



If WITSEC can't
keep her safe,
who can?

WEEP IN THE NIGHT

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NIGHT

Valerie Goree

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Dedication

In appreciation for his wholehearted and unwavering support, I dedicate this novel to my husband, Glenn.

A special thanks to my ACFW on-line critique group. Your suggestions, insight, and support are invaluable.

1

“Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” ~ Psalm 30:5

She ran her finger across the white plastic nametag. Blue letters spelled out *Debra Johnson*, but that wasn't her name.

The bulb above the sink crackled and died. She hated the dark. Backing out of the bathroom, she leaned against the wall and flipped on the hall light. Shadows scuttled away, but left a trace of unease in her gut.

Tears blurred her vision as she pinned the nametag on her shirt. It took two attempts to snag the pin in place. *Get a grip, Sadie. You're safe.*

Although she'd been in the Federal Witness Protection Program for almost three years, she still thought of herself as Sadie Malone. Sometimes the past latched onto her soul and yanked her down to the depths of grief like a meteor plummeting to earth. Today would have been her husband's thirty-seventh birthday. She closed her eyes. The faces of Aaron, and Hannah, her four-year-old daughter, floated in and out of a gray mist. Gone. They were both gone.

A shiver took control of Sadie's body as ice crystals formed in her heart.

She would not succumb to despair.

Clenching her jaw, she hunted in the closet for a

new bulb and installed it. Light cascaded as she glared in the bathroom mirror, chest heaving, and the corners of her mouth pointing south. The hall clock chimed the hour. Nine o'clock. Sadie squared her shoulders and opened her cosmetic bag. No matter her emotional state, she needed to leave soon.

Miles Griffin, her local WITSEC contact, had found her the job and would be disappointed if she got fired. Dabbing on makeup, she paid special attention to her red-rimmed eyes. Couldn't have curious co-workers bugging her with questions.

Sadie brushed her hair and arranged the short blonde curls to cover the dark roots. Time to schedule an appointment with Yolanda, but it would have to wait until her next day off. Dyeing her hair took time and money, which she sacrificed without complaint to keep her whereabouts secret.

Satisfied with the makeup's camouflage, Sadie headed to the kitchen for her salad sack lunch. She'd much prefer to eat a burger and fries, but patted her flat stomach and closed the refrigerator. No way would she gain back the weight she'd lost since being in WITSEC. Dressed for work in blue jeans, aqua T-shirt, and sneakers, she slid the nonprescription glasses on her nose and glanced in the hall mirror. The wire-rimmed frames changed her appearance. She sure didn't look like Sadie Malone anymore.

When she stepped out of her corner, ground-floor apartment, she scanned the area for loitering strangers or anyone out of the ordinary. The whine of a power mower filled the air with the sweet smell of cut grass. Mrs. Gaffney watered plants by her front door; Lloyd Kaiser tinkered with his bicycle in front of his apartment, three doors down; Jodie Powers walked her

pug. All familiar, all OK.

With a satisfied nod, Sadie took the sidewalk to the parking area and climbed into her white mid-sized sedan. The economical, inconspicuous vehicle matched her circumstances. In it, she could be as invisible as possible. At times, she missed her SUV, but with no little girl to buckle into a carseat and no husband to laugh and talk with, the smaller vehicle suited her needs.

As she drove to Rhodes DIY Headquarters, a local home improvement store, she fingered her nametag. Debra Johnson wasn't the only name change she'd had. Right after the trial in Los Angeles, still grieving for Aaron and Hannah, she'd been whisked to Seattle, known there as Sadie Mason.

She parked in the employee lot and glanced at her short nails as she removed the key from the ignition. At least in Seattle she had an office job. But her identity there had been compromised. Now, here in Austin, Texas, she worked at Rhodes in the garden center. Dirt under her nails, rough hands, aching back—nothing like her original job in technology. Computer expertise led to her placement in WITSEC. That meant no jobs in the computer industry for her ever again.

At least she had friends at Rhodes. She took a deep breath of the crisp morning air, still earthy from the overnight rain, and entered the store. Once in the break room, apron on, Sadie clocked in. Several people milled about.

“Hi, Debra. How was your weekend?”

Used to the name, she turned. “Hey, April. Great. It was nice to have two days off. How's Victor?”

“So-so. He took me to meet his parents yesterday. Then he asked me to move in with him, but I told him

no." April, in her mid-twenties, a decade younger than Sadie, closed her locker and tied the apron around her slender waist. "I told Victor what your pastor said about marriage."

