Dedicated to my Savior, Jesus Christ,
who allows me to do all that I do.
Thank you for the words.
May the readers see you on every page.
So do not fear, for I am with you; 
do not be dismayed, for I am your God. 
I will strengthen you and help you; 
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. 

—Isaiah 41:10
Flames licked higher, swallowing everything in their path. The curtains, the recliner . . . her father and sister.

Blinking the nightmare away, eighteen-year-old Alexia Allen clutched her diploma and looked out over the audience.

The families of five hundred students hovered around their proud teens in the downtown auditorium. Camera flashes nearly blinded her, and she decided she didn’t care a bit that she didn’t have even one family member in the audience.

She had her diploma. That was all that was important. That and the bus ticket she had in the back pocket of her only pair of jeans. She would’ve worn a dress if she’d been able to afford it, but the graduation gown and cap had already taken enough of her savings. A dress wasn’t a necessity.

Jillian Carter sidled up to her. “Are you going to the graduation party?”

“For a few minutes. Then I’ve got a bus to catch.”

“Where are you going?”

Alexia sucked in a deep breath and looked around. “Anywhere that’s not here.”
The flash of pain in her friend’s eyes made her bite her lip and regret her bitter words. The thumb and forefinger of her right hand went to the little silver ring on the pinky of her left hand and twisted it.

Round and round. A nervous habit she’d picked up right after the fire.

“Sorry, You and Serena are the only good things left in this town, but even you guys can’t keep me in that house a minute longer. Every day it’s a constant reminder of . . . well . . . you know. And my mother told me the other day not to let the door hit me on the rear on my way out.” Alexia swallowed and studied her fingers.

“I’m so sorry.”

Jillian’s compassion brought Alexia’s emotions to the surface. Emotions she didn’t want to deal with. “She’s just turned into this bitter old woman and I can’t take it anymore. I tried to help her. I did.” She sighed. “But she doesn’t want help. At least not my help.”

And still she couldn’t seem to lose the guilt. If only she’d had more control over her actions. If only . . .

“I don’t blame you.” Jillian’s soft words brought Alexia back to the present.

“I know you don’t.” She paused. “There was something in her eyes when she told me to leave . . . something . . . I don’t know . . .” She let her voice trail off, forced her mother’s face from her mind, then whispered fiercely, “I won’t let him hit me again. I can’t stay there one minute longer. If I do, it’s going to kill me. He’s going to kill me.” A shudder wracked her. “I need to get away. Tonight.” She now understood the desperation her brother, Dominic, had felt when he’d run away. She’d been angry with him for a long time, but now . . . she empathized with him. She just wished she knew where he was.

Wished she could take back the spiteful, hurtful words she’d hurled after him as he stomped out the door, and out of her life.

“I wish I had the guts to come with you,” Jillian murmured.

Hope brightened Alexia’s heart for a brief moment before she
LYNETTE EASON

could stop it. She knew Jillian wouldn’t leave. Her mother needed her too much. However . . . “Call your aunt. Tell her she needs to come help with your mother.”

“I can’t do that and you know it. She’s got my two little cousins to take care of.” Jillian gave a sigh and shook her head. “No, I’d love to go, but . . .” She shrugged and the pain returned to her eyes along with a flash of desperation.

Alexia put a hand on her friend’s arm. “What’s wrong, Jilly?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I’m fine.”

The forced smile said otherwise, but before she had a chance to question her friend further, she spotted Serena Hopkins pushing through the crowd and heading their way.

Giving a rare squeal, the usually dignified Serena waved her diploma and then gave each girl a massive bear hug. “We did it!”

Alexia couldn’t help laughing. Serena could always make her laugh, even when she thought she had nothing to laugh about.

Midnight black hair that looked almost purple danced around her shoulders. Tall, poised, and runway gorgeous, Serena was confident in the dark good looks her Spanish mother had bestowed upon her, not to mention her serene personality and flashing chocolate eyes that drew guys to her like a moth to the flame.

And she made it impossible to hold her wealth against her. Although Alexia often wondered what attracted Serena to the two girls from the wrong side of the tracks, she’d never worked up the courage to ask her. It was enough to bask in the friendship and Serena’s loving family.

So different from her own.

