



**THE PAST IS
NEVER FAR BEHIND**

CONCEALED

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PROLOGUE

THE DARKENED ROAD AHEAD made a wide curve to the left. Where the pavement finally straightened out, the corn had grown tall around Sydney. Gone were the vast mountain landscapes she'd been driving through earlier. In their place were towering stalks that limited her view and made her feel claustrophobic. She already believed her world was crumbling, but now the walls of corn threatened to suffocate her as the air was sucked from her lungs. Disoriented, she turned the wrong way at a 'Y' in the road and found herself heading west.

I'm never going back, she thought to herself as she made a confusing series of turns, trying to gain her bearings.

The intersections flew by, and soon they all looked the same no matter which way she turned. Nervous that she was lost, her breathing picked up. She reached up to brush a stray hair from her face and the rough plastic of her bracelet scratched across her cheek. All of the emotions she had tried so hard to bury with the hours of driving burst from her and she had to pull to the side of the road as her pain overwhelmed her.

“I’m sorry.”

The words rushed from her lips like a curse before she had a chance to stop them. No amount of grief would ever make things better. She knew that now. That’s why she left. Some things changed a person forever. No worthless mouthful of words was ever going to help. With a quick movement, she wiped the angry tears from her eyes, amazed her body could even produce them after all she had shed in the last twenty-four hours.

Her gaze strayed to the tattered green duffle bag on the floor of the passenger’s side. There hadn’t been any reason to take more than she could carry, not that she left all that much behind. Being thrown out of the house by your mother and left to fend for yourself tended to make one light on worldly possessions.

Sydney stayed until her weeping subsided, leaving her shaking with grief, but better able to breathe. When she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, she didn’t recognize the woman looking back at her. Gone was the determined eighteen-year-old who, just days ago, celebrated her high school graduation. In her place was a broken, shattered woman, who was fleeing the life she knew in search of something more.

“You can do this. One foot in front of the other, Sydney.” The words had become her mantra and had helped her keep it together for the last few hours as she had traveled over endless miles of road. There had to be something out there for her, far beyond this random cornfield in Montana; something that would take away the unfathomable ache in her heart. She’d just have to keep driving until she found it, across the entire country if that’s what it took. Even though she was devastated, Sydney had to hang on to that thought, or she would die.

She was finally starting to calm down when something darted out from the cornfield up ahead of her car and startled her. Her

heart was immediately thrown into hyperdrive. Nothing could have prepared her for the shocking sight of a bloodstained woman running toward her car.

“Oh, my God.”

Sydney threw open the door and gasped in horror. As the woman approached, Sydney could see her long brown hair was matted with blood. She looked exhausted when she lost her footing and stumbled forward. The woman was thin, but managed to loom over Sydney with her height. Her tattered nightgown had red bloodstains splattered across the front of it. The fabric was ripped open in several places where it must have caught on the stalks of corn. The cuts on her face and lips bled openly, making her look like something out of a horror movie. Even her bare feet were covered in blood.

“What happened to you?” Sydney could hear the woman’s labored breathing as she stumbled closer. “What’s that you’re—” She stopped abruptly as the woman thrust a bundle into Sydney’s arms then collapsed at her feet. It was impossible to tell which was more horrifying, the sound the woman’s head made as it cracked against the asphalt, or the realization that the woman had placed a newborn baby into Sydney’s arms.

“Help her,” the woman gasped, as she tried to stop coughing. “Don’t let him find her.”

Frantically, Sydney scanned the area. There was no sign of anyone in pursuit of this woman, but she didn’t want to hang around long enough to find out. “I’ll call an ambulance.”

“No!” The woman grabbed her leg. The wet sensation of her bloody hand coming in contact with her ankle made Sydney shudder.

“You need help. We’ve got to get you to a hospital! There’s so much blood. Where are we exactly? I need an address to give 911 if my phone even works out here.”

“N-No time. Listen to me.” Her voice grew softer and Sydney dropped to her knees, placing the quiet baby girl in the grass beside the road. “Wants to kill her. C-Can’t let him have her.”