April still referred to Reece Patterson as Sadie's pastor, although she'd attended Hillcrest Church for six months. Sadie had only been going there a few months longer. Her church activities had ceased two and a half years ago when her family died. Attendance now wavered between enthusiastic and perfunctory, a result of guilt and a gnawing vacuum where her soul used to be.

"Good for you. Considering marriage is a serious commitment." *Stop, Sadie. Don't get involved in a discussion about marriage and family.* She closed the locker before adjusting the fake glasses. "Are you ready to go?"

With a nod, April held the door for Sadie, and they left the room together.

"Have you met the new guy? Ooh, *muy caliente.*" April fanned her face. "If I didn't have my Victor, I'd set my sights on him."

"No, I haven't seen this new, hot guy." After all that had happened, meeting men, good-looking or otherwise, was not high on Sadie's priority list. Since the car accident that killed Aaron and Hannah, she had little interest in a romantic life. Her routine consisted of work, developing a few friendships, and most important, staying safe.

A jab in the ribs brought her back to the wide store aisles. "There he is, Debra. Over there." April pointed to a group of men examining a stack of cedar fence posts.

To appease her, Sadie asked, "Which one? I

recognize Oscar and Greg.”

“He’s the one in the blue shirt.”

The men concluded their discussion and the new guy turned, heading down the aisle.

Eyes on the approaching figure, Sadie had to agree with April. *Muy caliente*, indeed. About average height, thick black hair—a stray curl flopped on his forehead—and an athletic body. He beamed a hundred watt smile at April. “Hi.” His deep voice complemented his physical appearance.

Before April could respond, her name echoed through the store. Paged by the appliance department, she shoved Sadie towards the new guy. “Got to go. Meet my friend.”

Sadie frowned at April’s retreating figure.

The man turned to Sadie. A dimple in one cheek enhanced his rugged face. “Hi, April’s friend. I’m Sam.” He extended his hand.

His name ricocheted through her heart. Automatically, she shook hands and mumbled, “I’m Debra.”

Eyes as blue as a jay bird raked her face. “Nice to meet you. Which department do you work in?”

“Garden. And I’m sorry I can’t stay and chat. I have a load of star jasmine waiting for me.” She sent him a plastic smile she was sure never touched her eyes and hurried away.

Sam. His name was Sam. A lump of sadness slid down her throat. Because of her initials, her husband’s nickname for her had been Sam—Sadie Aretta Malone.

Although the arrival of plants and other merchandise kept Sadie busy, she couldn’t shake the recurring waves of melancholy that shadowed her. No matter how much she tried to avoid the new guy, he

appeared at every turn, reminding her of happier days. Why did his name have to be Sam? He attempted to strike up conversations, but the early spring rush provided believable excuses for Sadie to escape.

Her ploy worked until lunchtime. She opened the break room door and scanned the crowded area. Oscar munched on popcorn, the charred, nutty aroma announcing he'd burnt it again, and someone had heated a fishy meal in the microwave. Sadie wrinkled her nose.

Where could she sit?

Sam sat alone at a small table wedged beside the counter. A pile of sandwiches spilled out of his lunch box. One foot rested on the single unoccupied chair. With eyebrows raised, he glanced her way. "Hey, Debra. Want to join me?" He set his foot on the floor.

She had no choice. "Sure." With great reluctance, she collected her sack from the refrigerator and sat in the chair he scooted out for her. "Thanks."

Salad bowl open, she mixed in Italian dressing. *Stay away from his eyes.* But she couldn't help it. Their blueness intrigued her. Were they real or did he wear colored contacts?

Focusing on her bowl, she chomped on lettuce, the tangy dressing enlivening her taste buds.

Sam picked up another sandwich and set his elbows on the table. "So, Miss Debra, how long have you worked here?" His dimple appeared again.

Always cautious when questioned, she kept the answer vague and brief. "A year or so."

"And where are you from? I don't hear a Texas twang."

Getting too personal, mister. She took a swig from her water bottle. "I moved around a lot as a kid. Don't

claim any one state as home.”

“I can appreciate that. My brother and I were raised in foster care, but I was born in Dayton, Ohio.”

Thankful her eyes were focused on the last of the salad, Sadie kept her head down. First, his name brought back memories. Now, two more troubling coincidences. She’d been raised by foster families and moved more times than she could remember. And she had been born in Dayton.

