

Nowhere to Run

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WALLACE



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To my prayer team

Without your love, encouraging notes, and prayers, my stories would not exist. You all have prayed me through every aspect of life and reminded me every week that the reason I write is to glorify God, to experience His smile. I thank God for each of you and pray you experience God's smile and rejoice in the reality that your prayers have changed my life and the lives of readers forever.



*When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you. I praise God
for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be
afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?*

PSALM 56:3-4

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest
fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light,
not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves,
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your
playing small doesn't serve the world.*

MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

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CHAPTER ONE

Ashley Walters pushed aside the curtains of her bedroom window and peered into the growing darkness. The engagement ring on her left hand tangled in the fabric and she yanked it loose. She should be following her best friend's instructions for finalizing wedding plans, but she couldn't.

Someone was watching her.

Even after a year, she couldn't shake the sense that someone was waiting for the right moment to attack. But she couldn't find him. No amount of police training prepared her for this. No amount of time driving through the Mennonite farmlands or visiting with the gentle people who lived there provided peace.

It used to. But that was before a gunman shattered the calm and left her with more questions than answers. Before the haunting memories caused Brad and Anna and Jonathan to leave Montezuma. Maybe for good.

She scanned the backyard one more time. Just a forest of trees, a new fence, and an empty space in her side driveway where Patrick's car had been parked only a few minutes ago.

She flipped the curtain closed.

Cops always felt like someone watched them. Casualty of the job. Still...

"Ash, come look at the dresses I picked up from your parents. They're absolute perfection." Her best friend, Margo, spun around to show off her rich blue bridesmaid's dress, the long flared skirt dancing around her legs.

"You're stunning. Maybe too stunning. I should have gone with orange or fuchsia."

"Oh, Ashley, please. You shall dazzle them all, darlin'." Margo's *Gone with the Wind* drawl coaxed a smile. "I'm so glad you and your mom chose a flattering dress. Remember Jan's wedding?"

"Ugh. Those dresses made everyone look like pumpkins. I couldn't do that to you and Emma and Kath."

Margo paused in the antique mirror and studied her reflection. "I love this chiffon halter and empire waist. I've never seen this style of dress."

Ashley's phone played the dark and resolute opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Margo giggled. "You did *not* assign that ringtone to your mother, did you?"

"Hello, Mom." Ashley shrugged at Margo and turned back to the window.

"Ashley, dear, have you and Margo tried on your dresses yet? What about Kathleen? Patrick said his sister's dress might need more work, but she hasn't answered my emails to confirm. Emma did, bless her. I knew she would. You can't run a bed and breakfast as she does without impeccable manners."

At least Emma raised the standard of their slow-to-respond wedding party.

"I need to know if any further alterations are required. And I need you to answer my emails about last-minute issues from the caterer and florist, and the one from the musicians about the pieces to be played at the reception. I've sent along the top options and would like your input by this weekend."

"Sure thing. I only have the other list of three hundred things you asked me to do last week." Jailing drug dealers and helping keep

domestics from turning violent sort of took precedence over napkins and place settings.

"Yes, well. Do get to those this week too, will you? And let me know today about the dresses. That is why you took this week off, am I right?"

"Yes."

"Your father and I want this wedding to be perfect. Our gift to you. You understand that, right, honey?"

She did. And every reminder of that hurt. They'd spent the last ten years in a polite cold war after Eric's death and were now making up for lost time.

"It won't be perfect, Mom." Nothing in life turned out that way. No matter how hard she tried to make that a reality.

"Well, we're giving it our all to make sure everything involved in our only daughter's wedding is the very best."

"I know and love you for it, Mom. It's just overwhelming, and it doesn't have to be. Patrick and I would be happy with a small wedding for family and close friends, just like the reception at Emma's."

"The second reception, dear. Your father and I are taking care of the official one. Your big day will be the social event of the year. You'll love it, you'll see. Only the best." Mom's phone beeped. "That should be the caterer calling about the champagne and chocolate fountains."

"No alcohol, Mom. You promised."

"Yes. Yes, I remember that now. I'll take care of it. Talk to you tomorrow. Love to all."

"I love you too." But her mom had already clicked over to her other call.

Only the best.

If only...

"Did you hear me, Ash? This dress is exquisite."

"It's one of a kind, special made. Only the best." Her words bounced off the silent walls and fell flat. Too much control slipped out of her fingers with every phone call.

She surveyed the backyard for the hundredth time today.

Was he out there? He had been before.

Everything she did now was controlled by those two people. One she loved. The other was a waking nightmare. When would he strike? Would she be ready?

Was he even real?

“Ash?”

She faced her best friend.

Margo didn’t turn. Her blue eyes reflected from the mirror and locked onto Ashley’s. “Want to talk about it?”

“No.” She wouldn’t frighten her friend or spoil this time for Patrick or her parents. Especially when she had nothing to substantiate her instincts. Not yet, anyway.

She shivered. “It’s nothing, Maggie.”