Sydney froze. “The baby? Who wants to kill her?” There was a distant rustle in the corn and Sydney realized that if some man came barreling out of the field, they’d all end up dead. What they needed now was help. Fast. But Sydney needed more information before she could run back to the car for her phone.

“What’s your name?”

“M-Marcy.”

“I’m S—” Marcy’s uncontrollable coughing cut her off. Her color was getting worse by the second and Sydney knew there wouldn’t be much time. In the distance, she could now hear a man’s voice, angry and cursing, getting louder by the second. Her hands started to tremble as she bunched the woman’s nightgown and tried to stop some of the bleeding.

“He’s c-coming. Take her. Go!” It came out as a hoarse whisper but the desperation in her tone spiked Sydney’s anxiety.

“I’ll take her to the police.”

At the word ‘police’ Marcy lunged but her limbs couldn’t even lift her weight. The woman’s terror was palpable and, on some level, Sydney understood. Everyone had their secrets. Some were darker than others.

She tried to figure out how to talk the woman into letting her call the police, but with the man’s voice getting closer, and more blood pooling beneath Marcy, Sydney panicked. There was no telling who was going to come bursting through the corn, but after seeing his handiwork up close, Sydney didn’t want to be there when he finally showed up.

“Okay, okay. No police. I get it. Let’s get you to my car. I’ll drive you wherever you want to go. I’ll take you both to your family.”

“They’re gone. No one...but you...help her.”

Overwhelmed, Sydney glanced at the baby in the grass. She couldn’t have been more than a few hours old. “I-I can’t.”

Marcy grabbed her arm, digging icy fingers into her skin. Her voice was surprisingly clear and strong. “Take her, love her, and *protect* her.” The man’s voice grew louder now, the dry stalks cracking under his rough movements. “Please. Go!” Those were the last words Marcy spoke before she lost consciousness.

Sydney watched as Marcy’s chest stopped moving, her ragged breathing turning to silence in a matter of seconds. She was gone, and Sydney was all alone, except for the little girl beside her. Somewhere close, the man responsible for Marcy’s horrific injuries could still be heard charging toward them. There were so many things to consider, but no time to think. Any doubts Sydney had evaporated when she saw the leaves start shaking on the corn stalks. The angry words he was spewing terrified her. Without looking back, she snatched the baby from the ground and took off toward the car.

Decision made.

Her sudden movements startled the baby and tiny cries echoed in the night. “Shh, sweetie. I didn’t mean to scare you.” She closed and locked the doors, clutching the wiggling infant to her chest as her heart pounded.

Thankfully, the keys were still in the ignition and the car roared to life on the first try. As her foot hit the gas, a hulking man with blood down the front of his shirt broke through the corn near Marcy’s body. He stepped over her and raced toward the car clutching something in his hand. Sydney’s survival instinct kicked in. With a rev of the engine, she threw on her bright lights, blinding him long enough for her to speed past. She braved a single glance back in her rearview mirror and half expected to see him chasing after her, but instead,

she watched him turn away from her fleeing car, then raise what looked like a bat into the air over Marcy's limp body.

Bile rose in Sydney's throat as the scene behind her disappeared as the car rounded the corner. All she wanted to do was get away from her own sorrow and somehow she ended up thrown into another woman's nightmare and running for her life. Marcy was dead, and Sydney was taking her daughter. Sydney slowed the car and made sure she was going the speed limit. The last thing she wanted was to have to explain the blood on her clothes and the newborn in her arms, neither of which were hers. How had this even happened?

She could feel the hungry baby rooting against her breast and, once again, the hollow ache in her body answered. When the wave of misery passed, terror filled her. What was she doing? This girl had lost her mother. Was this the cosmos' way of fixing things? Replacing all that they had lost? Could two wrongs possibly make a right?

A half hour later, Sydney found herself in the darkened parking lot of a dinky hardware store with a stranger's baby at her breast. She had no idea where she was, where she was going, or what she was going to do. If she were thinking clearly, she would have called 911, explained the whole horrible ordeal, dropped the baby at the nearest hospital, and been on her way.

