” Petra agreed. “How much money could the blackmailer think they’d get in the end? Herman tried hard to figure out a way to pay more, but the congregation’s been shrinking for decades, right along with the town. Tithes aren’t what they used to be. He did get the council to purchase medical and life insurance, and he persuaded the local car dealer to provide that SUV, but that would hardly make a difference to an extortionist.”

Unless the blackmailer’s real goal was torture. And maybe murder.

THE STORE WAS on the way back across the valley to the Peckhams' spread, so Jane told Bridger to stop in on their way past. By the time she checked in with Wes and fielded his questions about a messed-up delivery from a tool manufacturer, the sun was only a finger's width above the craggy peaks to the west, and the temperature was falling fast.

Spring at elevation was a study in contrasts. Mild, sunny days were coupled with nights that dipped well below freezing. She grabbed a fleece jacket and headed out to the parking lot. The two men were standing on the far side of Bridger's Jeep, out of sight from the road.

"Hey, I'm ready," she called out. "Thanks for waiting."

Neither man moved. Once she got close enough, she could see they were inspecting their handguns. They quickly holstered them beneath their jackets as she rounded the hood of the car.

The sight of the weapons, dark and sinister-looking, made her stomach churn. After a lifetime around ranches and ranchers, she should be used to guns. She was used to rifles and shotguns, tools of the rancher's trade. But handguns were for only one thing: humans.

Did Bridger think Billy Peckham was a threat? Or was he worried about the threat they couldn't see?

The cold evening breeze caressed the back of her neck, making her shiver. Suddenly the sharp, granite peaks didn't seem so welcoming.

Gravel crunched as the three of them approached the front door to the small guest cabin in the shadow of the Peckhams' grand home. The doors of the four-car garage were closed, and no lights shone from the main house. A dusty brown compact with a crumpled fender was parked at a sloppy angle in

front of the guest house. Bridger peered inside and made a face. She looked, too. Old candy wrappers and half-empty paper cups ringed the seats.

Nora and Bill Peckham were prideful people. They'd eliminated the native brush surrounding the buildings, taming the landscape into tidy squares of lawn and precise flower beds. Appearances mattered to people like the Peckhams. Billy's dirty old car must have given them fits.

She looked from the unloved car to the tidy guest house, nestled precisely in the center of a perfectly-mowed patch of lawn. Despite the cheerful glow from the windows and the tidy paint job, the little one-bedroom place held an aura of dread.

Or maybe it was just her imagination.

She hadn't seen Billy in years. Not since he left town when he didn't get the pastor's position. He'd been home, on occasion, or so she'd heard through the grapevine. He'd been a couple years behind her in school. She hadn't known him well, but he'd been a sweet soul. Not arrogant and entitled like Randall Dressler and his wealthy friends.

Billy had an air of vulnerability that made it difficult to be around him. She'd always hoped going through seminary, and forging a strong bond with his Savior, would help him grow out of that awkward, adolescent period.

She eyed the battered vehicle again. Maybe not.

"Stay behind me," Bridger ordered as they approached the door.

Rather than follow, Tai peeled off to the right. "I'll check the back and wait outside."

"Copy that," Bridger acknowledged before stepping in front of her to knock on the door.

The blows echoed through the cold, dry air, sounding louder than they should in the silence.

The door opened slowly, and a face peered out, eyes wide beneath a mat of greasy hair.

Billy Peckham hadn't changed. Behind the weathered face and sallow skin, he was the same, awkward, fragile boy he'd always been.

She forced herself not to back away from the smell. Stale body odor mixed with the hot-plastic of microwaved food made the bile rise in her throat.

Bridger raised a fist to his mouth and coughed before crowding Billy back from the door. "Hey, there Billy. You remember Jane Reilly? We're friends of her and Jason. We want to ask you a couple questions."



He didn't ask, she noticed. But his aggressive tactic worked.

Still not having said a word, Billy backed into the small living room, and hugged himself around the waist. His eyes darted wildly before fixing on the tips of his shoes.

"Watcha want?" he mumbled. The words came out oddly slow, almost slurred.

Was Billy drunk? She didn't smell alcohol, and she didn't see any empty cans or bottles, though the junk strewn around the living area made it difficult to spot any one thing.

She tried to focus on the hunched form in front of them and not the disaster of a room. It looked more like a sixteen-year-old's bedroom than the space of a man in his thirties.

Bridger perched on the edge of the couch, his right hand on his hip. Ready to unholster his weapon, she figured. "You know anything about the trouble the pastor's been having lately, Billy?"

"R-reverend Peckham. I-I'm Reverend Peckham." He tapped his throat. "L-lost my collar, though. I dunno where it went."

Bridger met her gaze. His own eyes looked troubled. "That's okay. I'm sure it's here." He gestured at the mess. "Somewhere. You know anything about Pastor Myles' problems, Reverend?"

Billy jerked his head back. "His house blew up." He pointed toward the dark bedroom. "I listen to the police band radio. Gotta keep track of the black suits. They'll come for you if you don't."

Bridger nodded calmly. "Sure. Absolutely. Have they come for you?" he asked, his voice gentle with compassion.

"Not yet." Billy grinned strangely and wiped a hank of oily hair out of his eyes. "I know how to keep 'em away. You gotta listen for their signals."

"On the radio?" Bridger asked.

"Zactly. You know." Billy's eyes brightened for an instant before the fog descended again.

Bridger nodded forcefully. "I do. You bet."

Jane shuddered. What had happened to the man? If not alcohol, drugs? He seemed practically asleep on his feet. His brain appeared to be working so slowly it was a wonder he could speak at all.

Bridger toed an old pizza crust under the coffee table. "How long you been back in town?"

Billy rocked back on his heels and spread a dirty hand in front of him,

counting on his fingers. “It was Saturday. Five days. The Dodger game was on.” He pointed at the smudged flatscreen.

“You like the Dodgers?” Bridger asked.

Jane appreciated the soft voice, pitched at just the right volume to sound forceful without veering over into intimidation. Bridger might act like a grumpy mechanic, but the man had hidden people skills.

Billy’s face twisted in disgust. “No! They work for the black suits. That’s why they win. The black suits want it that way. But you have to watch the games. That’s how they send out the codes. If they come for you, you have to have the codes.”

Bridger nodded soothingly. “Sure. Absolutely. Have you seen Zack lately, Rev?”

Billy’s lips tightened. “I don’t like him.”

“Can’t blame you,” Bridger agreed. “I don’t like him, either. So you preacher guys don’t hang out?”

“I just stay here. Mom and Dad say it’s for the best. For now.”

Bridger jerked a thumb toward the door. “But you drive. That’s a nice car out there.”

Billy squeezed his hands together and shifted his weight from foot to foot. When Billy looked away, Bridger caught her eye. He shook his head, a tiny movement, but it communicated everything she needed to know. Billy wasn’t in any condition to drive.

Bridger rose slowly. Since they’d entered the house, he’d done everything slowly, she realized. Softly. Quietly. Every action oozing comfort and calm.

He clasped his hands and bowed slightly. “Thank you for your time, Reverend. Jane and I appreciate it.” Then he ushered her out.

Tai was waiting out front, next to Billy’s car. “Anything?”

Bridger followed her toward his Jeep. “Nothing good.”

He opened the passenger door for her, pinning her with his gaze. “You okay?”

She smiled, appreciating the gesture. “I will be.”

As she slid into the car, the house caught her eye. “What happened to him? Billy was always an odd kid, but now...” She didn’t have the words to describe his strangeness. “Do you think he’s on drugs?”

Bridger shot a look back over his shoulder at the house. “Not sure. If he is, it’s nothing common.”

He caught Tai’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Guy was practically

comatose. Not drunk or high, just...weird. Slow, almost like he'd had a stroke or something. Or he's mentally ill." He shook his head. "I don't have a lot of experience with serious mental illness."

Tai raised his face toward the mountains high above them, their edges rimmed in the last of the silver light. "So we're not liking him for the bombing?"

Bridger grunted. "Not sure. It's possible he's faking."

Jane eyed the little house. A curtain twitched in the front window, making her shudder. The thought of Billy in there alone, like some modern day troll, broke her heart.

Bridger fired up the engine, breaking the melancholy spell. "Whether it's Peckham or not, we need to up our surveillance game."

Jane felt Tai's knees rub the back of her seat as he tried to arrange his long legs. "I've got plenty of equipment," he said.

"Enough to cover where the Pastor's staying and this place?"

"Totally. The hardware store, too."

That made her start. She craned her neck to look at Tai in the back seat. "What makes you think the store's in danger?"

Bridger pulled out onto the dark road. "It's not the store I'm worried about."

She peered out the windshield, barely noting the stars flickering to life above the jagged horizon. "The bomb was clearly meant for Pastor Zack. Why set up surveillance for me?"

He shot her a quick look. "Because we can."

"Copy that." Tai chimed in from the back seat. "Trust me. It won't be intrusive. I've got cameras the size of pencil erasers. Most of my other sensors are smaller than that. Your customers won't notice a thing."

"He's just going to supplement the security cameras you already have in place," Bridger added.

"If you can call that security," Tai muttered.

She folded her arms and stared out the window. Everything here was so familiar. She knew every boulder. Every tree. Every roofline along the road. But now, in the space of a few days, she felt like she didn't know anything about her world. And she certainly didn't know who to trust.

The currents running, unseen, through the town threatened to sweep her straight off her feet.

She bowed her head and whispered a prayer for Pastor Zack, for Jason

and Billy Peckham, and for the very soul of Redemption Creek.

THE SKY WAS inky black by the time Bridger drove Jane to Jason's hangar. He was thankful for the extra power of the special headlights on his Jeep. The brilliant white light sliced through the velvet night, carving a car-sized tunnel in the darkness.

Jane rustled in the passenger seat. Every movement sent the scent of warm street tacos wafting through the Jeep.

His stomach growled. All the more reason to get inside quickly. Despite the hefty lunch they downed before that weird interview with Billy Peckham, he was starving.

Eager to get his web of security devices up and running, Tai had passed on dinner, so Jane suggested they pick up tacos at her favorite street vendor and eat at the hangar while they searched for more info on Jason's disappearance.

Before exiting the vehicle, Bridger glanced at the private security app on his phone. Tai had all his toys tied into an elaborate software program. Between the advanced software and the bazillions of sensors Tai set out, he could tell everything about Jason's property, including how many ants had made a run for the dried-out half of a Milky Way in the back office.

All systems glowed green. No intruders in the area. He punched in his code and disarmed Tai's security alarms.

"Hang here until I check the perimeter," he told Jane and slipped out of the vehicle.

She looked amused. "Don't trust Tai?"

He leaned on the doorjamb and ducked his head back inside. "I don't trust electronics." Not when he could take a good, old-fashioned stroll around the

building. One last set of eyes never hurt.

He shut the door and punched his key fob, locking her in the Jeep.

He'd spent more nights than he could count in high desert terrain of one sort or another, but the way the temperature dropped at night still caught him off guard. He shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and walked the exterior of the over-sized hangar, alert for any unusual sound or movements.

Nothing caught his attention until he rounded the far east corner. A light, whirring sound, like a hummingbird in flight. If he wasn't expecting trouble, he would have passed it off as a desert breeze.

But it wasn't. The sound was too mechanical. Too precise.

He flattened himself against the concrete wall and slid downward until he was on his haunches. Only then did he peer around the corner. With his head low, he'd be far less of a target.

The sound grew louder, like a mosquito coming in for blood.

He reached beneath his jacket and slid his handgun out of its holster. Not that he could see anything. There were no lights burning anywhere on the vast property, or on the miles of desert between the decommissioned airfield and crumbling mountains to the east. The runways were all in disrepair. No way Jason would have lights going that might signal otherwise to a weary pilot looking for a place to land for the night.

The buzzing became more insistent. He hunched his shoulders, bracing for an attack by some kind of unseen insect. Instead, a voice called out.

"Yo, North. I see you-u-u-u. Tag. You're it."

Bridger groaned and jumped to his feet. He craned his neck, glaring up in the direction of Tai's voice. It sounded like the man was twenty feet in the air. One of his stupid mini-drones.

He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to take his pulse down a notch.

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Sorry." The drone zipped to the left. "I never get to test the speakers on these things. Wanted to see if they work."

"Oh, they work."

More zipping and zagging. "How do I sound? Good?"

Finger on the trigger, Bridger pressed the gun against his thigh. "You sound like you're close enough to punch."

"Awesome. I'm telling you, we need to buy stock in this company. These babies are a lotta bang for the buck. They fly great. They're practically invisible, and they can be programmed to do all sorts of cool stuff."

All true, probably, but Tai's sense of humor was getting out of hand. Time to take the big guy down a peg.

He raised his face in the general direction of the invisible machine. "Do they light up? You know, like the ones at those drone sky shows?"

"Are you serious? Helllooooo?"

The berry-sized machine glowed red, then green, then blue. He raised his weapon, sighted, and fired.

Silence. And darkness. No more wiggly lights.

He holstered his gun and laughed. He'd owe Tai a hefty chunk of change for blasting the man's toy out of the sky, but whatever the thing cost, it was worth it.

And then he remembered Jane. Heart thudding against his ribs, he raced back the way he'd come, hoping he hadn't scared her silly.

Nope. He could just make out her features in the glow from the dashboard. She was leaning back against the seat, eyes closed. Between the bullet proof glass, the massive hangar, and her earbuds, the shot had been muffled.

*Thank you, Lord.*

He holstered his weapon and jogged back to the car. His phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from Tai, complaining about his reckless disregard for technological art.

He responded with a stuck-out tongue emoji before shoving the device back into his pocket. "You play with the big dogs, you get bit," he said and headed for the Jeep.

Jane eyed him with interest, but her placid expression confirmed that she hadn't heard the shot. Whew.

Irritated as he was at Tai's stunt, he sure missed that old camaraderie. The teasing. The way he and his teammates never had to actually say what they were thinking. Comfort was a look—or a punch in the arm.

He opened her door.

"What's so funny?" Jane asked.

"Hard to explain. Just thinking about an old buddy." How could he convey the closeness forged through years of danger interspersed with the excruciating boredom of days upon days of surveillance? Especially to someone who lived such an ideal life.

Not everyone in Redemption Creek was law-abiding, or even nice, but most folks were genuinely good. He'd spent the last ten years in places where

the opposite was true. Danger was around every corner. A misspoken word, or a mismanaged sortie, could get you killed. Or worse. Get your team killed.

He shook off the ugly thoughts and motioned Jane into the hangar.

After checking his security app one last time, he flicked on the lights. Two stories overhead, the giant overhead fixtures hummed. Despite the industrial heating system, the place was cold and echoey. While Jane set their food out on the only empty workbench in the place, he poked his head into the small rooms built around the edges.

He had to hand it to the guy. What work Jay had done on the place so far was first class. He ran a hand over the cool exterior of the Mustang. Yeah, it looked like Jay was planning to settle in. Another reason his disappearance worried Bridger. Jason was methodical, for sure, but no one would put this much care into a restoration if he wasn't planning to stay.

Jason was creating a *home* here.

Envy punched him in the gut. He closed his fingers into a fist, trying to ride the wave of pain. He had no such plans. No such desire.

At least that was the lie he'd been telling himself all these years.

He groaned silently and peered into the main office. The intruders hadn't been methodical. Judging from the papers tossed all over the place, they'd done little beyond make a huge mess.

Or maybe that's what they wanted anyone who came later to think. It's what he'd do; make it look like whoever tossed the place was inept.

But he trusted Jay's instincts. No way anyone but a friend would find a thing. If Jay had left any clues about his disappearance, they'd be well hidden, and encrypted.

Still, he prayed his friend had left them a few breadcrumbs to follow. Without more to go on, he was helpless to mount a rescue op. He blew out a breath and headed back into the main hangar.

He didn't do helpless. At. All.

*Please, Lord, help me help my friend. I need a hint. A direction to move in.*

Jane caught his eye and lifted up a taco. "You better hurry if you want any. There are no friends on Taco Day."

Her attempt at humor only added to his admiration. Other than insisting she be part of the search for her brother, she hadn't complained or argued or shed even a tear.

Jane Reilly was the kind of woman a man could depend on. Build a future



with. The more time he spent around her, the more he realized that future wouldn't be with a broken man like him.

He pasted a smile on his face and headed for the food.

*Lord, what I really need is a miracle. Maybe two.*

THE TACOS WERE, as usual, amazing, but Jane didn't have much of an appetite. Being inside Jason's hangar had only sharpened her worry. Where was he? Why hadn't he contacted her?

The only possible answers were bad ones. The barbacoa taco she'd managed to choke down felt like a ball of lead in her belly.

Bridger reached across the wide table and took her hand. "We're going to find him."

"I know." Only she didn't.

Her brother barely spoke about his years in Special Ops. Whenever he did, it was to praise his team. Still, they were only human. And whatever had Jason on the run must be serious. In the three years since he'd been home, he'd never left town without telling her. Or without staying in touch.

Bridger caressed the back of her hand. The whisper-soft movements made her heartbeat jump for an entirely different reason.

He smiled. "Hey, you don't need to worry. Your bro is one of the finest operatives I've ever met. He's got this."

"I hope so," she whispered.

"I know so." He tightened his grip on her fingers. "And I know something else that'll help."

Hand still holding hers, he bowed his head. "Dear Jesus, please protect Jason until we can join him in fighting whatever evil he's battling. Give us the strength, and the wisdom, to find his trail as quickly as we can."

"Amen," she added and looked into those deep brown eyes.

Praying always set her mind right. She suspected she'd be talking with her Savior every hour until Jason was safe.