“Are we going?” Serena demanded. “The party’s starting.”

“I’m in,” Alexia said.

“I’ll be there too,” Hunter Graham said over Alexia’s shoulder.

She shivered as his breath caressed her left ear. And his bright blue eyes had that little glint in them that she’d started seeing every time he looked at her. The little swoop in her stomach failed
to take her by surprise this time. But she’d sworn off guys forever after Devin’s betrayal.

She frowned as she pictured her ex-boyfriend. She’d thought Devin was different.

Obviously, she had lousy judgment in guys and wasn’t to be trusted when it came to picking one out. Although she had to admit, if she were interested in trying the whole boyfriend thing again, Hunter would be the one she’d choose.

But she wasn’t.

Besides, he was only going to the graduation party to keep an eye on his brother and sister, who’d just graduated with Alexia. Chad and Christine Graham were twins who had a penchant for trouble. Which was why Hunter often drew the short straw and got chaperone duty. She wondered how they felt about his big brother eye now that they were eighteen.

She considered him again. He was already a junior in college. Alexia knew she’d never be worthy of his interest.

Not that she wanted his interest, her mind insisted.

Right?

Right. Besides, she was on the next bus out of here.

Frowning at him, she started to tell him to get out of her space—in a nice way, of course—when Jillian said, “I’ll be there in a little while. I have to run an errand first.”

The girl’s voice trembled and Alexia shot a glance at Serena to see if she’d caught it. The frown on her face confirmed she had.

Glancing at Hunter, Alexia said, “Excuse me.” Taking Jillian’s arm, she pulled her to the side.

Serena followed.

Hunter got the hint and walked off.

Alexia rubbed her hand up her friend’s arm and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Tell us what’s wrong, Jilly.”

Jillian waved a hand. “Later. I need to go. I’ll catch up to you at the party, all right?”
Serena grabbed Jillian’s hand. “Promise?”
“Promise.”
Jillian whirled and headed for the door.
Alexia looked at Serena. “What’s her problem?”
“I have no idea. We’ll get it out of her when she gets to the party. Now let’s go!”
They raced for Serena’s car—a sweet little BMW Roadster—and within ten minutes arrived at the school gym.
Alexia looked around and smiled. The decorations looked great, the music was loud, and her friends were at her side. Life was good.
Soon she’d be on a bus to wherever, USA, and she’d never have to come home again. No more living with the craziness of her home life. The thought of her mother shot pain through her. She really didn’t care if she never saw her dad again, but her mother . . .
Memories of her mother’s arms around her when her dad had been gone—or passed out—flitted through her mind. Whispered words of her mother’s brand of encouragement flickered.
But the woman didn’t want her at home. Had been pretty definite when she’d told her she needed to leave.
She shook her head and focused on the music.
Life had just improved 110 percent. And the fear churning in her gut had no place in that new life.
Serena danced with Jacob Styles, her on-again, off-again boyfriend. Alexia gave a regretful sigh as she watched Serena fold her head into Jacob’s shoulder.
Even though she’d just convinced herself that she wasn’t interested in having a boyfriend, she couldn’t help wondering what it would be like to be able to lean on someone. To let yourself go enough to trust another person with your heart. To believe that person would never betray you. Alexia blinked back tears.
Allowing someone that close hadn’t been an option. Not with her home life. The one time she’d allowed someone to cross the
WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS

barriers to her heart, he’d betrayed her. Devin Wickham. It hadn’t taken him long to show his true colors.

But now?

No. She had a life to make for herself. She had goals. Plans. Dreams . . .

But maybe one day.

Her throat clogged. Would she ever find someone to love her? To believe in her?

Alexia’s eyes strayed to Hunter, dancing with his sister, who didn’t seem to care that he was there. He caught her eye and winked. She flushed and looked away.

Then back.

If he was interested . . .

A hand gripped hers and she turned to see Jillian standing beside her, wide-eyed and frantic, tears streaking her cheeks. “Jillian! What’s wrong?”

“I need your help,” she gasped. “I don’t know what to do . . . I saw . . . I’ve got to leave!”

Alexia looked for Serena, snagged her attention, and motioned her over with a mouthed “Help!”