But she wasn't thinking at all.

So she drove.

CHAPTER 1

ORDER UP!” PETE MASCA yelled through the large service window of his diner. He watched the leggy blonde waitress approach with a questioning look on her face. “Problem?”

“Are these eggs over easy?” she asked with a smirk, her blue eyes twinkling.

He waved the spatula menacingly through the window. “If he complains, dump them in his lap, Melissa.” Pete looked over her shoulder to the grumpy old man in the booth by the door. “Just because I’m from the East Coast, the old bat thinks I don’t know how to make a decent steak and eggs. You know how many diners we have back in Jersey?”

“No clue, but we can do an internet search when the crowd thins a little,” Melissa said with a laugh as she loaded the steak and eggs in question and three BLT sandwiches onto her tray. Another waitress came to the window grinning as she passed Pete her ticket. “Sydney, quick. Look up how many diners are in Jersey before I serve these eggs to Mr. Franklin. I need to prove Pete can cook.”

“His name *is* on the sign.” Sydney casually pointed to the menu for Pete’s Place on the counter. The diner was actually the biggest

restaurant for miles, and before Pete and Cara bought it, the space had been a short-lived barbeque restaurant called Sticky Bones. A fire and an unfortunate case of food poisoning at their first anniversary celebration had them closing up shop well before their second year was underway. Pete and Cara moved to town a few months later and decided to renovate the space. Pete's Place had been open ever since in the heart of Elton, Missouri.

"Besides, Pete," Sydney looked over her shoulder at Mr. Franklin who was holding his glass up to the light, inspecting the clarity of his tap water, "he's here every day, so you must be doing something right." As she swept her long, platinum locks back into a ponytail, Sydney grinned. "I'm with Pete," she told Melissa. "Dump the eggs on him. He stiffed me yesterday because his coffee was too hot. And that's after I saved him a piece of pie."

Melissa went over and quickly distributed the plates to each guest, not lingering to see if Mr. Franklin liked the eggs or not. She turned away to hide her smile. If only he knew how close he'd come to wearing his breakfast.

"Coward," Sydney teased as Melissa scurried back behind the counter.

"Brat."

Pete eyed Melissa through the window. "When do you leave for your trip, Miss World Traveler?"

She reached out and patted his stubbly cheek. "About a week. And you'll miss me when I'm gone."

"I still say backpacking through Europe is a bad idea. What if you fall off a cliff or get kidnapped? Who's gonna know you're missing if no one knows where you're supposed to be? I say keep your money in the bank, buy a book about Europe, and stay home where I can keep an eye on you."

Melissa rolled her eyes. "You sound like my parents."

“I might have called them last night...”

“Pete!”

“I just worry about you going off by yourself, Mel.”

“It’s an adventure and I’ve been dreaming about this all my life.” Sydney smiled as the two continued bantering back and forth.

“Now, if you go to Italy I have a nephew or two there I want you to meet. Really nice boys. Good lookin’, too. They take after their Uncle Pete.”

“Maybe she’ll come back a married woman,” Sydney teased. Pete chuckled while Melissa tossed the rag she was using to wipe off the counter at Sydney’s head.

“Bite your tongue.”

When Sydney Ross first came to town five months ago, everyone assumed she was a relative of Melissa’s because, within minutes of meeting, the two had become inseparable. They acted far more like sisters than strangers. The friendship had bloomed from day one when Pete introduced them. Pete declared them “Two peas in a pod,” which was true, and made working together at the diner all the more fun.

It was impossible not to be excited for Melissa as she prepared for this adventure. Her face lit up whenever she talked about the trip. The closer it got, the brighter her smile. But for everyone who cared about her, she was going to be sorely missed. For Sydney, Melissa was the heart of Elton and when she left, it was going to be hard to stay there without her.

While they waited for their customers to finish their food, Melissa and Sydney took care of a little housekeeping, wiping down the long strip of counter seating, refilling the napkins, and the salt and pepper shakers. The chime on the door sounded, making Melissa’s head snap up.