Bridger rose and gathered up the remains of their takeout meal. “Now we do our part. Find your brother’s hidden stash of info.”

“What makes you think he has one?”

“I would.” Hands full of takeout containers, he headed for the designer kitchen area at the back of the hangar.

She had to look away from the impressive collection of stainless-steel appliances Jason had asked her to pick out. “Outfit it the way you’d want your dream kitchen,” he’d urged her.

She’d raised an eyebrow at that. “Planning on impressing someone?”

That impish grin she rarely saw still made her smile. “Someday.”

Arms folded, she turned away, screwing her eyes shut so she wouldn’t cry. The hole in her heart Pete left when he ripped Kellen out of her life was just starting to be a little less tender, and now this: Jason in trouble, and the pastor tormented by a dangerous lunatic.

And two hard-edged operatives cluttering up her life.

“How about you start in the office?” Bridger suggested from the kitchen.

She slid off the stool. “Sure.”

She stopped in the doorway. The mess looked even more malevolent several days later. About time she cleaned things up.

But she couldn’t will herself into the space. From the footprints, Tai thought two men had broken in. Were they angry as they pawed through Jason’s things? Cold and calculating?

She dug her fingers into the doorjamb as she willed her brother to send her a sign.

*Tell me you’re okay. Tell me how to help.*

The only response was the clang of metal: Bridger prowling the outer edges of the hangar.

“Get over yourself,” she muttered, and plunged into the office.

Half an hour later she had the space straightened up, but she’d found nothing but invoices and blueprints for airfield projects. She brushed a hank of hair out of her eyes. Her gaze fell on the trashcan in the corner. The intruders had dumped that out, too.

She bent down to scoop up the old candy bar wrappers and crushed soda cans. A half dozen crumpled drawings lay scattered about. She could picture Jason at his architect’s desk, T-square in hand, drawing in that slow, deliberate way he had.

She dropped to her knees and smoothed out one of the pictures. Unlike

the blueprints, it was the front elevation of a house. A cabin, really. Cute and rustic.

The other pages were more versions of the same, each slightly different, as if he couldn't quite get the final details to his liking. She stacked the half-finished drawings, then pressed the pile to her chest. They might be the last things he worked on.

Still holding the oversized pages, she headed out into the hangar.

Bridger was on a ladder next to the Mustang. He pulled his head out of the P51's open cockpit. "Find something?"

"Nothing important." Except to her. "Just some architectural drawings."

He pointed at the papers. "Look at the back. That's Jay's writing."

She turned the stack so she could see. Her brother had scrawled a name.

*Rosalind.*

It was clearly Jason's writing, though much more hurried and jagged than his normal, precise printing. She could feel his haste.

She ran a finger over the name. The grooves from the pencil dug deep. He'd been rushing. She rubbed them again. Was he worried when he wrote it? Afraid? Or maybe hurt?

Jay wasn't a trained architect, but he had a knack for design. Could Rosalind be a woman he'd been hoping to impress?

Her throat tightened. Would her fierce, loyal protector of a brother ever have a love of his own?

Bridger held out a hand for the papers. "Looks like he was in a hurry." He rifled through the other pages, but that was the only word. "No phone number or email or anything. Weird."

At least they had something to check out. "I wish we had access to his online accounts. We could check his address book."

"I've already got somebody working on that," Bridger admitted. "She's the best of the best, but she hasn't made any progress yet." He jerked a thumb toward the massive tool chest, half hidden behind the P51. "I'm gonna check those drawers, then we can call it a night."

She couldn't stand the thought of spending another second in that office. Besides, she'd been through every inch of the place. "I'll help."

They were down to the last row of drawers when Bridger's phone beeped.

He grinned when he saw the caller and set the phone on the toolbox so Jane could join in the video call. "It's our tech guru. I bet she's got something."

A smiling blonde woman filled the screen. “Boy, do I.” She tipped her cute, pointed chin at Jane. “I’m Paige. Good to finally meet you. The Jayman said lots of good things about you over the years.”

For some stupid reason, the unexpected compliment threatened to make her cry, so she concentrated on the other woman. Even over a screen, Paige radiated a mischievous energy. Jane liked her immediately.

The woman leaned closer to the camera. “So. I have news.”

Bridger held up a hand. “I asked Paige to run background checks on the pertinent suspects,” he told Jane.

“And that would include?”

Bridger shoved his hands in the pockets of his tech pants. “A bunch of contacts from his old position, and here in town: Billy Peckham. Randall Dressler. Your pastor.”

She blinked hard. “You suspect Pastor Zack of doing this himself?”

“It’s a possibility. Even you admitted he was in a huge hurry to get out the door that morning.”

Jane hugged herself. Bridger wasn’t wrong. This was getting ugly. She wanted out from under all this deception.

Paige spoke again. “This is just a first-level pass, but I’d say we’ve got at least one clear suspect.”

A copy of a psych report from Meadow Hills Hospital replaced her image on the screen. Jane and Bridger leaned in to look.

The subject was Billy Peckham.

“I’ll give you the TL;DR version,” Paige said while they read. “He’s schizophrenic. No history of violence, but he’s pretty out there. You can read the reports for yourself, but he’s been in and out of institutions for the past five years.”

“I thought he held a couple clergy positions,” Jane said.

Off camera, Paige laughed. “Not unless he’s the head pastor at the nuthouse.”

Jane stared at the report so hard her eyes crossed. “This explains a lot.”

“No doubt.” Bridger squinted at it, too. “Shoot me a copy, huh?”

“Already in your inbox,” Paige said.

Bridger scratched his chin. “Looks like Billy P just jumped to the top of our suspect list.”

Billy Peckham’s diagnosis made sense, but if anything, it made Jane even sadder than thinking he had some kind of drug problem. Such a tragedy. She

felt for Billy and his parents. No wonder they seemed to be so stiff. So prideful.

She didn't know much about mental illnesses, but knowing his mind wasn't right, and that he was probably on serious medications, made his behavior and demeanor more understandable. He *was* on drugs, just not the illegal kind.

Bridger had gone back to studying her brother's drawings.

"We have to tell Sheriff Hammond about Billy," she insisted.

Bridger flattened the top page, pressing out the wrinkles with his palm. "Copy that."

His quick acquiescence surprised her.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Just because I don't always play by the rules doesn't mean I don't respect them."

"What does that even mean?" Gray wasn't her favorite color. In her world, you either went by the book, or you didn't.

"When rules get in the way of getting a job done—or saving lives—I'm gonna treat them more like suggestions."

Hard to argue with that sentiment, especially when he was trying to track down her brother—and help the pastor.

Bridger traced a finger over Jason's writing, almost as if he were trying to channel her brother. "Paige's info explains Peckham's behavior."

Absolutely. "He's probably on some pretty strong medication."

"Not strong enough," Bridger muttered.

"I thought mentally ill people were rarely violent?"

"Definitely not my area of expertise, but yeah, I've heard the same. 'Rarely' doesn't mean never, though. And Peckham would have good reason to carry a grudge against your pastor."

She couldn't say why, but she didn't want it to be Billy. "But he was so out of it."

"Maybe he just took his meds. Or maybe we caught him when they were wearing off. Either way, I'm guessing he's not always so loopy. I'm not going to dismiss him until we know what he's truly capable of."

"Fair enough." And smart. She couldn't go around dismissing suspects because she felt sorry for them.

If it was Billy, no way Jason's disappearance was linked to this case. Even in his right-mind, Billy didn't have the bandwidth, or the resources, to be a threat to her brother. But once they found the extortionist, they could

really dive into finding Jason.

She eyed the bulge of the gun tucked beneath Bridger's shirt. "Now what?"

"I'll contact the sheriff. Then we watch and wait. Tai's gotta be close to done setting out his surveillance devices. If Billy so much as sneezes, we'll know it."

"Or if anyone tries to get near Pastor Zack."

"Or that."

But what if it wasn't Billy? Her wishes aside, it just didn't feel like this was going to be resolved so easily.

Bridger shoved his hands on his hips and eyed the hangar. His gaze came to rest on Jason's over-sized travel trailer. "We should search in there."

Much as she wanted to find Jason, she was so tired her eyes practically crossed.

Bridger pressed his palm against his shoulder, rotating his other arm. The movement drew a soft intake of breath.

She had to stop herself from moving to him. "You're hurt."

He clamped his mouth shut and completed a final rotation. "Nothing recent. This shoulder's been pinned back together one too many times. Locks up on occasion. No big deal."

That she wasn't buying. For a man like Bridger to show pain told her exactly how much the old injury must bother him.

She didn't know much about espionage, but she did know her brother and that gigantic brain of his. Finding whatever clues Jay had left them would take sharp eyes.

Time to call it a night.

BRIDGER EYED the clock between the two beds in Jane's guest room. Forty-four. Two whole minutes since he last checked.

He groaned softly, rolled onto his back, and folded his hands across his stomach. The movement made his bad shoulder pulse again, but he was too restless to stay in one position.

Jane had tried to hide her sadness, but it was obvious Paige's news about the Peckham guy hit her hard.

Ever since he rolled into town, all he wanted to do was lift the weight from her slender shoulders. Instead, all he'd done was heap on more trouble.

"Let's regroup," he had told her before they dove into a search of Jason's giant RV. "A few hours won't make any difference. We need the rest."

That had made her smile. "I can see why you're in charge."

"Who told you that?"

"Tai. He said he couldn't tell me much about what your team did, but he did say you're a natural leader."

Though the compliment had pleased him far more than he would have guessed, he passed it off. "I've heard differently. Straight from the man himself."

He was called to lead, though. Even as a kid, the Lord seemed to put him in leadership positions, pressure situations where he had to act, and persuade a group to come along with him.

Right now, he wished more than anything that he could persuade one stunning brunette that he had what it took to be a partner in life.

To do that, though, the first thing he'd have to do was convince himself. Not gonna happen any time soon.



Even if he could get over his past, he was never going to settle down. He'd seen too much. Done too much. Some of it amazingly good. Lots of it....

He ground his cheek into the pillow, as if he could turn away from the ugly memories.

Not a chance.

There were too many missions with too many dead bodies left behind. Deaths he'd believed at the time were necessary, but now, in light of the speedy way the Consortium got rid of his team, he knew to be purely conveniences.

Purely evil.

He screwed his eyes shut against the wave of self-disgust—and sorrow—for the part he played. He should never have trusted his handlers. Not when they asked him to turn his team into assassins for hire.

If he'd only known. He flipped onto his back, but the change in position did nothing to ease the flare of heat in his belly.

To his left, Tai snored loudly.

“Sleep in peace, buddy.” He mouthed the words at the ceiling, adding a heaping dose of envy for his friend's legendary ability to sleep anywhere, anytime.

But the big security specialist's dreams weren't to remain uninterrupted. Tai's phone sprang to life on the nightstand between them, buzzing and shrieking and blinking wildly.

The big man jolted awake with a snort and grabbed the device. His dark face glowed eerily in the blue light from the screen. “Security breach at the store,” he announced, his voice thick with sleep.

Bridger threw off the covers and leapt to his feet. “I'll wake Jane.”

“Copy that.” Tai rubbed his face and grabbed his laptop. “I'll check the videos. And send up a few drones. You might wanna start some coffee.”

Bridger pulled on his pants, grabbed a tee shirt, and headed out the door.

Jane answered his knock immediately. The coffee was barely trickling into the pot by the time she joined them in the kitchen. The electric pink robe clashed with her stony look of concern.

Tai waggled his thick brows. “Nice robe. Cheeky.”

That drew a small smile. She curtsyed gracefully. “Exactly the effect I was going for.” The humor drained away immediately. She tilted her chin at Tai's laptop. “Did someone trip your alarms?”

He shook his head. “Not a person. A thing.”

He swung the computer around so she and Bridger could see the screen and punched up a video.

Bridger stared at the footage. Even in the dim light from the motion-detecting light above the front door, the picture was perfectly clear. A light-colored object flew into the frame and hit the front window. The sophisticated microphone in Tai’s equipment caught every tinkle as the glass shattered.

An engine roared off-camera.

Tai jabbed a finger at the screen. “Wait for it....”

There. A flash of taillights, the driver’s side bulb considerably dimmer than the passenger side. Alerted by the movement, the camera panned in the car’s direction. A dark compact sped away.

Bridger leaned closer, but he couldn’t make out the license plate. “That could be Peckham’s vehicle.”

“Yup.” Tai agreed. “The drones didn’t make it there in time to track the car, but it’ll be easy to check.”

With a few keystrokes, he enhanced the image, captured the license number and plugged it into one of the super-secret databases he’d hacked into.

A long, slow whistle told Bridger everything he needed to know. “Billy, Billy, Billy,” he murmured.

Jane stared hard at the image, as if burning the string of numbers and letters into her brain. “Why would he vandalize my store?”

Bridger didn’t much care at the moment. “He’s crazy. Why does he do anything?”

Jane turned on her heel. The plush pink robe swung out from her trim ankles. “I’ll get dressed. We should get down there.”

Tai eyed Bridger. “We?”

He rubbed his tired eyes. “We can’t leave her here.”

“Excellent point. You want me to alert the sheriff now, or wait until we get there?”

Bridger didn’t hesitate. The sheriff was already iffy on their participation in this. No reason to make more of an enemy. “Call it in now.”

Sheriff Hammond himself pulled into the parking lot right on their heels, making Bridger glad he’d had Tai make the call.

The man hitched his pants up under his substantial belly, his gaze on the

jagged hole in the window. “What do we got?”

Bridger tipped his head at Tai. “Why don’t you show the sheriff your footage. Jane and I will check out the damage.”

“Hang on there.” The sheriff snapped his fingers at the deputy just emerging from his own squad car. “Mancuso, check the scene. No one goes in until we clear the building.”

Bridger pulled Jane a few steps farther back from the entrance. Fair enough. Now wasn’t the time to explain that Tai’s equipment was sensitive enough to track a mouse. No harm in letting the man take charge of the scene.

He stood next to Jane, shoulder to shoulder, while the deputy unholstered his service revolver and slipped around the back. By the time he completed his circuit of the premises, Jane was shivering.

Bridger aimed his key fob at the Jeep. The engine roared to life. He pressed the button to start the heater. “Why don’t you wait in the car?”

She shook her head, her gaze on the deputy who was peering inside through the jagged opening in the window. Glass crunched beneath his boots. He pulled on a latex glove and leaned inside, plucking something off the shelf that ran the length of the window.

He strode back to the sheriff and presented a paper-wrapped rock, twice the size of his palm. Once Bridger and the sheriff had snapped a couple photos of it, he untied the twine and peeled off the wrinkled paper.

Words were scrawled across the face in thick black marker.

*JANE REILLY—I know what you do with the pastor. You’re an adulteress. An abomination to the Lord.*

*You should have repented. Now it’s too late.*

JANE SHUDDERED. A small sound escaped her before her teeth started to chatter. Bridger pulled her close, hugging her hard against him.

No way this evil would touch her. No. Way.

Except it already had.

“SHE’S FINE,” Tai said for the tenth time since he and Bridger had gotten their waffles at the Red Dog Saloon.

But what if she wasn’t?

Bridger swirled the pat of butter into the syrup dripping off the top of his short stack. When he suggested breakfast, she’d declined, wanting to stay back and clean up the store. The sheriff had left three deputies with her, and he and Tai were watching the front. His friend was right. She was fine.

For now.

Tai waved a fork in his face. Golden strands of syrup glinted in the morning sun. “Hellooooo. Earth to Captain North. Let the woman be. She’s f-i-n-e.”

This time, Bridger didn’t look away from the window. “I know.”

Tai rolled his eyes and sank his fork into the pile of hot cakes in front of him. “Her store got vandalized and she’s been threatened by a loony toon. She needs a minute.”

He forced himself to shrug. “Sure.”

They ate in silence, watching the early morning fishermen drive past towing aluminum boats bristling with poles. Despite the dry desert air, the ground was tinted white with frost that melted instantly in the weak sunlight, leaving the road edged with the outlines of low-growing sagebrush.

Bridger liked the high desert. He’d forgotten how much. The stark beauty appealed to something deep inside him. Warmer climes offered too many ways to conceal things, but out here, there was nowhere to hide. No fog. No foliage. No pretense.

Things that grew here had to stand on their own.

Finally defeated by the outrageous size of his pancakes, Tai pushed away his plate and leaned his elbows on the Formica. “What if the sheriff can’t hold Peckham in custody? We need a plan.”

And Bridger needed to assure himself that Peckham had been working alone. That was the most likely scenario, but with Jane’s life on the line, he wouldn’t settle for anything less than total certainty.

Tai’s gaze drifted over Bridger’s shoulder. He threw down his napkin. “We got incoming.”

The vinyl seat squeaked as Bridger turned to see Pastor Zack stalking stiffly toward him, Randall Dressler following close behind.

Tai waved. “Hey, Preach, what’s up?”

Tai’s lazy delivery might fool the pastor, but Bridger didn’t miss the way his friend got his hand in position to grab the gun concealed at his side.

Bridger did the same. “Randall.” He nodded at the other man.

Both guys looked alarmed. Terrified, even. He leaned back against the leatherette upholstery and waited.

The preacher jabbed a finger across the street. Jane’s assistant manager was nailing plywood over the broken window. “That’s what’s up.” He spat out the words, rapid-fire. “The sheriff showed us the note. Now the guy is threatening Jane. Who knows what’s next? I can’t even risk driving my own car. There could be a bomb under it or something. I had to ask Randall for a ride.”

“It’s not trouble,” Dressler said in that oozy, soothing voice that irritated Bridger to no end.

