

DANGER NEVER SLEEPS ③

# ACTIVE DEFENSE

# LYNETTE EASON



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CHAPTER  
**ONE**

**SEPTEMBER**  
**KABUL, AFGHANISTAN**

Dr. Heather Fontaine strapped her feet into the sandboard and pushed off. There was nothing like the feel of the wind in her face and that peace-filled stretch of time from the top of the mountain to the bottom. It was a stress reliever like no other. With the Bamyán mountains located about three hours from Kabul and considered a relatively safe adventure, it had been a no-brainer to head there when they'd had the time off. She wasn't a runner or gym rat, but she could hold her own when sandboarding or skiing.

An encouraging yell came from Gina Wicks, her nurse, and Heather grinned, happy to see the young widow enjoying a moment of fun. Gina's husband, Brad, had been killed by "friendly fire" and she'd returned a couple weeks ago to finish her tour.

At the end of the run, Heather expertly shifted her body to bring the board to a halt.

"Way to go, Heather," Gina said. "No one would know you hate to exercise."

Heather laughed. "That's not exercise, that's sheer exhilaration."

The other two friends who'd joined her and Gina grabbed their gear and they headed to the Jeep.

While Gina drove, Heather leaned her head back against the seat and shut her eyes. She was tired, but in a good way. Not in a twelve-hour-surgery-only-to-lose-the-patient way. She'd needed this. They'd all needed it. But now it was time to get back and her brain was already shifting into work mode, mentally reviewing the patients waiting for her in the recovery tent.

She must have dozed off, because the next thing she knew, Gina was poking her in the arm. Heather opened her eyes and realized they were almost back to base. "Wow." She scrubbed a hand down her cheek and drew in a deep breath. "I must have sacked out."

"Girl, you sawed enough logs to last all winter in Alaska."

Heather rolled her eyes, but smiled. "Hey, can you stop by the hospital? I want to check on a few patients."

"Now?"

"Yeah. If you don't mind?"

"Um . . . sure."

The other two ladies in the back groaned good-naturedly and guilt swept her.

"No, never mind. I'll walk over after we drop everyone off."

Gina swung the wheel and headed for the FOB hospital. "It's okay. It won't take you long. I'll drop you off first and come back and get you when you're ready."

That seemed to work for the others and soon Heather found herself walking toward the surgery recovery ward. The huge tents that made up the hospital might look rough and ancient on the outside, but the inside held state-of-the-art equipment for those needing it. And so many did—Afghani civilians and American soldiers, both.

She'd enjoyed being with her friends and knew she needed the mental break, but her patients weighed on her mind and in her heart the entire time she'd been away. Not that the other doctors weren't perfectly capable of caring for them, but . . .

Heather spotted one of the doctors caring for her patients while she was gone. “Hey, Hank, hold up.”

He turned. “What are you doing here?”

“We got back a little early so I thought I’d check in. Catch me up.”

He did, then patted her shoulder. “Glad you’re back, Heather,” he said. “It’s too quiet around here without you.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m not sure how to take that.”

He laughed. “Can I grab you a cup of coffee?”

“Sure, thanks.”

“I’ll be right back.” He darted toward the cafeteria.

Movement in the distance stalled her. She stood between the tents—to her left was the operating suite, to her right the recovery area. She tried to get a better view of the approaching figure and noted he’d caught the attention of several others.

He trudged toward them, head down, T-shirt two sizes too big and flapping around his thin frame. He passed two of the Humvees, walked between two more tents, and headed for the recovery ward.

The closer he got, the more she knew. Certainty settled in her gut. “No,” she whispered. “No!” She ran toward him. “Please! No!”

He stopped and locked eyes with her. She could see his desperation even at this distance. For a moment, he stood motionless, half a football field between them. Then he yanked off the shirt, and Heather froze as she saw the bomb strapped to his chest.

“Help me!” He grabbed at the bomb, struggled with it, trying to rip it from his body.

“No! Stop! Don’t come any closer! Bomb!”

Heads popped out from the tents.

