



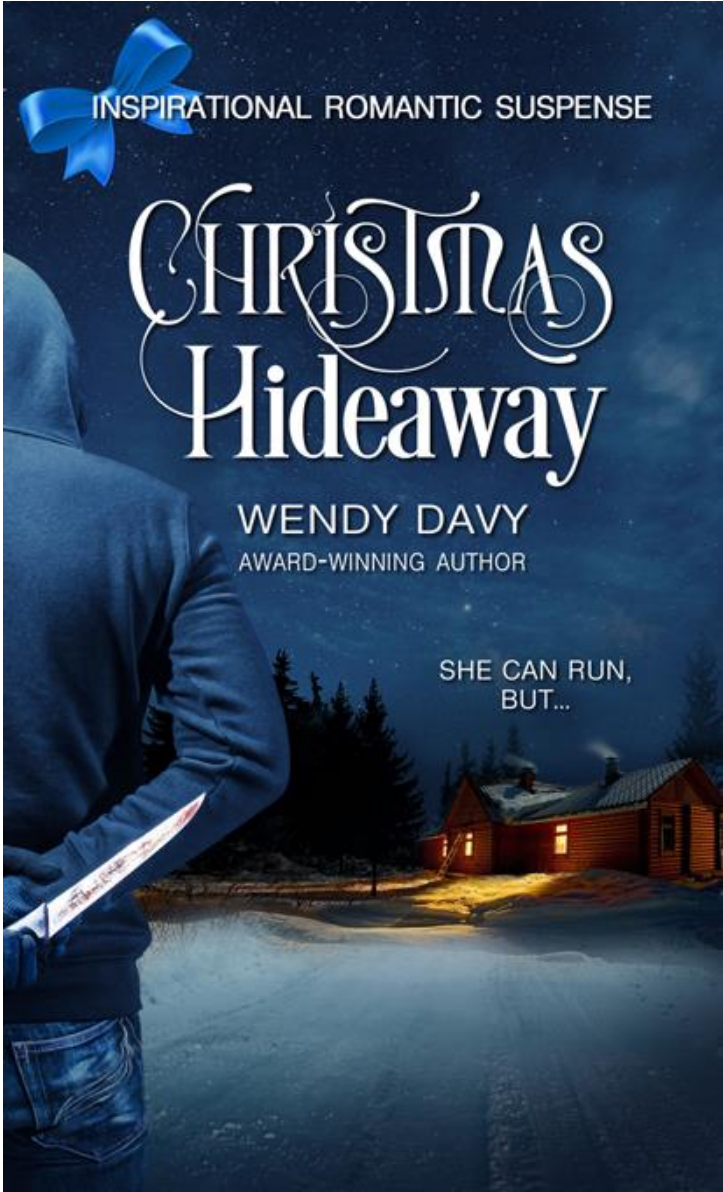
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

# CHRISTMAS Hideaway

WENDY DAVY

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

SHE CAN RUN,  
BUT...



Christmas  
Hideaway

Wendy Davy

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**Christmas Hideaway**  
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## *Dedication*

For Jesus.  
For my family.  
And for those who fight for justice.

## *What People are Saying*

A Dad for Christmas:

"Awe! A very touching heartfelt Christmas story Wendy has woven between this adorable cover ... Join me in reading Wendy's emotional story that will warm your heart this Christmas season." ~ Sharon Dean

Deadly Chase:

"I was really impressed with this story full of suspense. Believable characters and a story of how faith and prayer helped them through horrific circumstances and helping those whose faith is floundering to see that God is in control. Great edge of your seat story." ~ Gina Johnson.



# Prologue

*"Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."*

*Psalm 139:16*

At half past midnight, a creak sounded from the living room. Mandalyn Foster froze beneath the warm blankets on her bed. She didn't have to look at the clock on the nightstand to know the time. Unable to sleep, she'd been glancing at the digital numbers for the last couple of hours. She'd been restless for months, ever since she'd become the only material witness in a homicide investigation.