The pastor ignored the other man. “My wife is terrified. Randall agreed to drive me down to Southern California. She’s got her car with her. We’ll run. We’ll—”

Bridger cut him off. On the off chance Peckham wasn’t their extortionist, he needed the pastor close. “That’s a seriously dumb idea. Understandable, but dumb.”

The pastor’s small eyes narrowed. “It’s not dumb. It’s what normal people do when they’re in danger. They run.”

Tai shook his head sadly. “Preacher, preacher, preacher. Of course you want to be with your lady love, but dude, you could be leading the blackmailer straight to her.”

The pastor flapped his thick hands. “But she’s scared. I need to get to her.”

“Sure. Only natural.” Bridger nodded slowly and spread his hands on the tabletop, taking care to relax his muscles. People associated open palms with honesty. Relaxed body language would suggest calm. Confidence.

The pastor desperately wanted to have confidence in someone. Might as well be him.

“I’ve got people who can keep your wife safe,” he said.

Tai picked right up on his cue. “Absolutely. A hundred percent. We’ve got a whole crew who can watch over her.”

The pastor tugged at his beard, looking confused.

Excellent. Confusion was way better than stubbornness.

The set up completed, Bridger dove in for the kill. “It looks like the bomber is here, in town. I’d rather have you here, where we can protect you until he’s in custody. Then we bring your wife home.”

Myles made a face. “Because of that note? You can’t be serious. The guy could have a partner. Maybe he’s not even in Redemption Creek. Maybe he paid someone to do that.”

Bridger shot him a suspicious look. “You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Of course I have. It’s my life we’re talking about.” The man swiped sweat off the back of his neck. “And Jane’s,” he added lamely.

Bridger tamped down his rising irritation. How did the man not get that his best chance to stay alive was to let Bridger and Tai do what they did best?

Dressler looked from the damaged hardware store to the pastor. “These guys sound like they know what they’re doing, Zack.”

The pastor winced. “I know, but even if you can protect Vangie, I can’t stay with the Creightons anymore. It’s putting them in danger.”

Bridger nodded vigorously. Movement. At last. “Good point. Let’s think this through. We’ve got other options.”

Dressler winced. “You can’t stay with Jane.”

The very thought seemed to shock the preacher. “Of course not.”

Tai gave Bridger the high sign. “I don’t like the idea of us splitting up,” he said.

No. Bridger didn’t, either. If it came to protecting only one person, it would be Jason’s sister. He balled up his napkin, running the permutations through his mind.

There weren’t many.

“How about staying with me?” Randall offered. “My father’s terrified of being robbed. I’ve got a state-of-the-art security system. That would work,

wouldn't it?" he directed his question at Bridger and Tai.

"It is a sweet system," Tai agreed. "I'd love to get another look at it, maybe beef things up a little."

Dressler's eyes lit up. "That would be cool."

It was a sound plan. If Tai felt the trust-fund baby's security system was acceptable, that was good enough for him. "I like it," he announced. "How about you, Preacher? You okay staying with Randall for a few days while we wrap this up?"

"Two days," the pastor said firmly. "Two more days. Then I'm going to Vangie."

"Done." He wouldn't need two whole days to satisfy himself that Peckham was the bomber.

If it wasn't Peckham, he'd persuade the pastor to re-negotiate.

Clearly satisfied, the pastor regained some of his bluster. He shoved his hands on his hips. "I just talked to my wife last night. She's fine, for now, and she won't want strangers around. If you can get this done in the next couple days, she won't need a security detail."

Bridger relaxed against the back of the booth. "If you're sure."

"That's the way I want it. So what now?"

Tai took that one. "Now we flush out the perp. Make him show himself."

The other men looked confused. "How do you do that?" Dressler asked.

Tai motioned at Bridger. "Boss?"

Bridger grinned. The plan had just appeared, full-fledged, in his mind. One of those miracles the Lord offered up on occasion. He savored the feeling for a second. "We nudge him."

The pastor pursed his lips. "I don't like the sound of that."

"You should." Bridger drummed his fingers against the edge of the table, tapping out the backbeat to his favorite Switchfoot ballad. "It's our way of taking charge. We give him an irresistible target and a hard deadline. He gets you now, or he loses out."

The pastor opened his mouth to protest, but Tai cut him off before he could speak. "Don't worry, Preach. We got this. You'll be under surveillance the whole time."

The big man scrunched up his nose as if he'd gotten a whiff of sewer gas. "By the two of you?"

The pulse at the side of Bridger's neck pounded. Man, this guy was insufferable. "You could do worse."

Tai laughed. “Seriously. But no. We’ve got friends.” He turned to Bridger. “We still have friends, right?”

“Lots of ‘em.” Bridger rose slowly, crowding the rotund preacher. “They make us look like Girl Scouts.”

“That’s no joke,” Tai added. “We’ve got this covered.

The pastor eyed the hardware store again. “Fine. Two days.”

He stalked out, Dressler on his heels.

Tai made a disgusted sound. “Congrats on not socking him in the face.”

Bridger acknowledged the compliment with a bow of his head.

“We need reinforcements,” Tai pointed out.

Bridger pulled out his phone. “I’m way ahead of you.”

He knew just the woman for this job. Kate wouldn’t be thrilled about flying a boring, civilian-style private jet, but she’d love the challenge he had in mind. The woman had more cojones than most of the men in Special Forces, and twice the skills. Though this time, he didn’t want her for her aeronautical prowess.

He needed another set of eyes on this. And another skilled shooter, if—or more likely when—his sketchy plan went south.

“You gonna fill me in on this brilliant plan of yours?” Tai asked.

He let out a long breath and ran through the details as he saw them. With every word, Tai’s expression grew more grim.

When Bridger finished, Tai crossed his thick arms over his chest. “Are you serious? That is the worst plan ever.”

“Worse than the Kandahar Taxi?”

Tai made a dismissive gesture. “So much worse than that.”

“You have a better idea?”

Tai grimaced. “I got nothing.” He thrust his fist at Bridger for a fist-bump. “Dumb trumps nothing. You have a go, Captain.”

Despite his misgivings, Bridger laughed. Setting up the pastor was the only way he could think of to flush out their prey. And keep Jane safe while they did it.



JANE HAD JUST VACUUMED the front of the store when Sheriff Hammond called to tell her he was sending a deputy out to the Peckham's property to take Billy into custody.

She thanked him and shoved a hank of hair out of her eyes. She was covered in sawdust from the repairs. So was the front half of the store.

There'd be hours of cleaning to do. At least no one had been hurt.

The thought of Billie Peckham being handcuffed made her sad. The guy might be dangerous, but it was through no fault of his own. She hoped the deputy would be gentle with him.

Bridger and Tai jogged up the street from the diner, giving her something else to dwell on for the moment. The tall, fit men strode into the store, bristling with suppressed energy.

She explained about Billy's imminent arrest.

Bridger nodded thoughtfully. "That's good news."

Tai grabbed a push broom from behind the counter and started to sweep. "And there's more. We have a plan."

"For finding Jason?" With Billy soon to be in custody, and the pastor's original blackmailer dead, locating her brother could take top priority. "When do we start?"

Bridger waved her off. "One thing at a time. I want to be positive Peckham's responsible for the violence, and the extortion first. We're almost there," he added.

He must have seen her face.

What could he mean? She knew he and Jason and their team had dealt with complicated operations in the military, bad actors with murky motives

and fewer morals, but this seemed so clear cut. They had Billy Peckham on video.

Bridger toed the bottom of the counter. "I just want to be certain."

Fair enough. She could humor him. For a while. As long as he got back to searching for Jason ASAP. He probably thought she was clueless, but she'd been part of a military family long enough to be able to read between the lines. He and Tai were worried about her brother.

The landline on the wall by the display of fishing lures rang, startling her. "Redemption Hardware," she answered automatically.

"It's Rita King. Are you all right, dear?"

The elderly woman's voice trembled with concern. Or curiosity. Probably both. Not that there was any harm in wondering. Jane rolled her eyes and covered the receiver.

"Word's out," she said to Bridger and Tai before going back to the caller. "I'm fine, Mrs. King. Just a broken window. We're all fine down here." No need to mention the nasty note, though whoever started the town gossip line running probably had that information, too.

"I'm so glad." The woman hesitated. "If you've got a few minutes, there's something I need to talk to you about. I know this isn't the best time, but..."

"Of course." Rita King was a frequent customer, and a nice woman, but Jane couldn't imagine what they had to discuss. "Anytime."

"I'm not feeling up to driving these days. I hate to ask, but could you come out here? I wouldn't ask, but it's important. It's about Pastor Zack," she whispered, as if she was concerned about being overheard.

Jane's heart thudded against her ribs. Was someone there, threatening the poor woman? Her husband had been head of the church council when they hired Pastor Zack.

Maybe Rita did know something.

"I'll be right over," she said and hung up.

Heart still pounding, she filled Bridger and Tai in on the call.

Without a word, Bridger moved behind the counter and grabbed her jacket off the hook. "Let's go."

She stuck her head around back to tell Wes she'd be back in an hour and headed out to Bridger's Jeep, her two bodyguards in tow. "You better not scare her," Jane ordered as they drove the two blocks to the Kings' house.

Bridger scoffed. "We're not going to scare her. We're the good guys."

“She might not think so.”

“I’ll charm her,” he insisted. “I can do charming.”

“He can,” Tai agreed. “You wouldn’t know it, but he’s smooth when he wants to be.”

“This I’ve got to see.”

Despite having the morning from hell, Bridger’s grin did funny things to her stomach. “Oh man, I do love a challenge.”

Even with the vandalism, and Billy Peckham’s sad fate, that grin kept her tummy warm all the way to Rita King’s tidy ranch style home.

Smaller than many of the homes farther out of town, the Kings’ white two bedroom was beginning to show its age. As was the hunched woman who opened the door.

Jane was grateful for the way Bridger and Tai took care to conceal their handguns and check the place out without scaring the woman.

“I have coffee on,” Mrs. King said as she waved them inside.

Her welcoming words didn’t match her quavering tone. Jane ignored the offer and led the woman to a faded floral couch. “These are my friends. I thought we might need their help. I hope you don’t mind.” She introduced Bridger and Tai, who were, indeed charming.

Once they settled into the petite French chairs across the coffee table, she gave the older woman her full attention. “Tell me what has you so worried.”

At first, she thought Rita wasn’t going to answer. The woman pressed her thin lips together and avoided Jane’s gaze. Then she patted Jane’s hand. “I’m sorry to drag you into this, but you’ve always had a good head on your shoulders. And you don’t judge. With that ex-husband of yours, Lord knows you’ve had troubles of your own.”

Jane forced herself to keep her expression neutral. Why the woman had to bring up Pete of all things.... She could practically see Bridger’s ears perking up.

“Yes. Well. That’s very flattering. What’s troubling you?”

“I should have said something earlier. I’ve suspected for a long time. I should have made certain.” Tears filled the woman’s eyes. She dashed them away with a shaking hand. “I’ve been praying on this ever since I heard about Pastor Zack’s troubles, but up ‘til now, I didn’t have the courage to seek the truth.”

Jane inched closer. “Mrs. King, what’s the problem? Whatever it is, we can help.”

The woman laughed sadly. “It’s too late for that. I’m not even sure what I have to say will help, but it’s the Christian thing to do.”

Jane eyed Bridger. He shook his head, just the tiniest movement. Wait, he seemed to be saying. She swallowed and concentrated on her breathing, giving the woman time.

Rita let out a shuddering breath. “The papers were there, in Warren’s old office. They were there all along.”

“What papers?”

“Records of the blackmail payments.” Now she met Jane’s eyes. “My husband was the blackmailer.”

Warren King had been dead for two years. Was the woman confused? Senile?

Rita’s thin shoulders rose as she sighed. “I had cancer. Not everyone knew it. We got behind on the medical bills, and then all of a sudden, Warren had them paid off. Told me not to worry. He said he sold some forgotten property his parents left him. But I knew it wasn’t true.” Her white curls bounced as she shook her head. “There was no forgotten property.”

She rose unsteadily and crossed the room, returning with a small brown ledger. “It’s all here. A record of every payment. I’m certain Warren planned to pay the pastor back, but God took him first.”

“When was that?” Bridger asked gently.

“My husband’s been gone over two years now.”

Jane didn’t dare look at him, but she felt the jolt of awareness that zinged between him and Tai. She flipped through the entries, her mind whirling. The payments spanned the first two years that the pastor said he was blackmailed. But Warren was long dead by the time the new set of demands began.

Which meant they had two extortionists.

Someone else knew about Pastor Zack’s past.

Bridger inched forward in his seat, his attention on the frail woman. “Mrs. King, who else on the council would have known about Pastor Zack’s indiscretions?”

Pain creased the woman’s face. “I don’t know. Warren always told me he was the only one. He was desperate—and wrong—but he wasn’t cruel. He never would have told another soul. Not intentionally. I’d swear to it.”

Jane didn’t know about Bridger or Tai, but she believed the woman. Shocked as she was by Rita’s admission, she’d never known either of the Kings to be anything but upstanding citizens.

Just showed what she knew.

Rita coughed softly and sank back against the cushions, looking even more frail than when they'd entered. Her confession seemed to have sucked the energy out of her.

After pouring the woman a cup of coffee, Jane ushered the guys out of the house.

"So do we still like this Peckham guy for this?" Tai asked the minute they were in the Jeep.

"That was his car in front of the store last night when the rock went through my window," Jane reminded him.

"True that." Tai cupped his chin, stroking his beard. "But you can't see his face. Could have been someone else driving."

Bridger eyed her from the driver's seat.

She shook her head. "I don't know. A day ago, I would have said, 'No way.' But now...."

Bridger drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "I know what you mean. There's something about this that doesn't fit. I can see the guy threatening the preacher, and even planting the bomb and the warning letters. But the blackmail seems so...."

"Calculated," Tai interjected. "Although raising the ask to a hundred thousand and then trying to kill off the victim is pretty crazy."

There was that. And Billy was nothing if not crazy.

"How would Billy have found out about Pastor Zack embezzling from his former church?" She wondered out loud. "He hasn't been in town for years."

Bridger shrugged. "That's not so hard to explain. King probably let it slip. It wouldn't take long for the info to reach Billy's parents."

"They would have shouted it from the rooftops," she pointed out.

"True," Bridger acknowledged. "But it would have been after Myles got the position. Billy had been diagnosed around then. Why even bring it up? Billy wouldn't have been functional enough to fill the post anyway."

That made a sad sort of sense. Maybe Billy—or his parents—would clarify things, now that the sheriff was involved.

Bridger pulled back into the hardware store lot. Plywood covered the broken window, giving the place a sad, rundown air.

With the engine still running, he kept both his hands on the wheel. "Peckham's probably our guy, but you can see why I want to be certain."

Bridger's plan made sense. Even if the sheriff got a full confession from

Billy, she wasn't sure they could trust it. Better to be certain.

She slid down in her seat, hugging herself despite the hot air pumping out of the car's heater. With Jason missing and the ugly currents swirling around town, she wondered if she'd ever feel warm again.

BY THE TIME Bridger and Tai helped Jane and her assistant manager get the store cleaned up, it was time to head to Jason's airstrip to meet the two teammates he'd called in to help finish this thing.

He debated about going alone, but Jane's mood was sinking with the sun. Jane would probably find Kate and Fenn a little too intense for her liking, but at least they'd provide a diversion.

More importantly, the sheriff's department didn't have Peckham in custody yet. No way he was letting her out of his sight until their number one suspect was neutralized.

He parked the Jeep between the hangar and the one usable airstrip. The sun was behind them, ready to slip behind the ten thousand foot Sierra peaks and plunge the broad valley into darkness. But for now, it bathed the eastern hills in golden light. The desert stretched out in front of them, shimmering beneath the red-gold rays. Anyone who thought the high desert had nothing to offer had to be blind.

Tai crunched a sunflower seed between his teeth and spit out the hulls. "Jay-man picked a choice piece of property. I'm not a desert guy, but this is..." He shook his shaggy head. "I had no idea it would be this beautiful here." He offered the open bag to Jane.

She plunged her hand inside. "Most people don't."

Tai smiled. "A well-kept secret."

"Exactly." Jane popped a seed into her mouth.

She reached for the coffee she'd set on the Jeep's bumper, her eyes on the sapphire sky. "So run this by me one more time. How's this going to prove Billy has been the one threatening the pastor and me?"

Bridger waved off Tai's offer of sunflower seeds. "I figure if we make it known that your pastor's skipping town in the morning, whoever's been after him will make a final run at him."

"Or it's Billy, and nothing will happen."

"Or that. In which case, your preacher gets to take a private jet to pick up his wife."

The sweet sound of a finely-tuned Pratt & Whitney engine caught Bridger's ear. Shielding his eyes against the late afternoon sun, he watched the elegant turboprop circle around for a landing.

"Right on time," Tai noted.

Not that Kate Hackett would be anything less. The woman was as precise as she was fierce. Unlike the man she was hauling with her. Bridger laughed silently. What had it taken to get the mess that was Fenn Scarborough into that plane on schedule?

Despite his fears for Jane, and Jason, the anticipation of being reunited with his teammates lifted his spirits.

"Too bad they're not bringing the rest of the crew," Tai said, reading his thoughts, as usual.

He shook his head. "Overkill."

Tai snorted. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Reinforcements were hardly necessary. He and Tai could handle things, but this ruse would end things more quickly. Plus, he wanted to bring his friends up to speed on Jason's situation in person. And, though he'd never admit it, he missed his peeps.