Heather’s focus remained on the teen. He’d managed to pull the explosive partway off, the duct tape loosening, some of it tearing. He held it out to the right side of his body, and for a moment she thought he might succeed, let go of it, and run.

The explosion rocked him, lifted him, then dropped him onto his back on the hard-packed dirt. Heather screamed. She raced

toward him, pulling gloves from her pocket, hearing others yelling at her to get back, that there might be a second bomb, but she couldn't leave him like that. She dropped to her knees next to him. His right arm was gone, his right side a mangled mess. Blood pumped from the shoulder where his arm had been, and she clamped a hand over it.

"Hold on!" she yelled at him. "Hold on!" He was conscious, his eyes never leaving hers. "What's your name?"

"Abdul," he whispered. "I am sorry. I—"

And closed his eyes.

Heather looked back over her shoulder. "Someone get over here and help me!"

Another doctor raced from the tent, and time blurred as Heather went to work on the boy, who couldn't be more than fourteen or fifteen years old. "Please hold on."

She was acutely aware of others arriving to help transfer him to a portable stretcher and then to the OR. She raced alongside him, keeping her hands clamped around his open wound. And finally, they were in the operating room. Minutes turned into hours as they tried to put the boy back together. Another doctor worked to reattach his arm. Heather did her best with his torso. She pulled the last stitch and sucked in a breath.

"That's it," she said. "Now, we wait."



Two hours later, in recovery, Heather dozed in the chair next to Abdul's bed.

The alarms on the monitor woke her and she bolted to her feet. His heart had stopped.

Feverishly, she pumped his chest. "Please, please, please, don't give up. You asked me to help you and I will, but you have to live." More pumping. Sweat rolled from her in waves.

She had no idea how long she worked until Gina laid a hand on her shoulder. "Heather . . ."

Heather stopped, panting, heard the flatline—and knew it was over. They’d lost him. She blinked up at her friend, trying to keep from breaking down. “What are you doing here?”

“I came back just after the explosion to see if I could help. To make sure you were okay. I’m sorry.”

Heather let out a low cry and swung away from her, stripped off her gloves, and darted out the door. The sun was setting, turning the sky all kinds of beautiful colors. But she didn’t want to see beauty when she was surrounded by death. Not tonight.

“Heather!”

“Give me some space right now, Gina, please.”

The woman hesitated, then turned and went back inside with Abdul.

Heather paced near the trash heap, working hard to get her emotions under control. She wanted to weep, to scream, to lash out at the evil that had overtaken this country, but she didn’t. She couldn’t.

She took a deep breath and had turned to go back in when she spotted the full trash bag against the wall.

And the navy-blue T-shirt laying on top of it. She picked it up, noted the white paint stains on the left shoulder. Pictured it on the teen who’d come to kill them.

She buried her face in it and wept.



**JANUARY**  
**GREENVILLE, SC**

Heather pulled to the curb of her best friend’s house, put the SUV in park, and cut the engine. Brooke James lived in a middle-class neighborhood in a cottage-style home with a perfectly groomed yard. Even in the dead of winter.

But that was Brooke, a woman whose friendship Heather deeply appreciated. Most of the time, she couldn’t wait to get together

with her. But at the moment, Heather wasn't in the mood to put on her party face. Her left leg jiggled up and down—a sure sign she was anxious and stressed. She didn't even bother to try and stop it. “Just go home,” she muttered. “If you go home, you can curl up on the couch and read a good book.” While intermittently checking the alarm system, windows, and doors to ensure no one could get in.

*No one*, meaning the stalker she seemed to have acquired. Four months home from active duty in a war zone and she still wasn't sleeping much. She found herself ducking at loud noises, avoiding crowds, but managing to function at work without too much trouble. Which was weird, but she'd come to accept that was the way her brain was going to work at the present and deal with it. Only this stalker thing was about to send her over the edge, back into that dark mental pit that had sent her running home at the first opportunity.

She sat tense and knotted while scanning the surrounding area for *him*. Seeing nothing that set off her alarms, Heather allowed herself to relax a fraction.