She gulped hard to keep from choking on little bits of fear infused in her lunch. “You don’t say.” Salad bowl snapped closed, she gathered her things together. “Got a few phone calls to make before I return to the garden. Good-bye.”

Anyone observing her exit would have thought Freddy Krueger chased her as she ran from the break room. Not knowing what else to do, she punched Miles Griffin’s speed dial number on her cell phone.

Griff listened to her concerns about the new guy. “Good instincts, Debra. Glad you called. Find out his last name and any other personal information you can scrounge. I’ll do a bit of checking.” Talk about a Texas twang. Griff’s words drawled out as if he had a limited number and had to make them last all day.

Sadie slowed as she neared the garden center. Sam did not have on a nametag. “I’ll see what I can discover.”

“In the meantime, young lady, stay cool and keep your eyes open.”

“Always do. Thanks, Griff.” She slipped her phone into her apron pocket.

Oh, joy. Now she’d have to talk to the new guy again or find another way of snooping for information. And she’d have to call him Sam—he couldn’t be the

new guy forever.

Opportunity came when Sadie clocked out at ten after six and had the break room to herself. Rhodes still used time cards, which were listed alphabetically in the metal holder. After returning hers to its slot, she checked for Sam's. It took a while but she located a card for Sam Boudine.

She tugged her purse and lunch sack from her locker and jotted down Sam's name. As she turned to leave the room, he entered.

"Hey, Debbie. Your shift over?"

The name grated like screeching metal. If she couldn't use her real name, then at least she'd have one she could tolerate. "It's Debra." With her purse in hand, she couldn't deny her intentions. "Yeah, I'm leaving."

"Sorry, Debra. I'm on my way out, too. Hold up, and I'll walk with you."

Every fiber in her objected, but she waited for him to clock out.

On the way to the exit, she fudged on the truth. "April told me your last name. There can't be too many Boudines in Ohio."

"My grandparents were from Louisiana."

While considering other questions she could ask to garner personal information, he continued the conversation and provided a cache.

"I really like Austin. Never lived in Texas, before. Got pink-slipped up north and thought I'd give the south a try."

"So you don't have any family down here?" Now outside, she elongated her stride to keep up with his long legs.

"Nah. It's just little ol' me." His shoulders

drooped, which caught her attention. "Had a wife and little girl."

Antennae now on full alert, Sadie rummaged in her purse for her keys. "What happened?" She expected to hear about a divorce, but his next words stunned her.

"They were killed in a car wreck."

Just like her family. Goosebumps pinpricked her arms. To hide her alarm, she pressed the car remote.

"Allow me." Sam opened her door.

"That's really sad." Sliding into the car, she threw her purse onto the passenger seat.

"Two years ago." Sam lingered by her door. "Want to see a picture?"

With his wallet already out, she had little choice. An attractive brunette holding a dark-haired toddler stared back at her.

Words clogged her throat. She glanced up at him and her heart twisted at his pained expression. Guilt for her earlier rudeness and for talking to him only to collect information needled her conscience. But her heart did more than flutter at his next words. It jerked to a stop.

"I still miss 'em. My baby, Paige, and my wife, Sadie."

2

Bowen switched the cell phone to his left ear and sank into the recliner. "I made contact. Today, in fact."

"Good, good. And what's your impression?" A note of excitement tinged the husky voice on the other end.

"Using your target words got a reaction."

"Like what?"

Bowen gulped a swig of soda before answering. "She flinched when I introduced myself as Sam. And when I told her my dead wife's name was Sadie, she bolted out of the parking lot like a NASCAR driver."

"Interesting. But *is* she Sadie Malone?"

"Can't say for sure. So far she's the most likely candidate I've found, but I've got two more women to check on."

"OK, but stay with Debra a while longer. I'm counting on you, Boudine. I have to find Sadie."

"I will." Bowen opened a manila folder on the side table and removed one of the photographs. "But she doesn't look much like the pictures you gave me."

"How so?"

Bowen squinted at the photograph in his hand. "Debra's kinda slender, has short blonde hair. Even her face. There's something different."

"It's been nearly three years. Could be she had work done. You know, plastic surgery." Bowen traced the outline of the woman's chin. "Maybe."

The client cleared his throat. "I don't mean to tell

you how to run your business, but should you be using your real last name?"

"I needed to get a job. It's much easier with legitimate I.D. If Debra checks me out, she'll find nothing on Sam Boudine. No one here knows my real name's Bowen."

"Sounds like you've made progress. Anything else you need from me?"