Praying this was just the wind or some other false alarm, Mandi took in deep breaths and let them out slowly as she willed her racing heart to calm. But she knew the odds of Eric Allen contacting her—threatening her—would continue to climb the closer his trial came. She'd already sensed that someone had been watching her.

As she'd grocery shopped.

At work.

Coming and going from the gym.

She'd told her suspicions to the detectives in charge, but considering she hadn't actually seen

anyone or been directly threatened, she couldn't provide enough credible evidence to warrant police protection.

As minutes passed, she listened to the gusty wind and sleet pelting the windows on her oceanfront condo. The mid-December winter storm was kicking into high gear. While areas farther inland dealt with snow, the coastal areas of Virginia had thick ice forming on power lines and tree branches, covering roadways and wreaking havoc for residents. Tens of thousands of people had already lost power. So far, she'd been blessed to keep her electricity. Maybe she wouldn't lose it at all.

Mandi drew comfort from the twinkling Christmas lights on the small tree in the far corner of her bedroom. She focused on the lights, looking for something to ground her—to keep her fears from overtaking her.

The tree lights flickered. And then the lights flickered again before going out. Her bedside clock went black, too. The air vents stopped blowing heat. Frigid air immediately seeped in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the ominous feeling in her gut grew.

Mandi shivered and snuggled deeper under the covers. This night was going to be longer than she'd expected. As she listened to the sounds around her for another few minutes, she didn't hear another creak from the living room. All the noises came from the winter storm raging outside.

Maybe she'd imagined the sound inside her home.



She closed her eyes and tried to relax, but sleep remained elusive. At least she was on winter break from school. She didn't have to get up and go to work tomorrow. Or the next day, or the day after. In total, she had another three weeks before she had to resume teaching at Eastside School for the Deaf.

Which was a good and a bad thing. It gave her time to prepare for Christmas, but it also gave her too much time to think. To worry. To dread the upcoming trial which was set for the first of the year.

She'd always thought of her sign language skills and ability to read lips as positive and useful skills. They had helped her communicate with her little brother who'd been born deaf, and had needed her protection and support. Now that he was grown and living in Nevada, she continued to use the skills she'd learned to help others here at home in Virginia Beach.

Unfortunately, in this case, her ability to read lips had become a liability.

As her mind refused to shut down for the night, her eyes also didn't want to remain closed. Her sight had adjusted to the darkness and faint outlines danced just beyond her bedroom doorway. The neighbor's balcony light must be on. It always shone through her living room's sliding glass door at night and cast shadows throughout her living space.

She stilled at the thought. Why was her neighbor's light still on? In the past, when she lost power due to a storm, the entire building lost power. If her neighbors still had electricity that meant ... Someone could have tampered with her electricity.

The creaking sounded again. A subtle shift in the air and the slight scent of spicy cologne made the hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end.

She wasn't alone after all.

Mandi had thought through this scenario countless times. She couldn't escape from her balcony, not from five floors up. And the only place she could hide was in her bathroom or closet. Those wouldn't do. Her closet was stuffed with clothes and shoes, and her temperamental bathroom door wouldn't latch shut in the cooler winter months. Could she make it to the front door before the intruder saw her?

Just as the thought crossed her mind, a figure appeared in her bedroom doorway. It was too dark to see details, but the outline of a man's broad shoulders, thick biceps, and muscular thighs was unmistakable. As was his uncovered, bald head.

After close to six months of waiting and wondering, of looking over her shoulder, Eric Allen was here. Her living, breathing nightmare.

He lunged forward and before she could scream, his large, gloved hand clamped over her mouth and pressed her head against her pillow. "Shhh." His heated whisper held quiet warning.

As his fingers pressed into her cheeks, Mandi grabbed the man's wrist with both hands, trying to dislodge his grip. If she could scream, her neighbors might hear her and call for help. But he was too strong. Too forceful.

He flicked on a flashlight with his free hand and set it upright on the nightstand. It glowed like a lantern

and cast a soft light on his angular features. She wished he hadn't turned on the light. This was the guy she'd ID'ed; he had the same scar over his left eyebrow, and the same missing chunk out of his right ear.