But she still wanted to go home. She cranked the car. Hesitated. And shut off the engine. “Ugh.”

She'd promised Brooke and the others she'd come. They were welcoming Gina home from Afghanistan.

But doing that required getting out of the car. She pressed her thumb and forefinger to her eyes. Gina's arrival home had sparked all the memories Heather had worked so hard to suppress. To overcome. To ignore. Gina had been home a little over two weeks, and Heather had managed to avoid seeing the woman, much to her shame. But the truth was, Gina was a walking reminder of that day, and Heather didn't want to remember.

“Because avoiding Gina's working really well for you so far, right?” Her self-directed sarcasm didn't help. It was time to pull on her big-girl panties and go welcome home a woman who'd been nothing but a friend to her. She stuffed her keys into her bag. She

had enough on her plate dealing with the mess in her head; she didn't have time to play games with a stalker.

The longer Heather sat, the faster her anger boiled. Seriously. A stalker? No . . . more like a watcher. He would watch her but not approach—or would act like he was going to, then change his mind at the last minute.

It was unnerving. Even when she'd been serving at the hospital base in Afghanistan, she hadn't been this jumpy. Going back to Kabul after an extended period of time home was not on her radar until the Army deployed her again, thanks to a shortage of physicians in FOBs. Once her time was up—right after the bombing—she took an honorable discharge, with the hopes it would help with the nerves and the nightmares. And it had. She'd been making progress. Had been going about her life just fine. Until this guy had shown up. And Gina had come home to stir up memories of that day at the hospital four months ago.

Another glance in the rearview mirror didn't help. Neither did checking the side mirrors.

There was nothing and no one there.

But she'd seen him. Several times. She just couldn't get a good look at him. Once, at work, she'd thought he might attempt to speak with her, but she had been approached by a colleague. When she turned back to the place she'd seen him, he was gone.

But . . . the short look she had gotten had reminded her of someone. She'd seen him before. In the past. But where?

Her phone buzzed and she snatched it from the holder. "Hello?"

"Are you going to sit out there all evening or come in?"

Heather closed her eyes and pulled in a deep, cleansing breath. "Sorry, I was just thinking about something. I'm coming."

"You brought your suit, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Great. We're in the pool. Get changed and join us."

"Bossy today, aren't you?"

Brooke simply laughed, and Heather couldn't help the smile that curved her own lips.

"You do realize it's two measly degrees above freezing out here?"

"That's why my husband put the heater in. Plus, we have the hot tub now. Trust me, you'll love it. It's really relaxing." She paused. "And *relaxing* sounds like it might be beneficial for you."

Heather laughed. "I'm on the way." She hung up and grabbed her bag from the floorboard.

When she looked up, her gaze zeroed in on a shadow of movement on the street in front of the neighbor's house. A fleeting glimpse of someone in a ball cap, scarf, and plaid jacket. The same outfit she'd seen when she walked out of the hospital yesterday and the day before. He disappeared behind the van parked on the street, then reappeared, hands shoved into his coat.

She threw open the door, bolted from the seat, and raced in the direction she'd seen the person.

"Heather!"

The shout from behind her reached her ears, but she couldn't stop to acknowledge it. Just ahead was her stalker. Watcher. Whatever.

Her feet pounded the asphalt. "Hey! You!"

The man froze, then he turned and ran, hopped into a dark sedan, and sped off down the street.

A hand landed on her arm. On instinct, she spun and lashed out with a fist that connected to flesh. A harsh grunt escaped her attacker while pain exploded from her knuckles to her wrist. Her victim stumbled backward.

"Heather!"

She floundered to a stop, panting, heart thundering in her ears. "Travis?" Heather flexed her fingers to make sure she hadn't broken anything. When they moved freely, if painfully, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Travis Walker was bent at the waist, one hand covering his cheek. "Holy cow, you have a mean right."

Horrified, Heather gaped. “Oh, my word . . . oh no. I’m so sorry. What were you *doing*?” She’d hit him. The first guy she’d been interested in since . . . forever. But had been too leery to let him know it. And she’d hit him.