Frowning, Serena whispered something to Jacob and moved to join them. Alexia pulled Jillian into the relative quiet of the hallway. Serena followed two steps behind. “What is it?”

Jillian burst into tears and sank to the floor. “I’m dead,” she whispered. “I’m so dead. I can’t believe this. I don’t know what to do.”

“What happened?” Serena ignored her expensive dress and sank to the floor beside her friend.

“He’s going to kill me. He’s going to . . . because I was there and I think he saw me and what I saw . . .”

Jillian stopped and slapped a hand over her mouth. Her eyes darted to the door as the tears flowed. Frustration with Jillian started to sprout inside Alexia—not to mention a sprig of fear at
her talk of killing. “Spill it, will you? You’re talking in circles. How can we help you if we can’t understand you?”

The girl went still. Her tears stopped as though turned off with a switch. She looked up, horror on her face. “I can’t. I can’t be here and I can’t tell you. He knows we’re friends . . .”

“Wh—?”

“I’ll just put you in danger too.” She jumped up, eyes wide with sudden renewed horror. “Oh no! I can’t believe I didn’t think . . . I didn’t—” She shot a desperate look toward the exit. “I’ve got to get out of here. They’ll find me. And then they’ll find you. They’ll think I told you . . .”


“I can’t go home . . . I’ll need some money.” Grief and terror flowed from her. “Please, I’m sorry to ask, but . . .”

“Here.” Alexia dug into her purse and pulled out a hundred dollars.

“Never mind, I have to get out of here.” Jillian started for the door and Alexia grabbed her arm.

“Here,” she said, shoving the money into Jillian’s hand.

Serena did the same and handed her a handful of fifties. Jillian didn’t even blink as she grabbed the cash and took off.

“Hey! Come back!” Alexia called.

But Jillian’s feet pounded down the hallway toward the exit at the other end.

“Jillian!” Serena yelled. “Wait!”

Jillian didn’t even turn as she hit the door at a full run. The alarm sounded and Serena and Alexia took off after her.

By the time they got the door open again, Jillian was nowhere to be seen.
TEN YEARS LATER
APRIL 6, 2012
5:45 P.M.

He suspected what was in the envelope. Shaky fingers opened it and pulled out the single white sheet with the block-style printed words.

I KNOW.

Senator Frank Hoffman leaned back in his plush leather chair and drew in a deep breath.

It was Jillian; he knew it. She’d decided to come out of hiding. He’d searched high and low for the girl ten years ago, when she simply dropped off the face of the earth.

But the letter proved she wasn’t dead. She was back, taunting him with the skeleton in his closet.

Jillian Carter. The one person who could kill his career, ruin his shaky marriage, and sabotage his future.

He’d rather put a bullet in her brain than let that happen.

Again, he read the words.

I KNOW.

Amazing that two small words could instill such terror.

Jaw tight, he started to crumple the letter into a ball, then thought better of it.
Pulling out a large brown envelope, he added it to the one that had come two weeks ago. The one that said, “HELLO FRANK. I’LL BE IN TOUCH.” The one he’d been praying was from anyone but her.

He shoved the envelope into the top drawer of his desk, shut the drawer with a snap, and twisted the key to make sure it was locked. He did not want his wife finding those notes.

What did Jillian want? There’d been no blackmail demand, no reason given for the subtle threat.

Just, I KNOW.

And only two people on this earth knew his secret.

Of course one wasn’t talking. Were there others?

He doubted it. The fact that the last ten years had flown by without a peep from anyone was proof of that. With dread in his heart, he knew the truth of his situation. A truth he had avoided facing for ten years. Now that truth stared him in the face, mocking him. Letting him know that his comfort zone had just been penetrated.

He had to find Jillian Carter.

There was only one way to restore peace to his life. He picked up the phone and called the one person he trusted with absolute confidence to bury this secret so deep it would never stir again.
The flames reached for the ceiling, consuming everything in their path. Sprawled on her belly and forearms, staying as low as possible in the burning house, Alexia paused and listened. Visibility was almost nonexistent. She heard an ominous creaking and raised her eyes to the ceiling. It splintered, cracked. The fire had been burning up there a lot longer than reported if the ceiling was ready to go.