Chester barked and hopped around her feet. Her almost two-year-old Boxer wriggled and licked and scurried around her at the first hint of trouble.

“Silly dog.” She bent down and snuggled him close, stroking his chestnut fur. Such a loveable bundle of energy. “He needs to go outside. No more doggie door, so I have to take him out.”

“Ash, you changed the locks, the gate, the back door, the security system. When are you going to believe you’re safe?”

Never.

Someone had broken into her backyard last year. At least twice. Her fellow officers believed that man was in jail.

She wasn’t so sure.

Chester’s bark snapped her back into the present, and she hurried downstairs and let her wriggling pup out. Not willing to join him in the oppressive Georgia heat, she stood at the kitchen window. June’s temps were brutal. So were the memories.

Movement beyond her back gate caught her attention.

Chester barked.

Her skin pricked with goose bumps.

She grabbed her backup weapon from a safe in the kitchen and headed outside.

Slow and steady she crept down the porch steps and to the fence. Inch by inch, she regulated her breathing and stepped on silent feet.

Chester's low growl rumbled through the quiet.

Lightning fast, she disarmed the keyless deadbolt and flung open the gate.

Chester lurched forward.

An empty side driveway mocked her caution. Nothing moved up or down Vinson Avenue.

Again.

"You need to return to the police counselor, Ash. This is getting out of control." Margo's folded arms spoke volumes. Her designer jeans and flowered tank top didn't soften the worry lines on her forehead.

So much for hiding the truth from Margo. "I'm not crazy. I was jumpy the first few months after he was arrested, but then the edginess went away."

"But it's back."

"I'd rather talk about the wedding." Ashley whistled. "Come on, Chester, let's go inside."

Margo moved away from the door as they entered. "No amount of nagging has motivated you to talk about wedding plans this summer. Do you not want to go through with the wedding?"

"Of course I do. I love Patrick."

"You should talk to the counselor again. She'll help."

Ashley secured her gun and headed to the fridge for a water bottle. "I'm not going back. I respect what Patrick does, but I don't need a shrink. I need to find out who's watching me."

"Talk to Patrick then."

The front door closed. "About what?" Patrick's strong tenor wrapped around her.

He entered the kitchen, Yoder's takeout in hand, and wrapped his muscled arms around her.

For a second, she was safe.

Her stomach growled. She couldn't wait any longer, so she snagged the bag and peeked inside. One sniff and her smile widened. "Steak and potatoes. My favorite. And there's cotton candy ice cream in the fridge."

"So what do you need to talk to me about?" He kissed her cheek and then grabbed plates from the cabinet.

“Nothing.” She shot a warning glance at Margo.

Margo clicked her tongue. “I’ll set stuff out. Y’all go talk.”

Ashley inhaled and worked her jaw back and forth. “Thanks, Mom.”

Her best friend mouthed a *Sorry* behind Patrick’s back.

“Come on.” He took her hand and tugged her toward the living room. “I’ve missed you. Talk or not, a few minutes alone would be nice.”

As soon as they were out of sight, Patrick pulled her close and nuzzled her neck, planting small kisses all the way up to her lips.

Every one of her nerve endings tingled.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and deepened the kiss until nothing but Patrick filled her senses.

He pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. “I’m counting down the days.”

“Me too.” She wanted to be Mrs. Patrick James more than anything else. It was the planning for it that drove her to distraction. Among other things. Her parents’ help relieved and suffocated her at the same time.

And no one could help with the haunting sense that someone watched her every move.

“Let’s take a walk.” He took her hand and squeezed.

“Dinner will get cold.”

“At least to the mailbox?” He tugged her forward. “Some fresh air will do us both good.”

So would a winter snowstorm.

She unlocked the front door and opened it. “I don’t see how you run in this heat. It’s oppressive.”

Sweat dripped down her back the second they were outside.

“I love it. Gets my blood pumping and keeps me in shape.”

That it did.

He opened the roadside mailbox and smiled. “There’s a letter from Brad.”

She took the two white envelopes he extended.

“Who’s that blank one from?”

“Neighborhood kids.” She headed back to the shade of the porch.

“The first three were from a couple teens in the neighborhood, advertising yard work services. I just throw them away now.”

“They could cut the grass for you, so you could relax when you get home from work.”

“I don’t mind. Helps me download from the day, so I’m ready to enjoy the evening with you.” Back on day shift, she loved the normalcy of coming home and cutting the grass and gardening. Then she’d whip up a meal and share it with Patrick. Life was good.

Inside, she deposited the plain white envelope into the trash and tore into Brad’s.

“Let’s eat, you two. We have more wedding things to do tonight. Like try on a gorgeous bridal dress.” Margo beamed in the candlelight. She’d pulled the shades down to block out the bright summer sun and lit every candle Ashley owned.

Patrick extended his hands the second they sat down. “Lord, thank You for my incredible fiancée and her industrious best friend who keeps us all on track. Thank You for this food and for making the next forty-six days fly by. Amen.”

Margo grinned. “Y’all make such a lovely couple. This wedding will be the highlight of the year.”