“I pulled in behind you and saw you sitting in your car,” he said. “I was coming to walk inside with you, when all of a sudden you were racing down the street.”

“So, you decided to chase me?”

“And *catch* you, much to my regret.” He straightened and winced. “What were you running from?”

“Not *from*. *To*.” She glanced back in the direction she’d seen the figure. Gone now, of course. “And I . . . I’m not sure. I think someone is . . . watching me.”

“Watching you?”

“That sounds so freaky and paranoid, doesn’t it?”

“A little, without an explanation to go along with it.”

“Heather?” Brooke’s concerned call from her front porch sent a deep sigh shuddering through her.

“Be there in a minute!” She groaned. “I’ll explain later. I don’t want this to be a big thing tonight.” The urge to share her fears and concerns nearly overpowered her. However, while she’d gotten to know Travis over the last four months, thanks to her friendship with Brooke, his best friend’s wife, she swallowed the words and stepped closer to him. She studied his wound. He still looked amazing to her even with a slightly red eye. “Let me see it.”

“It’s fine. It was a glancing blow. I just want to know what you don’t want to be a big thing.”

Heather leaned closer. “Travis, come on.” She caught a whiff of that cologne he used. A scent she’d come to associate only with him.

“Nope.” He actually backed away from her, the expression on his face grabbing her curiosity. He rubbed just under the wound, his green eyes glinting at her, a mixture of admiration and . . . fear?

She raised a brow. “What in the world is wrong with you?”

He flushed. “Nothing. Doctors make me nervous.” He bent and picked up the black Stetson that had flown from his dark blond head when she’d belted him.

“Doctors make you . . .” She sputtered to a stop. Then laughed. When he didn’t join her, that trailed off too. “You’re serious?”

“Now you know my deepest, darkest secret.”

“Somehow, I doubt that. Are you going to explain?”

He raised a brow. “Are you going to tell me about this person you think is watching you?”

“Heather? Travis? Is everything okay?” Brooke called from the porch again, her voice a mixture of curiosity and concern.

“We’re coming, Brooke.” Heather figured Brooke’s rabid curiosity—which was part of what made her such a great psychiatrist—would get the better of her and she’d come to investigate if they didn’t hurry up. She waved toward the house. “Why don’t we go join the party and put some ice on that eye?”

His eyes narrowed, and for a split second, she thought he might insist on further explanation for her odd behavior, but he agreed with a quick nod.

With one last glance behind her, she shook off the ominous feeling that her watcher was escalating and vowed to have a good time tonight.

Even if it killed her.



Travis leaned his head back against the edge of the hot tub and let the jets pound his body while his left eye and cheekbone throbbed. He’d shucked his cowboy boots and Stetson in favor of a bathing suit and old T-shirt from his college days at Baylor University. Caden Denning and Brooke’s husband, Asher, sat opposite him while Gavin Black manned the grill.

Heather, Brooke, Sarah, Ava, and Gina had opted for the heated pool. Shortly after his wedding to Brooke last year, Asher had convinced his friends to join him in the DIY project of con-

verting the existing pool into a pool and hot tub combo. They'd painted oversized game boards on the concrete, including chess, backgammon, and shuffleboard. It was a gorgeous entertaining space.

At the time, Travis had been certain he and the others were nuts for agreeing to help put it all together. Right now, he decided it was the best idea any one of them had ever come up with. Mainly because of the hot tub adjoining the pool. He settled back in the tub, elbows resting behind him on the ledge between the two. The ladies had migrated to the shallow end steps to chat. Travis closed his eyes and let the hot water relax him.

"How are you doing?" Heather's soft question whispered past his ear. Opening one eye, he turned his head to discern she'd aimed the question at Gina.

"Okay today," Gina said. She had her auburn hair pulled on top of her head in one of those clip things women liked. The floodlights from the pool illuminated her face. She was pretty in a girl-next-door kind of way, but the stress of losing her husband had stamped a grief onto her fragile features that would only be softened by time.