“Joel! Get out from under there!” She shoved herself toward him, still staying low and knowing she wouldn’t reach him in time to push him out of the way.

On his knees, testing the door in front of him, Joel looked up—just as the ceiling caved, sending a large piece of wood crashing down on his shoulder, then glancing off the side of his helmet.

With a cry, he went down flat against the rapidly heating floor.

“Joel!” She made her way back through the smoke to reach him. Into her radio, she called, “Joel’s down, Captain, I need help!”

“On the way,” he reassured her. “Lex, the mother just showed up. Little girl, three years old, name’s Maddy. In the back bedroom, last door on the left.”

Alexia froze. A kid?
She scrambled over to Joel, grabbed him under his arms, and started hauling him to the exit, her exertions using more air. How much time did she have left? Plenty. They’d been in the building less than two minutes. “Joel, there’s another kid in here somewhere. I’ve got to find her.” But she couldn’t leave her partner. Not yet, not ever. She made sure his air tank was functioning. He looked dazed, stunned, but not seriously injured.

Looking up, she made out the shape of another firefighter. “Get Joel, he’s hurt. The girl’s in the back! I’m going to look.”

“I’ve got him.” Alexia recognized Snoop’s voice.

“I’ll be right out,” she said.

“I’m coming with you.” Sanders. Great. The one man in the department she didn’t want to work a fire with.

Another groan sounded from above.

Alexia looked up just in time to jump back from the crashing beam. Sanders muttered a curse and dove to help cover Joel. “Get back, Alexia! RIT’ll be coming for you!”

The Rapid Intervention Team. Two firefighters whose only duty would be to get her out. But until they reached her, she still had a job to do. She was trapped between a wall of flames and the back of the house.

“I’m looking for that kid!”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and crawled toward the bedroom. She paused and listened.

Nothing but the sound of the burning building.

Pounding on the closest door, she hollered, “Maddy?”

No answer.

Raising up on her knees, she tried the knob.

Locked.

She rose to her feet and stepped back. Lifting the axe in her right hand, she brought it down on the knob. The door shuddered and the molding around the door cracked as the knob fell to the floor. Lifting her booted foot, she gave the door a hard kick and
it slammed in against the wall. Smoke swirled out, but no flames. Breathing in the life-giving air from the tank strapped to her back, she used the thermal imager device in her left hand to search for anything that pumped blood and put off heat.

Nothing.

She filled her lungs again and headed for the closet.

Flames licked down the hall behind her. Great, she’d have to find another way out. She reported in. “I’m in the small bedroom on the left.”

“We’ve got Joel, Alexia. You find the kid?”

An alarm sounded. Alexia pulled in another breath of air. And stopped. No air. She looked at her gauge. Out of air. That was the alarm going off.

Panic hit her. “Captain, I’m out of air.”

“What?” His voice roared in her ear.

Dizziness hit her.

“Get out, Alexia. Now!”

“Just going to check the closet first, sir.”

“Get your tail outta there. Immediately!”

She needed air. She reached up to disconnect the hose from her tank, then shoved it up under her heavy turnout. The coat would protect her as much as possible from smoke inhalation. And she sure didn’t want a blast of hot air in her lungs. She caught a breath. The dizziness receded.

The countdown was on.

The decision: leave or check the closet?

She scanned the imaging device over the door. Bingo. “I’ve got something. Definitely a child.”

“Alexia! Get out!”

“She’s here, sir. Can’t leave without her.”

Alexia went to the door and turned the knob. A little girl.

“Maddy?”

The child looked up at her, eyes wide, stark terror stamped on
her tear-streaked features. Then she coughed and her eyes rolled back. Alexia slung the imager over her shoulder and leaned in to pick up the little girl.

Alexia took another breath and coughed.

Dizziness returned full force and she went to one knee. Vaguely, she felt the sweat roll down her back. “I’m in trouble,” she said into her radio, keeping her cool, refusing to panic. Help was just a second away. “Where’s RIT? No air.”

Lights flashed in front of her eyes and she blinked. Tried desperately to fill her lungs. How had she run out of air? She should have had plenty of time left.

She pulled in a lungful of smoke this time. Coughing, sputtering, she turned with the child, frantic to get her out before the flames caught up with the smoke.