"Use the eastern-most runway," Tai instructed over the portable radio. "It's the only functioning strip."

"Roger that." Kate Hackett's calm voice came over the speaker. "East runway."

Face hidden behind her dark aviator shades, the major floated the plane to the tarmac with her usual finesse.

Tai whistled softly. "Woman hasn't lost a step." He pointed the handheld at the cockpit. "Looks like Scarborough arrived in one piece."

"Yup."

"He and Hackett get along about as well as ice cream and tuna," Tai explained to Jane.

Bridger grinned. "It'll be good for them."

"No," Tai insisted. "It won't."



Yeah. Maybe not. If the look on Kate's face as she exited the plane was any indication, ol' Fenn was lucky he was still breathing. Good thing it had been a short flight from San Diego.

Kate strode down the steps, head high. The dark blue tie of her borrowed pilot's uniform flapped in the cold breeze. Funny. He'd never actually seen her in uniform in all the years they worked together. Covert ops didn't lend themselves to spit shine and chest medals.

Tai hooted, waving the pair over to the hangar. "What's the deal, Scarborough? Couldn't you find a tighter uniform?"

Probably not. If the guy breathed deep, he was going to pop a button. Not that the man they called Boy Toy would care if he did. Tall, blond, and handsome, Scarborough was a babe-magnet of the first degree. Perfect cover for the brilliant mind behind the too-white smile.

Scarborough grinned and curled his free arm. "You only wish you had these guns, Kaholo."

Tai snorted. "Same old Fenn. All show and no ammo."

The familiar teasing hit Bridger harder than he wanted to admit, but movement behind the plane's portholes drew his attention before he could get too far down memory lane.

Tai squinted at Kate. "You brought passengers?"

"Reinforcements," she corrected.

A blonde figure in a neon pink skirt and a black leather jacket appeared in the doorway. "Hey, everybody!" Paige, their cyber-security whiz waved energetically.

Another figure headed toward the exit. Bridger rocked back on his heels. Mason Ortiz. The best personal defense expert he knew. Armed or unarmed, the man was deadly.

Tai clapped his hands. "Wow. This is special."

"I know you didn't need the extra manpower, but those two were bored." Kate pointed at her passengers.

Bridger stared. "What are you all doing here?" he asked when they approached.

"Nice," Tai muttered sarcastically.

Mason smacked him in the stomach hard enough to make him groan. "Good to see you too, Champ." He hitched his duffle bag back up on his shoulder and spun around, taking in the airfield and the hangar, its bay doors yawning open.

Paige brushed straight past him and Mason. “He heard we were getting the band back together,” she announced before racing over to hug Tai.

Bridger knew the instant Mason spotted Jason’s old plane. Mason wasn’t a pilot himself, but the man lived and breathed machinery. Give him a piece of string and some chewing gum and he could fix anything.

Mason straightened like a bird on a scent, “Is that a—?”

“P51,” Tai finished for him. “Yup.”

“Sweet.” The guy headed for the hangar. “I’m in,” he said over his shoulder, “but only for the one gig.”

Bridger winced. “We’re not—”

Tai smacked him hard. “It’s a possibility,” he assured Jane.

Bridger scowled. “Is not.”

Tai put a hand to his face shielding his mouth from Bridger. “Is, too,” he assured her. “Don’t mind him. He’s crabby when he misses his nap.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Bridger said.

Tai winked. “He always says that.”

Jane watched the crew file into the hangar, a look of wonder on her face. “So these are Jason’s teammates?”

“Yup.”

Kate shoved her overnight bag into Fenn’s arms hard enough to send him toppling sideways and peeled away from the group, heading straight for the tidy galley in the back of the building. Fenn followed, juggling her bag in his arms like an oversized baby.

“How long have Kate and Fenn been a couple?” she asked.

Bridger choked. Cool, precise Hackett and arrogant, bad boy Scarborough? No. Way.

He flicked Tai a look, but the big man was watching Kate and Fenn, a look of dawning comprehension on his face.

“They’re not a couple,” Bridger insisted. “They’re more liable to kill each other than go on a date.”

“I used to worry about that, too,” Tai said, shaking his head. “But you know....”

“We’re not getting the band back together,” Bridger muttered to himself as Tai followed the team into the hangar.

Jane trotted alongside, hands stuffed into her jacket pockets, grinning.

He swiped a hand down his face and hurried after them. He couldn’t be the only one still grappling with the horrors of what they’d done. The

innocents they'd killed on faulty orders. The lives they'd destroyed to line the Consortium's pockets.

He was with Ortiz on this one. Just the one gig.

But did Mason mean button up this extortion case, or find Jason?

Jay-man. Had to be. Figuring out whether Billy Peckham was their perp would be a cinch for this group.

The group disappeared into the building, their voices fading. He might not plan to get back into the black ops business, but he was grateful his friends showed up.

Hands on his hips, he bowed his head.

*Dear Jesus, thank you for keeping my friends safe through all the dark times, and thank you for calling on them to back us up. We surely could use the help. And Lord, if you could see your way clear to disabusing them of the idea that we're back in business, I'd be deeply grateful.*

His mind still on the surprise arrival of his team, he almost didn't hear the soft ding notifying him of the incoming text.

*Hammond here. Be advised. Unable to locate Peckham. BOLO issued. My office will keep you updated. Keep Miss Reilly safe.*

Okay then. Good thing he'd set his plan in motion. And good thing he had four of the finest operatives he'd ever met watching his six.

“DON’T WORRY,” the man urged his accomplice over the phone. “This doesn’t change anything.”

He mumbled a few more soothing words and hung up, fighting the urge to hurl his phone at the massive living room windows.

The words were a straight-up lie. Bridger North flying in reinforcements changed *everything*.

He’d heard the smooth engine winding up as the aircraft streaked down the center of the valley. He even stepped outside to watch it, appreciating the beautiful lines highlighted by the golden afternoon glow.

The only surprise was the cargo. Four others, instead of the two he’d been told to expect.

His body shook with fury. The plan had been foolproof. Until this.

He dug his fingers into the thick leather upholstery, biting back a wave of rage. After everything he’d endured, this had better work.

He threw his head back and opened his mouth, sucking in a lungful of air. It had to work. But if it didn’t, he had an exit strategy. The thought calmed him instantly.

Worst case scenario, his shining future blew apart. So be it. The fallout wouldn’t touch him. He could start again.

Rise again.

And their plan could still work. He hated to imagine failure, but really, for him it was a win-win. Besides, all great accomplishments required courage. Grit.

No matter what his parents said, he wasn’t a quitter.

Tonight, Zack Myles died. Jane Reilly, too, if necessary. Whatever it

took. So what if there was collateral damage?

No one would suspect him. His alibi was in place.

The shining future he'd always wanted was so close he could taste it. All they had to do was continue the misdirection. And stay calm. The rest would take care of itself.

And if not, he'd survive. He always did.

*Magic time.*

THE DRIVE back to Jane's house from the airport had never been such fun. By the time she pulled her brother's old work truck up to the house, her sides ached from laughing. Bridger and Tai were behind her in the Jeep, Kate Hackett and the handsome Fenn in tow. Which meant she got Paige and Mason for company.

The cyber-security woman was a hoot. Just as engaging and alive as she'd seemed over the short video conference when they met. Mason Ortiz was the surprise. With his dark eyes and that intense stare, he made Tai seem like a lightweight. But the man was funny. He had a sharp wit to go with his powers of observation.

They were full of stories about the team, particularly Jason and Bridger. She couldn't wait to tease the two of them with her newfound intel.

As she understood it, the plan was for Fenn and Kate to head over to the Red Dog and talk up their fake assignment: flying a couple locals out of the area. Bridger and Tai figured it wouldn't be hard for an interested party to assume they'd been hired to get her and Pastor Zack out of danger.

Especially after she told Wes she'd be gone for a week or two. Between Wes's propensity for gossip, and the sight of four fascinating strangers at the saloon, anybody who wanted to know why the sleek business jet was parked overnight at Jason's airfield would have their answer.

And Billy—or whoever was responsible for the blackmail and the attacks—would know his targets were fleeing.

But then what? Would Billy come after her? Or would he make an attempt on the pastor?

"Bridger's got a solid plan," Mason said from the back seat, as if he could

read her mind. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Copy that,” Paige added. “He’s really good at strategizing. And Mason and I’ll be with you the whole time.”

“I know.” She gave the woman a grateful smile. “It’s not me I’m worried about.”

Mason released his seatbelt and opened the car door. “No need to worry about the team. We’re a lot more dangerous than we look.”

Yikes. Because they looked plenty dangerous. Well everyone but Paige. And she looked smart. Brilliant, actually.

Paige rolled her eyes at Mason. “I don’t think it’s us she’s worried about. Bridger and Tai will head over to your pastor’s hideout ASAP,” she assured her. “Kate and Fenn’ll swing by after they hit the saloon. The pastor and his friend’ll be well-guarded.”

Of course, they would. Bridger would hardly set Pastor Zack up as bait and then blow the chance to catch the bad guy.

Once inside, Jane felt like she couldn’t move. Her more-than-adequate house felt like a dollhouse. Mostly, it was the sheer size of Bridger’s team. The two women were strong, but slender. The men, though, were all outsized specimens. With outsized personalities to match.

She eased her way between the bodies, heading for her kitchen. Panic hit. Did she even have enough food in the house to put together a decent snack for all these folks?

“You doing okay?” Bridger asked, nearly stopping her heart. “Sorry,” he muttered when he realized he’d startled her.

“I’m good.” She breathed deeply, trying to get her heart to migrate back to its normal position. She wasn’t good, actually. She might not be aware of the details, but she knew the noose was tightening.

Bridger intended to force their assailant into a trap. Cornered people were dangerous. She couldn’t help but worry.

So why lie about it?

She shoved a bag of tortilla chips into his hands. “That’s not true. I’m not good. I’m scared, is what I am.”

He set the bag on the counter and took her hands, wrapping his strong, warm fingers around hers. “That’s a good thing. Fear keeps you sharp. You’d be an idiot not to be frightened. And you’re far from stupid.”

She forced a laugh. “You’re just saying that.”

“Of course, I am. If Jason thought I dissed his baby sister...” He shook

his head and gave her fingers a last squeeze before letting go. “Then I’d be the idiot.”

“We can’t have that.”

“Nope.” He raised his hand again, as if he were going to caress her, but he stopped.

She would have given anything to feel his touch on her cheek, but that would only lead to more silly daydreams about a future with the most unsuitable man on the planet.

A wave of laughter from the great room rolled over them. She envied their carefree ways. Her house would be silent when they left. After long hours at the hardware store, she craved quiet, but she wasn’t so sure she’d like it as well going forward.

Not when she knew what she was missing.

Another burst of laughter hit her. Bridger dug a hand in his pocket and pulled out his phone, then he turned to the group, whistling shrilly.

The conversation halted, the mood shifting instantly from a playful reunion to business.

Bridger pressed a finger to his free ear, walking away as he concentrated on the call. “Slow down, Dressler. Say that again.”

He snapped his fingers at Tai. “Bring up Dressler’s place,” he ordered quietly.

Tai headed for the guest room. Paige set her heavy pack on the kitchen counter and dug inside, pulling out her own laptop.

“Are you okay?” Bridger said into the phone. “Good. Stay put. Lock the doors. We’re on our way. I’m sending the police as well. You’ll hear sirens soon.”

Tai raced back into the room, his laptop already open. He set it on the counter next to Paige’s computer. The two bent their heads together over their keyboards.

“Oh man. This is not good. Not. Good.” Tai’s voice was tight with frustration. He turned the computer so the group could see the grainy video feed playing across the screen. “Take a look at this. It’s time stamped ten minutes ago.”

Jane and Bridger closed in behind him, shoulder to shoulder, watching the disaster unfold. There were two camera feeds on the split screen, both showing the back of the house. A large figure—Pastor Zack—stood in the doorway. But then he moved. He must have heard something. He headed out



the back door, where a shadowy figure waited.

“Don’t do it,” Tai warned, as if the scene had not already played out. “Do not do this.”

Jane pressed a hand to her mouth. It was like watching a horror movie unfold in real time. Her heart was beating so hard it knocked against her ribs.

*Please, Lord, protect them.*

Bridger whipped out his phone and dialed. “Yes, dispatch, I’ve got an armed intruder on camera attempting to enter a residence.” His eyes never leaving the feeds, he recited Randall’s address, then hung up. “Why would Myles do that? Why would he let the guy in?”

Whoever it was wore a hoodie and kept their head down, face away from the camera. “It looks like Billy,” she said. “Same build. Maybe he talked his way in?”

Tai squeezed the back of his neck. “That makes sense. There were no pings on the security system.”

Paige made a strangled sound. “There’s no realtime satellite coverage. We might get eyes on the property in another twenty minutes or so.”

Bridger gave Jane a long look. “Whoever that is, your preacher let them in. The guy hit Dressler in the head and took off. With Zack Myles.”

“The incursion was over ten minutes ago,” Fenn observed. “Since we haven’t heard from the target, my guess is he didn’t go willingly.”

Head whirling, Jane pressed a hand to her mouth. Why would the pastor let the guy in? Both Bridger and Tai had drilled him and Randall on safety procedures. Don’t go outside. Don’t hang out near windows. Don’t fiddle with the security system.

“I don’t know.” Bridger shrugged, responding to her unasked question. “We’ll figure it out,” he added, before addressing his team. “Paige and Mason, secure the perimeter and hunker down here. The rest of you, let’s hit it.”

The team sprang into action, their movements precise and controlled. They pressed tiny transmitters into their ears, checking the comm lines, then Bridger and his part of the team headed out.

Jane sank down on a stool. Adrenaline flooded her, shooting liquid energy through her limbs. For the first time, she was grateful she’d never known when Jason was on an op. The stress was so much worse than the vague, sickening ache she’d felt every day he was in Special Ops.

This was a vicious, searing pain. Because one way or another, someone

she knew might die in the next few hours.  
If they hadn't already.

FOOT on the gas the whole way, Bridger got the team to Randall Dressler's spread way ahead of emergency services. Sirens whined low in the valley. Still at least ten minutes out, he figured. Not a surprise, given that the small sheriff's department patrolled thousands of square miles, and the only paid EMTs were an hour away in the larger town of Buttermilk Valley.

Not that he was worried for Dressler's safety. The guy had been coherent on the phone. Mostly. Still, the lapses in logic could easily be explained by the attack.

The team approached the front door, quickly scattering so they wouldn't be in the line of fire if anything happened. No telling what a frightened civilian could do. Fenn and Tai headed around the back while Kate covered Bridger's six as he headed up the front steps.

Careful to keep his body away from the door, he knocked hard. "Dressler? It's Bridger North. I brought reinforcements."

Footsteps pounded down the marble hall. "Perimeter's clear," Tai said in his ear.

Bridger relaxed, a little. Dressler could still come out shooting. Anything was possible when civilians got rattled.

The man yanked open the door and stared out, a bloody towel in one hand. Pale and shaking, he waved Bridger and Kate inside.

While the man babbled, Bridger checked the hallway beyond. No sign of movement. A second later, Tai and Fenn appeared.

"I never saw the guy," Dressler insisted. "I was in the media room." His gaze shifted to the ground. The man was clearly embarrassed.

Bridger eyed the oversized foyer with its six-foot chandelier. "You

probably have a top-of-the-line sound system,” he observed, trying to coax the man to focus.

Dressler smiled faintly. “Rocks the whole house when I crank it up.”

“Nice. What were you watching?”

“Basketball. The Warriors are trying to make the playoffs. I have money on the game....” He cleared his throat. “I heard Pastor head into the kitchen, but....” Dressler shrugged helplessly. “The next thing I knew, he was shouting. I ran in, but the guy hit me before I saw anything.” He pointed at the kitchen. “I woke up on the floor.”

He pressed the towel back to his temple.

Tai pulled his hand away. “Let me take a look at that.”

Blood trickled from a contusion at the corner of the man’s eye. The skull was thinner there. Tai was the medic, not Bridger, but even he knew that was a dangerous spot to take a hit.

He shared a look with Tai. Dressler’s story matched up with the video footage.

“I found something,” Fenn said over the comlink. “A cell phone.”

While Tai tended to Dressler, Bridger and Kate headed for the kitchen. Fenn was on his haunches photographing a smashed cell phone on the floor between the counter and the back door. The screen was splintered, the case, too. About ten feet away, just inside the entry from the hall, blood spatters made a trail back toward the front door. Dressler’s most likely.

Documentation complete, Fenn rose, the device in his gloved hand. Sirens blared. Closer now. Maybe another minute or two.

Fenn held up the device, back toward Bridger. A white label with Myles’s name covered the back. “Looks like your preacher’s. We saving this for the cops?”

Bridger eyed the abused device. “Why not?”

Dressler hurried in, towel still to his head. “What if there’s evidence on it? I don’t want to wait for the sheriff to try and figure this out. They’re barely computer literate. You must know people who can—”

Bridger held up a hand. “Calm down.”

The man wasn’t wrong, he just didn’t understand what Paige could do with a computer. She had no need of a broken phone to gain access to every text the preacher had ever sent, or anything else about the man’s digital life.

The sirens died in a final series of yips. Red and blue lights flashed through the floor-to-ceiling windows in the entry. Cue the cavalry.

“Time for you all to disappear,” Bridger announced. “Tai and Kate, drop Fenn at Jane’s place, then swing by the Peckham’s house. Find out what they know about their son’s whereabouts. Paige, we need access to Zack Myles’ phone records ASAP. I’ll hang here and talk to the authorities. We’ll rendezvous back at Jane’s place.”