He leaned across her, pinning her down. Mandi bucked and writhed, fighting with everything she had. The man didn't budge. She needed something, anything she could use as a weapon. But the only thing within reach was a glass of water, and her cellphone.

If she could just grab the phone from the nightstand ...

"Shh, sweetheart. Relax." His voice came out smooth and deep, calm and in control.

As if that was supposed to make her feel better. His arms felt like thick steel rods, his body heavy against hers. She continued to struggle against him until he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, but sharp knife.

"Don't make me use this." The blade's tip touched her skin, trailed down her neck. Rested at the base of her throat.

Mandi stilled, frozen by fear. She wasn't getting out of this alive, was she? She'd tried to do the right thing. She'd stepped forward as a witness knowing she'd have to testify. Knowing there was risk involved. And now she would pay for it. How bad would the blade hurt as it plunged beneath her skin? Would her death be quick or drawn out? Would anyone besides her closest friends, her grandmother and her brother truly mourn her?

Regret slammed into her like an angry ocean

wave. Not for the things she'd done in her twenty-eight years. But for the things she'd yet to do. She'd never feel the warmth of a loving husband's embrace. She'd never have the family she ached for. She'd never be the mother she'd always wanted to be.

All because she'd seen this man where he claimed he hadn't been. And, because she'd read the murderous intentions on his lips. While she'd known stepping forward was the only way she could live with herself, the cost was killing her. Literally. But that didn't mean she would just give up. She was still breathing for a reason. And she had to believe that reason went beyond the here and now.

As if sensing her intentions, Eric shushed her again. "We can work this out, Mandalyn. We can both have the outcome we want. It's not too late." He slowly released his hold on her mouth as his bold, brown eyes skimmed over her. "I like your spirit. It's a shame we didn't meet under different circumstances." He sat up beside her, shifted the knife to his other hand as he lifted a lock of her hair between his thick fingers and twirled the strands. "I've always been partial to blondes."

Mandi's breath caught. "You like my spirit?" He hadn't seen anything yet. Without the knife pressed against her skin, she took the opportunity to shove both feet out and kick him off the bed. He landed with a thump on the hardwood floor.

Good. She hoped it hurt. A lot.

She rolled off the bed and came to her feet just as he stood on the opposite side. "What do you want

from me?" she demanded.

Instead of coming after her, Eric shook his head and grinned. The shadows from the flashlight danced over his face. With a playful smile on his features, he looked as if he were enjoying this. "I wish you hadn't seen me at the inlet with Johnathan," he said.

"That makes two of us." She would try to make it to the door, but he had her blocked in. He was just toying with her now, wasn't he? At least they were on opposite sides of the bed.

"What were you doing at the inlet at two in the morning, anyway?"

"You're *really* going to ask me that?" Her jaw dropped. "What does it matter?" She'd been there, end of story.

His lips quirked. "You don't seem the type of girl who stays out late for no reason, even on a beautiful, hot summer night. So, I can't imagine what you were doing out there alone at that hour." He rubbed a hand along his stubbly jaw. "Unless ... you were there to meet someone?"

She kept her face neutral, but her insides churned. Although he'd guessed close to the truth, she'd never tell him that. She'd rather eat last year's leftover fruitcake than admit why she'd been at the marina that fateful night back in July. The police didn't even know the full story, and she preferred to keep it that way.

Why was he asking anyway? Was he trying to find some dirt on her to make her look bad? If so, he needed to get in line. Ever since she'd come forward as a witness, Eric's team of defense attorneys had tried to

discredit her.

But her life was as transparent as polished sea glass. She had nothing to hide. Well, except maybe that one thing. "What I was doing there is none of your business." Mandi straightened her spine. "I saw you on that ridiculous speedboat that night with the guy who ended up dead soon after. *Why* I was there is irrelevant." Wow, she'd gotten bold. Who knew sheer fright could bring out this side of her?