And then she had no more time to think as the spots before her eyes merged into one big black dot.

Then nothing.
The letter had arrived at one o’clock this afternoon.
Seven hours and sixteen minutes ago.
Alexia picked it up and studied it once more, as though rereading it might change the contents.
It didn’t.
She tossed it back onto her bedside table. It had been four weeks since the fire. Four weeks of giving her statement and waiting on pins and needles as the investigation progressed at a snail’s pace. Four weeks of wondering if she had a job or not. Well, now she knew.
She’d disobeyed a direct order from her captain. He’d been livid. But she should have had time. Should have had enough air.
The investigation showed one thing that really concerned her. She had tiny little holes in her air hose. That explained why she’d had to replace her tank so soon. She’d brought out a nearly unconscious six-year-old boy and handed him over to the paramedics. He was mumbling a girl’s name over and over. They could only guess it might be a sister still inside, and Alexia started to head back in. That’s when she glanced at her air gauge and saw she was low on...
WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS

air. A quick trip to the truck and she shrugged on her new tank before heading back inside with Joel. But still using the same air hose, she had again run out of air too fast.

Confusion filled her as the horror of her suspicions hit her once more. Holes in her hose meant someone had deliberately put them there.

Which meant—someone had tried to kill her? Why?

Unless she could prove it, she was stuck. She was officially suspended from both firefighting and smokejumping until further notice. After all, it wouldn’t look right for a suspended firefighter to be smokejumping, would it?

Not according to her boss.

“Argh!” Alexia grabbed the nearest pillow and punched it. The depression morphed into anger, and she flexed her fingers before curling them into another fist. Unfurling them, she twisted the ring on her pinky as she thought.

Okay, she’d disobeyed a direct order from her captain. But she’d saved a child’s life. That had to count for something, didn’t it?

Apparently not.

Her stomach churned. She’d worked hard to get where she was. Straight out of high school, fresh off a cross-country trip to a new city, she had started training to be a firefighter. She worked her way up the ladder—literally. From secretary to firefighter to smokejumper. She sweat blood and tears for her current position. She was proud to be a member of the North Cascades Smokejumpers.

And now she was in danger of losing it all.

Normally, she wouldn’t have even been at the Washington Fire Station No. 2, but her old chief, Corey Burnham, had called and asked her to fill in. The flu had wiped out half his crew and he needed her if she could spare the time.

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. She’d been doing a favor and now her life had fallen apart.

Again.
The letter glared at her like the accusing eyes of her captain when she’d finally regained consciousness in the hospital.
Alexia swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood.
Another piece of mail caught her eye.
A postcard announcing her ten-year high school reunion to be held in September. Four months away. Her eyes bounced back and forth between the letter and the postcard. Did she dare go back?
She remembered the night she left. And Jillian’s frantic plea for help before her dramatic disappearing act. She remembered her mom’s not-so-subtle push out the door.
The phone rang and she jumped. A glance at the caller ID told her it was Serena Hopkins.
Alexia picked up the phone and dropped back down onto the bed. “Hello, Serena. Are you a mind reader now?”
“You’re thinking about the reunion.”
“I am.” She flopped back onto her pillow.
“And you’re coming, right?” Serena didn’t sound at all sure, just hopeful.
“I don’t know. When I left there, I sure never planned on going back. Too many bad memories.”
“You think it might be time?” A pause. “Your mother’s in the hospital.”
Alarm clanged through her in spite of the fact that she didn’t want to care. “What’s wrong with her?”
“They’re not sure. They’re running tests to find out.”
“Come on, Serena, you and I both know there’s nothing wrong with her. It’s most likely another anxiety attack.” Her friend didn’t say anything, and Alexia drew in a deep breath. “But she’s all right?”
“For now.” Serena paused. “She’s really changed, Alexia. You would be amazed at the new person she’s become over the last few years.”
“You keep telling me that. But why would she change? How does someone grow a spine at the age of fifty-six? And why now?”
“God can do amazing things when he has a willing heart to work with. You used to believe that.”
“I used to want to believe that. There’s a difference.”
“You still want to believe that,” Serena countered.
Yes, she did. Desperately. But it was a moot point.
Time to change the subject. She didn’t feel like churning up emotions that took too much time to calm down. “How’s the morgue?”
“Dead.”
“Cute.”
“Seriously, I’m so not busy right now.”
“Which is why I get the phone call.” Silence. Alexia frowned.
“Hey, you okay?”
“I heard from Jillian.”
Alexia sat straight up in the bed. “Where is she? How is she? What’s she been doing all this time?”
“She said she’s fine, but not to tell anyone she’d been in contact. She’s been living under a different name all these years. Can you imagine?”
Memories bounced in her mind. “She’s still scared, isn’t she?” “Sounds like it. I told her about the reunion, but I don’t think she’ll even consider coming back.” A pause. “She still refuses to talk about that night.”
Alexia remembered Jillian’s frantic desperation to escape. Even now, she could hear the echo as the exit door slammed behind her fleeing friend. “I always wondered what she saw. What she was so scared of that she wouldn’t risk telling us about.”
“I know. Me too. When I asked her why she was calling, she just said, ‘It’s time.’”
“It’s time?”
“Yeah. Then she said she’d be in touch and hung up.” More silence, then, “So, are you coming home?”
Alexia drew in a deep breath, forced herself to think about what Serena called home. Columbia, South Carolina, held so many bad
memories, but Serena was there. And the fact that her mother was in the hospital concerned her more than she wanted to admit.