The team scattered, disappearing with practiced ease long before the deputy and the pair of EMTs made it to the front door.

While the techs checked Dressler for damage, Bridger slipped out the front door to fill Paige and Mason in on the details over the comlink. Jane would be anxious for info.

He went over Dressler’s story and explained about Myles’ phone. Tai and Fenn filled in the other details so Paige and Mason were up to speed. They’d clue Jane in.

“So this Dressler guy didn’t see anything? No description at all?” Mason asked.

Bridger could only wish. “Nope. The guy was in a dark room watching basketball.”

Mason groaned. “So we have no firm ID on the intruder, and no idea where they’ve taken the victim.”

“That pretty much sums things up.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Paige added over the link.

The ache between Bridger’s shoulder blades released some. He didn’t have to do this alone. He had a team again. “Talk to me.”

“I’ve got satellite imagery from before the attack,” she said. “The only car on the road in the past several hours matches the description of Billy Peckham’s vehicle. There’s been no satellite coverage for the past hour, so I don’t have footage of the car leaving Dressler’s place, and I can’t track it again for another ninety minutes or so, but that’s what I have so far.”

“Copy that,” Tai said. “I’ll have info from our target’s parents in a sec.”

Bridger strode back into the house. He’d give the wide-eyed young deputy ten minutes, then he’d borrow one of Dressler’s expensive rides and get himself back to Jane’s place.

Once Paige pinpointed Peckham’s location, he wanted the team together, ready for an extraction.

They’d find Myles. But would it be in time?

“NICE RIDE,” Mason said as he opened Jane’s front door for Bridger.

Bridger tossed him the keys to the vintage Jag he’d eased in next to his Jeep. “Rides like a go-cart.”

The smells wafting out from Jane’s kitchen seemed at odds with the seriousness of the mission. Sugar cookies and kidnapping didn’t exactly mix. Though he couldn’t deny the way the comforting scents eased his tension.

Still, no amount of comfort food on earth could erase the fact that Peckham had sprung the trap early, and the pastor might pay the ultimate price.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and headed for the voices in the kitchen, his jaw so tight he knew he wouldn’t be able to eat a thing.

At least it wasn’t Jane in danger. *Thank you, Lord.*

It probably wasn’t very Christian of him, but her life meant more to him than anything. He’d do everything in his power to save Myles, as would his team, but if it was Jane in trouble....

He scrubbed the awful images from his mind with ruthless efficiency. There was a time for reflection. This was not it.

Hair pulled back in a simple ponytail, Jane was bent over the oven, pulling out a sheet of golden cookies. His heart stopped. Just flat stopped. She was such a vision. So pretty. So kind. So innocent.

He wished he could shelter her from whatever evil the pastor had brought into her town. And from the even bigger evil her brother was likely fighting.

“Is Randall all right?” she asked as she turned around.

He nodded. “He’ll have a headache for a good while. The EMTs wanted him to get checked out at the hospital, but he refused. I don’t blame him. He

did agree to let friends check up on him every hour or so.”

Tai and Fenn reached for the tray of cookies.

“Guys,” Jane warned. “They’re hot.”

Tai ignored her, scooping up a handful of treats he had to juggle like hot potatoes. “No worries. Better to suffer than lose out.” He glared at Mason. “Some people take more than their share.”

That made Jane laugh. “I’m baking as fast as I can.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “These two are bottomless pits. It never ends. I warn you.”

Ignoring the byplay, Bridger asked Kate and Tai what they’d found out from Billy’s parents.

Tai pulled a face. “Nothing that’s gonna help.”

“They were very cooperative,” Kate added. “They just have no idea where he is.”

“He left around ten a.m. for his weekly psychiatrist appointment in Buttermilk Valley,” Tai said. “The parents made that a condition of him living at home.”

Bridger blew out a breath. “Let me guess. He missed his appointment.”

Tai cocked a finger at him like a gun. “Hasn’t been seen since. The parents weren’t aware that he’d blown off his appointment until we showed up. They have permission from Billy to confirm his visits, but he’s been really regular lately so they stopped checking. They haven’t tried to confirm them in over a month.” He paused to devour a cookie. “When he didn’t get back, they figured he stopped somewhere between Buttermilk Valley and home to hike. Apparently he does that a lot. They called the shrink while I was there. Billy was a no show today.”

“Paige?” Bridger called out.

But the woman was already typing away, her pixie-ish features lit with an inner fire. “On it.”

She shook her head. “Peckham’s phone stopped registering at oh-nine-hundred this morning, so that’s a no-go for now. But I’ve got some interesting data on Zack Myles. Just before his phone got smashed, he received a text.” She read it out loud.

*Knock. Knock.*

*I’m at the back door.*

*Come out now, or your wife dies.*

*Yeah. I found her.*

Tai groaned. “That’s not good.”

“You think?” Bridger couldn’t help the bite in his tone. No wonder Myles opened the door.

Hands on his hips, he paced the floor, letting the text sink into his brain. Why not kill the pastor where he stood? The guy had been making threats. He could have ended it right there. He made a face. “Our perp’s not finished playing with his prey.”

Fenn snatched one of Tai’s cookies and zoomed out of reach. “The guy wants to make a statement. Putting a bullet in the preacher would fall kinda flat. No drama, right?”

“Seriously.” Tai agreed.

Everything Peckham—or whoever they were chasing—had done had been over the top. The bomb at the parsonage. The rock through the window. Their guy wanted to make a point.

That would take time and planning. And opportunity.

Bridger snagged the last cookie off the tray, waggling it as he considered the various elements. The bolt of recognition hit him hard, the way it usually did on those excellent occasions when all the puzzle pieces fell into place.

The room had quieted. The team—and Jane—were watching him.

He snapped his fingers. “I think I know where the perp took the pastor.”

But Paige wouldn’t have access to live satellite feeds for another half an hour. Way too long to wait to confirm his suspicions.

They’ll have to confirm his hunch the old fashioned way. Boots on the ground.

Tai stuffed the last of his cookie into his mouth. “We heading out?”

“Affirmative.” Bridger pointed at Mason. “You and Paige hang here with Jane. Stay out of sight. Stay silent.”

He didn’t have to tell the professional bodyguard his business, but this was Jane they were talking about. Luckily, Mason didn’t take offense, he merely nodded and pulled his sidearm out of its holster.

Jane’s eyes narrowed and her lips flattened into a line of displeasure. “You might need us.”

No. He wouldn’t. Not her. Especially not her.

“I need you here,” he said, making full eye contact. “I need you safe. It’s the only way I can do my job.”

His words obviously startled her. She’d clearly been prepared to argue, but for whatever reason, she backed down, her body relaxing. Okay. One less



battle to fight.

Tai crossed his arms over his chest and shot Bridger a steely look. “You wanna clue us in here, boss?”

Before he could open his mouth, Paige shot to her feet, waving her hand like a kid in school. “You think they’re at the church.”

He blinked in surprise, though he had ample reason to respect her deductive skills. More than ample reason. The petite analyst had saved the team’s bacon on more than one occasion.

“Bingo.” He acknowledged her guess. “It’s the only place with all the elements.” He ticked the points off on his fingers. “The perp already knows the layout. It’s not being guarded....”

“And the symbolism is perfect,” Kate added. “High drama.”

“You know it.”

And if he was wrong, it would be no harm, no foul. They didn’t have any other leads to chase for the moment. Once Paige got the new satellite data, they could pivot if need be.

Everyone looked pleased with his reasoning, except Jane. She perched on a barstool, her face a mask of bleak despair. “I just hope you get there in time.”

Yeah. Him, too.

*I NEED YOU SAFE.*

The words filled a space in Jane's heart she hadn't even known existed.

Though she lived a quiet life, it was a secure one. She took care of others, and they watched out for her. Her friends and neighbors would drop anything to help her, and Jason would lay down his life for her, but this was the first time a perfect stranger had made her safety a priority.

The thought was humbling. And thrilling.

Blood rushed to her cheeks, and her heart did a little two-step. Bridger could never settle for a life like hers, but that didn't keep her from dreaming for a precious instant.

"I'm such an idiot." Paige's exclamation pulled Jane out of her pleasant daydream.

Mason glanced over from his perch in the corner of the living room.

"What're you thinking?"

Paige paused, her fingers hovering above her keyboard. "Myles would have called his wife."

Mason and Jane exchanged a puzzled look.

"When he got that threatening text," Paige explained. "He would have called her."

Mason rubbed his chin, eyes never leaving the front yard. "Sure. Yeah. Makes sense."

The sound of keystrokes filled the room.

Paige pointed at her screen. "He did. They talked for seventeen seconds, and then he let the bad guy in the back door."

"Too bad you can't get a transcript of that call," Mason muttered.

“Calls aren’t automatically recorded,” Paige told Jane. “Just texts.” She frowned at the screen. “That’s weird.”

“What?” Jane asked.

Paige’s fingers flew over the keyboard. “Tell you in a sec.”

She stopped typing and blinked at the screen.

Mason checked the rounds in his handgun. “What?”

Paige turned toward them, clearly concerned. “She’s here. Vangie Myles is here. Or at least the burner phone is.”

Mason shoved the gun in the holster at the base of his spine. “Here in Redemption Creek?”

She nodded.

“Are you saying Billy Peckham kidnapped Vangie and brought her here?” Jane could believe Billy guilty of threatening people he imagined to be sinners, but why torment the pastor’s wife?

Paige scrunched up her face. “Not necessarily. The delay between the pastor’s outgoing call and answer from the other end seemed way too long. I just ran the Myles’ credit cards. Someone purchased a burner phone over two months ago. I’m guessing it’s Vangie. She’s been routing the calls to and from her husband through it.” She shook her head. “Not bright to pay with plastic. How did I miss that?”

Mason clapped a hand on her shoulder. “You weren’t looking. Seeing what’s not there’s the hardest skill there is.”

Paige blew out a breath that ruffled her blonde bangs. “Thanks for that.”

He nodded. “Can you pinpoint her location?”

Paige was already typing “Oh no. Not good.” She scraped a hank of hair out of her eyes. “The burner phone’s at the church.”

Before Jane could digest the information, Mason activated his comlink. “Yo, guys? We think Vangie Myles is at the church. Or at least her burner phone is.” He tapped the link again. “Okay,” he said to Jane and Paige. “They’re aware. They’re still five minutes from the location.”

Paige caught Jane’s eye. “They got this. Not a problem.”

Jane nodded, trying to swallow around the sharp lump in her throat. Unless they were too late. The one possibility Paige was careful not to mention.

“I’ll have satellite imagery in less than ten minutes,” Paige said. “This area’s sparsely populated, so surveillance satellite coverage is thin, at best. We should have a live feed for fifteen or twenty minutes before the satellite

passes out of range.”

Mason frowned out at the driveway. “Can you tell how long the phone’s been here?”

“Two days.” Paige didn’t even hesitate.

“Why use a burner phone?” Jane wondered out loud.

“To hide her location,” Paige responded. “Her husband probably has her on a friend finder app. Most people who share a phone account do, especially spouses.”

Mason remained motionless at the edge of the window, like a predator awaiting prey. “The more interesting question is why would she want to conceal her location from her clueless hubby?”

Jane’s head spun. So much deception. “Billy—or whoever we’re after—could have kidnapped her and brought her up here two days ago.”

Paige cocked her head, clearly considering that. “Sure. I could see that. A definite possibility.”

Mason grunted. “No use speculating until we have more hard intel. Paige, let me know when you—” He pulled back from the edge of the window, his hand going to his weapon. “Hold up. We’ve got company.” He eyed the two of them. “Get behind the counter. Now.”

Paige was out of her seat with lightning speed, grabbing Jane’s arm and pulling her down behind the breakfast bar.

“It’s Dressler,” Mason called out.

Paige touched her ear, activating her comlink. “Randall Dressler just pulled up.”

“He’s approaching the door.” Mason narrated the action as coolly as if he were watching a dog walker stroll past. “He doesn’t look armed, but I want you two to stay down. I’ve got this.”

Jane held her breath. Mason wouldn’t shoot the man, would he? Randall probably had some good reason for—

A fist pounded on the door. “Jane? It’s me. Randall. Please let me in. Hurry!”

Pistol in hand, Mason stood next to the door, one hand on the knob. “Hang tight, there, cowboy.”

Jane couldn’t hear Randall’s response, but Mason’s deep voice cut through the air. He spoke with clipped, military precision. “Hands in the air, Dressler. Back away from the door.”

His back to Jane and Paige, he spoke again. “A little help here, Paige?”

Jane, you stay put.”

Paige hurried to his side.

“I’m going to let him inside. As soon as I shut the door, you frisk him. Then we’ll search him for bugs.”

Paige moved in behind Mason. “Copy that.”

Jane clasped her shaking hands together and prayed. She wished she had Paige’s fortitude. The woman sounded so calm. So strong.

Of course Randall Dressler wouldn’t be a threat to seasoned operatives.

She inched her way to the edge of the bar, peeking around the corner.

Despite Mason’s order, she had to look.

The cold night air billowed in along with the lanky form of Randall Dressler, hands laced together behind his head, like a man about to be arrested.

Mason kicked the door shut behind him and locked it before pulling Randall away from the door. “Search him,” he ordered Paige.

She patted Randall down with quick efficiency and then waved a palm-sized device around his entire body. “He’s clean.”

Mason waved him into the living room. “What do you need, Dressler?”

Randall made it to the couch in three jerky steps, eyes wide as he scanned the room. “Where’s Jane? Is she okay?”

“You can come out,” Mason announced.

Jane rose from her hiding place, feeling like a kid playing hide and seek. If the situation weren’t so dire, she might have laughed.

Randall looked relieved. He moved toward her, but Mason yanked him back so hard he almost lost his balance. “Stay put, dude.”

Randall’s eyes widened, but he didn’t argue. “I’m sorry. I had to come. I have information.”

Mason didn’t appear impressed. “You could have called.”

Randall raised his arms in a helpless gesture. “I tried the sheriff, but his phone went to voicemail. I left him the information, but I want to make sure someone acts on it.”

Unlike Randall, Mason seemed fully at ease. He folded his arms over his impressive chest and waited.

“Okay. Okay. That’s not the real reason.” Randall thrust his fingers in his hair, making his wavy hair stand on end. “I’m freaked out. I wanted company. I figured you guys wouldn’t mind.”

Jane had to stop herself from going to the poor man. Mason wouldn’t like

her touching him. She settled for a gentle smile. "Of course. Might as well wait this out together."

Randall smiled back. "Thanks."

Neither Paige nor Mason added any words of encouragement. She caught the strained look that flew between them. She appreciated their vigilance, but Randall was clearly a wreck. The company wouldn't hurt.

Randall gave her a watery smile. "Do I smell cookies?"

"They're gone." Mason's gaze moved from Randall to the curtained window and back again. "So what's this information?"

"I think I know where Billy Peckham is." Randall swallowed hard, making his Adam's apple bob. "As of an hour ago, he was heading toward the church."

Mason eyed Randall. "You said you didn't see your attacker."

"I didn't see his face." Randall insisted. "This is new information. Someone in town saw Peckham's car."

One of Mason's dark eyebrows soared toward his hairline. He nodded at Paige, the movement almost imperceptible.

She was already back at her computer. "Sats are back up. The only vehicle at the church is ours."

Randall made an impatient sound. "This is important info. My mother's hairdresser just called her. She saw Peckham's car going past her house over an hour ago. She lives down the street from the church. I've known Mrs. Miller my whole life. She wouldn't lie."

"But you might," Mason said.

Randall's jaw dropped. "Why would I lie? Peckham's dangerous. I'm sure he's the one that attacked me. What's to say he won't try again?"

The best reason yet to believe Randall's tale. He was nice enough, but the guy had always been more than a little self-centered.

Mason seemed to agree. "Car could be in the parsonage garage," he said to Paige.

She nodded. "Or gone by now. We've got no data to go on. The satellite pass is complete. It'll take me a couple hours to access any recorded data."

Mason never took his eyes off Randall. "Dressler's been secured," he said over the comlink. "He says Peckham's car was spotted on the road toward the church an hour ago." He paused, listening. "Copy that. You kids stay safe."

"What's going on?" Randall asked.

Mason scratched his cheek. "Not sure. Whatever it is, it's not good. The

team's pulling into the church lot now. They confirm there are no vehicles visible in the immediate vicinity, but Tai's drones registered one live body in the parsonage."

Randall's mouth dropped open. "Just one? Is it Vangie?"

"No idea," Mason said. "All we know for certain is there's one person alive in there. Could be Peckham. Could be Myles or his wife."

"The nut job probably took Vangie with him." Randall said. "Your people need to search the highway. We need to call the sheriff."

Mason pointed at Randall, then at the dining room table. "Sit down and keep quiet. You move, I tie you up. You talk, I add a gag. Get it?"

Jane expected Randall to argue, but apparently good sense prevailed. Mouth crimped into a pout, he flung himself down in the chair.

Too nervous to sit still, she grabbed a dishrag, wiping the spotless countertop. "What now?"

Paige gave her a sympathetic look. "Now we wait."

"And pray," Mason added. "It never hurts."

The four of them bowed their heads as Mason lifted a plea for the team's safety, and for Pastor Zack.

Her heart ached and her nerves felt like they were on fire, but the quiet SEAL was right. Praying never hurt.

“YOU DON’T THINK the perp would set another IED, do you?” Tai asked from the passenger seat of the Jeep.

Bridger pulled off the road out of sight of the parsonage. “Why not? It worked last time.”