Eric's shoulders bounced as he chuckled. "You're nothing like I'd expected." Something close to admiration flickered in his gaze for a moment, but then it was gone, replaced by something she didn't want to explore. "If circumstances were different, I would've enjoyed getting to know you."

Mandi shuddered. The thought of allowing this man any more insight into her life was not appealing. "You need to leave," she said, as if just stating it would make him comply.

He shook his head. "I'm not finished."

"Hurting me won't change the charges against you. And it won't keep you out of prison. The DA and the police already have my statement. They know what you did."

His brow lifted. "There's something you're not considering, sweetheart. Written statements don't have the same impact that live witnesses have on members of the jury. The only way any charges against me will stick is if you testify in person."

Mandi couldn't refute his statement because it made sense. Witnesses on the stand could answer

questions, clear up misconceptions. They could explain details that might not be spelled out on paper.

She tried another tactic. "You can't kill me. If something happens to me, the cops will know it was you. Your bail will be revoked, and you'll have new criminal charges on top of the original ones." She'd never understood how he'd gotten out on bail in the first place. Other than the fact that he had money to hire the best lawyers practicing on the East Coast.

"You think I don't know that? The last thing I need is another dead body that the police can connect with me. I don't want to have to fight any more charges, and if you end up in a body bag, a jury might wonder. I'm not stupid. I didn't come here to kill you tonight."

"Then why are you here? With a weapon?"

"You'll see." He snatched her cellphone from the nightstand. "What's the passcode?"

Mandi hesitated. She didn't want to allow him access to her phone, but he had her cornered and still held the knife. She rattled off the numbers.

He tapped the screen and scrolled down. "Mmm ...who do we have here? I see Grandma is still around. Hillside Nursing Center, right here in Virginia Beach. That's convenient."

Mandi's heart lodged in her throat, and her mouth dried. "Stay away from her."

Eric scrolled through the names on her contacts list. "Jen ... Cate ... Michael ... Who is this Michael guy in Nevada? Oh, I see." He looked up and met Mandi's gaze with an icy glare. "You two share a last name. He must be your brother. Are you close? I bet you are."

“Stop. Please, just stop,” she whispered in a desperate plea. It was one thing to risk her own safety; it was another matter to put her friends and family in harm’s way.

“I’m here to make sure you understand something very clearly.” Eric tossed her cellphone onto the bed and met her gaze. “If you testify, the people you love will die.”



# 1

“My material witness is missing.” District Attorney Janice Whilley clasped her hands together as she placed them on top of her desk, getting straight down to business. “I need you to find her.”

Private Security Specialist Rylan Copeland stretched out his long legs and crossed his ankles as he leaned back in the chair across from her desk. He’d first met Mrs. Whilley while he was a police detective working in Washington DC. Back then, she’d been climbing her way up the corporate ladder, and she’d earned his respect by demonstrating her fierce determination and code of ethics along the way. Which is why he’d personally responded to her call, although he was already packed and ready for his time off.

“I’m sure my partner can handle this.” Finding missing witnesses for attorneys was one of many things his company, Elite Falcon Security, handled. Mrs. Whilley also knew his company’s daily rates, which reflected their stellar reputation for getting the job done, and she was fine with the price. Which meant there had to be a lot at stake.

“I want you on this case, Copeland. Nobody else.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the best at what you do. And this case involves more than just locating my witness. There’s a catch...”

Rylan’s curiosity sparked. For the past several months as he’d been recovering from a run-in he’d had with a bullet, he’d been working the management side of the business. Meeting with clients. Handling finances. He missed being in on the action. He was itching to get back into the field. He needed to feel alive again.

But that could wait. He needed to get through Christmas first. And that meant isolating himself for the next few weeks until life returned to normal. Despite his interest in what she had to say next, Rylan prepared himself to pass this case to his partner, Cyan Miller.

“Mrs. Whilley—”

She held up a hand. “Before you say anything let me explain the importance of this woman. She’s the key witness for the case against Eric Allen.”