Why did she care? Her mother had never done one thing in her life to make her care. And yet . . . she was still her mother. Some part of Alexia wanted to believe the woman had changed.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess I am.”

Serena’s uncharacteristic squeal nearly pierced her eardrum. But for the first time in a month, Alexia smiled. Serena did not squeal unless she was extremely pleased.

Then Alexia frowned as her thoughts circled back to her faulty equipment. If she stayed in Washington, she could fight back and figure out what had gone wrong with her tank. And she could appeal the decision and see how everything played out. But if she stayed, would she be in danger?

If she went home to Columbia, she wouldn’t feel compelled to watch her back. Maybe she could forget there was the possibility that someone tried to kill her.

Maybe.

Taking a deep breath, she said, “I guess it’s time for me too.”

As she hung up the phone, somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard a voice mocking her decision.

*Running away again, huh, Alexia?*  
*Why not?*  
*It was what she did best.*
MONDAY, MAY 14
5:32 P.M.

Senator Hoffman walked to his desk, pulled the key from his pocket, and used it to unlock the top drawer. The shaking in his hands hadn’t eased since the first letter. If anything, it had gotten worse. And now the third letter joined the first two in the brown envelope.

This one simply said: SOON.

His pulse quickened as he thought about the election coming up. He had to take care of this and fast. Thank goodness his bank account could handle whatever he needed to have done.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Pocketing the key, he considered whether or not to tell his wife everything. Their marriage wasn’t exactly in the best place right now. It was probably best to continue to keep this to himself.

“Frank, are you in there? It’s time to go.”

“I’m coming, Elizabeth.”

She appeared in the doorway. For the first time in a while, he studied her and found hints of the young woman he’d fallen in love with thirty years ago. Wrinkles had tried to invade her face, but she’d raced ahead of them with surgery and whatever it was...
women did to stay looking young. Not a touch of gray dared show itself in the brown hair she had cut in a stylish bob.

She looked like a senator’s wife should. Poised, classy, confident, and wealthy. Everything she’d been reared to be.

And yet, lately, there was a look in her eye that made him wonder what she was thinking. Sometimes a sadness that she didn’t blink away fast enough.

But they both enjoyed the perks of his job, so neither rocked the boat. “Did you have Ian bring the car around?”

Ian, their live-in handyman and gardener. He’d been with the family for two decades, and both he and his son, Joshua, were faithful, loyal employees.

“I did. He said he would have it waiting in the time it took for me to find you and get you out there.”

Frank placed his iPhone into the front pocket of his tuxedo coat, then reached up to adjust his tie. “All right, darling, let’s go mingle with the common folk.”

Her left brow lifted. “Don’t forget it’s mostly those common folks who vote you into office.”

His hand absently reached into his pocket to touch his phone. Sometime during the evening, he’d find a quiet moment to make a phone call.
MONDAY, 5:39 P.M.