Tai snorted. “Kind of. They missed their target.”

Yeah. And Jane. Barely.

He tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel, shoving any thoughts of Jane’s sweet face out of his mind, calling up the hyper-focus he’d honed over years running ops. Two deep breaths, and his mind was centered, his emotions blanked out.

He killed the engine, wondering what they were walking into. Tai handled his high-tech drones like a maestro, but there was only so much info tech could provide. They’d dropped Kate and Fenn at the intersection of the highway. The pair would hike around the back side of the property and report in, ready to provide cover fire. Or help with a rescue.

Tai sprang out of the vehicle, his eyes on the screen of his drone controller. “No movement inside.” He shoved a hank of hair out of his eyes and pointed at the parsonage. “That old chimney’ll work. I’m sending in a sensor drone now.”

With the windows on the left side covered in plywood, and blast marks scoring the white paint, the wounds to the tidy building were all too obvious. Bridger sighed. Sometimes he missed the old days, when surveillance meant actual human intel.

The tiniest flicker of black sped across the sky and disappeared down the chimney. Tai’s sensor drones were less than half the size of a cell phone. Or a



house finch. And they moved a lot faster. Unless you knew where to look, you'd never see one.

"Whoa." The big man frowned down at his screen. He activated his comlink. "A friendly safety alert, folks. We got dimethyl methane. High concentration."

Bridger rolled his eyes. "English, please?"

"Propane," Fenn answered over comms.

"Someone's been doing their homework." Tai sounded impressed, then his tone turned serious. "It's close to lethal levels. Whoever's in there, we gotta get them out ASAP." He looked at Bridger. "Let me send in a camera drone. We need to know if there are any booby traps set."

Bridger nodded. While Tai got the second drone up and running, he considered their options. No time to alert law enforcement. Plus, calling in deputies would only put more people in danger. Time enough to inform the sheriff's department once they rescued the victim and secured the area. Once they had the situation handled, he'd take whatever tongue lashing the old-school sheriff wanted to dish out.

Like most of the buildings on the fringe of the small town, the church compound used propane for heat, and probably cooking. He activated the comlink. "Kate or Fenn, you see the propane tank?"

"Roger that." Kate's competent voice came through clearly. "It's about fifty feet from the northwest corner of the main house."

"Can you get to it safely? We need it turned off."

"No problemo," Fenn responded. "Captain Hackett is in position to cover me. That is if you're okay with protecting my very fine rear end," he teased Kate.

"I'd rather eat dirt," she responded, clearly not a fan of Fenn's sense of humor.

"Don't worry. She loves me," Fenn said. "Here I go."

A minute later, his report came over the comlink. "There's no booby trap on the valve. Gas is shut off."

"Copy that." Tai responded first, his attention on his tablet. "We've got one body on the ground. It's the preacher. No electronic devices armed, as far as I can tell, and no telltale wires hanging off the doorknobs or anything." He caught Bridger's eye. "Except for the gas, it looks clear. I say we're good to go."

Bridger nodded. Every second that ticked by lowered their chances of

retrieving the pastor alive. “Let’s do this.” He activated his comlink. “Tai and I are approaching the building.”

He headed for the compound at a quick trot, using the thick shrubbery to obscure himself from view. Tai had only read one body inside, most likely the intended victim, but he had no intention of making himself—or his team—a target.

“This is gonna be tricky,” he warned. Propane ignited instantly. They could be walking into a booby trap. Even if the place wasn’t rigged to blow on entry, the tiniest spark could send the place up.

Tai followed on his heels. He outweighed Bridger by fifty pounds, but he moved just as silently. They stopped next to the front door, each flanking a side.

Bridger addressed the others over comms. “We’re heading in. Stay sharp.”

“And stay back,” Tai added. “If this thing goes, the blast zone’ll encompass your positions. Stay alert and stay down.”

Both Kate and Fenn responded with two quick bursts of static.

Bridger strode up the front steps, thankful for his rubber-soled boots. He extracted his lock pick set, poised to handle the deadbolt.

Tai grabbed his arm. “The smallest spark. You know that, right?”

“I’m aware.”

The front door sagged, but it hadn’t been blown off its hinges in the first explosion last week. He was good with locks. He’d have it open in a heartbeat. Hopefully, the workings of the deadbolt and doorknob hadn’t been too badly damaged. If he edged the door open slowly, they might be able to retrieve the victim without getting dead.

He extracted his lock picks from his pocket, careful not to let them clank against each other. Despite the need for speed, he took a second to lift a prayer.

“Dear Lord, protect my team, and the victim inside. Help me stay clear-headed.”

“And steady-handed,” Tai added from his side of the door.

Bridger grunted. Not a bad ask, given the risk.

But the Lord provided an even better solution. The door wasn’t even latched, let alone locked. He eyed Tai, who shrugged. If there was a booby trap, it wasn’t obvious. That was the best they’d get in terms of a guarantee.

And with every breath, the unconscious man inside was dying.

“Heading in,” Bridger announced over comms. He sucked in a deep breath. Even outside, the air was tinged with the nauseating stench of the sulfur compound used to give propane its awful rotten egg smell. He held his breath and pulled the door open with a slow, steady movement.

The gas rushing out made his eyes water. Cheeks bulging, and lips pressed into a tight line, Tai followed him inside. Unlike him, the big man had thought to pull on a pair of goggles.

Bridger blinked hard, trying to ignore the sting of the gas. With the door hanging open, the gas would dissipate quickly. Far less chance of ignition now. He hurried to the preacher’s side and pressed his finger to the man’s carotid artery.

He caught a pulse. Weak and thready, but clearly there. They’d made it in time. He nodded at Tai and gripped the man beneath the shoulders. Tai headed for the man’s feet, stopping to pocket a piece of paper next to Myles’ hip.

Between the two of them, they got the man outside before their lungs burst. The air barely stirred, but at least there was enough movement to help the gas drift eastward, away from the house. They set the unconscious man upwind of the open door and gasped for air.

“We’re out,” Bridger told Kate and Fenn as soon as he had enough air in his lungs to speak.

His teammates rounded the far corner of the parsonage an instant later, both heading straight for the pastor’s prone body.

“He gonna make it?” Bridger asked while he watched Kate and Fenn check him for vitals. Red-faced and slack-jawed, the unconscious man was barely breathing. Vomit trickled from the edge of his mouth.

“I think so.” Fenn grabbed a penlight from the med kit in his backpack and checked the man’s pupils. Then he shook his head, staring up at Kate. “Pupils are dilated, response is sluggish.”

She bit her lip. “Getting him outside should have helped.” She looked up at Bridger. “I think he’s been drugged.”

That made sense. Myles hadn’t been restrained in any way, and there was no indication that he’d taken a blow. Unless he’d been incapacitated somehow, he would have simply walked out of the house at the first sign of a major gas leak.

Tai toed the man’s foot. “Not gonna get any answers from him anytime soon.”

“No.” That was unfortunate. Myles held the key now. He’d know who lured him back to the bombed-out parsonage. And why. He might even know what the killer had planned next. Was Jane still on the perp’s radar?

The back of his neck tightened. He dug the heel of his hand into the taut muscles. “Time to contact the sheriff.”

Tai wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve and pulled the paper out of his pocket. He scanned it quickly, then handed it to Bridger. “Handwriting looks the same as the note Peckham threw through Jane’s window.”

Yeah, it did. Thick and disorganized, the letters marched unevenly across the paper.

*You have defiled the bonds of matrimony. The time is now. The punishment: death.*

TAI TOOK the note from his hand. “You should go. We can handle the sheriff.”

Bridger nodded, his gaze on Kate and Fenn, still ministering to Zach Myles. Whoever wanted Myles dead clearly hadn’t planned on him being found before the propane asphyxiated him. A smart way to commit murder, if it had worked. By the time the preacher was discovered, the killer could be hundreds of miles away.

He paced the dirt lot, trying to calm his racing mind. Leaving Myles to die alone helped with an alibi. It also worked if a killer had more victims in mind. Like Jane.

He tapped Tai on the arm. “I have to get to Jane. You got this?”

“You bet. Git.”

He headed for the Jeep at a full run. If Peckham was the killer, he clearly thought Jane and Myles were adulterers.

Either way, Jane was still in danger.

He leapt over a frost-tinged sage, activating his comlink before his feet hit the dirt. “Yo, kids. Our perp’s in the wind. Might be heading in your direction. Stay on full alert. I’m on my way.”

WHILE THEY WAITED for word from Bridger, Jane tried to keep busy. The kitchen was already spotless, the counters and sink polished to a mirror finish. She opened the fridge and pulled the condiments out of the door. Maybe she should arrange them by color?

She did a mental eye roll and set the first jar back exactly where it had been. She couldn't stop thinking about Paige's discovery. Why would Vangie Myles get a burner phone? And why would it be in Redemption Creek when she was supposed to be in a secluded place hours away?

Randall slumped at the dining table and picked at his cuticles. "It's hard to believe Billy Peckham could have gotten to Vangie. He's not that smart."

Paige squinted in thought. "Crazy doesn't mean stupid."

"True." Jane couldn't disagree. Billy had been smart enough to complete divinity school. Clearly, the mental illness hadn't drained away all his intelligence.

She lifted a pickle jar to the light, trying to remember when she'd last opened it. The waiting was awful. She expected to hear an explosion any second. If they'd even hear it five miles away. The only explosives she'd ever come in contact with were the sticks of dynamite ranchers used to blow apart stubborn tree stumps.

Randall's fidgeting didn't help. One long leg pumped up and down, and he picked at his fingers, so intent on his task it was a wonder the man had any cuticles left.

When the communication came, it was obvious. Both Paige and Mason looked like they'd been shocked with a jolt of electricity. They shared a long look.

“What?” Randall asked, half rising from his seat. “What’s happening?” Mason ignored him. “Copy that,” he said over the comlink.

Finally he turned his attention to her and Randall. “The team’s okay. The pastor, too. There was an explosive device, but they disarmed it. There’s no sign of Vangie or Peckham. Bridger’s on his way over.”

Randall looked like he was about to throw up. “Was she there? Was Vangie there?”

Mason shook his head. “No sign of her. The only life sign they detected was Myles, and they got him out.”

Randall put his head in his hands. “It was Peckham. He’s crazy. We all know it. But what about Vangie? What did he do with her?”

“No idea yet. Looks like the pastor’s been heavily drugged. They won’t get anything out of him for a while.”

“Maybe Peckham kidnapped her,” Randall said.

Mason dismissed the idea with a quick gesture. “She’s not the one he’s been threatening.”

“Not true,” Jane said. “This started with the extortion attempts, and threats to Vangie.”

Paige looked up. “That’s right. Maybe we’ve been looking in the wrong place. At the wrong people. Why blackmail a pastor?” She wondered out loud. “It’s not like there’s a lot of money in it.”

“If this Peckham guy’s mentally ill, he might not have a good reason,” Mason pointed out.

Billy wasn’t stupid. She could picture him becoming obsessed with the idea that the man who “stole” the position he thought was rightfully his was an adulterer, but then the blackmail angle made no sense.

While Mason paced and Randall fidgeted, Paige continued her research. Jane had just given up on the fridge when Paige backed from the table, shaking her head. “I’ve been over Myles’s financials ten times. There’s no hidden money. No Swiss Bank account. No way the pastor has the money for a big payment. He’s got nothing of value but that life insurance policy.”

Jane’s stomach lurched. The puzzle pieces suddenly clicked together. The realization made her lightheaded. None of this benefited Billy Peckham, but Vangie Myles stood to make a fortune.

Mason stiffened like a bird dog on a scent, confirming the horrible feeling in Jane’s gut. Could the woman actually be trying to murder her spouse?

Mason leaned over the back of Paige’s chair, staring at the screen over

her shoulder. “How much is the policy worth?”

“A million dollars.”

He whistled through his teeth. “Well there we go.”

“But it wouldn’t go to Billy.”

“No,” Paige said. “It wouldn’t.”

Jane looked at Randall.

He had stilled, looking strained and frightened, but not shocked. “No,” he protested. “Vangie would never... It’s impossible.”

“Not necessarily.” Mason touched his comlink. “Hey, guys, heads up—”

But before he could finish the sentence, the window in the dining room shattered.

The sound followed an instant later. A gunshot.

Mason rushed her, shoving her to the floor. Her shoulder bit into the carpet. She braced herself for his weight, but he held himself over her, careful to keep his body off her. “You okay?”

“I think so.” Her forearm stung. The side of her face, too, close to her hairline. But as far as she could tell, that was it.

Somewhere behind her, Randall cried out. “She cut me. The crazy woman cut me.”

Mason squeezed Jane’s shoulder. “Stay down,” he whispered, and peeled himself off her.

Two more shots rang out. One blew out the window over the kitchen sink, showering Paige’s back with broken glass.

Randall clapped a hand to the side of his face. Blood gushed between his fingers, running down his neck and staining his crisp white shirt.

A terrible realization hit her, stealing the air from her lungs.

They’d been chasing the wrong person.

MASON SLAMMED RANDALL against the wall, pinning the thinner man with a hand to the throat. “That’s Vangie Myles outside, isn’t it?”

All Randall could do was gurgle. He pulled his hands away from his face to tug on Mason’s arm, revealing a six-inch gash from the corner of his eye to his jaw.

Jane’s stomach lurched. She looked away.

Paige flew to Mason’s side yanking on his arm until he released Randall and stepped back.

Hand back to the wound, Randall sagged against the wall. “I d-don’t know.”

Mason shook off Paige’s grip and grabbed Randall by the shoulder, yanking him toward the front door. “I know a good way to find out. How about you have a look?”

“Stop!” Randall struggled against his hold. Blood poured off the edge of his jaw, soaking his shirt. “Okay. It’s her.” He pulled free, casting a terrified look at the front door. “She’s crazy. She’ll kill all of us. Just like she killed Billy.”

Jane felt the floor tilt beneath her. *Randall knew all along.*

Neither Mason nor Paige reacted to his revelation. Either they didn’t understand the significance, or...

Or they were professionals. She groaned silently. She was so far out of her element, she had no idea how to react. Or how to help.

Paige whipped out her own gun. Small and stylish, but every bit as deadly looking as Mason’s intimidating weapon.

Mason raised his weapon, sitting on Randall. “You meant like you and



Vangie killed Peckham, right? You were part of this all along. My guess is you were supposed to meet her after the bombing and ride off into the sunset together.”

“No!” Randall protested, but the word sounded forced, even to Jane’s untrained ear. “She wanted me to help her, but I wouldn’t.” He caught Jane’s eye. Blood poured between his fingers. “You know me. I’d never kill anyone. I told her she was crazy. Said I’d call the police if she went through with it. That’s why I came here. I wanted to make sure I had witnesses.”

Jane couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Are you saying Vangie Myles knocked you out?”

“I g-guess so. I never saw her face.”

Mason looked unmoved. “You are a seriously bad liar, dude. But we can discuss that later. With the sheriff.” He grabbed a dishcloth and tossed it at Randall before cocking his head toward Paige. “Watch him. I’ll take care of our other visitor.”

Gun in hand, Paige waved Randall back to his chair. “Copy that. I’ll fill in the team,” she told Mason, but he was already at the back door.

Jane protested. “Vangie’ll shoot you.”

“Doubtful.” Mason didn’t even turn around. He slipped silently out the door.

Jane turned to Paige, silently willing her to reason with her partner, but Paige shrugged. “She might have a gun, but clearly, the woman doesn’t know how to use it. Mason’s got this. Don’t worry.”

One eye on her prisoner, Paige activated her comlink. “We’ve got another situation here, kids. We’ve got Dressler neutralized, but we’ve got another visitor. If Dressler can be believed, Peckham’s dead, so we’re thinking Mrs. Pastor is paying us a visit. Armed and slightly dangerous. Dressler claims she killed Peckham. I’m assuming she took the vic’s car. Mason’s outside hunting her down. Interior is secure. You might want to get your rear ends back here ASAP.”

From the way Paige winced, Jane figured Bridger was venting his frustration over the comlink.

Paige winked at her. “She’s fine. A few scratches, but she’ll live.”

Jane couldn’t take her eyes off Randall Dressler. Now that she knew what he’d done, she could see the evil in him. The anger and fear and desperation. What if he lunged at them? He was more like a cornered animal now than a man.

“We should tie him up,” she suggested, once Paige finished her conversation. “I’ve got rope in the garage.”

Paige shook her head. “Not a great plan.”

Jane did a mental face palm. Leaving the security of the house was a stupid idea.

She closed her eyes, straining to hear. Would Mason be all right? She knew she shouldn’t worry, the man was scarily competent, but sometimes bad things happened.

As if to underline that point, a shot rang out. Jane bit down on a whimper. Randall ducked his head. Paige flinched slightly, then cocked her head, clearly listening to her comlink.

“Roger that,” she said finally, and grinned hard. “Mason got her. It’s all good.”

“Did he kill her?” Randall fired the question. “Is she dead?”

Jane’s legs gave out. She sank to the floor.

Weapon pointed straight at Randall’s chest, Paige closed in on him, hovering just out of reach. “If you have any other accomplices, you better tell me now.”

Randall shrank back, his mouth set in a stubborn line. “She’s not my accomplice. She’s crazy. She wanted me to... wanted us to....” He sent Jane a pleading look. “You can’t blame me for—”

Paige held up her free hand like a stop sign, cutting him off. “Say another word and I’ll shoot you.”

Randall snorted. “You’re not going to kill me.”

“Who said anything about killing?” She winked at Jane, then, eyes on Randall, she reached into her backpack, extracting a shocking yellow handgun. “I’ve been dying to try out this beauty. It packs three times the voltage of a Taser. I’m not convinced, though. Give me a reason to test it.”