"Nope, not right now. I've got a few more tricks in my arsenal. Plan on spending time with little Miss Debra. Should have a definite answer for you soon."

After Bowen ended the call, he retreated to the small enclosed back patio and strapped on his boxing gloves. Each successive jab and thrust at the punching bag suspended from a beam mired him deeper in self-loathing. Although committed to a successful conclusion of this job, he could no longer ignore the guilt pricking at his conscience like an annoying leaky faucet.

Lies...jab...lies...thump. His cover story consisted of nothing but lies. He displayed a wallet photograph of an unknown woman and child to Debra—a fictitious wife and daughter. What kind of man did that? And he'd witnessed the blood drain from her face by mentioning the name Sadie. That hadn't been fun. Maybe the reason for her sudden departure had been legitimate, or maybe he simply came across as a little creepy.

Jab...one last upper cut before Bowen stilled the bag. "Doggone it. Wish there was another way." He tore off the gloves, threw them on the floor, and glanced around his makeshift gym. Bringing the worn punching bag with him when he'd left Los Angeles a month ago had been an afterthought. At least this

furnished apartment had a place for it, and he needed the exertion more than ever.

A quick shower, then he dressed in blue jeans and gray T-shirt, and drove to Jerry's Café. He'd scouted the neighborhood for days and knew Debra's favorite haunts. Although she often ate at Jerry's, part of him hoped she wouldn't show up tonight. At this early stage of the hunt he usually orchestrated one encounter a day.

The waitress brought a glass of iced tea.

Bowen added sugar and stirred his drink before sliding a notebook from his leather case. He checked off trigger words the client had given him and found several he hadn't tried on Debra yet. He'd have to work them into their next conversation. Tomorrow. A gulp of cold tea slid down his throat. He smacked his lips as he set the glass on the table. Good thing he had electrical and woodworking experience. Having a job at the same place Debra worked sure made his investigation easier.

Next, he took out the folders of the other two candidates. The first, Mary Wolfe, lived across the street from Debra. The more he studied her photographs, the more he was convinced she couldn't be Sadie Malone. Something about her overall body build didn't match.

With the last folder open on the table, he examined a photo of Sandra Miller. Bowen knew people placed in WITSEC were usually given names with the same initials as their original name. That made Sandra a good possibility, plus she matched the physical characteristics—taller than average, with a little extra weight, long dark hair, oval facial structure. If Debra proved not to be Sadie Malone, he'd pursue Sandra

next. He closed the folder. Debra Johnson. Mary Wolfe. Sandra Miller. The only one with Sadie's initials was Sandra. That meant if either Debra or Mary were in WITSEC, Austin was not their first relocation. That knowledge generated another set of questions he'd direct Debra's way at their next meeting.

Information given by the client placed Sadie living in an apartment on Monterey Oaks Boulevard in a large city in Texas. The client refused to reveal his sources, but for now Bowen accepted his position. The accuracy of the information mattered most. Bowen had already spent two weeks in Dallas chasing down leads, but the woman bearing a resemblance to Sadie in an apartment complex on Monterey Oaks turned out to be on the Dallas police force. He figured no one in WITSEC would be allowed to work in law enforcement.

The waitress set a plate of pork chops swimming in cream gravy, a baked potato, and mixed vegetables on the table. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"Nope. This'll do for now. But I will take more tea when you have a chance. Thanks."

The waitress moved to the next booth as Bowen mixed sour cream into the steaming, fluffy potato. His closed folders lay on the table near his glass, but it wasn't Mary or Sandra who occupied his thoughts. A blonde, brown-eyed co-worker's face kept intruding.

Bowen took a bite of pork chop smothered in gravy. He had to keep the association with his target on a professional level. But after meeting Debra, he struggled not to think of her personally, which could be dangerous.

With tea glass in hand, he decided to turn up the charm level at their next meeting—for the sake of the

job, of course. Shifting on the seat, he shook his head. He'd have to remember his assignment and forget about her pretty face—if possible.

His meal finished, Bowen gathered the folders, slid them in the leather case and zipped it closed. He left a tip on the table and paid for his meal at the counter. Behind him, a commotion at the entrance sent twitches to his stomach muscles and his breath quickened, as he separated Debra's voice from others. Should he acknowledge her presence or slip out unnoticed?

Oscar Santos made the decision for him by slapping him on the shoulder. "Hey, Sam. Want to join us?"

Sam? His cover name, of course. Bowen turned and recognized several people from Rhodes. "I've eaten already."