"Tomorrow I might not be," she said. "I try to stay busy. I joined a chess club here before I left Kabul and the first meeting is tomorrow night, but it's hard to work up any enthusiasm for it."

Travis grimaced at the pure sadness in her voice and shut his eye. Gina's husband had been killed in Afghanistan about six months ago. She'd come home to bury him, then returned to finish her tour. A courageous choice.

"It doesn't help that my mother-in-law keeps posting stuff on Brad's social media page, ranting about the military and everything wrong with it," Gina said. "Including me. She blames me and everyone involved for his death. She thinks I should have done something. Everyone should have done something to keep him from dying."

"Oh, how awful," Brooke said.

“I’d simply delete his profile, but his friends still post on there as a way to honor his memory, and I hate to take that away from them. Or . . . I could simply block her, but that doesn’t seem right either. I can see it now, can’t you? #worstdaughterinlawever.” She rubbed her eyes. “And, truthfully, I don’t want to lose the content that he posted.”

“I’ve seen a few of the posts,” Heather said, “and I can imagine those are really hard for you. Can you ignore her or snooze her?”

“I’ve been ignoring her. Or trying to. It’s not working very well.” Gina shook her head. “I need to stay off social media until she calms down—and she will. Eventually.”

Heather rubbed her friend’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Travis glanced over at Caden and noticed his eyes were on the ladies.

Most specifically, Ava. Caden and Sarah’s childhood friend, but it was obvious Caden wanted to take that to a new level.

Travis lifted a brow and caught the man’s eye. Caden gave him a deadpan look and rolled so his back was to Travis. He crossed his arms on the hot tub ledge and rested his chin on them. Travis filed the information away. So, Caden was interested in Ava. That was a relief. He’d thought for a long time he might be attracted to Heather.

He would understand it, of course. Heather had the looks of a runway model with her long wavy blonde hair, creamy complexion, and eyes that reminded him of his mom’s sapphire pendant she wore only on special occasions. And while he had initially been attracted to her good looks, it was the heart that beat within her that kept his attention snared.

Travis had a healthy self-esteem for the most part, but when it came to women, he sometimes felt like a fish out of water—especially since his last relationship had gone south. Heather was so out of his league she didn’t even have a league. He often found himself paralyzed when in her presence. It was stupid, but it was also reality.

“. . . friendly fire,” Gina was saying. “What’s so friendly about it? It still kills.”

“Aw, Gina . . .” Brooke’s voice was soft, sympathetic, and raw with hurt for her friend.

Gina waved a hand. “Sorry. Being home and trying to adjust to this life without Brad has been hard.” She paused. “So, here’s some good news. I start my new job tomorrow.”

“New job?” Heather tilted her head and frowned.

“It’s part-time right now with a construction company, but it could turn into full-time. A friend of mine told me about it. I talked to the manager and he said he’d give me a chance.”

“Construction?” Brooke asked. “What happened to nursing?”

“I . . . I’m not ready to go back to that yet. I just—” She looked away. “I’m not sure I’ll ever want to return to medicine.”

Heather and Brooke exchanged a glance, and Heather gave a slight shrug.

“Well, are you all right financially?” Brooke asked. “Because we can help, you know.”

Gina blinked. “That’s really sweet, but no, I’d never take your money. I’m fine right now, but the money from Brad’s life insurance and the death gratuity won’t last forever, so I have to start thinking about the future and making plans.” She paused. “And . . .” She drew in a deep breath. “As part of those plans, I’m putting our house on the market.”

A small gasp slipped from Sarah, and Gina gave her a sad smile.

“I know. It may seem extreme, but I simply can’t live there without him.”

“Understandable. Where are you going to live?”

“With my parents. For now. I’ll look for something else soon, though. As much as I love them, I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to handle living with them.” Gina shoved a few stray strands of hair behind her ear.

“How long were you married?” Ava asked. “I feel like I should know this, but I don’t remember.”

“A little over a year, but we dated for two.”