“Like clockwork.” She giggled, elbowing Sydney in the side when she noticed who walked through the door. “Wanna take bets on where he sits?”

“Stop it,” Sydney hissed, trying to make herself look busy. She didn’t need to look up to know that the local sheriff, Wade Jenkins, had strolled into the diner. He had a way of filling the place with his presence and she always knew the moment he arrived. Her skin would prickle with awareness when he was close and her pulse would race, like she had a radar for the man.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” Mrs. Whittman, one of Sydney’s favorite customers, snickered from her perch on the stool at the counter. Sydney watched Agnes not-so-subtly tap the space beside her in invitation as Melissa laid a menu out for him.

The two of them were incorrigible. And two of Sydney’s best friends in Elton. For weeks they had been dropping hints about Wade, claiming he had a ‘thing’ for her, but Sydney didn’t see it. He was always polite, kept to himself and didn’t talk much to her, or anyone. That didn’t stop her friends from playing match-maker, though. Melissa shared a wink with the gray-haired woman, both openly grinning by the time Wade slipped onto the seat at the counter.

Just as they had predicted.

“What brings you to the diner today, Wade?” Mrs. Whittman mumbled into her mug with a grin, “Like I even need to ask.”

Agnes Whittman was a long time staple of Elton and a force to be reckoned with. A widow for the last year, Agnes had remained active in the community even after her husband’s passing. Everyone adored her, but knew not to mess with her. Heaven help you if you were to sneak onto her property in the middle of the night. She’d take a shot at you then claim self-defense. Beneath the wrinkles and gruff exterior, she was still young at heart. That’s why everyone loved her.

“Hello, Agnes.” Wade sat down beside her with a smile then turned his attention to Sydney who always found herself struck mute at the sight of him. If she was looking for a man, Wade Jenkins would definitely be a slice of mouth-watering heaven. At 6’2, he was a head turner for sure. His deep brown hair was a touch on the long side, hanging just over his ears with a sexy curl above his brow. His chiseled jaw and mysterious eyes were enough to make even the strongest woman swoon.

If she was looking for a man, she would have imagined running her fingers through his hair, over the defined muscles in his arms, and kissing his full lips. Beneath the gorgeous exterior there was something dark about him. It seemed like he had his secrets, things he most definitely wanted to keep private. That was something Sydney understood completely.

But because of her own secrets, she wasn’t looking for a man.

“Sydney will be right with you, Wade,” Melissa said in a voice loud enough to turn every head in the diner. No one saw Sydney pinch her under the counter, but they did take note of how Sydney’s cheeks flared red with embarrassment.

“You’re dead,” Sydney snarled as she turned her back to Wade and grabbed a mug.

“And you’re welcome,” Melissa sang as she swatted her in the rear with a rag. The yelp Sydney let out caught Wade’s attention. He gave a little nod her direction and set his hat on the counter.

The bright green color of his eyes was distracting whenever he would look her way. It took a lot to rattle Sydney, but there was always something about Wade that definitely threw off her equilibrium. He slowly looked her up and down, waiting for her to say something. Her stomach gave a flutter and random words tumbled from her mouth before she could stop them. “H-Hi. Hey. Hello. How are you? Want something? What can I get you to drink today?”

Make an ass of myself? Check.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Melissa shaking her head and smiling. She busied herself refilling one of the napkin holders and shamelessly continued to eavesdrop. Sydney would've told her all the embarrassing details later, so Melissa might as well witness her humiliation firsthand. At least that would save Sydney the trouble of having to relive it.

Deep breath. "Sorry, let me try this again. Hi, Wade. How are you today?"

"Sydney," he said in that deep voice of his that made her feel all warm and tingly inside. How could he make a simple hello sound so sexy? "I'm good. Coffee, please." When she slid the mug and the creamer his way, he rewarded her with a warm smile. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

One thing she had learned was Wade Jenkins was a man of few words. Not that she had been watching him. Or pining over him. Or having erotic dreams about him the last few weeks. Definitely not wondering what he looked like naked. Nope. Not Sydney. That would be stupid because she wasn't looking for a man. But she had noticed that when he came in to the diner with other people, he sat back and listened, only contributing to the conversation if asked something directly. It was probably why she always asked him so many questions. It was her feeble attempt to get him to talk a little more.