Debra paled and averted her eyes as she stepped behind April.

"We're here for pie and coffee." Oscar slugged Bowen on the arm. "Come on. We'll make room for one more."

Bowen could change his evening plans for an opportunity like this. "Guess there's always room for pie." He tucked the case under his arm and followed Oscar.

The waitress directed the group of six to a large semi-circular booth. Debra shadowed April, eyes downcast. The group's general camaraderie covered Bowen's intense observation and analysis. Debra, seated between April and Oscar, acted as if she'd never met him before. Bowen figured he had a long way to go to gain her trust. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned his fictional dead wife so early in their

acquaintance.

After coffee mugs were filled and assorted pie slices served, Bowen kept a stealthy eye on Debra while he chatted with Victor, April's boyfriend.

Greg shrugged out of his jacket and draped it in his lap.

Giggling, April pointed to his blue T-shirt. "Why do you have that silly horse on your shirt?"

With a pained expression, Greg clutched his shirt over the faded white outline of the animal. "It's not a silly horse. It's a mustang. My high school mascot." He stretched out his pecs and frowned down at the shirt.

April took a sip of coffee. "What high school?"

"Raul Medina in El Paso. The Medina Mustangs. It's an awesome mascot. What's yours?"

"A yellow jacket."

Almost choking on a bite of pecan pie, Oscar sputtered, "A what?"

"A yellow jacket. You know, a wasp." April flapped her arms like wings.

Oscar backed away. "Bzzz, real scary."

"That's nothing, you guys. My mascot was an owl and I nearly killed him one night."

"You're kidding." Greg tapped his fork on the plate. "What happened?"

Victor cleared his throat like he had an earth shattering announcement to make. "I ran into him during the Homecoming football game. Squashed him flat. Poor guy."

No one spoke for a bit while they cackled at Victor's expense.

Then Debra removed her glasses to wipe her eyes and set the frames on top of a menu.

Bowen stared at the print through the lenses—no

magnification. Her glasses were fake.

A jolt like electricity shot through his chest. He glanced away quickly so she wouldn't see his reaction. In his mind, a giant arrow pointed at Debra. Her glasses were part of her disguise. Why else would she camouflage her chocolate eyes with unflattering frames?

Greg elbowed him. "You haven't told us about your mascot. Where'd you go to high school?"

Unable to avoid participating in the discussion any longer, Bowen glanced at Debra across the table and blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Dayton, Ohio."

Why'd he say that? He gave himself a mental thump when he realized the predicament he'd created. If Debra was Sadie, she'd know he lied. Why didn't he tell the truth about his high school in L.A.? He reeled in his lone excuse—his cover story didn't go back that far. Still, experience should have kicked in.

"What was your mascot?" Oscar asked.

Bowen stirred his coffee and then took a big gulp. When words did exit his mouth, he stammered, "It's so...so long ago, guys."

"Come on." Oscar gave him another thump. "You're not that old."

Bowen racked his brain. What were the odds he'd think of a real mascot for a real school in Dayton? "A cougar." Then to flesh out the lie he added, "Central High Cougars."

Debra's gaze locked on his. Cover story blown. But what she said next surprised his socks off.

Hands cradling her coffee mug, Debra corrected him. "Central High's mascot isn't a cougar. It's a panther."

3

Sadie couldn't believe she'd fallen for Sam's trick. Did he deliberately choose the wrong mascot or was he flying by the seat of his well-fitting pants?

Once safe inside her apartment, she lingered in the shower and tried to wash away the slip of her tongue. It had been a long time since she'd accidentally divulged details of her previous life. Why to Sam? Obviously he wasn't who he claimed to be. Although he'd covered his goof by saying he remembered the mascot as a cat of some kind. Still, his answer gave her further proof of his brand of truthfulness. She needed to maintain her guard around him.

At work the next day, Sadie kept busy in her department, surrounded by sweet scents from young spring flowers and primordial whiffs of damp earth. She hadn't heard back from Griff since supplying him with the new guy's last name, so she made a point of sitting with Sam at lunchtime.

Swallowing a bite of pasta, she studied him. In another blue shirt, his eyes mirrored the early morning sky. "You said you worked up north. Which state?"

"Indiana. Ever been there?"

She shook her head and stabbed a piece of chicken onto her fork. "What kind of work did you do?"

With his last meat filled sandwich in hand, Sam took a bite and chewed. "Construction." He drained his soda and then squeezed the can, collapsing the middle. "Where did you live before moving to