“Brad was a wonderful man,” Heather said. “I always enjoyed his stops at the hospital to see you. I appreciated his humor and obvious love for you.” She shook her head. “It never should’ve happened and I’m sorry I couldn’t save him. I tried, Gina, I promise, I tried.”

“I know you did. But you and I both know it wouldn’t have mattered who his doctor was,” Gina said. “He barely lived ten minutes after he got to the hospital—and it was because of you that he had those minutes.” The ladies gathered closer around Gina, who grimaced and gave a humorless chuckle. “Well, I’m a downer, aren’t I? Let’s talk about something else.”

“Hey, Gina,” Caden said, “how about a game of chess? I bet I can beat you. I’ve been practicing.”

Gina actually laughed, her face softening as the strain of grief lifted for the moment.

“Beat me?” Gina smirked. “That’s just delusional.”

The two of them wandered over to the giant-sized chess set next to the pool, and Travis closed his eyes once more, glad to see Gina smiling.

“Cowboy, you gonna soak your skin off or come finish barbecuing these ribs? It’s my turn in the hot tub.”

Gavin’s question made Travis smile. “I’m coming.” He and Gavin had formed a friendship when they’d gone through boot camp together and stayed in touch in spite of the fact their lives had gone in different directions. Gavin had stayed in Afghanistan for a couple of years, Travis had been there for one tour, then opted out at the first possible opportunity to work as an EMT. He’d gotten bored with that and headed to the police academy. After working his way up to detective and the SWAT team, a restlessness he hadn’t been able to shrug off had made the decision for him. He’d opened his own security firm and became his own boss, hiring Gavin and Asher, who were more partners than employees.

“You’d better hurry,” Caden said with a lazy southern drawl, looking up from the game, “or someone’s liable to punch you in the other eye.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s just allergies.” Travis ignored Asher’s and Caden’s quiet laughter—and Gina’s quizzical look—and hauled himself out of the water. He grabbed one of the robes from the hook on the wall before the chill could chase away the warmth of the soak.

Brooke and Asher treated their guests well, and he was always happy to be included in any invitation from them—especially when it involved cooking and the pool.

And Heather.

At the grill, he grabbed one of the barbecue bottles he’d brought. A light laugh rang out from the hot tub.

Heather’s.

Chills slipped up his spine. Chills that had nothing to do with the weather, but everything to do with the fact that the more he was around Heather Fontaine, the more he liked her. But something was definitely bothering the pretty surgeon and Travis wanted to know what it was.

She’d been chasing something—or someone—and the pinched look to her mouth and flare of fear in her eyes when she’d thrown that punch told him a whole lot.

He touched the bruise beneath his left eye. She hadn’t broken the skin, but based on his glance in the bathroom mirror, it was already an intriguing shade of red. Dodging the immediate questions as soon as he’d walked into the house had required some quick thinking. Allergies. Yeah. Right.

Caden’s comment during the chess match made him wonder if the man had actually witnessed the whole thing or if he was just a good guesser. No way to know without asking, and Travis didn’t plan on doing that.

Once he had the ribs slathered with another layer of his special sauce, he stepped inside to find Gavin pulling more sodas from

the refrigerator. “Ribs should be done in about another fifteen minutes.”

Gavin nodded. “Thanks for bringing them.”

“Do you know how hard it was not to finish cooking those suckers and have a feast? Even my parents came over hoping to score some.”

“They could smell it from their house?”

“Them and every ranch hand on the place.” That’s what he got for living in close proximity to his entire family and the people who worked for them. And he wouldn’t change it for anything. “They hate me now, but I refused to share. Only my promise to cook them some in the near future has kept me in the will.”

Gavin smiled. “Glad you managed to protect them—and stay in the will.”

“Barely.”

“How are things on the ranch anyway? Haven’t heard you mention it much lately.”

“Not too much to mention. Things are mostly good. Some bad. Got a horse we’re going to have to put down before too much longer. It’s going to devastate my sister.”