He was incredibly polite and tolerated her verbal diarrhea, which seemed to strike often in his presence. At twenty-four years old, she should have been over that by now. But not where Wade was concerned. He would politely respond to whatever random thing she prattled on about, but rarely offered information. He was probably an excellent poker player because he gave nothing away with his body language. Sydney had studied him long enough to learn the few predictable habits he had, and the coffee was one of them.

He looked up over the rim of the mug and Sydney realized she was still standing there, ogling and gawking at him. She nervously twirled her pen between her fingers as her mind raced, trying to come up with a plausible explanation for her odd behavior. When her shaking hands sent the pen clattering onto the counter, Sydney wanted to die. Things went from bad to worse the moment she and Wade collided trying to retrieve it. She panicked and her hand landed on top of his with a rough slap, loud enough to startle Agnes.

“Oh, my gosh! I’m so sorry.” She tried to cover her embarrassment, but failed miserably. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me today. That doesn’t qualify as assaulting an officer, does it? It was an accident. Did I hurt you? Do I need a lawyer?” Wade didn’t say anything, but gave her an odd look. Sydney realized with a mortified start that she was rubbing the back of his hand where she’s slapped him. She jerked hers away as if she’d been scalded. He probably thought she was certifiable, and Melissa’s snickering wasn’t helping.

“Cuff her, Wade.” Agnes laughed, thoroughly enjoying their awkward interaction.

“Ooh, I hear she likes that,” Melissa teased, adding to the humiliation.

Sydney closed her eyes and prayed Wade hadn’t caught either comment, but apparently his hearing was as perfect as the rest of him, and he fought to hide the slightest hint of a smile. He held out the pen. “How about a turkey club?”

Relieved he had a sense of humor and was taking all the ram-bunctious teasing in stride, Sydney smiled even though her cheeks were bright red. “I think that can be arranged.”

She called his sandwich back to Pete and piled another order onto her tray, then hurried off to deliver it to a customer who didn’t make her act like a fool. Her reprieve was short-lived when Melissa snuck up behind her and sang softly, “He’s watching you.”

If Melissa ever gave up waitressing, she could open a dating service. Nothing made her happier than setting people up, even against their will. So far, Sydney had managed to stay out of her crosshairs, but now that she was leaving for her trip, it seemed that Melissa wouldn't be happy until she forced Wade to suffer through an evening out with Sydney. The poor man.

To keep some distance from Officer Sexy, she chatted with a table of ladies from town. They were planning the fall festival, and since she was new to the area, they were sharing all the details with her. Donna Perkins was explaining the dance and bake-off, and how the money raised went to fund the school library when Melissa swooped in.

"Why are you over here? Go flirt with him!" Melissa quickly excused them both and linked their arms together, dragging her back to the counter. Sydney's attempt to give Wade some peace with his coffee was thwarted by the hyper blonde.

"Maybe I don't want to flirt," Sydney snarled through her smile, refusing to give in to her desire to strangle Melissa.

"Liar."

"Let the man enjoy his coffee."

"Let the man look at you, dammit." Melissa wrenched her arm and flung Sydney behind the counter. She hurried up to the window to ask about the turkey club, avoiding Wade for a few seconds longer. Pete slid the order through the window with a grin and, over her shoulder, Sydney could hear Melissa accosting Wade.

"So, do you have plans tonight?"

"No." He took a long sip of his coffee.

"Seeing anyone?"

Sydney almost smacked her in the back of the head with her tray. She showed great restraint, though, but found herself holding her breath, waiting for his answer.

Not that she was interested, but if he said yes, she just might burst into tears.

Without skipping a beat, Wade grinned. “You asking me out, Mel?”

It was such a shame she was standing behind Melissa because at that moment, Sydney would have killed to have seen her friend’s face. The unflappable Melissa was actually rendered speechless—a monumental feat, for sure. Agnes snorted, hiding a grin behind her mug, enjoying Melissa’s stunned silence as much as Sydney.

