

PROLOGUE

May 2022

Darkness fell later than normal.

On an unusually cold May night, a window slid open from inside the Morgan household. The girl responsible, merely fifteen-years-old, inched the old wooden frame up, occasionally glancing at her sister in the bed on the other side of the room, worried about alerting her and giving the game away. But Carly was normally a heavy sleeper. She had no reason to believe she would just randomly wake up, tonight of all nights, and catch her in the act.

No, Lindsey had planned for this. And she'd planned well. Or as well as she could.

The light creaks made her cringe, fearing the worst every time, but soon she'd managed just enough to slip her small figure through, carefully navigating to the sturdy white painted wooden trellis between her bedroom window and her brother's. With a backpack full of only a few articles of clothing and a photo of her family from before the divorce, Lindsey carefully shut the window as much as she could before she needed to start her descent, fearful of falling from so high off the ground.

She'd never tried scaling the trellis before, but Carter and Carly had. They snuck out, and in, all the time using it as their ladder. The twins always made her promise to keep their secret, but surely their parents knew, right? After all, the house had been in their family for generations. Their mother grew up in the very room she'd just escaped from. A house with no air conditioning and where the heat came into the house from an outside furnace someone had to throw wood into and keep stocked. A house whose location only barely got wifi, and even then, it was barely enough to handle a connection when she wanted to listen to Spotify, her sister wanted to watch Netflix, and her brother wanted to play *World of Warcraft* at the same time.

A house that had been built in the 1940s and had barely been upgraded, making it seem like it belonged in the twentieth century and somehow made the jump to the next one.

But she wouldn't have to remain any longer.

Hurrying away from the house as soon as her feet touched the ground, Lindsey headed toward the county line where her new friend told her he'd be waiting for her. She'd longed for this day for months. If she had to remain in Treasure Falls a moment longer, she wasn't sure she'd survive. Living in a conservative hellhole kept her on edge, longing for a world where she didn't have to fear being outed for who she was; a world where she could simply be herself.

Waking up every day, wondering if her community would find out she liked girls as much as boys, wanted to cut her hair short, and stop going to church? They'd skin her alive for it. Or at least her mom would make her go to church every day and have the 'sin' driven from her.

Even thinking about it on her way to the meeting spot made her nauseous. She couldn't be sure if the nerves were entirely because of the trauma she'd endured, or if they were because she was leaving the only place she'd ever known. After all, she'd never been outside of Montana. The furthest she'd ever traveled was to Butte for her great uncle's funeral when she was five, and she barely remembered it.

She wanted to explore the world. She wanted to be with people who loved and accepted her for who she was, not the person she had to pretend to be.

So it was a coincidence that someone else in Treasure Falls wanted to escape too and offered to be her lifeline.

A flurry of mixed emotions swarmed through Lindsey, forcing her to slow to a fast walk, allowing her to catch her breath while readjusting her backpack on her shoulder. Despite not carrying many things, it suddenly felt far too heavy. Perhaps her lack of physical activity hindered her ability to hustle. Plus, with it being dark outside, she feared being caught, or worse. Only the small metal flashlight she'd stolen from her mother's toolshed provided her with any light, barely enough to see a few feet in front of her.

Even if she knew the grounds like the back of her hand, everything felt different in the dark.

The walk seemed further than normal. She struggled to keep her lungs from burning as she pushed through the final stretch. Miles away from home, headed toward the outskirts of town, she ducked through the old, broken fence that bordered the back of the Burke Ranch. According to her friend, they were to meet in the old barn on the original ten acres, back from when her grandfather's grandfather was still alive. It sat a mile from the main house and new barn, surrounded by woods and unkept foliage that started to come back to life weeks earlier at the beginning of spring.

Folks didn't usually venture back there. Not even the Burkes did, and it was *their* property. Surely ol' Zip came to check on it every once in a while to make sure no squatters had taken up residence on his property, but as far as Lindsey knew, unless the cows wandered too far, they kept close to the house.

As she approached, Lindsey was surprised to find a dim glow coming from a lantern outside the barn, hung just next to the top right corner. She hoped it meant that her friend had arrived, as promised, and she could rest a moment before they took off. With no vehicle around, though, she wondered how much farther she would have to walk before she could put her feet up for hours as they made their way out of Montana.

The barn door was left cracked and she could see more light coming through the old, busted wood door that desperately needed repairs. But since the Burkes didn't use it, surely they spent their resources on more important matters.

Pulling the door open, she stepped inside, looking around for any sign of her friend when it appeared the barn remained empty. With the exception of old hay and a slew of broken farm equipment, her throat nearly closed up as anxiety gripped her muscles.

"Hello?" she asked, keeping a low tone.

"Lindsey?"

She whipped around, searching for whoever said her name. The voice was male, and she hadn't expected a boy or a man. Her friend was female.

Wasn't she?

"Who's there?" she asked, her body shaking.

And out of the corner stepped a tall figure, dressed in all black with a hoodie on, his face shrouded in darkness. Lindsey felt a gasp emerge from her throat, but no sound came with it. She took a slow step back and asked, "W-who are you?"

"I'm your friend, Lindsey," he said. "We've been talking for weeks. mtcowgirl823?"

Her friend's username online. But how would he know that ... unless ...?

She shook her head repeatedly. "No, you can't be. She's a girl. You're ... you're clearly not." As she spoke, she continued taking slow steps backwards, hoping to reach the door and bolt for the road. Somehow, everything she thought was true had been a lie. The glimmer of hope she saw when it came to the possibility of leaving Montana seemed to evaporate in an instant.

Perhaps she could make it back home. Or even find the highway on her own.

"But we've shared so much, Lindsey," the hooded man said as he continued approaching. He sounded ... sad? "You're my best friend."

You're my best friend.

Something mtcowgirl823 had said to her just a couple weeks ago.

You're my best friend. I have no one else to talk to who understands me. I'm so glad we met.

Lindsey shook her head, blinking hard. It couldn't be true. Everything had been a lie. It *had* to be.

"I don't know you," she said, her body shaking. "Please, stay away from me." She hit the barn door, stumbling back as it moved, denying her a solid foundation to grasp.

And the stumble would be her downfall.

Because, before she could blink, the man charged at her.

ENDANGERED HEARTS

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