Gavin winced. “Ouch. I hate that. That the one she’s had for a while?”

“Over twenty years.” He didn’t even want to think about it. “Dad’s doing well. He’s doing some contract work for the Marshals when he’s not taking care of the ranch. He has to stay busy or go nuts.” One would think the ranch kept him busy enough, but Travis knew the man missed his law enforcement days. “Mom just shakes her head.” He paused and glanced at his phone. “I got a request from that senator who’s getting married next month in Asheville. Are you and Asher up for it?”

“Sure.”

“Might take all of us to cover it.”

“Then it’s a good thing you brought three more people on board. We’ve needed them.”

“Thanks.” Travis sent an acceptance email that would automatically log the event on his calendar. “How’s Sarah doing?” A few short months ago, Caden’s sister, Sarah, had been kidnapped by the Taliban and held until Gavin and his team had managed to rescue her. She and Gavin were now engaged and making wedding plans.

“Doing well. She and Brooke talk a lot and she’s come a long way. She’s more at peace with herself, her father . . . everything.”

“She’s still enjoying the job?” Sarah had been offered an investigative journalist position with a local newspaper once she’d been discharged from the Army. She’d finally caved after taking several months to decide if that was what she wanted to do. It said a lot about the respect she commanded in the profession that they were willing to wait for her.

“She is. It’s a little different from what she was doing in Kabul, but she likes it. *I* like it because it’s not near as dangerous.”

“I get that. She’s crazy talented. Some of her articles have left me reeling.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, man.”

Travis chuckled and glanced at the ladies, who’d slipped into robes and gathered under one of the tall propane patio heaters. “Have you talked to Heather much?”

“I talk to her when I see her, which is every once in a while. Sarah sees her a lot more than I do. Why? Something going on?”

“I’m not sure.” Travis told Gavin about her race down the street—leaving out the part about how he got the bruised eye. “She said she wasn’t running from anything, but *to* something.”

“To what?”

“I don’t know. She started to tell me, but Brooke interrupted, so Heather said she’d explain later.”

Gavin stroked the five o’clock shadow on his chin. “You know, she does seem a little more tense than usual.”

“How so?”

“Just . . .” He shrugged. “The last few times I’ve seen her, she’s

just seemed . . . off. *Tense* is the only word I can think of—or strung tight.”

“Yeah.” Travis fell silent, processing. “I guess she’ll share with us when she’s ready.”

Gavin gave light scoff of disbelief. “Heather *might* share with Brooke, and that means you’ll never know what’s going through her head.”

True. Brooke would never betray a confidence. Which meant Travis would have to do his own digging. “Those ribs are probably done by now. You ready?”

“Been ready even though you made me stand here and talk instead of getting a good soak in.”

Travis laughed and led the way back out onto the deck. With the three heaters, the grill, and the firepit, the chill wasn’t too bad. Asher had already started handing out the plates.

Once they’d piled the food high and had gathered around the firepit, Travis waited for Asher to say grace, then shot a look at Caden. “So, who won?”

“Shut up.”

Gina grinned and Caden scowled before giving a rueful smile and a shrug. Conversation shifted to small talk until Brooke turned to Heather.

“What were you running from earlier?” she asked.

Heather froze and her lips tightened a fraction. “Nothing.”

“Running?” Sarah asked with a raised brow. “Since when does Heather run voluntarily?”

The others snickered. Heather’s aversion to physical exercise was anything but a well-kept secret.

Gina leaned in. “Come on, Heather, spill it.”

Heather rolled her eyes, then sighed. “I’ll sound like I’m crazy. Y’all will think I’m flat-out losing it.”

“Now you have to tell us,” Sarah said. “No way you can say that and then just shut down the topic.”

Travis caught the darkening of Heather’s blue eyes and the fur-

rowed brow along with the minuscule flash of fear. He frowned. “What’s going on, Heather? We’re your friends and want to help.”

Heather scowled. “Y’all . . . really. It’s *probably* not that big of a deal.”

“But?” Travis asked.

“But . . . I think I might have something of a stalker.”