Randall clenched his jaw until a muscle leapt beneath his uninjured cheek.

Jane shivered. How had she ever thought him handsome? Or harmless? The man before her looked mean and desperate, willing to do anything to save himself.

Even if that meant turning on his partner. Or killing two innocent men—and her—to get what he wanted.

And she’d been blind to his motives the entire time.

She closed her eyes, praying for relief from the chilling fear, and the

grace to find forgiveness.

A fist pounded on the door, sending her heart rate skyrocketing.

“Jane? Are you okay?” Bridger’s deep voice penetrated the wood.

Jane leapt to her feet, almost tripping in her haste to reach the door.

The door slammed open. Bridger filled the doorway, hands planted above his head, fingers digging into the wood. “Are you okay?” he repeated, eyes wide with concern.

Jane could only nod. She stepped back to allow him to enter. Except for the two small scratches on one cheek, he looked...great.

She backed into the living room, legs barely working. All this fear and stress must be cumulative. She couldn’t seem to get her brain in gear.

Weapon still trained on Randall, Paige grinned. “Way to make an entrance, boss.”

Bridger ignored her, his attention on Jane. He reached for her, pulling her into a hug. He was warm and strong. The only hint that he was anything but calm came from the rapid beat of his heart against her cheek.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, glorying in the hard feel of him. The safety.

He’d never be hers. Never fit into her calm, quiet world.

But for this moment, she could pretend.

AN HOUR LATER, after the EMTs had bandaged Dressler's cut and the two sheriff's deputies had cuffed him and Vangie Myles, Bridger's heart rate was just beginning to come down.

Two squad cars idled in front of Jane's house next to the ambulance. Sheriff Hammond had just arrived on scene. He wasn't happy that Bridger hadn't called in immediately, but he seemed to understand Bridger's reasoning. At the moment, he was outside getting details from Fenn and Tai and Kate—they had caught a ride back to Jane's with the first deputy on scene at the church.

Paige was tucked into a corner of the couch, the only area in the front of the house that wasn't covered in glass and blood. He and Mason wielded brooms while Jane vacuumed up the tiniest shards of glass. Once they had the kitchen and dining room cleared of debris, he'd mop up.

Fenn and Tai and Kate were outside, providing discreet protection. Not that Dressler or Vangie Myles were capable of breaking out of the squad cars.

He bent down to pick up one of the bigger shards of glass. His fingers shook. It was taking way longer than he wanted to admit to master the icy fear that shook him to the core. Jane could have died. Would have, if it weren't for Mason and Paige's quick thinking.

What if they'd ignored the threat to her?

Nausea roiled his belly. He clenched his teeth, willing himself to find the calculating calm that saw him through a decade of black ops work.

It had only been a week, but Jane had burrowed so far under his skin he'd never be the same.

And she had no idea.

If he had his way, she never would. She was Jason's baby sister, so that was a total no-go. Not that it mattered. He wasn't exactly relationship material himself. And he wasn't looking.

But all the perfect logic in the world couldn't stop the feels. He might pretend he didn't want a relationship, but he sure wanted to see where things with Jane might lead. He tossed the jagged glass in the big garbage can Mason had brought in. Tai and Fenn and Kate clomped back inside before he started down a bad, bad road.

"Whew." Tai pointed out the window at the squad cars just pulling out of the drive. "Those two are something else. Ten pounds of crazy in five-pound sacks."

The sheriff came in behind him. He snorted, shaking his head. "Haven't heard that phrase in a while."

"You get used to it." Bridger threw his buddy a look. "Kind of."

Pastor Myles was almost to the ER in Buttermilk Valley. The paramedics reported that he'd already regained consciousness.

All that was left was cleaning up the mess. Blood and glass everywhere. Thankfully, none of it hers. She'd gotten away with a few nicks from flying glass around her hairline.

A fact he'd already thanked his Savior for at least twenty times since he blew in the door.

"Did Vangie talk?" he asked the sheriff.

Hammond laughed dryly and sank down on one of the clean barstools. "Talk's not the word for it. Woman couldn't rat out Dressler fast enough. Same goes for him. The way those two have turned on each other, we won't even need to have trials. We could just turn 'em loose on each other."

He shook his head sadly and continued. "Turns out Vangie and Dressler had this planned for years. 'Fated lovers,' she said." He wrinkled his nose as if he'd gotten a whiff of rotten garbage. "Vangie knew her husband had been blackmailed a couple years before. She figured that was their way in. Start it up again and then they'd have a reason to kill Myles off."

Jane turned to Bridger, her beautiful eyes troubled. "That part never made any sense. Why kill the golden goose?"

Sheriff Hammond rubbed his bald pate. "Turns out this was never about the blackmail money. Jane was right about the life insurance. Dressler says the original plan was to make it look like a suicide. Despair over the blackmail."

“Clever,” Bridger acknowledged. “Only Jason started investigating. Ruined that plan pretty quick.”

Broom in hand, Mason sidled closer. “Why drag this out so long? If I had my mind set on a woman, I sure wouldn’t wait years.”

The sheriff rubbed the top of his bald head. “He didn’t say as much, yet, but my guess is Dressler wasn’t eager to commit. I think Vangie got tired of waiting. She started the blackmail then bullied him into helping.”

Fenn grabbed a mop and a spray bottle of cleaner. “She must have figured a spare million would sweeten the deal.”

“But Randall’s family’s wealthy.” Jane protested. “Vangie might need the money, but he wouldn’t. Certainly not enough to commit murder.”

Paige swung her laptop around so they could see the screen. “His family might have money, but Mr. Handsome’s flat broke.”

Tai clapped Mason on the shoulder. “Told you. You owe me lunch.”

“Fine.” Mason muttered.

“Oooh, food.” Paige sat up straighter. “Who’s up for pizza after this?”

Tai grabbed the vacuum from Bridger’s hand. “Give me that. You’re slower than molasses in January, Captain.”

Jane put a hand to her mouth, trying to hide a smile.

The crew got back to cleaning, the atmosphere decidedly more cheerful now.

But Jane’s grin faded fast.

Bridger put a hand on her arm, catching her attention. “What are you thinking?”

Her eyes were wide, and sad. “Are Randall and Vangie responsible for Jason’s disappearance?”

“Nah.”

“No way.”

“You kidding?”

Bridger, Mason, and Paige talked over each other.

Bridger squeezed her hand. “My guess is Myles told Dressler that Jason was helping him. That would have gotten their attention. They would have realized they’d have to rap this up quickly, before Jason uncovered their plot.”

She seemed to consider that for a second. “So when Jason disappeared, they probably thought he was off investigating them.”

“That’s my guess. And then Billy Peckham came back to town. It was the

perfect set up.”

The sheriff looked grim. “Poor kid.”

Jane’s expression morphed from fear to sadness. She looked up at Bridger. “You’re saying Vangie and Randall don’t have any information about my brother.”

“Unfortunately.”

She scrunched up her nose. “Then why did Randall show up at my house?”

“Covering his hind end,” Mason said. “He’s not wrong about Vangie being a little...” He circled his index finger next to his temple.

“Seems Randall takes care of Randall,” the sheriff added. “Showing up here was a win-win. If Vangie succeeded in killing her husband, Randall had an alibi.”

“And he could still ride off into the sunset with her and stick around until he got his half of the payout,” Bridger finished.

Paige made a face. “Ick. What a piece of work.”

Mason looked incredulous. “Piece of work? What about that little husband-killer?”

“Oh she’s outright awful,” Paige agreed.

Jane stared at the front door, oblivious to the team’s banter. “It seems so obvious now. What about Billy?”

Bridger and the sheriff exchanged looks before Bridger shook his head sadly.

“One of them’ll give up the location of the body before the end of the day,” the sheriff assured them.

Fenn pointed at his watch. “We’re supposed to have the rental jet back. If we’re gonna grab pizza first, we need to move.”

Tai mopped up the last small pool of blood. “We should hit it. On the way back, Bridger and I can grab some plywood from the store. We’ll have your place secured before nightfall.” He pointed at the sheriff. “Hey, Lawman, you coming with? My treat.”

That drew a faint grin from the round-bellied sheriff. He shook his head. “The wife’s got a meatloaf in the oven. No one misses Mrs. Hammond’s meatloaf.”

“That good?” Tai asked.

“Not exactly.” The sheriff sighed. “But one thing I’ve learned over thirty years of marriage; don’t disappoint the lady.”

Tai nodded sagely. As if he knew the first thing about having a longtime spouse. “Copy that.”

Bridger refrained from rolling his eyes.

Hands on his hips, the sheriff stared him down. “Good work today. I don’t much like your methods, but your results speak for themselves. The Creek could use a few more folks like you six in town.”

“Thank you, sir.” The unexpected praise stopped Bridger short. And here he figured the sheriff would have nothing but disdain for the way they worked. “I appreciate the vote of confidence, but this was a one-off. A favor to Jason Reilly.”

The sheriff nodded his understanding and headed out. When Bridger turned back around, Jane was watching him, her expression unreadable.

Jeep keys in hand, Tai headed past him. “Serious tactical error there,” he whispered.

Bridger glanced at Jane out of the corner of his eye. Tai had it all wrong. The tactical error would be pursuing a woman who was far too good for him. And far too out of reach.



PIZZA WITH BRIDGER'S crew was every bit the raucous experience Jane expected. Between rounds of bubbling pies, there was trash talking and tall tales.

"You should have seen this guy." Fenn pointed across the table at Bridger. "He was out on assignment when the sandstorm of the century blew up. He went radio silent for three days. We were just about to call in air support to help locate him when he walks out of the middle of the sandstorm, grinning like a fool."

Laughing hard, Tai slammed his empty glass on the table. "No shirt. No shoes. No pants. Just undies and half a canteen of water. Like Lawrence of Arabia in skivvies."

Bridger squirmed next to her. "I had on pants," he protested. "And a field hat."

"Don't wreck the story," Tai ordered, planting his thick forearms on the wood. "He lost it all in a poker game with a chieftain's brother-in-law."

Jane looked to Bridger for confirmation.

He nodded sheepishly. "That part's true. One of the few times I underestimated an opponent. Turns out the guy went to Penn State. Texas Hold 'em was the game of choice in his fraternity."

Jane smiled as laughter erupted around the table.

Mason gestured at her with the slice in his hand. "Once the storm quit, we headed back to their camp. Your brother persuaded the guy to play again. Won back Bridger's dive watch and secured us enough provisions to last us two weeks, until our transportation arrived."

She loved hearing these tales from Jason's military life. He'd never

shared much. She knew most of it was classified. Plus, he couldn't talk about the good without remembering the bad.

So he stayed silent. And she didn't ask.

And now she was going to lose her new friends, too. She had no doubt the Lord had brought Bridger and his team into her life to find Jason. She only wished her Savior had other plans in mind, too. Plans that involved him and his wild, adventurous, loyal team sticking around.

As Bridger said, this mission had been a one-off. Except for him and Tai, the rest of the team would head out on Kate's rented jet. She suspected he and Tai would leave soon, too.

And—except for searching for Jason—her life would go back to normal. She spun the half-eaten slice on her plate from side to side. The spicy, cheesy aroma no longer appealed. When Bridger and Tai got into town, she resented the intrusion. Now, she didn't want to face life without them and their lively team.

Mostly, she didn't want to face life without Bridger North.

She'd probably hear from him as he pursued leads on her brother, but the contact would be occasional. And brief.

From the way he fidgeted next to her, it was obvious the man couldn't wait to get out of Redemption Creek.

As if reading her mind, Kate rose. "We need to get that plane back."

While Bridger headed to the cash register to settle the bill, the team gathered their things and headed out to the parking lot. She soaked in the hearty farewells—and the many hugs and promises to find Jason.

It didn't take long to fill up the back of her truck with supplies from the store. It took even less time for Bridger and Tai to help secure the broken windows.

And just like that, they were done.

Bridger stuffed his hands in his pockets, looking around her house as if he'd never seen it before, looking everywhere but at her. "So, it's been... interesting, huh?"

She didn't mean to close down, but self-protection won out. Arms wrapped around her waist, she nodded faintly. "That's one way to put it."

He toed the clean floor, tracing a grain of wood with his boot. "We'll find your brother. You know that, right?"

"I believe you." She might not know much about the secretive man, but she knew he wouldn't make a promise he didn't intend to keep. And she

knew he and his crew would never leave a teammate behind.

“Good. Great.” He raised his eyes to meet hers.

The brief contact sent a jolt of longing through her.

He pulled out his keys. “It’s a long way home. We’d better get on the road.”

Tai winced, as if someone had just stomped on his foot. “I forgot my bag,” he said. “I’ll be right out.”

Bridger spun his keyring around his finger. “It’s been great getting to know you. Your brother’s really proud of you. I can see why. Take care, Jane. As soon as we have some leads on Jay, we’ll let you know.”

He spun around and headed out the door without a backward glance.

Jane screwed her eyes shut, willing away the sharp ache in her throat. They barely knew each other. She had no reason to feel so empty at the loss.

Not that reason had anything to do with falling in love. Because she was definitely in love with the man. He was just her style. Strong. Intelligent. And completely unavailable.

From the window, she watched him climb into his Jeep, her body numb. Forgetting Bridger North would take a very long time.

Fabric rustled behind her, then Tai was at her side, his backpack slung over his shoulder. “I know he likes to pretend he’s the last of the hardcore loners, but my man’s better boyfriend material than he looks. Just saying.”

“Thanks for the tip, but your friend there’s not looking for company.”

“Oh he’s looking. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

She shot Tai a look.

“He’s smart. Don’t get me wrong. He can read people like books. But my boy Bridger couldn’t sort out his own feelings if his hair was on fire.”

Tai’s down home-isms continually surprised her. But this time, she knew what he meant. Bridger North might be a gifted leader and a scary-good interpreter of others, but until the man let go—until he allowed himself to be vulnerable—there’d be no happily ever after.

Tai pulled her into his arms for a rib cracking hug. “Until next time, Miss Jane Reilly. Don’t stop believing.” He winked and disappeared out the door.

As the Jeep barreled off down the drive, she lifted a prayer for Jason, and for the dedicated team planning to find him. And maybe, just maybe, could the Lord lead Bridger to find the answer to his own prayers in a little place like Redemption Creek?

BRIDGER HAD BARELY MADE it to the end of Jane's driveway when his phone dinged. A text from Paige.

*I have a lead on Jason. Rosalind isn't a person. We're waiting at the airport. Get here ASAP.*

Tai grinned hard. "Let's do this, bro."

While Bridger accelerated, Tai let her know they were on their way.

The jet sat out on the tarmac, fueled and ready for flight, but the team had gathered in Jason's hangar. Paige had her computer out on the big drafting table. Kate and Fenn flanked her. Mason had his back to them, polishing the one good wing on the Mustang.

"Rosalind's a place," she said the minute Bridger and Tai entered the hangar. "Look."

She angled the screen toward them. Bridger leaned in to study the map and the red dot in the center. "It's an old abandoned airfield about two hours south of here by car."

Bridger's pulse kicked up. Maybe he wasn't heading home just yet.

"We should stay," Tai said without prompting.

Mason turned back toward the group. "We should tell them."

Paige and Kate and Fenn murmured in agreement.

"We've been talking," Mason said, his tone uncharacteristically tentative.

"We want to get the band back together." Kate rushed through the words.

Bridger's mouth dropped open. To use a Tai-ism, you could have knocked him over with a feather. "You all made it clear this was a one-and—"

Fenn held up a hand like a stop sign. "We thought so, too, but we've got

Jay-man to find.”

Normal scowl in place, Mason made eye contact with each one of his teammates before settling his gaze on Bridger. “I like working with these guys. Most of the time.”

“If we’re going to find Jason, we should do it together,” Paige insisted. “I mean, literally, together.”

“Should we tell him the rest?” Kate asked the group.

There were nods all around.

“We figure we’ll have some downtime while we chase clues,” Kate pointed out. “If we find other folks who could use some assistance, we’d be up for that, too.”

Tai grunted. “You mean like Jason was doing?”

Fenn cocked a finger at him. “Exactly. We could put the word out. Shouldn’t take long for the right people to get the news.”

The thought of doing good in the world lifted Bridger’s heart. “After what we did for the Consortium, we could use some redemption. A lot of redemption,” he corrected himself.

“You know it, brother.” Tai jumped in. “And this time, we choose the clients. Only the deserving. No fees required.”

“Not like we need the money,” Kate pointed out.

Bridger had no words. Their sincerity made him weak in the knees. After what they’d endured. After the atrocities they committed—they thought, for their country—he’d never blamed them all for scattering. Easier to keep the memories at bay that way.

But to see them rise up like this....

Kate and Paige were grinning hard. Tai, and Fenn, too. Even Mason’s lips were curled up in the hard man’s unique version of a smile.

He shoved his trembling hands into his pockets. “Copy that. I’m in.”

Tai reached for Bridger’s hand, pumping it up and down and tickling Bridger’s fingers in one of his complicated secret handshakes no one else could seem to remember. “We’ll bring Jay-man home.” He completed the maneuver, but held onto Bridger’s hand, pulling him closer. “We might even find more reasons to stay,” he murmured.

Bridger’s cheeks flushed. Jane would be a whole other issue. He’d like her to be his issue, but they had a long, long way to go. Might never get there. But this could be a start.

A new start. For all of them.

With their Savior's guidance, they might just find their own redemption.