Rylan sat forward as his interest piqued. He was familiar with the pending trial. He’d kept up with the news. Allen was a womanizer, a drug dealer, and a murderer. He had suspected mob ties, and he acted as if he could buy his way out of a prison sentence. The outcome of this case was riding on the witness’s testimony.

“Do you think Allen got to her?” Unfortunately, not all the witnesses he located were still breathing when he found them.

Mrs. Whilley shrugged. “That’s my best guess. I

came in this morning to find this message waiting for me on my private line." She pressed a button on her desk phone, and a voicemail played.

A woman's shaky voice came over the line. "Hi, Mrs. Whilley, this is Mandi Foster. I know you asked me to only use this number in case of an emergency. Well, this is important. I ... I've changed my mind about testifying against Mr. Allen. I won't be attending the trial. I'm sorry." Her words sounded rushed and she disconnected almost before her "sorry" was out.

That was a new one. A witness on the run with a guilty conscience? "That's it? No explanation as to why?"

The DA shook her head. "That's it. But I've confirmed she's not at her place of residence, and she's not answering her cellphone. She's a teacher on winter break, so I know she's not working. I'm afraid she's left town."

It was possible Miss Foster had gotten cold feet and decided to take off, but why call and give the prosecuting attorney a head's up? It was also possible Allen had done something to scare her, but then why hadn't she gone to the police? Why risk jail time by being held in contempt of court?

"She does know that testifying is not optional, right?"

Mrs. Whilley nodded. "She knows."

"She also knows without her testimony Allen will walk away from this without repercussions?"

"She does."

Maybe this case was worth looking into. He

needed more information before he could decide. "Let me step outside, make a few phone calls. I'll have some answers for you when I get back."

It didn't take long. Within fifteen minutes, Rylan had all the answers he needed to get started, along with an intense desire to track down this woman. She was too important to the case to let her change her mind, as she'd said in the voicemail.

"I'll take the job," he told the DA when he returned to her office.

"Glad to hear it. What did you find out?"

Rylan didn't bother to sit down. "Turns out Miss Foster used her credit card to fill up her gas tank at nine o'clock this morning. She bought an extra-large apple cinnamon latte and a sausage biscuit at a fast-food place, and the toll at the tunnel in Norfolk registered her heading westbound at nine thirty-five a.m." He crossed his arms and spread his feet wide. "She also stopped by her bank's ATM."

"Any clue as to where she's headed?"

"I've got my team on it now. They'll be tracking her license plate on the VDOT cameras. In the meantime, I'll be heading west as well." His vacation could be postponed a couple days if it meant ensuring this woman returned to testify.

Normally, in these cases, Rylan only located the witness, informed his client where to find them, and his job was done. He'd be willing to make an exception in this case and take it a step further. "I'll find her and bring her back. Maybe by tomorrow."

DA Whilley let out a brilliant smile. "I do admire

your confidence but remember that little catch I mentioned?"

He tensed. "Mind filling me in?"

"I want you to find her, but I don't want you to bring her back. Not yet, at least. If you bring her back now, she'll have time to run again."

"I can make sure she doesn't get the opportunity."

The DA shook her head. "The last thing I need is for my witness to feel as if she has no control over this. I need a confident, willing witness on the stand."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Find her. Find out why she's running. If she's being threatened, protect her. Play nice with her. Do whatever it takes. It's your job to figure it out. When it's time, bring her back to testify."

"And if she doesn't want to come back?"

"If she is a no-show on the trial date, she will be held in contempt of court. An arrest warrant will be issued, and she will be jailed until the judge decides what to do with her. But, I don't want it to come to that. Miss Foster came forward as a witness on her own. I've met with her on several occasions. She's an exemplary citizen with no criminal background."

Rylan didn't agree with the exemplary citizen statement. If she was, she wouldn't have run away. She would've contacted the police. She wouldn't have just changed her mind about testifying.

But he would keep his opinion to himself.

"This isn't a typical in and out job, Copeland. I've been working with the cops for years trying to get enough evidence to nail this guy. When something