“Yes.” Ashley squeezed Patrick’s hand. “It will be amazing.” If she could push aside the shadows long enough to enjoy the day she’d looked forward to for almost a year.

The letter in her hand crinkled. Between bites of country fried steak and mashed potatoes she deciphered Brad’s scribbles. All scrawled and to the point, like a typical fourteen-year-old boy.

She missed him so much.

Margo touched her arm. “So how long has Brad been gone?”

“He and Anna have been in Shipshewana with Jonathan’s family since last February. Over a year. They should have come home long before now.”

Patrick drank a long gulp of sweet tea, made the way both he and Margo and most Southerners liked. Sugar shock sweet. “What does our favorite teen have to say?”

"An antique fair Anna dragged him to and..." Ashley's mouth wouldn't form the words she'd read on the white stationery.

Patrick's strong but gentle hand enclosed hers. "Everything okay?"

"Brad is moving home."

"That's great." Patrick's smile stretched ear to ear. "Then we can ask him in person to be in the wedding. It'll be good to have him and Anna home again."

"Anna's not coming with him." Her eyes misted. "Brad says...well, I should read it. 'Mamm is happy in Shipshe, helping with Cousin Mark's and Uncle Philip's bed and breakfasts. Cousin Jonathan wants me to stay here and help in his carpentry shop. But I can't. My mom needs me. She said so when she came to visit a few weeks ago. I'm leaving Monday and I'll come by to see you and Patrick soon. I can't wait. I miss you guys. Love, Brad.'"

"He's going to live with Joyce?"

Ashley nodded. "She's his biological mother, and Brad promised last time we talked that she's really changed since she went to visit him at Christmas."

Her one and only meeting with Joyce had been a disaster. The woman's brash behavior and blaming her for dumping Brad on the Yoders' doorstep rankled her. Still, Brad living with her was a very bad idea.

Poor Anna. All she'd endured at the hands of an evil man last year. On top of losing her husband and almost losing Brad. And yet Anna wrote letter after Scripture-filled letter to remind Ashley who God was and to pray for her healing. What could she do for her friend now?

Protect Brad.

"We should head up to Shipshewana and see if we can help." Patrick unsnapped his phone from his belt and called up his calendar. "I could make it work for this weekend."

"I'd love to visit, have wanted to since they left. But..." She flipped the envelope over. "He's probably already here. This was mailed late last week."

"Then it'll be good to see him." Patrick ran his thumb over her hand. "He'll call as soon as he's settled."

"I know. It's just..."

"It'll be okay. We'll pray. You'll see."

"Maybe."

Margo collected the dishes and set to arranging them in the dishwasher.

Patrick stood. "I hate to eat and run, ladies. But I have some work that has to be completed tonight, and you have wedding plans to finalize."

He and Margo must have talked earlier and planned this all out. Her entire week off and Margo would hustle her here and there to make final payments with her parents' money to the hundred people her mother had hired. All for a wedding at Patrick's church and a small reception at Emma's B&B. Of course, there was the guest list Mom had included, bringing the guest numbers into the hundreds. And the formal reception at the country club. Ridiculous. Her chest burned. She hated being managed again.

"I love you. You can do this." Patrick pulled her to him and kissed her soundly.

"I love you too."

And he was gone.

Margo slid her arm through Ashley's. "Let's go try on your gown to make sure the alterations are perfect."

Nothing in life was perfect. Especially wedding planning.

Before Margo could wrangle her ivory, strapless trumpet gown from the complicated packaging designed to keep her dress in perfect condition, a knock at the door saved her. She'd deal with the delicate and understated lace later.

On the way downstairs, she replayed the monstrosities her mother had her try on at the bridal salon. Layers of lace and ribbons, diamond-studded bodices, skirts befitting Scarlett O'Hara. Ugh.

Ashley had won with the simple and classic dress she'd chosen.

Peeking through the living room window, she surveyed the entire front porch and yard. No one was there.

She opened the door to find a crystal vase with two dozen red roses.

Margo slipped past her and picked them up. "Patrick is so thoughtful."

"Patrick brings me tulips. And he doesn't leave them on the porch."

Margo headed to the kitchen. "Here, read the card. This is so romantic."

Not. "The card says *I'll always be here for you*. But that's not Patrick's style. These aren't from him."

"So you have a secret admirer making his move at the last minute to dissuade you from marrying the wrong man?" Margo sighed. "Face it. These are from Patrick to cheer you up from the stress of wedding plans and to take your mind off Bradley's moving in with his birth mother."

"Thanks for reminding me of all that."

"Like you've forgotten." Margo situated the flowers on the dining room table. "I think Patrick's just showing you his ultra-romantic side."

"I'm calling him to find out."

Margo grabbed the cordless phone. "Don't. He's at work, and you're obsessing about every little thing. Take the flowers as the romantic gesture they were meant to be and thank him tomorrow."

"It's not romantic. It's more like playing games."

"It's fun."

No. It sent chills up and down her spine. She hated games.