THIS IS JUST the beginning of Bridger and Jane's story! The idea for Redemption Creek started as a short novella for a joint author anthology....but on the way, I fell in love with the broken souls of Blackout Squadron. To say nothing of the hardy residents of Redemption Creek.

Bridger and his team have personalities WAY too big to contain in a single book, and so, the series was born. Jane and Bridger's story continues in FALSE SINS.

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**Two wary souls get a second chance at love  
If a killer doesn't find them first.**

When a stalker turns to murder, pilot Kelli Spencer needs protection. What she doesn't need is her old love Jack Reese returning to stir things up, but the former Navy SEAL and his team of protection specialists are the best of the best. Trust him with her life? If she has to. With her heart? No way.



The last time Jack left, he made it clear married life held no appeal. Ten years later, he wastes no time letting her know he hasn't changed. Not that she'd be fool enough to hope.

As the commander of Knight Tactical, Jack jumps at the chance to protect Kelli and take down a killer, but as soon as she's safe, he plans to shake the dust of the small mountain town off his feet again...until he realizes he never should have left the first time.

Can he convince Kelli to give him another chance, or will a devious killer destroy his plans for a happily ever after?

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READ on for the first 3 chapters...

## HARD LANDING CHAPTER 1

*IT'S NOTHING.*

Mouth open in shock, Kelli Spencer stared at the footprints along the side of her garage. *It's nothing. It's nothing. It's nothing.*

The mantra didn't make a dent in her fear.

Black and malevolent where they tore through the last of the spring snow, the prints caught her attention the instant she stepped out the front door for her morning run.

Her breath froze in her lungs and her heart hammered against her ribs, sending her straight back to those frightful months when her stalker had been on the loose. Heat spilled out the open door, insulating her from the chilly morning, but it did nothing to reduce the chill of fear.

The man-sized prints begin in the puddles of run off that pocked her drive, trailed straight past her front porch, and continued into the snow that still covered the walkway along the side of her closed garage.

*Just like before. Lord, protect me.*

She struggled to get her breathing under control. The footprints mocked her, ripping away the fragile sense of safety she'd only just begun to rebuild since the Hope Landing police had tackled the stranger skulking around the back of her house less than two months back.

The dark despair wrapped around her, squeezing her chest. And then came the hurt, the loneliness that gripped her throat so hard she couldn't swallow.

Because she was alone. Vulnerable. Until the stranger began tormenting her, she'd held onto her faith, trusting in God to guide her to her soulmate in his own time. But living in fear had left her wanting, wishing for things she

couldn't control. A husband. A family of her own. Someone to hold her through the interminable nights when the stalker roamed the forest behind her house.

Ready to flee back inside, she eyed the driveway. Sunlight winked off the windshield of her dad's car where he'd parked it at the very base of the drive. She sagged against the doorframe. The spurt of fear evaporated, leaving her legs shaking. It was only Dad. He'd told her he'd be by early to take her car in to have the snow tires removed. They'd switch cars once they both arrived at the office.

How had she forgotten that? She screwed her eyes shut, wrinkling her nose as she sent up a silent prayer of thanks. "False alarm," she whispered.

Now that she saw the scene without terror clouding her vision, it was obvious the tracks stopped at the back door of her detached garage. Dad must have misplaced the extra door opener she'd given him. She chuckled to herself. He was a brilliant pilot and a skilled mechanic, but wallets, keys and shopping lists—the small bits of life—slipped through his fingers with distressing regularity.

At least he hadn't lost the keys to her car.

Still shaky from her scare, she pulled the door shut and locked it, jiggling it firmly to assure herself it was secure before she jogged off down the road.

The tang of pine rode the cool air. She inhaled deeply, letting the familiar scent soothe her nerves as she ran, gently at first, giving her muscles time to acclimate to the chill. She loved the forest, loved the rugged, mountainous terrain of Hope Landing, her lifelong home.

Warm light shone from most of her neighbors' windows, lending a cozy feel to the day. Still, despite the beauty of the late spring morning, it took two miles to burn through the tarry residue of fear. Her stalker was in jail. He'd be there at least another couple months awaiting trial for violating the restraining order. The DA promised. The last time he'd been near her home, three Hope Landing sheriff's deputies had been there to arrest him.

There was nothing more to fear.

Life was back to normal. Regular, boring, normal. She sucked in a lungful of pine-scented air and attacked the hill at the far end of her street. Legs pumping, she leaned into the slope. Building up a good sweat would banish the last of the adrenaline.

The lengthy list of to dos waiting at the office would do the rest. She loved running Spencer Aviation. Every day brought fresh challenges, and

when she was really lucky, a chance to fly. She loved that most of all.

As she crested the hill, Hope Landing's small municipal airport came into view in the valley far below. Spencer Aviation's enormous hangar anchored the storage area at the east end of the property. The wide doors were closed against the crisp morning air, but she imagined the scene inside. Their mechanics, Tank and Jonas would be downing their first cups of coffee as they eyed the client aircraft needing maintenance. Dice would be rolled. The winner got his pick of tasks, leaving the least interesting jobs—the older, smaller planes—for the loser to tackle.

Upstairs, in the office area, Nan, their longtime manager, would be sorting email, a mug of Earl Grey at her elbow, while their accounts manager, Erik, studied the spreadsheets splashed across his big triple screens. The image swept the last of the adrenaline away, leaving her with a sense of comfort. They were a small company, more of a family than a business. And while it wasn't precisely the family she yearned for, it would do.

A familiar text tone interrupted the soft rock music streaming from her earbuds. Eyes still on the expansive view, she fished her phone out of her pocket and scanned the screen.

*Lemon poppy seed muffins fresh from the oven. You need one. Trust me.*

Kelli laughed and stowed her phone. Lauren Lowe, her best friend since freshman year of college, owned the cafe that took up one wing of their small municipal terminal. The kitchen might be small, but Lauren's talent was not.

Another reason Kelli ran regularly.

She checked her watch. It wasn't yet eight. Time enough for another mile. She'd need it with lemon muffins on the menu. She turned right instead of left, opting for the longer route. Besides, the extra exercise would do her good after that scare.

A siren whined from down the mountain. She stilled, listening. It was only the one, and it came from the west end of town. Far away from the airport. But the schools would start soon. It was probably the local deputies out catching early morning speeders.

Impatient with the lingering jitters, she slapped her hands against her thighs and ran on. The siren stopped, replaced by the purring motor of a plane. Still running, she glanced up. A sleek white fuselage streaked past. A top of the line Pilatus turbo prop. She grinned. Her dad's pal, Dusty Barnes, was back early from his weekly trip to San Francisco.

If she knew Dusty, he'd have a case of Dad's favorite chocolates on

board. She rolled her eyes and picked up her pace. The doctor had cautioned her father to take it easy on the sweets, but Robert Spencer wanted something, it was best to get out of his way.

By the last mile, she'd shoved her fears to the back of her mind, where they belonged. Fear would not own her.

Determined to end her run on a cheerful note, she pumped up the volume and sped up as she rounded the corner for home. More sirens whined in the background now, fading in and out as the hills between her neighborhood and the principal route through town blocked the sound. Some lead-footed drivers would pay a high price for their inattention.

Three doors from home, she froze. A police cruiser sat at an awkward angle, half in, half out of her driveway. Her pulse quickened. Had Stan Graton escaped jail?

Hands on his hips, a young officer hurried toward her. "Miss Spencer?"

His expression said it all. Whatever the reason for his presence, it was serious. Dread crashed into her with all the force of a full body blow, rocking her back on her heels. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Couldn't do anything but pray as the officer strode closer.

*Lord, give me strength.* The prayer echoed through her brain.

He was close enough now that she saw the kindness in his eyes. "Your father's been in an accident."

## HARD LANDING CHAPTER 2

THE RIDE to the hospital had been a blur, but the next three hours crawled by as Kelli waited for her father to come out of surgery. Lauren and Nan had joined her immediately, offering the comfort of their presence while the minutes ticked slowly by. Finally, the surgeon emerged from the OR to give her the excellent news. Her father had a broken femur. Serious, but not life threatening.

After that, it didn't take long for them to be ushered into a room, where her father was already alert and giving orders.

"I have to get out of here," he said by way of greeting.

Kelli clasped her father's hand and winced at his stubborn tone. The anesthetic hadn't even worn off, and he was ready to dive back into work. She leaned close, careful not to disturb the tangle of wires taped to his forearm. "Not going to happen. The doctor said you're here for at least a week."

"A week? I can't." He gestured weakly. "We have two jets that need servicing before Friday. Tank's counting on me to check the avionics."

None of the women took the bait. Nan stabbed a red-lacquered fingernail at his elaborate hospital bed. "Unless you can get that thing in the air, you're grounded, Flyboy."

Dad shot her a glare, which didn't appear to faze the woman in the least. Lauren laughed.

Dad growled, which only made her bestie laugh harder. "You're stubborn, Mr. S, but my money's on Kelli and Nan." She patted his uninjured leg through the thin hospital blankets. "Be good, and I'll send Jose by with a box of double fudge brownies."

Her dad looked away. "I'm immune to bribes."

"Right." Lauren winked at Kelli and headed for the door. "I'll remember that."

Nan shook her head as she rose to her feet. "Looks like you'll survive. I've got an inbox deeper than all that manure you're shoveling. Best get back to the office."

Her dad pressed his lips together as if trying to suppress a grin. "That's what I pay you for," he said, but the gruff response came out more like an endearment.

"True enough." The office manager caught his eye before disappearing out the door.

"Woman's a handful," her dad muttered.

Kelli smiled. "Takes one to know one."

"What? Me?"

Kelli opened her mouth to say something smart, but tears clogged her throat. She struggled to choke them back. The surgeon said he'd be fine, apart from a broken femur and a mild concussion. Still, the powder burns on his cheeks from the air bag, and around his eyes made her tough as nails father look uncharacteristically fragile.

She squeezed his hand. "Dad, are you ready to talk about what happened?"

He stared hard at the ceiling, as if he, too, was caught up in a swirl of unfamiliar emotions. "Brakes failed," said finally. "I don't remember much of anything after I turned onto Sierra Avenue, but I remember that once I hit that first stop sign at the top of the hill, the brakes felt... spongy. I figured I'd have Ellison give them a once over when he changed out your tires."

Fear made the breath freeze in her lungs. That stop was at the top of a very long hill that dead ended into Hope Landing's main street, Reed Pass Road. She could picture her bright red Jeep streaking through the busy intersection. It was a miracle he hadn't hit a car on his way through the three-way stop.

An even bigger miracle that he'd survived t-boning a parked truck at what had to be thirty or forty miles an hour. Her legs trembled. She clutched the rail of his bed.

"Hey now, Pumpkin, I'll be fine." He covered her hand. "No one else got hurt, and we have insurance. Things happen."

Images of what could have happened slammed through her mind. She

could only nod.

A sharp rap on the door made her look up. Cory Frazer, Hope Landing's police chief, filled the doorway. "Bob? Can we talk?"

Her dad nodded. "You bet."

The chief eyed her with concern before stepping further into the room. "I took a look at your Jeep." He cleared his throat. "I'm going to have the State crime lab boys give it the once over, too. It's possible I'm mistaken."

"About what?" Agitated now, her dad struggled to sit up. She pressed him gently down. That he allowed her to do it spoke volumes about his weakened condition.

He eyed the chief. "Spit it out, Cory."

The chief nodded firmly and met her gaze. "Someone cut those brake lines."

Open-mouthed, she stared at her father. He looked equally stunned.

Frazer's gun belt jingled as he moved to the head of the bed. "Who would have known you were driving Kelli's car today?"

"No one. I only decided last night to take her jeep in." Her father stared into her eyes, his own face a mask of fear. "Texted you around nine, didn't I, Pumpkin?"

She nodded.

The chief swore softly. "Then we've got to assume whoever did this meant to harm Kelli."

Fear punched her in the gut again. She pretended to study the elaborate pulley system supporting Dad's broken leg while ice poured through her, short-circuiting her brain. Aside from Stan Granton, she didn't have any enemies. Her divorce was over three years ago, longer than her two-year marriage had lasted, and the breakup had been amicable from the beginning. Two lonely friends who never should have gotten married. Sad, but she wished Roger well, and she knew he felt the same. A commercial pilot, he'd been based in Miami for the past few years. Outside of the occasional text, they hadn't seen each other since the split.

"She'll need protection." The chief's deep voice barely registered over the whirling of her own brain.

Her father nodded. "I've got a man in mind."

The way he avoided her gaze made her shoulders tense. She scowled down at him. "Dad? You better not be thinking what I think you're thinking."

His jaw tightened. "He's the right man for this, pumpkin. He's the only



man—besides Cory here—that I’d trust with your life.”

She couldn’t find the words to refute his ridiculous idea. Clearly eager to avoid her eye, he tried to shift about, but the sudden movement made him gasp. His face paled, and he squeezed his eyes closed.

The pain on his face brought tears to her eyes and lit a burning rage in her heart. Whoever had done this came close to killing him. Innocent bystanders, too.

“Kelli, sweetheart,” her father coaxed softly. “I’m not going to be of any use here, and I don’t want you going through this alone.”

“I have Lauren and Nan and the guys.”

Chief Frazer came from a big city department. He’d catch whoever did this. She had faith in the longtime lawman’s abilities. They didn’t need outside help.

Until they caught the criminal, she’d take every precaution. She put a hand to her own pounding head. If her brain was swimming before, now she was drowning.

Asking Jack Reese for help would be a disaster.

## HARD LANDING CHAPTER 3

ALONE AT THE controls of the new Phenom jet, Jack Reese pushed the engines to their limit. The weather from San Diego to Hope Landing was favorable. At max speed, they'd touchdown at eighteen hundred, less than three hours after Bob Spencer's urgent call.

His hands tightened on the yoke. Kelli was in trouble. Anger pulsed like a hot coal in his stomach. He took slow, even breaths, consciously pushing away the nasty mix of fury and concern.

Emotions got people killed.

That wasn't going to happen to her. Not while he was on the job. He breathed in the new plane smell and considered the gleaming instrument panel while he thought through a reasonable protocol. Not that there was much to think about. His job would be simple; create a plan to keep her secure, then execute it. That he could do with his hands tied behind his back. Hope Landing was far from the war zones and bleak, third world hotspots he and his team had operated in before Admiral Knight had hired them away from the Navy to form his private tactical company.

And now he had even better resources at his disposal than when he was a SEAL. As the operations chief of Knight Tactical, he had a handpicked team of commandos, and the best equipment money could buy. Keeping Kelli safe and running this coward to ground would be child's play.

Facing her after ten years gone, not so much. Her father had been a mentor. A parent, even...until Jack ran away from a future with his daughter. Or ran toward the adventure and excitement SEAL life offered. He much preferred to look at things that way. It had taken a lot of years to rebuild a long-distance relationship with Bob Spencer.

He and Kelli had never made the effort.

“You’re pushing her pretty hard there, Cowboy.” Austin, Jack’s best friend and second in command at Knight Tactical, angled his big body into the copilot’s seat and buckled himself in. “These engines don’t have two hundred hours on them. the admiral said to take good care of his baby.”

Jack grunted. The six seater jet was their employer’s favorite new toy. It was a mark of the man’s decency that he didn’t hesitate for a moment to send Jack and his three available teammates off in it the minute Kelli’s father had called for help.

Austin settled the headphones over his wide head and adjusted the attached mike closer to his mouth. He studied the scenery far below. “So I finally get to see Hope Landing.”

“Yup.” Jack scanned the blanket of trees below for signs of the familiar runway.

Austin shook his head. “I can’t believe you’ve never been back.”

“Not since college. No reason to.”

Austin eyed the expanse of forest and the jagged, snow-topped mountains. “Looks cold for April.”

“It is.” Jack watched the peaks drift past as the jet hurtled across the sky. All but the lowest were still covered with a good deal of snow. Spring came late to the High Sierra.

After years of sand and heat, he missed that.

Austin was staring at him.

“What?”

“I’m trying to imagine you small.” He spread his hands in front of him. “I see a little Jack Reese running around town in a tiny flack jacket. Baby commando.”

Jack laughed at that. “I was more of a skinny skateboarder.”

“That I cannot picture.” Austin drummed his fingers on his muscled thigh. “You okay with this, man? You and Kelli didn’t leave things in a good way. Hernandez and Olivetti and I can handle this if you want to pass.”

“Not necessary.” Kelli couldn’t still be angry, right?

“Whatever you say.” The new leather upholstery squeaked as Austin turned to face him. “You know, I always thought you messed that up. This might be the man upstairs giving you a second chance.”

Jack snorted. “I deserve a lot of things. A second chance with Kelli isn’t one of them.”

“Whatever you say.”

Jack grinned as the broad valley that cradled the airport came view. *Thank you, Lord, for that excellent timing.* “We’ll be on final in a minute. Tell Hernandez and Olivetti to get ready.”

Austin switched on the cabin’s communication system. “Buckle up, boys. We’re wheels down in two.” He flipped the switch back off and settled back into his seat, all the while giving Jack a hard look.

“What?”

“It’s been three years since her divorce. Plenty of time to heal.”

Jack stared at the battle-hardened SEAL across from him, incredulous. “When did you turn into such an old woman?”

“Joke all you want, bro, but the Lord works in his own mysterious ways. That’s all I’m saying.”

Jack ignored his friend as he deployed the jet’s landing gear and concentrated on lining up his approach. He and God hadn’t exactly been on speaking terms for a while now. Besides, after the way he’d disappeared from Kelli’s life, it would take more than a heavenly miracle for her to want him back.

Any prayers he made, he’d reserve for keeping her safe.



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