Melissa recovered and tried to sputter an explanation. “M-Me? A-Are you s-serious? I-I never, I mean you’re cute but... I don’t mean like, cute like I want to go out with you, I mean cute like a puppy. No, you’re no puppy. Maybe a baby tiger. Or a shark, but they’re not really cute. I’m gonna shut up now.” Melissa spun around and retreated into the kitchen with Pete.

“Well played, Wade,” Agnes said with a laugh, slapping him on the back. “I’m going to go ask the reverend why he talks so damn long during those sermons on Sunday. See if I can’t make that vein pop out of the side of his head for a few seconds.” She winked at Sydney and excused herself, giving them an audience-free moment.

Sydney offered Wade an appreciative smile. The only thing she though could have derailed Melissa from her line of questioning was and atomic bomb—although apparently a gorgeous sheriff with a sarcastic streak worked too. “You’re my hero.” She slipped the sandwich across the counter and topped off his coffee. There was one piece of pie left in the case so she quickly grabbed it and placed it beside his lunch.

“Thanks for the pie.”

“It’s on me. It’s the least I can do after assaulting you.” She stood there awkwardly when he didn’t break their eye contact. Part of her wondered if he had something to say, but then she was startled from her reverie by Pete’s booming voice.

“Syd, it’s three o’clock. You better hustle over to school or little Faith is going to be ticked at you for picking her up late.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Sydney looked down at her watch. She was never late to pick up Faith. Never. She couldn’t be. But the distraction of Wade and Melissa made her lose track of time. She had been careless, and that couldn’t happen again. She scrambled to get her purse and keys from under the counter then raced out the door. It dawned on her as she tore out of the parking lot that she had walked out on all her customers without a single word.

Including Wade.

Swamped with guilt, Sydney managed to keep it together on the drive to school, but her mind was racing the entire way. How could she have let herself be late? Even five minutes would make a difference. The plan needed to be followed.

Always.

Her fingers tapped out an erratic rhythm on the steering wheel as she tried to stay calm. Years of paranoia never really went away, no matter how comfortable she was in a new location. Something always happened to disrupt her calm. Nine moves in almost six years would do that to a person. Obsessively she scanned the area and noticed an unfamiliar car parked down the street. She tamped down the unwarranted suspicion and tried to get control of her fear.

If only she had been on time!

She leaned across the seat, trying to see around the pickup truck in front of her, but it was impossible. Until she had Faith in the car, Sydney was going to be a ball of nerves. She never liked being apart from her daughter, but now that Faith was in school, Sydney was going to have to learn to deal with that better.

Don’t let Faith see you like this, she told herself. When it was her turn to pick up, she took a deep breath and stepped out to take Faith by the hand.

“She had a great day,” Miss Westmore said as Faith barreled into Sydney’s arms.

“Momma! I made you something today.”

“I can’t wait to see it.” She looked over at her daughter’s teacher. “Thanks. Have a nice evening.”

Sydney ushered Faith into the car and buckled her seatbelt. The moment she was in the car, the tension and anxiety began to ease. Out of habit, she quickly scanned her surroundings and couldn’t help but feel like she was being watched. Her eyes darted to where the car had been parked on the side of the road. She froze when she saw someone standing beside it. Instinctively she reached for Faith, but when she looked back, the figure was gone.

Or it hadn’t been there to begin with, she told herself. Calm down, Syd. You sound like your mother.

On the drive home, Sydney did her best to reign in her fear. They were fine. They’d always been able to stay longer than this before anything happened. Elton was a blip on the map, if it even was on the map. It was that small. Who would think to look for them there? She made sure everything she did was in cash to keep their trail as invisible as possible.

Sydney glanced at Faith’s reflection in the rearview mirror. She was looking out the window, happily singing a song they must have learned at school today. She was happy and healthy. That’s all that mattered. There was no way Sydney was going to let anything happen to her.

Ever.

It was a promise she had made, and one she intended to keep.