Detective Hunter Graham folded his six-foot-two frame into the unmarked squad car and shut the door. He cranked the engine, pulled from the station parking lot, and headed down the street to meet up with Katie Isaacs, his partner.

When the phone rang and the caller ID popped up on the screen, his heart lurched into his throat.

Chad was at it again.

Hunter’s brother, twenty-eight-year-old Chad Graham, couldn’t seem to get his life together. Instead of turning to those who wanted to help him, he’d decided to turn to alcohol, drinking himself into oblivion. Fortunately, he usually chose the same bar every time he felt the need to toss a few back, and the bartender was good about calling Hunter’s cell phone.

Wheeling into the parking lot of the Westwood Bar, Hunter clenched his jaw. Chad was already drunk and causing trouble, and it wasn’t dark yet. And it was only Monday.

He climbed from the vehicle and drew a couple deep breaths. After all that Chad had been through, Hunter couldn’t turn his back on his brother. He was family. And he was hurting.

Just outside the door, Hunter could hear the music and smell
the smoke coming from inside. Before he could open the door, his phone vibrated. An impatient glance at the screen showed his father’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hunter? Where are you? What’s that noise?”

“I’m on a call, Dad, what do you need?” An unofficial call, but a necessary one nevertheless.

“Saturday night, your mother and I need the pleasure of your company.”

“For what?”

A long, disapproving silence came through the line. Hunter wracked his brain. What had he forgotten?

“The dinner, Son, remember?”

Oh right. “Dad—”

“No excuses. I need you there.”

His father had decided he was getting too old to work fires. Only retirement wasn’t an option for him. Someone had decided Harper Graham would make a good mayor with his background in law and five years as a street cop before changing careers. Harper agreed with that assessment and now was working on getting elected to the office.

And he expected his family to put as much into the effort as he did.

Hunter would do his best if this was really what his dad wanted.

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

“And bring a date.”

“Dad . . .”

“Your mother made me say that. I’ve done my duty. See you Saturday.”

Shaking his head, Hunter hung up. His father could be overbearing and autocratic, but he was a good man with a good heart. Hunter loved him. Respected him. And would do what he could to help him out.
Stepping into the smoky atmosphere, Hunter paused a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dark environment. Music pulsed, bodies danced. He ignored it all to zero in on the one he came for.

His brother slapped his glass on the bar and slurred, “I’m not done, yet, Zeke. I want another one.”

Zeke’s eyes met Hunter’s and the bartender turned away as Hunter slid onto the stool beside Chad. “Hello, little brother.”

Chad jerked as though he’d been shot. With a narrow-eyed glare, he slurred, “What are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d come by and check on you.”

Chad sneered at his brother. “Rescue me, you mean?”

Hunter gave a nonchalant shrug. On the inside his gut churned. Was Chad going to go peacefully this time or would it be a struggle? “Whatever. You ready to go?”

Chad gave a dramatic sigh and dropped a twenty on the bar in front of him. “Fine. I have a headache anyway.”

“You think you have one now, wait until morning,” Hunter muttered as he led the young man from the bar.

Chad stumbled along beside him as Hunter kept a firm grip on his brother’s upper arm. “Why do you keep doing this, Chad? You ought to realize by now this isn’t going to make things any better.”

Hunter got him into the front seat and belted in. He shut the door, rounded the car, and settled himself behind the wheel.

“She left me, Hunt,” Chad whined. “She left me and won’t forgive me. And she won’t let me see Shorty.”

Hunter blew out a sigh and clapped his brother on his shoulder. “I know, man. I know.” Shorty was Chad’s six-year-old daughter, Michelle.

“I’m gonna find me someone else.” Chad sniffed and tried to punch a determined fist into his opposite palm. Instead, he managed to hit Hunter’s elbow. “Someone who’ll love me, You know? Someone who won’t leave me and take my kid. And break my heart. She’s mean and unfair and I hate her, man.” He choked on
a sob. “But I’m gonna find someone else. I am. Someone sweet and
gentle and kind and . . .”

“Yeah, you will, Chad. As soon as you get over Stephanie.”
And sober up.

But Chad didn’t hear him. A light snore drifted toward him.
Raising his eyes heavenward, Hunter offered a prayer for his hurting sibling.